

# PLATO'S SOCRATES AND HIS CONCEPTION OF PHILOSOPHY

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## 1. Socrates the Philosopher

What is this thing called “love of wisdom”—“philosophy”—that Plato offers? Before Plato’s time, many were hailed as wise (*sophos*, *sophistēs*), but surviving Greek texts written before the fourth century BCE rarely mention a “philosopher” (*philosophos*).<sup>1</sup> The word was common in Plato’s time, though, and Plato contended with Isocrates about what it is to be a philosopher.<sup>2</sup> What exactly was Plato’s contention? Despite apparently promising to do so (*Sph.* 216c-217c, *Pol.* 257a), he seems not to have written a dialogue dedicated to the question “What is a philosopher?”<sup>3</sup> But he does offer the

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<sup>1</sup> Diogenes Laërtius says, “The first to call himself a philosopher was Pythagoras” (I 12), but he cites Heraclides of Pontus, a follower of Plato who was probably pushing a Pythagorean origin for Platonic philosophy (Burkert 1960). (Isocrates credits Pythagoras as the first Greek to bring philosophy from Egypt, but does not say that Pythagoras called himself a philosopher (*Or.* 11.28).) Heraclitus fr. 35 DK includes the phrase “philosophical men” (*philosophous andras*), but this “fragment” looks like a paraphrase, by Clement of Alexandria, which leaves the origin of the key phrase uncertain (*cf.* Kahn 1979, 105; Laks and Most 2016, 3:157). The earliest indubitable occurrence of *philosophos* or *philosophein* (“philosophize”) is Herodotus I 30; other indubitable occurrences that probably predate the fourth century are Thucydides II 40.1, Gorgias, *Helen* (fr. 11 DK) 13, and the Hippocratic *On Ancient Medicine* 20.1 (with Schiefelky 2005, 300-302). To speculate about origins, take up Moore 2020, note that Herodotus and Gorgias might have known Pythagoreans, from Herodotus’ time in Thurii and Gorgias’ in Sicily, and note that Gorgias and Thucydides likely knew of Socrates. I thank Robert Hahn, Rusty Jones, Christopher Moore, and Ravi Sharma for help.

<sup>2</sup> Like Plato’s Socrates, Isocrates sharply distinguishes philosophers from “sophists” and “eristics” (and *cf.* Xenophon, *Cyn.* 13.6-9). But Isocrates also denigrates some Socratic patterns of speech, and insists that philosophy should be more politically engaged than Plato’s Socrates is. See especially the opening paragraphs of his *Encomium of Helen* (*Or.* 10) and *Antidosis* (*Or.* 15), with Nightingale 1995, 13-59. *Cf.* *Euthd.* 304d-306d, with Chance 1992, 200.

<sup>3</sup> *Cf.* Gill 2012. See also the possibly Platonic *Lovers* with Peterson 2011, 201-205, and 2017.

unforgettable character of Socrates.<sup>4</sup> Because Plato presents Socrates as a philosopher<sup>5</sup> and as a deeply admirable human being (esp. *Phd.* 118a), this character offers a model of what Plato thinks philosophy is.<sup>6</sup>

Plato's Socrates contrasts his commitments with other clever talkers'. He says that he cares for truth and loves wisdom, whereas "eristics" such as Dionysodorus and Euthydemus seek to win debates and "sophists" such as Protagoras and Gorgias seek to persuade audiences.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Socrates is a philosopher as a lover of wisdom. But what is the wisdom that Socrates loves? Also, what does loving wisdom involve? Scholars disagree about how to answer these questions,<sup>8</sup> and their disagreements are complicated by the fact that Plato's dialogues seem to offer more than one Socrates and thus more than one exemplification of philosophy. Our would-be model threatens to dissolve.

This chapter seeks solidity about what Plato's Socrates loves and what activities constitute his wisdom-loving. In search of answers acceptable to readers who distinguish sharply among Plato's Socrateses,<sup>9</sup> and especially those who distinguish between a "Socratic" Socrates who asks questions and a "Platonic" Socrates who develops answers,<sup>10</sup> I focus on the *Apology*.<sup>11</sup> This "dialogue" explicitly characterizes Socrates' philosophizing and, as a defense of his life, is widely thought to portray a very "Socratic" Socrates. But to amplify the *Apology's* whispers, I give some voice to other dialogues, especially the more "Socratic" ones in which Socrates asks questions more than he develops answers.

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<sup>4</sup> This character was of course inspired by, and must resemble, the historical Socrates. For the problem of discovering the historical Socrates, see Lacey 1971 and Dorion 2011; cf. Jones and Sharma forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup> See §5 below; cf. *Grg.* 481c-482c, *Phd.* 60e-61a, *Rep.* VI 496a-c.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Peterson 2011, against Nehamas 1990 and Nightingale 1995.

<sup>7</sup> See *Euthydemus* with Hawtrey 1981 and Chance 1992 and *Gorgias* with Shaw 2015, 102-142. Cf. Barney 2006, McCoy 2008, IRWIN, and ASMIS.

<sup>8</sup> The vast literature includes Gulley 1968, Santas 1979, Kraut 1984, Reeve 1989, Vlastos 1991, Brickhouse and Smith 1994, Irwin 1995, 3-147, Benson 2000, Weiss 2006, Wolfsdorf 2008, McNeill 2010, Peterson 2011, Belfiore 2012, Moore 2015, Ahbel-Rappe 2018, and Prior 2019. Wolfsdorf (2013) surveys one prominent strand. Taylor (1998), Brickhouse and Smith (2000), Ahbel-Rappe (2009), and Rudebusch (2009) provide introductions.

<sup>9</sup> Wolfsdorf 2004, 76-79; Blondell 2002, 8-11.

<sup>10</sup> This broad, fuzzy distinction is reasonable and potentially significant, but sharp divisions and chronological speculations are dubious. Cf. INTRODUCTION; Vlastos 1991; Nails 1995; Kahn 1996 and 2003; Gill 2006; Brickhouse and Smith 2010, 11-42; BRANDWOOD.

<sup>11</sup> When citing Plato's texts, I refer to the most recent Oxford Classical Text edition (Slings 2003, Duke et al. 1995, Burnet 1901-1907); I omit the title for the *Apology*; and I use my revisions of the translations in Cooper 1997.

## 2. The Wisdom Socrates Loves

On trial for impiety, Socrates spends the first third of his defense (17a-24c) ignoring the official charges against him, to concentrate on earlier accusations. He worries he has developed a reputation that falsely prejudices the jurors against him, and he wants to clear the air.

The earlier accusers—including Aristophanes, in the *Clouds* (19c, 18d)—represent Socrates as one of the “nature-theorists [*phusiologoi*]” whom we often call “Presocratics” and as one of the “sophists” who teach rhetoric. Many fifth-century intellectuals counted as one or both of these,<sup>12</sup> but Socrates says he knows nothing of things in the heavens or under the earth and nothing of how to make the weaker argument stronger (19b-c). Elsewhere, he goes further to distance himself from these reputedly wise people by suggesting that the nature-theorists and sophists are pseudo-experts (*Phd.* 96a-99d; *Grg.* 462b-466a), although he remains open to genuine expertise in their fields (*Phd.* 97b-98b, 99b-c; *Grg.* 503a-b, 504d). In the *Apology*, he simply disavows their undertakings.

