

WHEN THE MIDDLE COMES EARLY: PUZZLES AND PERPLEXITIES
IN PLATO'S DIALOGUES

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Plato's early dialogues appear to be much different from his middle because of their aporetic nature.¹ Whereas Socrates of the middle period puts forth philosophical positions and argues in support of theses, Socrates of the early dialogues professes ignorance, uses *elenchus* on others rather than arguing for conclusions, and ends discussions in *aporia*.² The hypothesis of developmentalism is often used to explain these differences. The basic developmentalist position, arising in the 19th century with Karl Friedrich Herman in 1839 and reaching dominance by the early 1860's, divides the dialogues into three chronological periods and associates these periods with three stages of development in Plato's thought, often identifying the philosophy of the early dialogues with that of the historic Socrates.³ Gregory Vlastos,

¹ I would like to take this opportunity to thank the University of Texas at Arlington for awarding me a Research Enhancement Program grant (summer 2008) for beginning research on Plato's early dialogues.

² For examples of such differences found between the early and middle dialogues, see Gregory Vlastos' ten Theses in *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (1991, 47-49) and Terrence Penner's twelve points of contrast in "Socrates and the Early Dialogues" (1992, 125-130).

³ For a history of developmentalism, see C.C.W. Taylor (2002).

perhaps the most influential proponent of developmentalism in the 20th century, distinguished the thought of Socrates in the early dialogues and Socrates in the middle as two radically separate philosophies. According to Vlastos, Socrates, in these two periods,

pursues philosophies so different that they could not have been depicted as cohabiting the same brain throughout unless it had been the brain of a schizophrenic. They are so diverse in content and method that they contrast as sharply with one another as with any third philosophy you care to mention.... (Vlastos 1991, 46)

Many other scholars agree that there is a unique philosophical position in the early dialogues, either belonging to the historic Socrates or influenced by him, and their work has given rise to the field of Socratic studies.⁴

In this paper, I challenge the position that there is a radical shift between Socrates' philosophy in the early dialogues and that in the middle by offering a competing explanation of the differences in the two periods.⁵ I propose that these distinguishing characteristics of the early dialogues display Socrates' use of the "summoners" (παρακαλοῦντα) described in *Republic* 7 and are thus

⁴ See, for example, Terrence Irwin (1977), Gerosimos Santas (1979), Terrence Penner (1992), Hugh Benson (1992), and Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith (1994).

⁵ Other scholars who argue against a sharp distinction between Socrates' philosophy in the early and middle dialogues include Julia Annas (1999, 12), Charles Kahn (1996, 39), and Christopher Rowe (2007, 4-5).

explained by Plato's middle period epistemology.⁶ As a consequence, my position is consistent with unitarianism, the view that there is a fundamental unity in Plato's corpus and continuity between periods.⁷ My argument is in four sections. In the first, I establish the importance of summoners in Plato's middle period epistemology. In the second, I argue that Plato is, in the early dialogues, aware of the important function played by summoners and depicts Socrates' attempts to summon interlocutors. I argue that Socrates embarks on his divine mission as a result of the summoning process and that, in performance of his divine mission, Socrates uses *elenchus* in an attempt to summon others. After establishing these points, I argue in section 3 that Plato uses Socrates' failed summoning attempts to establish a framework for summoning readers. I support this claim with a close reading of the *Laches*. In the final section, I argue that the features unique to the early dialogues may be explained in terms of Socrates' and Plato's attempts to initiate the summoning process, and I trace out the implications my hypothesis for the debate between unitarians and developmentalists.

⁶ For more on summoners, see Miriam Byrd (2007, 365-381) and Nicholas Smith (2000, 126-40).

⁷ Charles Kahn defines unitarianism as follows: "The unitarian tradition tends to assume that the various dialogues are composed from a single point of view, and that their diversity is to be explained on literary and pedagogical grounds, rather than as a change in the author's philosophy. Different dialogues are seen as exploring the same problem from different directions, or as leading the reader to deeper levels of reflection" (1996, 38).

I. Summoners in the Middle Dialogues

In the *Republic* and the *Phaedo*, both considered to be middle dialogues, Socrates assigns summoners an important role in epistemological development. In *Republic* 7, after describing his educational philosophy, Socrates explicitly describes summoners and situates them within his pedagogical theory. Following his famous allegory of the cave at *Republic* 514a-517b, Socrates states his view of education. At 518b9-10 he explains: "Education isn't what some people declare it to be, namely, putting knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes."⁸ Rather, he continues:

Our present discussion, on the other hand, shows that the power to learn is present in everyone's soul and that the instrument with which each learns is like an eye that cannot be turned around from darkness to light without turning the whole body. This instrument cannot be turned around from that which is coming into being without turning the whole soul until it is able to study that which is and the brightest thing that is, namely, the one we call the good. (518c3-d1)

The allegory of the cave represents this turning of the eye of the soul as a forcible turning of the body. In the context of discussing education in the good city, Socrates appoints summoners a significant role in this process. At 521a-d, in the process of investigating how philosophers will develop within his city, Socrates raises the question of what will lead them from darkness to light and turn the soul from becoming to being. Answering his own question at 522a,

⁸ All translations of the *Republic* are from Grube and Reeve (1992).

Socrates says that number and calculation, or “[t]hat inconsequential matter of distinguishing the one, the two, and the three” (522c5-6), will fulfill the role of the person physically turning the prisoner’s body in the allegory.

However, according to Socrates, no one uses calculation correctly, that is, as a summoning process. He asserts that “some sense perceptions don’t summon the understanding to look into them, because the judgment of sense perception is itself adequate, while others encourage it in every way to look into them, because sense perception seems to produce no sound result” (523a9-b5). Socrates distinguishes the latter as summoners.