The earlier accusers also represent Socrates as someone who teaches the young how to be successful, for a fee. But Socrates says he lacks the expertise (*technē*) that would make him “a knower of human and political virtue” and enable him to teach others to live well (19d-20c, quoting 20b4-5). Elsewhere, he discusses this expertise obsessively, as something he and his interlocutors should want to find. In the *Apology*, he simply says such knowledge about how to live would be valuable, and claims not to have it.

Socrates’ responses prompt a question: how did people come to such mistaken views about him (20c)? He answers by telling a story about the Delphic oracle (20c-23b).<sup>13</sup> Socrates’ friend Chaerephon asked the oracle whether anyone was wiser than Socrates, and the oracle said no one was (21a). This pronouncement puzzled Socrates (21b) and inspired an unusual response that annoyed many but gave him the reputation of being wise (21b-23a). The details of this story begin to answer our two questions about Socrates’ love of wisdom.

To explain his puzzlement about the oracle, Socrates says, “I am aware (*sunoida*) that I am wise in nothing big or small (*oute mega oute smikron*)” (21b4-5). This phrase ‘big or small’ is not merely rhetorical. Socrates denies that he possesses the expertise the manual craftsmen do: they “know many honorable things” and are “in this way wiser than [he]” (22c-e). Such experts are another common

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<sup>12</sup> IRWIN.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Brickhouse and Smith 1989, 87-100; Stokes 1992.

obsession of the more “Socratic” dialogues, which are filled with talk of builders, doctors, and such (cf. *Grg.* 491a, *Smp.* 221e). Socrates treats each expertise (*technē*) as mastery of some particular work (*ergon*)—usually a product of activity but sometimes just an activity (*Chrm.* 165c-166a; *Euthd.* 290b-d)—and he assumes that the expert can make or do their particular work well, can correctly answer questions about their work, and can transmit their expertise to an apprentice.<sup>14</sup> In the *Apology*, while he admires such expertise as a kind of wisdom, Socrates contrasts it with something bigger:

But I thought, men of Athens, that the good craftsmen and poets made the same mistake—because each practiced his craft well, he thought he was also very wise with respect to other things, the biggest things (*ta megista*)—and I thought this mistake of theirs overshadowed their wisdom. (22d4-e1)

So when Socrates disavows all wisdom, big or small, he disclaims both expertise focused on some small work and wisdom about “the biggest things.”

What is this bigger wisdom? Translators often assume, reasonably, that the “biggest things” are especially weighty and thus important, and readers sometimes speculate that they include the cosmological matters that the nature-theorists explore (19b-c). But the context suggests another construal. The “biggest things” are contrasted with what a manual craftsman knows, which is a narrow domain defined by one particular kind of work. By contrast, then, the “biggest things” would be not simply important but also *broad*.<sup>15</sup> On this construal, big wisdom does not focus narrowly on one kind of work but concerns how to do everything one does—how to live. The most relevant earlier passage is not the one about the nature-theorists but the one about expertise concerning human and political virtue (20a-c; cf. 20d-e, 29e-30a). This construal certainly fits other, more “Socratic” dialogues, where Socrates finds people lacking wisdom not so much in cosmological matters as in questions of how to live virtuously and well.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Reeve 1989, 37-45, Roochnik 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the “biggest kinds” (*ta megista genē*) in *Sph.* 254b-257a.

<sup>16</sup> The usual reading of ‘biggest things’ as merely the most important supports the same conclusion, and agrees with other Platonic texts (e.g., *Alc.* I 118a; *Grg.* 527d-e; *Rep.* III 392a-b; *Leg.* X 890b). But taking *ta megista* to be the broadest and not merely the most important things helps us notice one way in which eristics and sophists are a special threat to philosophy: they, too, claim the broadest scope for their endeavors (*Euthd.* 274d, 275e and *Grg.* 451d, 452d-e, 456a-c, respectively). I thank Emily Fletcher for this. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaph.* Γ2 1004b17-26.

Given his own lack of wisdom big and small, Socrates' puzzlement is clear: why does the oracle credit him as the wisest? After failing to find anyone who has the bigger wisdom, Socrates arrives at an answer:

What is likely, men, is that in reality the god is wise, and in this oracle he means that human wisdom is worth little or nothing. He appears to say 'this one, Socrates' and to use my name in order to use me as an example, as if he were saying, "This one of you, human beings, is wisest who, like Socrates, has recognized that he is in truth worth nothing in relation to wisdom." (23a5-b4)

Socrates interprets the oracle tentatively, but he makes sense of its claim by introducing a third kind of wisdom that consists in grasping that one lacks (big) wisdom. This is a wisdom he can claim, but those he has examined cannot. Socrates calls it *human* wisdom, as though it were what befits a human and not a god (*cf.* 20d-e). Moreover, Socrates does not take the oracle's point to concern only him. He takes the god to be saying that the wisest human being has the merely human wisdom that Socrates has, and he presents this as a perfectly general truth, applicable to any human being anywhere, at any time. So the oracle means that no human *could* be wiser than Socrates, and Socrates follows the Delphic injunction 'Know thyself' in a traditional way,<sup>17</sup> by understanding himself *as a human being*, a mortal incapable of immortal things (*cf.* 42a, *Hi.Ma.* 289b, *Phdr.* 278d).<sup>18</sup>

One might wonder whether Socrates identifies his human wisdom with some expertise, as he does the big and small wisdom he lacks.<sup>19</sup> He explicitly contrasts his general ignorance not with *all* expertise, but with the expertise *manual* craftsmen possess (22c-d; *cf.* *Grg.* 450a-e). Perhaps he intentionally leaves room to avow some non-manual expertise. Perhaps Socrates realizes he has some dialectical expertise (*Euphr.* 11d), including erotic expertise in how to desire well, by asking questions in pursuit of the truth (*Smp.* 177d; *cf.* *Lys.* 204c, *Phdr.* 257a), and midwifing expertise in how to test the fruits of good desire, by examining answers (*Tht.* 149a). Scholars typically ignore this possibility and attribute especially midwifery to a less "Socratic" Socrates.<sup>20</sup> But the possibility is not blocked by Socrates' disavowal of all wisdom big and small (21b) or his claim of general ignorance (22c-d). He qualifies these when he admits that he has some human wisdom, and nothing prevents him from

<sup>17</sup> Burkert 1985, 148; *cf.* Moore 2015, 22-31.

<sup>18</sup> Forster 2006; *cf.* Benson 2000, 180-185.

<sup>19</sup> These speculations are indebted to Verity Harte.