A summoner, according to Socrates, is a perception that appears to be contradictory, such as the same object appearing to be both tall and short or hard and soft. He uses the example of someone holding out a thumb, index finger, and middle finger. When one observes the index finger, perception presents opposite qualities. The index finger is big in comparison to the thumb, but it is small in comparison to the middle finger. Perception presents the one finger as being simultaneously large and small, which causes the soul to be at loss (ἀπορεῖν).⁹ Puzzled, the soul is summoned to use calculation. Though prior to encountering a summoner the soul believed the data of its senses to be true

⁹ Socrates uses the term “ἀπορεῖν” at 524a6 and e5. The verb “ἀπορέω” means to be at loss, in difficulty, puzzled, or at an impasse. Note that Socrates’ description of how summoners bring the soul to *aporia* parallels Diotima’s description in the *Symposium* of the conception of Eros, who is a personification of the philosopher. Penia, scheming to get beyond her lack of resources (ἀπορίαν), manages to become pregnant by Poros (203b8-9). Eros is her offspring.

and took sensation to be reality, the summoner brings it to *aporia*. The soul realizes that one thing cannot simultaneously have opposite qualities in the same respect, and it invokes calculation to resolve the contradiction. Calculation separates the intelligible objects, bigness and smallness, from the perception.

Plato writes:

Then it's likely that in such cases the soul, summoning calculation and understanding, first tries to determine whether each of the things announced to it is one or two.

Of course.

If it's evidently two, won't each be evidently distinct and one?

Yes.

Then, if each is one, and both two, the soul will understand that the two are separate, for it wouldn't understand the inseparable to be two, but rather one. (524b3-6)

Whereas the soul began by grasping one sense perception, it now distinguishes the intelligible entities from the perception in which they appear and attempts to grasp the forms. Plato writes:

And isn't it from these cases that it first occurs to us to ask what the big is and what the small is?

Absolutely.

And, because of this, we called the one the intelligible and the other the visible. (524c7-10)

Having begun practicing calculation, the soul is ready to study the mathematical sciences recommended by Socrates for the education of future rulers.

Though Socrates does not refer to summoners by name in the *Phaedo*, we see analogous intellectual puzzles which play a similar epistemological role.

Recollection, the process whereby sensible things bring to mind our prior knowledge of the forms, consists of being summoned, as is shown in the following excerpt from Socrates' description of recollection to Simmias:

Do not equal stones and sticks sometimes, while remaining the same, appear to one to be equal and to another to be unequal – Certainly they do.

But what of the equals themselves? Have they ever appeared unequal to you, or equality to be inequality?

Never, Socrates.

These equal things and the equal itself are therefore not the same?

I do not think they are the same at all, Socrates.

But it is definitely from the equal things, though they are different from that equal, that you have derived and grasped the knowledge of equality?¹⁰ (74b-7-c6)

When someone sees, for example, a pair of sticks that appear equal, one notices that in some aspect these sticks also appear unequal. The sticks, appearing to have opposite characteristics, provoke the soul to thought. In trying to resolve the contradiction, the soul separates out the equal from the unequal, and realizes

¹⁰ All translations of the *Phaedo* are from Grube (1981).

that the equal itself, unlike the equal sticks, can never appear to be unequal. Sensible objects, the two sticks, have prompted the soul to recollect a form.

When Socrates recounts his own educational journey in lines 96a-101e, he says that apparent contradictions caused him to abandon his pursuit of natural science and its emphasis on the senses and appeal instead to the forms as causal explanations. For example, sight suggested to Socrates that a large man was taller than a small one by a head. This explanation of why one man was taller than another proved inadequate, however, for Socrates realized that it led to contradiction, “first, because the bigger is bigger and the smaller smaller by the same, then because the bigger is bigger by a head which is small....” (101a9-10). Resolution of the hypothesis involves Socrates’ separating out bigness and smallness from the perception of the two men. Socrates’ new explanation is “that it is through bigness that big things are big and the bigger are bigger, and that smaller things are made small by smallness” (100e4-6).¹¹

II. Socrates’ Divine Mission and Summoners in the Early Dialogues

The summoning process is evident in Socrates’ account of how he embarked on his divine mission. He relates that his friend Chaerephon traveled to Delphi and asked the oracle if any man was wiser than Socrates. The oracle answered that no man was wiser. Socrates, upon being informed of this, was perplexed and asked:

¹¹ Socrates uses similar puzzles in the *Theaetetus*. See 154c and 155b. At 155d he expresses approval of Theaetetus’ puzzlement and describes it as the beginning of philosophy.

Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle (καὶ τί ποτε αἰνίττεται)? I am very conscious that I am not wise at all; what then does he mean by saying that I am the wisest? For surely he does not lie; it is not legitimate for him to do so.¹² (21b4-8)

Socrates is here presented with an apparent contradiction very similar to the summoners mentioned in *Republic* 7. When Socrates hears the oracle's answer to Chaerephon's question, he is faced with an inconsistency that provokes his thought. Socrates perceives himself as lacking in wisdom, and he believes that this perception is true. However, the god, whom he respects and trusts, has said that no man is wiser than Socrates, which Socrates interprets as the god saying that Socrates is the wisest of men. Socrates believes that the god speaks only truth. When the oracle's answer is added to Socrates' beliefs that he is not wise and that the god does not lie, Socrates recognizes that he is faced with contradiction. Socrates experiences *aporia* when confronted with the god's riddle. In *Apology* 21b7 he recounts: "For a long time I was at loss (ἠπόρουσιν) as to his meaning...." Socrates has been brought to the first stage of the summoning process: perplexity and a desire to resolve the apparent contradiction.

Finding himself in *aporia*, Socrates sets out to solve the puzzle by searching for a man wiser than himself so that he can refute the oracle. Upon questioning "wise" men, Socrates discovers that, though each believed himself to be wise, none was. Socrates even discovers that he, in a way, was wiser than they because he is aware of his own ignorance whereas they are not (21d). Socrates says that,

¹² All translations of the *Apology* are from Grube (1981).

because of the importance he attached to the oracle, he continued to question prominent men in order to “prove the oracle irrefutable” (22a8), and the results have convinced him that the god’s message is something to this effect: “This man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless” (23b2-4). Socrates has now found a solution to the puzzle. He is not wise in respect to the fact that he does not know anything worthwhile, but he *is* wise in respect to the fact that he is aware of the limitations on his own wisdom.