<sup>20</sup> See, *e.g.*, Burnyeat 1977. *Cf.* Sedley 2004, LaBarge 2005, Reeve 2006, Belfiore 2012.

identifying his human wisdom with some non-manual expertise. Nor is the possibility blocked by his assumption that expertise is teachable, since Socrates expresses confidence that he has inspired dialectical skill in others (39c-d, *cf.* 23c, 37d).<sup>21</sup>

Speculation about Socratic expertise aside, Socrates' story about the oracle reveals three kinds of wisdom: the narrow wisdom of craftsmen, bigger wisdom concerning human virtue, and human wisdom. Which of these does he love? If love is not inexplicable—if it tracks what is good and beautiful, or at least what the lover perceives as good and beautiful<sup>22</sup>—then neither human wisdom nor the wisdom of limited technical expertise would be valuable enough to inspire Socrates' love. So understood, he must love the wisdom of the “biggest things,” expertise about how to live. This certainly fits what he says in other, more “Socratic” dialogues, where he talks often about this expertise about living. In fact, in those dialogues, he usually calls such expertise “wisdom” full-stop and does not apply the word to any narrow expertise or his own awareness of ignorance. We, too, can use ‘wisdom’ without qualification to refer to the expertise about living that Socrates loves.

### 3. Loving by Honoring: Philosophy as Critique

Socrates' story about the oracle also begins to answer our second question, concerning what activities his love of wisdom involves. After inferring what the god meant by saying that no one is wiser than he, Socrates infers what he should do:

Thus even now I go around to inquire, in accordance with the god, and to seek among citizens and foreigners anyone I might think wise, and whenever he does not seem wise to me, I aid the god and show that he is not wise. And because of this work, I haven't had the leisure to do anything worth mentioning of the polis' business or of my household's, but I live in significant poverty on account of my service to the god. (23b4-c1)

Although Socrates understands the oracle to mean that no human could be wise, his interpretation is tentative, so he proceeds as though he could be mistaken. He continues to seek people who might be

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<sup>21</sup> Socrates' dialectical expertise would be atypical, for it would be identified with the “worthless” product, human wisdom, that it creates and sustains, and Socrates teaches it not as a master transmits expertise to an apprentice but by inspiring imitation (see §5 below). Also, this skill would differ from both the dialectic Socrates disavows in less “Socratic” dialogues (*Rep.* VI 506c-e with VII 531d-535a, 537c; *Phdr.* 262d with 259e-274b) and the dialectic the Eleatic Stranger of the *Sophist* and *Statesman* develops and calls “philosophy” (*Sph.* 249c-d, 253c-254b; *cf.* 259d-260a).

<sup>22</sup> See the *Lysis* (esp. 216d) with Obdrzalek 2013 and *Symposium* (esp. 201a-c) with OBDRZALEK.

wise, but not merely to test his interpretation of the oracle. He also takes himself to be helping the god—presumably Apollo, the god of the Delphic oracle—when he shows that a person who seems to be wise is not. Socrates will later say that there is more to his service than this, but for now, he says that his examinations serve Apollo by disseminating the message that wisdom is divine, not human. That is, Socrates examines others to *honor* wisdom. But honoring wisdom is one way of loving wisdom. So Socrates has just identified critique as part of his wisdom-loving.

Socrates the critic has inspired skeptics,<sup>23</sup> but the Socrates of the *Apology* is no skeptic.<sup>24</sup> He does not even disavow all knowledge. He claims to know, for example, that his examinations annoy people (24a) and that were he to continue his examinations in another city, young people would flock to him (37d).<sup>25</sup> This need not contradict his disavowal of wisdom, big and small (21b), or even his claim of general ignorance, as compared to the manual craftsmen (22c-d). Those claims concern expert knowledge, and he might think that some things are knowable without expertise, by ordinary human experience.<sup>26</sup> Anyone can know who Chaerephon is (21a) or how to get to Larissa (*M.* 97a).<sup>27</sup>

Still, the things Socrates knows without expertise are trivial (*Euthd.* 293b). He assumes that the “biggest things” concerning how to live are knowable only with systematic mastery. This explains why Socrates thinks Meletus is ignorant in charging him with corrupting the youth unless Meletus can explain what corruption is and identify other corrupters (24c-26b). Elsewhere, Socrates’ assumption

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<sup>23</sup> Cicero, *Acad.* 1.16, 1.44-46. Cf. Bett 2006.

<sup>24</sup> That is, Socrates bears no resemblance to the “rustic” skeptic who suspends judgment about everything. He might resemble an “urbane” skeptic who suspends judgment only about non-evident matters. For the (contentious) distinction, see Burnyeat and Frede 1997.

<sup>25</sup> Both times, Socrates uses the verb *oida* (“I know”), which is an ordinary way of making a knowledge claim, contrasted with “I opine” (*doxazō*), “I think” (*oiomai*), and “it seems to me” (*dokei moi*). The verb *epistamai* (“I know” or “I understand”) is less common, but can be used interchangeably with *oida* (as at *M.* 97a-b; cf. 22c-d).

<sup>26</sup> Contrast the distinction between expert and non-expert knowledge drawn by Reeve (1989, 37-53) and Woodruff (1990). They distinguish two different ways of knowing the same facts or activities (and run into problems—cf. Reeve 1989, 58-62). I distinguish two sets of facts and activities. On my interpretation, a claim to knowledge is always justified by mastery, but for some facts and activities, this mastery is provided only by ordinary experience, and for others, only by expertise.

<sup>27</sup> Socrates occasionally avows knowledge of epistemological or logical matters (e.g., *M.* 98b and *Prt.* 360e-361a, respectively). Presumably, he puts these in the class of things knowable without expertise, or he treats them as parts of his dialectical skill that includes the erotic and midwifery arts. (Meno’s response at *M.* 98b might suggest the former.) Either way, he can similarly claim to *know* that he lacks wisdom, and we do not need to assume that his grasp (*sunoida*, 21b5; *egnōken*, 23b3) of this falls short of knowledge. Cf. Fine 2008.

plays a prominent role, as he insists, for instance, that if Euthyphro knows that it is pious to prosecute his father, he must be able to explain what piety is (*Euphr.* 4a-5d).<sup>28</sup>

Given this assumption, and his lack of expertise about virtue, Socrates should disavow knowledge about virtue. Even if he has justified confidence in many claims about virtue, he should not think he *knows* them. But in the *Apology*, he says,

...and if I should affirm that I am wiser than anyone, it would be in this, that what I do not sufficiently know about things in Hades, so, too, I do not think that I know. But I do know that it is bad and shameful to do injustice and to disobey one's superior, whether god or human.  
(29b2-7)

Here and in three other passages (37b, *Euthd.* 296e-297a, *Grg.* 521c-d), a "Socratic" Socrates claims knowledge about virtue.<sup>29</sup> These passages are hard to square with a narrowly critical Socrates.

#### 4. Loving by Pursuing: Philosophy as Learning

In fact, Socrates' account of the oracle has already assumed that critique does not exhaust his philosophizing. Consider again how he compares himself to the manual craftsmen. After noting that their limited wisdom was accompanied by a mistaken claim to be wise in the "biggest things," Socrates says,

I asked myself on behalf of the oracle whether I would prefer to be in the condition I am in, not being wise in their wisdom or ignorant in their ignorance, or to have both the things they have. I answered, to myself and the oracle, that it profits me to be as I am. (22e1-e6)

Socrates prefers human wisdom without technical wisdom to technical wisdom without human wisdom. Why?

Human wisdom is worth "little or nothing" (23a, *Smp.* 175e). So it is not *by itself* more valuable than the limited wisdom the experts have. One might think that it is instrumentally valuable because it fosters humility and a sensible conservatism. Elsewhere, Socrates finds something risky about prosecuting one's father without knowing what piety is (*Euphr.* 4a-b, 4e, 15d-e). Perhaps he thinks that someone aware of his ignorance would not be so bold.<sup>30</sup> After all, later skeptics often go for

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Benson (2000, 112-141; 2013a) on "the priority of definition."

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Wolfsdorf 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Benson 2000, 245-246, retracted by Benson 2013b. Cf. Shaw 2015, 61-62.

conservatism.<sup>31</sup> But Socrates is not at all conservative. In the *Apology*, he challenges ordinary Athenian values and insists that he will not give up doing so, even to escape death (*Ap.* 28b-30b, discussed in §5). So conservatism does not explain why Socrates is better off than the craftsmen.

Socrates' confidence in his own convictions suggests a more promising explanation. He thinks that his beliefs about how to live are better than theirs, and that it is better to have superior beliefs about how to live, without any limited expertise, than to have inferior beliefs about how to live, with some limited expertise.<sup>32</sup> But his conclusion depends on more than just human wisdom. If all he had was awareness of his own ignorance, without any grounds for confidence in his beliefs about how to live, he would not be justified in thinking himself better off. So what explains his confidence in his beliefs about how to live? For that matter, what explains his realization that he lacks wisdom, a realization that predates Chaerephon's visit to the oracle (because it explains Socrates' puzzled response)? Finally, what explains Chaerephon's thought that Socrates is especially wise, the thought Chaerephon took to Delphi?<sup>33</sup>

The simplest answer to these questions is that Socrates loved wisdom *and started pursuing it* long before Chaerephon went to Delphi.<sup>34</sup> There is no reason to suppose that Socrates always thought wisdom unattainable, since he presents this as a thought he reached *after* he tested the oracle. Nor need we suppose that he was initially motivated by any awareness of general ignorance. Mere curiosity or wonder (*cf. Tht.* 155d) about particular questions he could not easily answer could have stimulated Socrates, as some love of wisdom could prompt the pursuit of answers to such questions. Then, by pursuing understanding and falling short, he could have learned that he lacks wisdom—thus his puzzlement at the oracle—and that some attitudes are defensible without inconsistency whereas others are not—thus his confidence that he is better off than the craftsmen. Finally, because his continued pursuits prompted witnesses to attribute wisdom to him (23a), his earlier pursuits could have prompted Chaerephon to do the same.

So understood, Socrates' longstanding love and pursuit of wisdom made him confident that it is wrong to disobey one's superior (29b, *cf.* 37b), that his way of life is better than other

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<sup>31</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *PHI* 23-24; Montaigne I 23 "Of Custom...;" Descartes, *Discourse III*.

<sup>32</sup> I thank Nicholas D. Smith for clarification here.

<sup>33</sup> Kraut 1984, 271n43; Reeve 1989, 31-32; Brickhouse and Smith 1989, 87-100.

<sup>34</sup> Socrates' response to the oracle—examining it (*elegxōn*, 21c1) to determine what it means—also suggests prior experience with examination. I thank Casey Perin for this.

Athenians' (28b-32e, 37e-38a), and that his accusers cannot harm him (30c-d). He cannot consistently believe that he *knows* these things, since he takes such knowledge to require the wisdom or expertise that he lacks. But he can consistently suppose that his beliefs are well tested, unlike those of most people.

Why, then, does he sometimes claim to know something about virtue (29b, 37b, *Euthd.* 296e-297a, *Grg.* 521c-d)? Some readers suppose that he sometimes wants to mark the fact that his beliefs are unusually well-tested, so he exaggerates and says he knows.<sup>35</sup> But this seems unacceptable when Socrates explicitly prides himself for *not* misconstruing his ignorance as knowledge (29a-b).<sup>36</sup> Other readers suppose that Socrates' claims to ethical knowledge do not exaggerate at all, because he thinks his tested, coherent beliefs about virtue constitute a distinct kind of knowledge that lies between the mere opinion most people have and the full mastery only gods have.<sup>37</sup> But Socrates does not explicitly say any such thing, and if he really thought that his tested, coherent grasp of virtue constituted a kind of knowledge, he should claim to know a lot more about virtue than he does. It would make more sense of his practices if there were something special about the particular theses about virtue that he claims to know. Perhaps there is.<sup>38</sup> At their core, his problematic knowledge claims look like conceptual, necessary truths: the good obey the better (29b, 37b),<sup>39</sup> do not accuse the innocent (*Grg.* 521c-d), and are not unjust (*Euthd.* 296e-297a). Perhaps Socrates has inquired enough to be fully confident of these definitional entailments among goodness, justice, and obedience, even though he has not achieved complete mastery of what justice or goodness is, since that would include the ability to identify and explain instances. Thus, he might think his examinations establish that certain conceptual claims about justice and goodness are true, without establishing general knowledge, even of a secondary sort, of what justice or goodness is. Unfortunately, the more "Socratic"

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<sup>35</sup> Irwin 1995, 29; Benson 2000, 236-238; Forster 2006, 15-16nn35-36.

<sup>36</sup> Vasiliou 2008, 37.

<sup>37</sup> Vlastos 1985. *Cf.* Leshner 1987; McPartland 2013.

<sup>38</sup> These speculations are indebted to Jeremy Henry. *Cf.* Vasiliou 2008, 27-39; Peterson 2011, 42-56.

<sup>39</sup> The penalty Socrates knows to be evil (37b) is to cease philosophizing and thus disobey the god (*cf.* 29b-30b, 37e-38a). The other penalties Socrates canvasses (death, exile, imprisonment, fine) are not evil for Socrates, at least not if evils harm their possessors (*cf.* 30c-d). *Cf.* Vasiliou 2008, 34.

dialogues say nothing programmatic to encourage this suggestion.<sup>40</sup> Still, it both explains why Socrates avows ethical knowledge only when he does, and it potentially justifies his doing so.

Speculation about Socrates' exceptional knowledge claims aside, the present account makes Socrates the philosopher a learner as well as a critic. His love of wisdom is longstanding; that love includes pursuit; and that pursuit has to some extent succeeded. While Socrates lacks wisdom and is thus not justified in claiming that he knows about how to live, he rightly takes himself to have acquired better beliefs—to have learned.

Some readers will doubt this. First, some will doubt that Socrates always pursues wisdom. Even if he pursued it for years before the oracle's pronouncement, once he interprets the oracle to mean that wisdom is unattainable for a human being, would he not drop the pursuit? What is the point of pursuing an unreachable goal?<sup>41</sup> It is true that some goals are not worth pursuing unless they can be attained. But not all goals are like this. Consider someone who thinks they could not perform Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* perfectly. They could still think it worthwhile to pursue this goal, because the pursuit could bring progress and it would be valuable to be able to play the piece *better*. Moreover, even if they should feel stuck in a rut, unable to make further progress, they might think that the attempt at progress—the activity of practicing—is intrinsically valuable. Socrates' pursuit of wisdom has earned him confidence in his beliefs about how to live. So he is well positioned to believe that he could make further progress by continued pursuit. But even if he had progressed as far as he could, given his limitations, he might have learned that pursuing wisdom is itself a valuable activity (see §5 below).