Both in the *Apology* and in the *Phaedo*, Socrates’ story of his own intellectual development includes a description of being summoned, and the act of being summoned is placed at some important juncture in his life. In the *Phaedo*, after being summoned Socrates gives up naturalistic explanations and instead appeals to the hypothesis of the forms, which serves as the philosophical foundation of the middle dialogues. In the *Apology*, Socrates’ experience of solving the oracle’s riddle has an equally momentous impact. Socrates, speaking of the god, says: “when he says this man, Socrates, he is using my name as an example (παράδειγμα)” (23b1). Socrates is saying that the god wishes to use him as a role model for others, and he thinks that what the god wishes to illustrate is that mortals would be wise to understand that their wisdom is worthless. He continues:

So even now I continue this investigation as the god bade me – and I go around seeking out anyone, citizen or stranger, whom I think wise. Then if I

do not think he is, I come to the assistance of the god and show him that he is not wise. (23b5-9)

I argue that not just Socrates' human wisdom, but also his successfully undergoing the summoning process, makes him exemplary. According to Socrates' account of Chaerephon's visit to the oracle, Socrates does not merely acknowledge that he is faced with a riddle and give up, declaring his ignorance, but he is summoned to answer the riddle, takes great pains in his investigation, and is able to move beyond his former opinions and find a solution. Socrates is a worthy model for others not only because of his ability to recognize that he has been brought to *aporia*, but also due to his ability to progress beyond that point. Socrates' activity of examining and cross-examining others (29e) represents his ongoing fight against complacency by continuing the investigation of his assumptions. As explanation of why he persists in questioning people even though he has collected a reasonable amount of samples, Socrates says that he keeps on so that the oracle will remain unrefuted. Socrates moves beyond his old assumptions in his solution to the riddle, but rather than allow his new assumptions to solidify into the belief that he has "knowledge", Socrates, by continuing the investigation, admits the hypothetical nature of his interpretation and his willingness to re-examine beliefs.

Socrates' profession of ignorance contributes to his acting as a role model for fellow Athenians.¹³ He often exemplifies the summoning process by becoming

¹³ Whether or not Socrates is genuinely perplexed by an impasse to which he has led an interlocutor, I believe that his actions present us with a positive role model since we should recognize puzzling

puzzled along with his interlocutors in the early dialogues. He models one who is challenged by riddles and is attempting to work out inconsistencies in belief. At the end of the *Laches*, for example, Socrates declares himself to be in the same state of perplexity as his interlocutors, declaring: “as the matter stands, we are all in the same difficulty” (200e6).¹⁴ In *Charmides* 165b, Socrates, speaking to Critias, asserts:

you are talking to me as though I professed to know the answers to my own questions and as though I could agree with you if I really wished. This is not the case—rather, because of my own ignorance, I am continually investigating in your company whatever is put forward.¹⁵ (165b5-c2)

Critias, unconvinced, accuses Socrates of just trying to refute him, and Socrates replies:

Oh, come, I said, how could you possibly think that even if I were to refute everything you say, I would be doing it for any other reason than the one I would give for a thorough investigation of my own statements—the fear of unconsciously thinking I know something when I do not. And this is what I claim to be doing now, examining the argument for my own sake primarily, but perhaps also for the sake of my friends. (166c6-d6)

problems for what they are and have the appropriate reaction of being humbled and perplexed. See Gareth Mathews (1997) for the position that Socrates’ declarations of ignorance reveal a genuine and appropriate perplexity.

¹⁴ All translations of the *Laches* are from Sprague (1992).

¹⁵ All translations of the *Charmides* are from Sprague (1992).

A similar problem is found in the *Meno*. There, Meno accuses Socrates of putting him under a spell so that he is perplexed and compares him to the torpedo fish that makes anyone it touches numb. Socrates retorts: “Now if the torpedo fish is itself numb and so makes others numb, then I resemble it, but not otherwise, for I myself do not have the answer when I perplex others, but I am more perplexed than anyone when I cause perplexity in others” (80c7-d1).¹⁶

Socrates does not just provide an example of the summoning process, but he tries to summon others as he himself was summoned. When perplexed by the oracle’s answer to Chaerephon, Socrates identifies the pronouncement as a riddle. His reference to riddles, in the context of questioning others, indicates that he is trying to bring them, also, to *aporia*. For example, in *Republic* 1, when Polemarchus bases his definition of justice as benefiting friends and harming enemies on Simonides’ statement that “it is just to give to each what is owed to him” (331e, 332a-b). Socrates casts doubt on the definition, saying: “It seems then that Simonides was speaking in riddles (ῥηνίξατο)—just like a poet!” (332b9-10). Socrates then immediately launches a series of arguments that convince Polemarchus, too, that this statement is puzzling. Polemarchus loses his conceit of knowledge, rejects his former definition, and is willing to join Socrates in inquiry. We see a similar example in the *Charmides*. Charmides says that he remembers someone saying that temperance is minding one’s own business. Socrates calls the definition a riddle, saying: “if we succeed in finding out what it means, I should be surprised, because it seems to be a sort of riddle

¹⁶ All translations of the *Meno* are from Grube (1981).