Other readers will doubt that Socrates' pursuit has made any progress by wondering *how* his examinations foster learning. The fabled “Socratic method” of questioning and testing the answers with more questions is only briefly used in the *Apology*, where Socrates questions Meletus and finds him to have inconsistent beliefs (24c-28a). Elsewhere, Socratic examination is more fully on display, and such inconsistencies are the regular result. But how does this help anyone learn? Even if it is valuable to recognize that one's beliefs are inconsistent, this does not help settle what one should do

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<sup>40</sup> In the less “Socratic” *Republic*, Socrates suggests that necessary, definitional truths are knowable but not opinable while contingent, perceptual matters are opinable but not knowable (V-VII 475c-535a). This recasts the distinction between things knowable only by expertise and things knowable only by ordinary experience (*cf.* n. 26), restricting what can be known by the more demanding cognition to necessary, definitional truths and demoting the less demanding cognition based on ordinary experience.

<sup>41</sup> Benson 2000, 182; Forster 2006.

next. At least one belief is false, but which (and how many)? So how does Socratic examination manage to make progress toward wisdom?<sup>42</sup> It is true that an isolated iteration of Socratic examination cannot yield a positive conclusion. But large sets of overlapping examinations establish patterns. Over time, little by little, Socrates learns that *these* beliefs cohere, whereas *those* introduce inconsistency, and he develops beliefs that hang together systematically.<sup>43</sup>

This might still seem insufficient. Even if, over time, Socrates can advance toward coherence, beliefs can cohere without being true. In the most “Socratic” dialogues, Socrates simply assumes that by inquiring sincerely into what is true people tend to track what is true. But less “Socratic” dialogues suggest a way of potentially justifying this assumption: perhaps humans have some innate knowledge (*M.* 81a-e, 85b-86b, *Phd.* 72e-73b).<sup>44</sup>

Whatever might explain (and justify?) Socrates’ faith in learning by examination, we should note that the more “Socratic” dialogues are filled with evidence that he *claims* to learn. He repeatedly insists that in examining others, he also examines himself (28e, *Chrm.* 166c-d, *Prt.* 348c-e, *Grg.* 505e-506a).<sup>45</sup> Additionally, he reveals goals for his examinations—agreement with himself (*Grg.* 482a-c, cf. *Hi.Mi.* 376b), clarity (*Chrm.* 166d, *Prt.* 360e-361a, *Grg.* 505e) and stability (e.g., *Euphr.* 11b-c, *Prt.* 356d, *Hi.Mi.* 376c)—that offer criteria for assessing his progress. Finally, throughout the more “Socratic” dialogues, Socrates suggests he has made progress, by confidently insisting on certain turns in the inquiry. He suggests to Euthyphro, for instance, that piety is a species of justice (*Euphr.* 11e-12a), and he suggests to Charmides that temperance is good for a person as a feature of their character and not merely of how they behave (*Chrm.* 158e-159a, 160d-e). Repeatedly, he suggests that things are good only if they are honorable (e.g., *Chrm.* 159a-161b; *La.* 192c-d).

These features of Socrates’ examinations give the lie to the impression that he is merely a critic, or worse, an unhelpful, hostile critic. They also help to explain why Socrates thinks he has gained some justification for the beliefs about how to live that he expresses so confidently in the *Apology*. After all, he presents himself as wise (though only humanly so, 23a-b), courageous (especially in the pursuit of wisdom, 28b-29d), temperate (in ignoring money and the pleasures it buys, 29d-30b,

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<sup>42</sup> For this “problem of the elenchus,” see Vlastos 1983, Benson 2000, 32-95. Cf. G.A. Scott 2002.

<sup>43</sup> Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 10-29; Gentzler 1994; Irwin 1995, 17-30.

<sup>44</sup> Note, too, the related concerns about how to start inquiring from a position of ignorance: see *Charmides* with Tuozzo 2011 and *Meno* with D. Scott 2006 and FINE.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *Sph.* 218b-d, *Plt.* 258b-c, 285c-d.

31b-c, 36b-c), pious (by serving Apollo, 23b, 29b-d, 30e-31b), just (especially in politics, 31c-33a, 37a-b), and generally good (28a-b, 32e, 41d; *cf. Grg.* 521c-d). At first glance, this self-presentation conflicts with Socrates' admission that he lacks wisdom and his tenet, clearest elsewhere, that virtue is or requires knowledge or wisdom (*cf.* 29e-30a).<sup>46</sup> But if he has made enough progress to be confident that he possesses well-tested, true beliefs about how to live, and if he lives in accordance with those beliefs, he can reasonably conclude that he *approximates* wisdom and virtue.<sup>47</sup>

In fact, a third group of readers will doubt the present account by claiming that Socrates thinks he more than approximates wisdom and virtue. These readers suppose that he is merely shamming when he disavows wisdom.<sup>48</sup> But this gives too much credit to Socrates' learning and neglects his insistence that wisdom belongs only to the gods.<sup>49</sup> Socrates might think that wisdom is "simply" knowledge of what is good and bad (*e.g., Chrm.* 174a-d, *La.* 194c-199e), but on his view, knowledge or expertise about a domain requires being able to survive examination about that domain. So if Socrates is not confident that he can survive examination about everything to do with good and bad—at least everything that it takes to be a knower<sup>50</sup>—he cannot be confident that he has wisdom. One further thing would give him pause. If he were wise about how to live, he would be able to transmit his expertise to apprentices. But Socrates doubts whether anyone can do this.<sup>51</sup>

## 5. Loving by Living: Philosophy as Teaching

According to Socrates' account of the oracle, he has honored wisdom by examining others and thus serving Apollo, and he has pursued wisdom, thereby acquiring better beliefs about how to live and thus improving his life. By honoring and pursuing wisdom, then, his love of wisdom has clearly

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<sup>46</sup> For this tenet and the related question of the "unity of virtues," see *Euthd.* 281e, *M.* 88b-89a, and especially the *Laches* and *Protagoras* with Penner 1973; Vlastos 1981, 221-269; Devereux 1992; and Brickhouse and Smith 2010, 154-167.

<sup>47</sup> Shaw 2011.

<sup>48</sup> Gulley 1968, 62-73; Senn 2013. *Cf. Rep.* I 337a.

<sup>49</sup> Even the less "Socratic" Socrates who suggests wise philosopher-rulers are in principle possible (Burnyeat 1992) restricts the scope of their wisdom so that it does not include mastery over perceptibles (*Rep.* VIII 546a-b with n. 40) and falls short of what the gods enjoy (*Rep.* X 613a-b).

<sup>50</sup> *Cf. Euthd.* 293b-294a; Benson 2000, 162, 250-252. One might wonder how much one needs to know to be a knower about how to live. Does one need to know, say, the geometrical structure of nature? Compare *Grg.* 507e-508b with the less "Socratic" *Republic* VI-VII and *Timaeus*.

<sup>51</sup> See the *Protagoras* and *Meno* with Kraut 1984, 285-304.

benefited *him*. But what about the people he has annoyed with his examinations (22e-23a, 24a)? Is the love of wisdom a selfish enterprise? Later in the *Apology*, Socrates confronts this objection. After responding to the earlier accusations and clarifying his own relation to wisdom (17a-24c) and after briefly addressing the formal charges against him (24c-28b), Socrates imagines that someone might find something shameful about his love of wisdom (28b) and his avoidance of the political work that helps fellow-citizens (31c). In reply, Socrates insists that he will not quit philosophizing (*philosophhein*) for any reason and that no greater benefit than his philosophizing has come to Athens. This full-throated defense transforms his model of philosophy.

Socrates' jurors find something shameful in philosophizing partly because they misidentify it. Socrates noted this earlier:

And whenever someone asks them [*viz.*, those charging Socrates with corrupting the young] what he [*viz.*, Socrates] does and what he teaches, they are silent and ignorant, but in order that they not seem to be at a loss, they make the familiar charges against all who philosophize [*philosophountōn*], about “things in the sky and things below the earth,” “not believing in the gods,” and “making the weaker argument stronger.” (23d2-7)

According to the “familiar” conception, the philosophizers are atheistical nature-theorists and sophists. Socrates has distanced himself from those activities, but his audience has no other conception of philosophizing. To defend philosophizing, Socrates must say what it is.

Thus, when he repeatedly insists that he will not stop philosophizing (28d-30b), Socrates never uses the verb *philosophhein* by itself but always adds another verb, to explain what he means. The first time he does this, he says,

I would do terrible things, men of Athens, if I had risked death and remained at my station (as anyone else would) when men you had elected to rule over me at Potidaea, Amphipolis, and Delium had stationed me, but now, when, as I have thought and supposed, the god stations me to live by philosophizing *and by examining* myself and others, I should leave my post for fear of death or anything else. (28d10-29a1, emphasis added)

Socrates is not saying that the god stations him to do two separate activities, philosophizing and examining himself and others. These participles are linked by an epexegetic ‘and’, which conjoins not two separate things but a second that explains the first.<sup>52</sup> Such conjunctions are common and occur several times in this chapter (*e.g.*, Socrates “exaggerates *and* says he knows”). Socrates must be using

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. Strycker and Slings 1994, 134; Stokes 1997, *ad loc.*; Peterson 2011, 39.

an epexegetic ‘and’ here because he must be identifying philosophizing for his audience (and *cf.* 29c6-d1).

But Socrates is not content to explain philosophizing as examining. Soon after, he adds, Men of Athens, I am grateful and I am your friend, but I will obey the god rather than you, and as long as I breathe and am able, I shall not cease philosophizing *and exhorting you and showing* any one of you whom I happen to meet, saying in my customary way, “Best of men, since you are a citizen of Athens, the greatest city and a city most famous for wisdom and power, aren’t you ashamed to care to get as much money, reputation, and honor as you can, while you do not care for or think about wisdom and truth and the best condition of your soul?” (29d2-e3, emphasis added)

Again, Socrates does not let the participle ‘philosophizing’ stand alone, where it might mislead his audience. Again, ‘philosophizing’ is followed by an epexegetic ‘and’ and then another participle to explain what he means. This time, though, the explanation is provided by a closely conjoined (by *te kai*) pair of participles ‘exhorting’ and ‘showing’, which he *further* explains by a fourth participle (‘saying’, in simple apposition) that introduces the content of what he exhorts and shows. This sentence is complicated, but its point is simple: Socrates says that when he exhorts others to care about the right things, he is philosophizing (*cf. Euthd.* 275a).

In the ensuing lines, Socrates clarifies that exhortation is not subordinate to examination. He continues,

And if one of you should dispute and insist that he does care [*viz.*, about wisdom and truth and the best condition of his soul], I will not immediately let him go or leave him, but I will ask him and examine him and test him, and if I think that he does not possess virtue but claims to possess it, I shall reproach him because he makes the least of things worth the most and makes more of worse things. (29e3-30a3)

Some people whom Socrates exhorts to care about the best condition of their souls insist that they *do* care. This prompts Socrates to examine them, presumably in the hope of finding that they have successfully cultivated some virtue and put their souls into good condition. But when they prove to lack knowledge (and thereby virtue!), he exhorts some more, because he thinks that people who *claim* to care about virtue but do not cultivate it are failing to attach as much value to the cultivation of virtue as they should. Strikingly, the activity of examination here is *not* Socrates’ ultimate focus.

Rather, it is one part of a larger pattern of activity that aims at cultivating wisdom and virtue in others (*cf. Cleit.* 407a, 410b).

Examination remains important, of course. Examination can make Socrates' interlocutors aware of their ignorance and bring them closer to human wisdom. Human wisdom is not by itself valuable, but it does remove the conceit that one is already wise, which is an obstacle to the pursuit of wisdom. Indeed, awareness of one's ignorance might ignite desire for the wisdom one lacks.<sup>53</sup> But it might not: despair or hatred of inquiry might set in (21e, 22e-23a, 24a-b; *cf. Smp.* 215d-216b, *Phd.* 89c-91c). So examination and its product, human wisdom, are not enough. Socrates needs to exhort his interlocutors, too, so that they will pursue wisdom and seek improved beliefs about how to live.

Socrates immediately reinforces the centrality of moral suasion to his mission as a philosopher:

I will do these things [*viz.*, exhort them to care about wisdom and virtue, test them if they say they do care, and reproach them if they turn out not to be virtuous] to anyone whom I meet, whether younger or older, whether citizen or foreigner, but especially to citizens, to the extent that you are closer to my people. For the god orders these things, know well, and I think no greater good has come to be for you in the city than my service to the god. For I go around doing nothing other than persuading the younger and older among you not to care for your bodies or money before or as intently as the best condition of your soul,<sup>54</sup> by saying "Virtue does not come to be from money, but from virtue money and all other things become good for human beings, both individually and collectively."<sup>55</sup> (30a3-30b4)

Socrates has transformed his account of his mission. According to his story about the oracle, he aids Apollo by examining people, which tests and disseminates the god's message about wisdom. Now, Socrates insists that he serves Apollo by seeking to persuade others to care less for capital and more for virtue (*cf.* 36c-d). Moreover, he has now explicitly characterized both kinds of service as philosophizing. On Socrates' view, then, the god wants human beings to be virtuous but needs human help to achieve this goal, and philosophizing helps to achieve it by fostering both the awareness that

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<sup>53</sup> *Cf. M.* 84a-c, *Lys.* 218a-b, *Smp.* 203e-204a, with OBDZALEK.

<sup>54</sup> 'Bodies or money' replaces 'money, reputation, and honor' (from 29d9-e1). *Cf. Phd.* 68b-c and *Rep.* IX 580d-581c with VII 518d-e.

<sup>55</sup> In translating the last clause, I follow Burnet 1924, *ad loc.*; Stokes 1997, *ad loc.*; and Burnyeat 2003. *Cf.* Burnyeat 1971, 210; Strycker and Slings 1994, *ad loc.* and 138-140; and Brickhouse and Smith 2010, 172-189.

wisdom belongs only to the gods *and* a commitment to trying, nonetheless, to become wise and virtuous like the gods.<sup>56</sup> So philosophizing is not a selfish enterprise.