(αἰνίγματι)" (161c7-9). Immediately afterward, Socrates questions Charmides until he is puzzled. After showing Charmides that the definition, as he and Socrates interpreted it, leads to absurdity, Socrates cast his net for a bigger fish, the true author of the statement, Critias. At 162a-b Socrates twice repeats the claim that the person giving this definition must have been riddling. Once Critias enters the argument, Socrates leads him through a grueling questioning process during which Critias becomes perplexed, though he unsuccessfully attempts to conceal this fact (169c-d). Socrates alludes to riddles once again in the *Apology*, but mocking his accuser, he places Meletus in the position of riddler. Protesting the impiety charge, Socrates says of Meletus:

He is like one who composed a riddle (αἰνίγμα) and is trying it out: 'Will the wise Socrates realize that I am jesting and contradicting myself, or shall I deceive him and others?' I think he contradicts himself in the affidavit, as if he said: 'Socrates is guilty of not believing in gods but believing in gods.... (26e10-27a7)

Continuing, Socrates says: "You must have made this deposition, Meletus, either to test us or because you were at a loss to find any true wrongdoing of which to accuse me" (27e3). Socrates goes on in lines 27b-28a to bring out the inconsistency in Meletus' impiety charges. In all three of these examples, Socrates declares his intention to show that a knowledge claim is inconsistent with the interlocutors' other beliefs by drawing attention to it as a perplexing riddle. Then, Socrates uses question and answer to bring the interlocutor to

perplexity on the matter, revealing to him that he does not know all he believed himself to know.¹⁷

Socrates' attempts to summon interlocutors are not limited to instances in which he explicitly refers to riddles. The above examples are all instances of Socrates' unique style of questioning others in the course of his divine mission. It has become common practice to refer to Socrates' pattern of questioning in the early dialogues by this term.¹⁸ Lately, however, scholars have challenged both the assumption that Socrates has a method and the assumption that this method is *elenchus*.¹⁹ Socrates' use of *elenchus* usually follows a certain pattern. Socrates' interlocutor makes a knowledge claim, often in the form of a moral definition. Socrates next asks the interlocutor a series of questions, eliciting other beliefs from him. Socrates then shows that the interlocutor's answers imply the negation of the original knowledge claim. From this, Socrates concludes that there is an inconsistency in the belief set. At this point the

¹⁷Michael C. Stokes notes Socrates' use of riddling in these three dialogues and argues for a similarity between passages, but he uses this information as support for the claim that Socrates is treating the oracle as he does his human interlocutors (1992, 39-41).

¹⁸For an early and influential discussion of *elenchus*, see Robinson (1953).

¹⁹For scholars who deny that *elenchus* is a method, see Brickhouse and Smith (2002, 147, 154-156) and David Wolfsdorf (2003, 301-2). For the purposes of this paper, I will assume that *elenchus* is a philosophical practice whereby Socrates refutes or cross-examines stated knowledge claims.

interlocutor is shown that he must reject either his initial claim or one of his other beliefs.²⁰

Elenchus has great potential to summon. First, it disturbs the interlocutor's complacency by presenting him with a contradiction within his account. Ideally, this awareness that one's account is not sufficient, combined with the unsolved puzzle created by the contradiction, motivates the interlocutor to initiate thought. Finally, through struggling to resolve the contradiction, the interlocutor makes epistemological progress. The slave boy demonstration in the *Meno* presents us with an incomplete, but moderately successful, example of Socrates' summoning through *elenchus*. Though Socrates refers to the process as

²⁰ According to the so-called constructivist interpretation, Socrates thinks that he has established that the interlocutors' thesis is false. For example, in "The Socratic Elenchus," Vlastos defines the pattern of 'Standard Elenchus' as follows: "(1) The interlocutor asserts a thesis 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 argument 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" (1983, 39). Non-constructivists deny that Socrates is using *elenchus* to support positive knowledge claims. For examples of their arguments, see Benson (1995), Stokes (1986), and Grote (1888, 449-50, and 457). I believe that Benson makes a convincing case and share his position.

recollection, his pattern of questioning is the same as that used earlier in the dialogue in his elenctic examination of Meno. In this demonstration, Socrates begins questioning a slave boy, asking him to solve a geometrical problem. At first, the boy thinks that he knows the answer. As Socrates continues to question him, however, and show him the problems with his mathematical reasoning, the slave boy realizes that he does not know the answer and becomes puzzled.

Describing the benefits of *elenchus*, Socrates says that, prior to the examination, the boy “thought he knew, and answered confidently as if he did know, and he did not think himself at a loss, but now he does think himself at a loss, and as he does not know, neither does he think he knows” (84a7-10). According to Socrates, finding himself in *aporia* motivates the boy to seek answers. Socrates asks: “Do you think that before he would have tried to find out that which he thought he knew though he did not, before he fell into perplexity and realized he did not know and longed to know?” (84c4-6).²¹ The boy’s curiosity and willingness to continue submitting himself to Socrates’ questioning results in his eventually looking in the right direction and seeing the correct answer. Though *elenchus* leads to a positive result for the slave boy, the summoning process is left incomplete. The boy, at this stage, only has true opinion – he sees that the answer is correct, but he cannot provide an account. However, Socrates claims that “if he were repeatedly asked these same questions in various ways, you

²¹ In *Sophist* 230b-d, the Eleatic visitor presents a similar view of beneficial effects of a process that appears to be *elenchus*.

know that in the end his knowledge about these things would be as accurate as anyone's" (85c8-d1).

The success of Socrates' summoning process depends upon the interlocutor. *Elenchus* presents the interlocutor with contradictions within his own thought. But, once Socrates reveals those inconsistencies, the interlocutor is the one who chooses either to acknowledge or deny that he is in *aporia*. Likewise, the interlocutor chooses whether to become eager for inquiry or, alternatively, sink back into complacency and ignore the problem.²² Socrates can use questions in an attempt to turn an interlocutor's attention in a helpful direction, but he cannot force someone blinded by false beliefs to focus on what is before him. At most, Socrates can set up a summoning opportunity; he cannot force the process. Understandably, elenctic dialogues tend to have inconclusive endings in which problems remain unresolved.

III. Plato's Attempt to Summon Readers

With the exception of his slave boy demonstration in the *Meno*, Socrates' attempts to summon prove unsuccessful—though interlocutors are brought to contradiction, they do not acknowledge being in a state of *aporia* and give up on attempts to resolve inconsistencies within their accounts.²³ Why would Plato

²² As an anonymous referee has pointed out, Socrates' description of his role as midwife in *Theaetetus* 150d-151b supports this point.