This expanded conception of philosophy prompts questions. First, how exactly can Socrates understand exhorting others as an instance of loving wisdom? To answer, Socrates could first clarify what it is to love and pursue wisdom. Some things that we love and pursue, we seek merely to be close to. One person, smitten, seeks to be in the company of another. Someone else seeks to own a beautiful vase. But wisdom is not like another person or an artifact. When Socrates pursues wisdom, he wants not merely to be in the company of wisdom or merely to have it in any old sense. He wants to *be* wise, and for him to be wise, as a living being, would be to live wisely.<sup>57</sup> So when Socrates loves and pursues wisdom, he loves and pursues living wisely.

With living wisely established as philosophy's goal, it would remain to explain why pursuing this goal includes exhorting others to virtue. The essential point is that trying to live wisely requires cooperation with others. This might occur especially naturally to Socrates, given his "love of humanity" (*philanthrōpia*, *Euphr.* 3d7), but insofar as Socratic examination is central to trying to live wisely, *anyone* trying to live wisely should see the need for cooperation. So Socrates' adherence to cooperative norms (29b, 32d), his strong preference for the company of good fellows rather than wicked ones (25c-d), and his exhortations are not extraneous to his wisdom-loving.

What Socrates says outside the *Apology* adds two important layers to this explanation. First, he suggests that virtue is or requires wisdom (see n. 46, *cf.* 29e-30a), so helping people become virtuous must help them become wise. This tempts readers to think that Socrates has a narrowly intellectual conception of virtue, or that his conception of philosophizing outside the *Apology* is focused more on intellectual examination and less on exhortation. But even if every virtue is identical with wisdom, Socrates need not think intellectual achievement alone secures virtue. He might think the intellectual achievement requires some cultivation of affect and desire. Indeed, he *does* seem to think this. Throughout the *Apology*, Socrates shows sensitivity to others' emotions: the anger, humiliation, and envy of those he examines (21d, 22e-23a, 23c-d, 28a-b, 31a); the pleasure of onlookers (23c, 33c); the Athenians' ambition, greed, fear of death, and shame (23d-e, 28b, 29d-e, 30a-b); and the jurors'

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<sup>56</sup> *Euphr.* 13e-14c with Taylor 1982. *Cf.* Reeve 1989, 62-73; McPherran 1996; Burnyeat 1997; Forster 2007. *Cf.*, too, *Rep.* X 613a-b, *Tht.* 176b, *Ti.* 90b-d, *Leg.* IV 715e-718c.

<sup>57</sup> Plato's Socrates often identifies being wise with acting wisely, and sometimes means by 'virtue' or 'medicine' what the virtuous or doctors know and sometimes what they do (*e.g.*, *Grp.* 460a-c). Aristotle criticizes this (*e.g.*, *EN* I 8 1098b31-1099a7), but with the possible exception of the comatose, no one who entirely fails to act wisely is wise.

potential sympathies with him (34b-35b) as well as their surprise or even outrage at him (17c-d, 20e, 21a, 27b, 30c, 31e, 34b-d, 37a). Elsewhere, too, Socrates regularly appeals to his interlocutors' sense of honor or shame and confronts their emotions.<sup>58</sup> That is why, even if he thinks that every virtue is identical with wisdom, he does not limit his philosophizing mission to intellectual examination.

A second layer is added by Socrates' suggestion elsewhere that everyone has the ultimate goal of living well, that is, success (*eudaimonia*) (*Euthd.* 278e, 282a; *Smp.* 205a). This puts Socrates' commitment to living wisely in new light. Either his goal of living wisely is subordinate to his ultimate goal of living well, or they are the same goal. The evidence in more "Socratic" dialogues suggests the latter: Socrates identifies living well with doing well, doing well with acting virtuously, and acting virtuously with acting wisely.<sup>59</sup> This helps to explain why Socrates prefers to die rather than to cease philosophizing. For him, there is no distinction between his ultimate goal of living well and the goal of acting wisely or being wise, so to cease philosophizing would be to give up on the point of living (*cf.* 38a). This also helps to explain why Socrates thinks philosophizing is so valuable. Because acting wisely is the ultimate goal, it is unconditionally valuable. Although only a god can be wise and live wisely, Socrates' philosophizing best approximates that goal, so nothing can be better for him than his philosophizing (*cf.* 38a).<sup>60</sup> Last, this additional layer helps to explain why *others* should philosophize. In the *Apology*, Socrates is on trial for impiety, so he frequently insists that he philosophizes because Apollo has told him to. This is a special reason to philosophize that others would not share (33c), but his general reason—that philosophizing best approximates living well—is available to others (*cf.* 38a).<sup>61</sup>

A second question about Socrates' expanded account of philosophizing concerns whether it answers the objection he faces. Even if his philosophizing aims to benefit others and so is not entirely

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<sup>58</sup> Blank 1993, Devereux 1995, Singpurwalla 2006, Austin 2013, Brickhouse and Smith (2010) reconcile this with "motivational intellectualism"—the thesis that everyone always does what they believe to be best (*cf.* Reshotko 2006 and Penner 2011)—though perhaps they should not (Kamtekar 2017). *Cf.* the less "Socratic" Socrates' division of the soul to explain non-rational affect and desire, with Barney *et al.* 2012.

<sup>59</sup> The first two identities are expressed at *Cri.* 48b; assumed at *Chrm.* 171e-172a, *Grg.* 507b-c, and perhaps 28b; and used in *Euthd.* 278e-282d, *M.* 87c-89a, and *Rep.* I 352d-354a. For the third identity, see n. 46, with 29e-30a. *Cf.* Zeyl 1982; Irwin 1986; Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 103-136; Morrison 2003; Bobonich 2011.

<sup>60</sup> Whether Socrates approximates living well closely enough to count as being successful (*eudaimōn*) is unclear. He might think that *eudaimonia*, like wisdom, is beyond human reach during this life (*cf.* 36d). *Cf.* Smith 2016, Jones 2016. In any case, he should not say that he *has made* anyone successful, although he could say that he *is making* people successful, especially to insist that he has their genuine *eudaimonia* as his target (41c; *cf.* *Grg.* 527c).

<sup>61</sup> *Cf.* Ebrey 2017.

selfish, does it fully replace the political work that he avoids? Socrates admits that he has largely avoided public affairs and gives two reasons why. He says that his service to the god examining people has left him with no time for political work (23b), and that if he had engaged more in public affairs, his commitment to justice would have led to his death long ago and thus cut short his help for others (31d-32a).<sup>62</sup> These are quite different reasons. The second suggests that public engagement would have been preferable had the Athenians been more just, whereas the first does not. Perhaps there is no inconsistency, though. Perhaps Socrates thinks that public work is *generally* preferable if one's community is just, but would not be preferable *for him* even if the Athenians had been just, because *he* has a special obligation to Apollo. So understood, he gives two reasons because he wants to record the second, but the first by itself was enough for him (*cf.* 28d-29d, 37b, 38a). Thus, Socrates *is* vulnerable to the charge that he has minimized his engagement with civic affairs.

Socrates answers, in effect, that his philosophizing—his examining, his pursuing, and his exhorting—does what politics is supposed to do, by striving to benefit others. His examinations foster clarity, which is a common good (*Chrm.* 166d, *Grg.* 505e), and pursue wisdom, which would also be shareable, and most importantly, both his examinations and his exhortations seek to move people toward virtue, which is good not just for the more virtuous but also for others. In the *Apology*, he does not call this political work, but he does say that he does more good for Athenians than anyone else (36c-d) and even that he is god's gift to Athens (30e-31b)! Elsewhere, he declares, more explicitly, that he, alone among Athenians, does the work of politics.<sup>63</sup> Socrates thus defines politics by its work of improving others' lives (*cf.* *Euthd.* 292d, *Rep.* I 347d) and challenges the assumption that locates politics in the business of ordinary civic institutions.<sup>64</sup> And because his philosophizing aims to help not just Athenians but also foreigners (23b, 30a), Socrates challenges anti-cosmopolitan assumptions, too.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Socrates also says his divine sign (*daimonion*) steered him away from public affairs (31c-d), but it is unclear how much weight he gives the sign apart from the reason he offers to explain why it was correct (31d-32a). Although the *daimonion* probably bolstered Socrates' confidence in some of his beliefs, and perhaps entirely underwrote his confidence in one (40b-c with Austin 2010), Socrates does not suggest that a divine sign is essential to philosophy, for he encourages others to philosophize without saying they need a *daimonion*. *Cf.* Smith and Woodruff 2000, Destrée and Smith 2005.

<sup>63</sup> *Grg.* 521d with Shaw 2011.

<sup>64</sup> Brown 2009.

<sup>65</sup> Brown 2000b.

One last question about Socrates' extended defense is prompted by its suggestion that he teaches others to care about their souls, because Socrates insists in the *Apology* that he is *not* a teacher.<sup>66</sup> He asserts that he does not teach others as an expert would, transmitting expertise to an apprentice, or as a sophist would, in a formal relationship with a fee (19d-20c). But he also asserts broadly that he is not a teacher and that no one is his student (33a-b).

Socrates is aware that he teaches in some ways. At the close of his defense speech, he acknowledges that he *could* persuade the jurors to ignore their oath of office and thus “teach” them not to believe that there are gods (35d). This is teaching as persuading (35c2), and when Socrates examines and exhorts people, he is at least trying to teach them in this way (*cf.* 30a8). Also, Socrates knows that his examinations attract followers, who imitate him (23c, *cf.* 37d). He expresses confidence that after he is gone, there will be many others, younger and more difficult to deal with, examining the Athenians (39c-d). So he models and inspires—and in this way teaches—dialectical practices.

Why, then, does he deny that he teaches? He does so to insist that he is not responsible for what his interlocutors do (33b). This might seem objectionable: is Socrates just evading responsibility? But he makes a good point about his philosophizing. The point is clearest in the case of his examinations, for when Socrates examines others, he does not seek to put thoughts into their heads that were not already there. He seeks to draw out their thoughts, to examine them. He is not so much teaching others as he is helping them rethink themselves (*e.g.*, *M.* 85b-86b, *Grg.* 495d-e).

This point is less apparent in the case of Socrates' exhortations. If many people entirely lack thoughts that incline toward temperance and justice, and away from wealth and status, then Socrates could hardly exhort others as he does without sometimes putting thoughts in their heads. But Socrates might think that people are *not* entirely without these thoughts. His experience examining others has taught him that some thoughts come easily from his interlocutors. He insists elsewhere that *everyone* wants to live well (*Euthd.* 278e, 282a, *Smp.* 205a) and that *everyone* thinks it is better to suffer injustice than to do it (*Grg.* 474b, 475e). Perhaps Socrates exhorts others not to give them values they lack but to redirect them toward values they already have.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *Cf.* Kraut 1984, 294-304; Reeve 1989, 160-169; Nehamas 1992; G.A. Scott 2000.

<sup>67</sup> Compare the thought, mentioned in §4 above, that human beings innately possess the views drawn out by Socratic examination (*M.* 81a-e, 85b-86b, *Phd.* 72e-73b).

So understood, Socratic philosophizing does not teach by conveying new thoughts to people, but it does educate by inspiring and challenging others to examine themselves and reorient their priorities.<sup>68</sup>

## 6. Plato and Socrates the Philosopher

The historical Socrates certainly inspired Plato, and Plato's characterization of Socrates has inspired many others. But already in Plato's dialogues, there are questions about whether philosophy should be exactly as it is for the *Apology's* Socrates. According to the Socratic model, a philosopher loves wisdom—the expertise about how to live, including understanding of good and bad—in three ways: by honoring wisdom as the gods' possession, examining others' false claims to knowledge; by pursuing wisdom, learning about how to live as one examines oneself alongside others; and by trying to live wisely, which includes helping others to pursue virtue. Many of the questions that arise in other dialogues involve relatively minor complications, such as how exactly to pursue wisdom (n. 21), whether wisdom is attainable (n. 49), what kind of thing (n. 40) and how much (n. 50) the wise must know, and the relation between intellectual and non-intellectual affect and desires (nn. 54 and 58). But two questions involve deeper doubt about Socratic philosophizing. How well do Socratic examinations benefit those examined? And how well does the Socratic pursuit of wisdom cohere with the political work of helping others?

Both doubts are rooted in the *Apology*: Socrates is on trial in part because he has annoyed people and in part because his pursuits were ill-suited to ordinary politics. But he does not always shrug these doubts off as he does in the *Apology*. In the *Republic*, after Adeimantus records that Socrates' examinations fail to move most people (*Rep.* VI 487b-c), Socrates suggests that in an ideal city, they would keep such examinations away from the young and others who had not been carefully prepared for them, lest the examinations have the terrible consequences they have “nowadays” (*Rep.* VII 537d-539d, cf. VI 497e-498c, *Phlb.* 15d-16a). Also, the *Republic's* Socrates sees a conflict not just between philosophy and politics-as-usual, where the unjust threaten the just, but also between philosophy and politics-in-the-best-case-scenario, since politics is always messy and unappealing compared with the beautiful truths that the philosopher loves.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Cf. *Phdr.* 261a; *Rep.* VII 518d *contra* I 345b (with *Smp.* 175d); and *Sph.* 228d-231b.

<sup>69</sup> See *Rep.* VII 519c-521b, 540b with Brown 2000a. Cf. *Phd.* 78b-84b, *Tht.* 172c-177c, *Ti.* 89e-90d; Jenkins 2016, Peterson 2011.

Although the Socratic model of philosophy as a way of life is rarely manifest now,<sup>70</sup> many features of it survive. Strikingly, Plato's two concerns also survive. Today's worries about the effects of hostile criticism are not merely about practices alien to philosophy—eristic or sophistical practices—invading. They are also worries about *philosophical* practices misfiring. And today's debates about whether philosophy can or must be politically engaged are not boundary skirmishes about how to distinguish philosophy from other pursuits. They are debates that have been central to philosophy from the start. These questions, about how to examine critically in ways that help instead of hurting and about how to relate philosophy to politics, are living inheritances from Plato's reflection on the Socratic model of philosophy.

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. Hadot 2002.

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