²³ Socrates' failure is underscored by Plato's choice, as interlocutors, of historical figures such as Alcibiades, Charmides, Critias, and Meno, who had already become notorious for their lack of virtue.

write dialogue after dialogue showing Socrates fail in his mission? I posit that at least one reason Plato allows Socrates to fail time after time is that he is using Socrates' attempts to summon the interlocutor to summon us. Were Socrates' interlocutors carefully to examine their beliefs, identify questionable assumptions, and succeed in resolving contradictions, readers would be left with the opinions of others rather than with puzzles designed to provoke thought.

Since Plato does not speak in his own voice in the dialogues, any thesis concerning his intent is difficult to support. Many scholars assume that the main speaker of a dialogue, usually Socrates, is the mouthpiece for Plato. On the basis of this assumption, they use the words of the mouthpiece to support their claims concerning Plato's beliefs and intent. This approach is not open to me, however. Since Plato makes a conscious choice to avoid speaking in his own voice, I believe that accepting the mouthpiece assumption is presumptuous.²⁴ I have freely quoted from Socrates in the middle dialogues to support my claim that Socrates, in the early dialogues, employs a pedagogical technique he continues to endorse in the middle period. However, in that case, I use Socrates' words in order to support a claim about the belief and action of the dramatic character. I would be on much weaker ground if I were to use that approach to support a claim about Plato's intent.²⁵

²⁴ The mouthpiece assumption, prominent though it is, has been challenged in recent years. See, for example, Press (2000).

²⁵ Another option is appealing to Plato's letters. *Letter VII* does not mention summoners, but the views expressed at 341c-e do express a pedagogical philosophy consistent with use of aporetic dialogues to

The very fact that Plato wrote his dialogues for an audience, however, offers some insight into his intent; it is reasonable to suppose that he hoped to affect readers in some beneficial way.²⁶ Plato's repeated representations of Socrates' elenctic encounters indicate that he took the process of bringing interlocutors to *aporia* seriously. This does not prove that he endorsed it, since he might have had some other goal in emphasizing it. However, if Plato did believe that being summoned was important to engaging in philosophical inquiry, and he intended his dialogues to have a beneficial influence on his audience, it is likely that aporetic dialogues were crafted to summon readers.

My argument uses a close reading of the *Laches* to show that, if one looks at the dialogue as a whole, Plato has created additional puzzles for the reader. The reason I have chosen to focus on just one dialogue rather than present relevant passages from many is that my claim requires contextual evidence that can only be provided by examining the dialogue as a unified whole.²⁷ I have chosen the *Laches* because it is widely recognized to be one of the earlier dialogues and it

summon readers. Because this letter has not been definitively identified as Plato's, however, it offers weak support for my position.

²⁶ See Rowe's argument for the persuasive function of the dialogues (2007, 9-12).

²⁷ I recommend Edward Halper's discussion of "evidentiary literalism," the assumption that, because the mouthpiece gives Plato's philosophy, the only acceptable evidence for an interpretation of Plato's dialogues is what is explicitly asserted. Halper (1993), appealing to the differences between a philosophic treatise and a Platonic dialogue, proposes that both structural and contextual evidence are important for understanding Socrates' arguments, and he correctly points out that evidentiary literalism is hardly neutral since it rejects any interpretation appealing to implicit arguments in the text.

represents Socrates conducting his divine mission as described in the *Apology*. I show that Socrates is attempting to lead interlocutors to complete the summoning process, but flaws in their character prevent him from succeeding. I then demonstrate that Plato is using Socrates' failed attempts in order to summon readers.

The dialogue begins with a conversation between two older gentlemen, Lysimachus and Melesias, who have invited the generals, Laches and Nicias, to attend with them Stesilaus' demonstration of the art of fighting in armor. Lysimachus explains that, since the generals too are fathers, they seek their counsel in the matter of how to raise their sons Thucydides and Aristides, also present, to be good men. They wish to know if lessons in fighting in armor will improve their sons, and they ask advice about other pursuits that would benefit the boys. Socrates happens to be present at the event and, through the prompting of Laches and Nicias, is invited to join the conversation. Though the subsequent conversation originates in debate over the benefit of learning Stesilaus' art, with the two generals arguing opposing positions, Socrates re-frames their discussion by leading his interlocutors to see that the real concern is making the boys virtuous. Socrates expresses concern over whether any of the men present have this knowledge (186a-c). Lysimachus and Melesias are aware that they lack it, but the generals seem confident that they are qualified to give counsel on the subject. In order to prevent them advising out of ignorance and harming the young men, Socrates sets the stage for a series of elenctic arguments. He points out that the knowledge relevant to caring for young men's

souls is knowledge of virtue (189d-190c). Since investigation of the whole of virtue appears to be too difficult, Socrates recommends investigating one part, courage (190c-d). He continues on to ask the generals to tell him what courage is.

Early in the dialogue, before elenchus begins, Plato reveals the interlocutors' fundamental beliefs. The general's speeches concerning fighting in armor provide an introduction into their views. Laches' later distinction between *logoi* (words) and *erga* (deeds), made at 188d, is anticipated here. Nicias appears to value *logoi* over *erga*. He calls fighting in armor a "branch of study" (181e1), and assumes that, as such, it is beneficial (Hoerber 1968, 99). He extols its value, claiming that it initiates love of learning:

such a study arouses in us the desire for another fine form of instruction, since every man who learns to fight in armor will want to learn the subject that comes next, that is, the science of tactics; and when he has mastered this and taken pride in it, he will press on to the whole art of the general. So it has already become clear that what is connected with this latter art, all the studies and pursuits which are fine and of great value for a man to learn and to practice, have this study as a starting-point. (182b4-c5)

Nicias assumes an association between courage and knowledge, declaring: "this knowledge will make every man much bolder and braver in war than he was before" (182c6-9). Nicias' emphasis on intellectual matters is emphasized by his use of the words "*mathema*" and "*episteme*", or their derivatives, eleven times in thirty-five lines (O'Brien 1963, 142).

Laches, on the other hand, values *erga* over *logoi*.²⁸ He is against this type of training due to the actions of its practitioners. He observes that though the Lacedaemonians are experts in war craft, the teachers of fighting in armor “regard Lacedaemon as forbidden ground and keep from setting foot in it” (183b4-6). In addition, the teachers of this art fail to distinguish themselves in war, even worse, “the men who practice this art seem to be those who have the worst luck at it” (183c7-8). As an example, Laches recounts an instance in which Stesilaus, who has just given the display, publicly made a fool of himself in battle (183d-e).

The distinction between words and deeds is reflected in the reasons both give for bringing Socrates into the discussion. Laches is surprised that Melesias and Lysimachus have sought his and Nicias’ advice but not Socrates’. One reason is Socrates’ actions: “he is always spending his time in places where the young men engage in any study or noble pursuit of the sort you are looking for” (180c5-6). Also, Laches praises Socrates for his deeds on the battlefield. Laches says:

Don’t under any circumstances let the man get away, Lysimachus—because I have seen him elsewhere keeping up not only his father’s reputation but that of his country. He marched with me in the retreat from Delium, and I can tell you that if the rest had been willing to behave in the same manner, our city would be safe and we would not then have suffered a disaster of that kind. (181a-b)

²⁸ See similar discussions in Robert Hoerber (1968, 99) and Henry Teloh (1986, 45).

Nicias, too, vouches for Socrates, but he recommends Socrates for a reason more closely associated with *logoi*. Nicias vouches for Socrates because, he says, Socrates recently recommended the sophist Damon, a man whose intellect Nicias finds impressive, as a music teacher for his son (179e-d). Later, immediately before *elenchus* begins, the generals display these same basic values when they consent to be questioned by Socrates. Nicias consents to it because he enjoys intellectual discussion with Socrates and believes it to be beneficial. Nicias says:

I take pleasure in the man's company, Lysimachus, and don't regard it as at all a bad thing to have it brought to our attention that we have done or are doing wrong. Rather I think that a man who does not run away from such treatment but is willing, according to the saying of Solon, to value learning as long as he lives, not supposing that old age brings him wisdom of itself, will necessarily pay more attention to the rest of his life. (188a8-b6)

Laches consents because he believes that Socrates' deeds have entitled him to speak on the topic of virtue. Laches explains that he enjoys listening to discussions about virtue and wisdom when the speaker's words and deeds are in harmony but hates to listen to a man whose deeds are not in harmony with his words (188c-d). Here, Laches shows a preference for deeds over words – he is only willing to listen to the words of those whose deeds he respects. Concerning Socrates, Laches says:

Now I have no acquaintance with the words of Socrates, but before now, I believe, I have had experience of his deeds, and there I found him a person privileged to speak fair words and to indulge in every kind of frankness. So if

he possesses this ability too, I am in sympathy with the man, and I would submit to being examined by such a person with the greatest pleasure, nor would I find learning burdensome, because I too agree with Solon, though with one reservation—I wish to grow old learning many things, but from good men only. (188e-189a)

The interlocutors' definitions follow their previously expressed beliefs. When Socrates asks Laches to define courage, Laches answers confidently: "Good heavens, Socrates, there is no difficulty about that: if a man is willing to remain at his post and to defend himself against the enemy without running away, then you may rest assured that he is a man of courage" (190e4-7). This definition of courage emphasizes deeds but leaves out possible strategy (Hoerber 1968, 99). Laches' definition is too narrow. Socrates presents the example of a man who fights the enemy in retreat (191a-c), the action for which Laches had earlier praised Socrates. Laches next attempts to define courage as "a sort of endurance of the soul" (192c9-10). This definition, too, stresses action. Socrates points out that this definition is too broad. Socrates guides Laches' third attempt, persuading him to add knowledge to the definition: wise endurance is courage (192d). Since Laches has attended deeds to the exclusion of *logoi*, he has not considered what kind of wisdom is necessary for courage.

When Laches defines courage as wise endurance, Socrates begins his *elenchus* by suggesting that they investigate in what sense it is wise. He presents a list of examples based on the implicit assumption that the relevant wisdom is skill knowledge. Here, he seems to be following up on a point Laches made in his

earlier speech against fighting in armor. At 184b, Laches warns that someone who has gained false confidence due to learning this art will likely be too brash, rather than brave, in battle. This implies that having technical skill is necessary for being brave.

It turns out that, in the context of these examples, Laches thinks that the acts of foolish endurance are the more courageous ones. For example, Laches believes that a man who endures in battle because he knows that reinforcements are on their way and that his side will have greater strength is less courageous than one who endures in battle without this knowledge (193A-B). Similarly, Laches believes that those who dive into wells without being skilled are braver than those who do so with training (193C). Laches' reaction to these examples shows that the notion of courage he uses in order to pick out individual cases of courageous behavior is different from the definition he has given. Also, his reaction implies that he believes that courage is foolish endurance, which is opposite to his definition. Not only is courage as foolish endurance contradictory to his stated definition; it creates inconsistency when added to his beliefs that courage is noble (193D) and foolish endurance disgraceful and harmful (192D, 193D).

After performing *elenchus* on Laches, Socrates suggests that they also summon Nicias to the hunt (194B). Nicias' definition, too, follows from the beliefs he has expressed earlier. Nicias, who values *logoi* over *erga*, discards the notion that endurance plays a role in courage, and, drawing on a saying he attributes to Socrates, "that every one of us is good with respect to that in which he is wise

and bad in respect to that in which he is ignorant” (194d1-2), infers that courage is a kind of wisdom: “the knowledge of the fearful and the hopeful in war and in every other situation” (194e10-195a2). This association of knowledge with courage was earlier assumed at 182c in his speech supporting Stesilaus’ art.

Socrates sets the stage for *elenchus* by confirming that Nicias does, indeed, believe that courage is a part of virtue (198a). Socrates asks: “And do you also speak of the same parts that I do? In addition to courage, I call temperance and justice and everything else of this kind parts of virtue. Don’t you?” (198a7-10). When Nicias answers in the affirmative, Socrates says “We are in agreement on these points....” (198b2). Socrates then begins constructing an argument to show that Nicias’ definition of courage, combined with other of his beliefs, results in inconsistency. Socrates ascertains that Nicias agrees that

[W]e regard as fearful things those that produce fear, and as hopeful things those that do not produce fear; and fear is produced not by evils which have happened or are happening but by those which are anticipated. (198b5-9)

Then he argues, and Nicias accepts, that knowledge is not just of past, present, or future but of all times (198d-199a). Courage is, then, not knowledge of *future* good and evil but knowledge of good and evil (199c-d). A man with knowledge of good and evil has all of the virtues. Socrates asks:

Then does a man with this kind of knowledge seem to depart from virtue in any respect if he really knows, in the case of all goods whatsoever, what they are and will be and have been, and similarly in the case of evils? And do you regard that man as lacking in temperance or justice and holiness to whom

alone belongs the ability to deal circumspectly with both gods and men with respect to both the fearful and its opposite, and to provide himself with good things through his knowledge of how to associate with them correctly?

(199d4-e3)

Socrates concludes: “Then the thing you are now talking about, Nicias, would not be a part of virtue but rather virtue entire” (199e5-6). Nicias appears to be contradicting himself by maintaining that courage is both a part of virtue and the whole of virtue. Nicias, too, has reached an impasse.

Though Socrates has successfully performed *elenchus* on the generals, he has not fully brought them to *aporia*. Socrates has made progress with Laches.

Laches is aware of inconsistency in his belief set, agreeing with Socrates that their deeds are not in harmony with their words (193e). Laches’ admission that he is not in a good state (193e) implies that he wishes to resolve this problem, and Socrates rallies him to continue searching for courage:

let us hold our ground in the search and let us endure, so that courage itself won’t make fun of us for not searching for it courageously – if endurance should perhaps be courage after all. (194a1-5)

Laches expresses enthusiasm for the search, saying “I am ready not to give up, Socrates, although I am not really accustomed to arguments of this kind. But an absolute desire for victory has seized me with respect to our conversation....” (194a6-b1). At this point, Laches is perplexed about a matter about which he was formerly complacent. However, he has not fully arrived at *aporia*. He denies his ignorance, saying “I still think I know what courage is, but I can’t understand

how it has escaped me just now so that I can't pin it down in words and say what it is" (194b2-5).

Though Laches has been stimulated to seek answers, his neglect of *logoi* has left him ill equipped for philosophical inquiry and he fails to endure in the search for courage (Teloh 1986, 51; Hoerber 1968, 99; O'Brien 1963, 141-142; and Devereaux 1977, 134). After Laches finds himself at loss and doesn't know how to proceed, Socrates invites Nicias to define courage, and at Socrates' request, Laches takes over the job as interrogator. Nicias, however, is more experienced in argumentation, and Laches soon relinquishes his role in frustration at 196c. Even with Socrates at the reigns, at 197e Laches displays unwillingness to continue the conversation, even in a passive role. When Socrates attempts to keep Laches engaged, saying "Pay attention and join me in examining what is said" (197e7-8), Laches unenthusiastically responds "Very well, if that seems necessary" (197e9). Though Laches is still present, he is no longer actively engaged in the search.

Nicias also fails to endure in the search for courage. Though Nicias presents himself as a thinker and claims to find Socratic elenchus beneficial (188a-c), he is deficient in *logoi*. After admitting that he has not successfully defined courage, Nicias breaks off discussion (200b). Nicias ends the investigation: "As far as I am concerned I think enough has been said on the topic for the present, and if any point has not been covered sufficiently, then later on I think we can correct it both with the help of Damon...and with that of others" (200b6-7). Nicias offers to instruct Laches about courage after Damon, the sophist, has found a resolution

(200c). Clearly, Nicias has been neither troubled nor perplexed by the inconsistency revealed in his thought.

Socrates cannot achieve his desired result with Nicias because Nicias is content with using the thought of others. Nicias' definition of courage is not really original to him, but is an interpretation of one of Socrates' points. Recall that, in introducing his definition of courage, Nicias says "I have often heard you say that every one of us is good with respect to that in which he is wise and bad in respect to that in which he is ignorant" (194d1-3). From this he reasons that wisdom is a necessary condition of courage (194d), and builds his definition on the idea that virtue is a sort of wisdom (194d ff.). Later, when Nicias distinguishes between courage and boldness in his discussion with Laches, Socrates' attributes Nicias' distinctions to sophists. Socrates says:

Never mind him, Laches. I don't think you realize that he has procured this wisdom from our friend Damon, and Damon spends most of his time with Prodicus, who has the reputation of being best among the sophists at making such verbal distinctions. (197d1-5)

When Nicias realizes that he doesn't understand what courage is, he is content to use whatever solution Damon produces (200b) rather than try to figure things out for himself. This pattern of using the thoughts of others as a substitute for independent thought is reinforced by the reader's knowledge of Nicias' notorious failure in the Sicilian expedition. Socrates' remark at 199a that "the law decrees, not that the seer should command the general, but that the general should command the seer" reminds the reader of Nicias' real-life failure to

exhibit courage. When it was time to withdraw by sea, Nicias was superstitiously frightened by an eclipse of the moon. Rather than demonstrating courage, he listened to seers and delayed retreat for a month. This lack of intellectual self-reliance resulted in a devastating defeat for Athens (Devereaux 1977, 134-135; Hoerber 1968, 145-6; and Teloh 1986 54).

The reader is left with a puzzle: the perspective of *erga* alone has proven to be deficient. Not only has Laches reached impasse due to ignorance of the kind of knowledge associated with courage, but his lack of *logoi* has made him fail in *erga* and thus prevented him from resolving the contradiction to which *elenchus* led. On the other hand, Nicias' focus on *logoi* to the exclusion of *erga* has proved deficient as well. Nicias' removal of "endurance" from the definition of courage leads to courage being indistinguishable from the whole of virtue. Also, his own lack of endurance makes him deficient in *logoi*. Failure to endure in reasoning things out and looking for answers has led him to be content with using the views of others without understanding them. These failures suggest both wisdom and endurance are essential to the definition of courage (O'Brien 1963, 139-140; Devereux 1977, 135; and Hoerber 1968, 102). Can the two be combined?

Though neither of the generals fights his way through the difficulties of *elenchus*, their conversation with Socrates offers some direction for the reader who has endurance. For example, Laches reaches an impasse because he associates the wrong kind of knowledge with courageous behavior. He appeared to contradict his definition of courage as wise endurance because he labeled as

courageous examples of people enduring though they lacked relevant skill knowledge. Ironically, an implicit resolution to his contradiction is provided in the discussion at lines 195b-196b. Nicias, defending his own position against one of Laches' criticisms, distinguishes between skill knowledge and knowledge of good and evil. One of Nicias' examples involves the craft-knowledge of medicine. He points out that the doctor's knowledge of how to heal a body is separate from the knowledge of whether it is better for a particular individual to live or to die (195C). Laches, however, refuses to accept Nicias' distinction and accuses him of being "unwilling to make a gentlemanly admission that he is talking nonsense...." (196a10-b2). Laches, writing Nicias' contribution off as "empty words", does not recognize its potential to remove himself from his earlier difficulty. Laches' inconsistency is produced when he associates the wisdom involved in courage with skill knowledge. If Laches were to discard his assumption about the type of wisdom relevant to courage, he could resolve his problem (O'Brien 1963, 139-140 and Devereaux 1977, 136).²⁹ Resurrecting the definition of courage as wise endurance provides a possible solution to Nicias' problem. Nicias' definition of courage fails to differentiate courage from virtue itself, but, if courage is endurance based on knowledge of good and evil, courage can be distinguished from virtue in general.

IV. The Summoner Explanation and its Implications for Developmentalism

²⁹ For a related interpretation, see Teloh (1986, 50 and 55).

I have accounted for the aporetic features of the early dialogues—Socrates’ declarations of ignorance, use of elenchus, and the dialogues’ inconclusive endings—in terms of Socrates’ attempts to summon. I have also argued that Plato uses these features to summon the reader. The thesis that differences between early and middle dialogues can be explained as Plato’s application of middle period epistemology is not limited to aporetic features, however. It also explains another major difference between the two periods; while Socrates appeals to the hypothesis of the forms in the middle dialogues, he does not mention or discuss the forms in his earlier works. In response, one can argue that lack of mention of the forms in early dialogues does not entail that Plato had not yet formed an opinion on the subject.³⁰ Moreover, the thesis for which I have argued provides a good explanation for his silence. Within the dramatic context of the early dialogues, Socrates is drawing out and examining the thought of interlocutors in an attempt to summon them, and sharing his own views would hinder this process.³¹ Similarly, explicitly presenting the hypothesis of the forms in the early dialogues would prevent the reader from grasping the forms through her own inquiry.³²

³⁰ See, for example, Paul Shorey, (1933, 314); Rowe (2007, 39); and Kahn (1996, 40).

³¹ Julia Annas makes a good point on the subject. She writes: “Socrates’ lack of position must be understood to be relative to the context of teaching: he has no doctrine *when eliciting other peoples’ views*, since if he did, this would interfere with the process of getting views out of them, but this does not mean he has no positions of his own which can be discussed in a different context (1999, 21).”

³² Kahn also explains silence concerning the forms by appealing to Plato’s pedagogical motives. He proposes that Plato was aware of how unusual his view was and expected it to be met with hostility,

My thesis has interesting implications for the debate between developmentalists and unitarians. There are two common approaches to attacking developmentalism. One is challenging the accuracy of the standard chronological ordering of Plato's dialogues.³³ I do not use this tactic and tentatively accept the division of the dialogues into three chronological periods.³⁴ Instead, I have taken the second approach, providing an alternative explanation of differences between periods. By explaining unique features of the early dialogues as manifestations of Socrates' epistemology in middle works, my argument challenges the inductive case for the developmentalist claim as an inference to the best explanation and also brings to light an important point of continuity between the two periods.

My explanation has an advantage over developmentalism in that it does not depend on the controversial assumption that we have an accurate linear chronology of the dialogues. Though I have used the chronological labels of "early" and "middle" in this paper, the summoner explanation applies equally well when we set aside these terms. The purported inconsistency with which

thus the "rhetorical motivation for his use of indirect statement and the device of myth-making, his holding back and then his gradual, ingressive exposition of the otherworldly metaphysics (1995, 32)." Rowe, too, argues that Plato, aware of how strange his theories would sound to his contemporaries, sought to prepare the readers of his early dialogues (2007, 23-25).

³³ For scholars who raise serious challenges for the project of ordering the dialogues, see Nails (1995); Thesleff (1989); and Young (1994).

³⁴ Though developmentalism presupposes acceptance of the standard ordering of the dialogues, acceptance of the established chronology does not imply developmentalism.

I've been concerned is, at its most fundamental level, an inconsistency between the style and content of aporetic dialogues such as the *Laches* and *Euthyphro* and so-called doctrinal dialogues such as the *Phaedo* and *Republic*.³⁵ My summoner explanation explains these differences by positing that the aporetic dialogues present an application of a position held in certain "doctrinal" works. In addition, its independence from chronology also gives it an edge in accounting for inconsistencies within a single dialogue or between dialogues assigned to the same period.

The cumulative force of attacks against developmentalism has left us in need of a better explanation of inconsistencies within the dialogues. I propose that the hypothesis that Socrates and Plato use summoners in order to provoke philosophical thinking provides an alternative framework for interpreting the significance of contradictions within the Platonic corpus. This framework not only preserves consistency for an author who placed much emphasis on harmonizing one's belief set, it challenges us to tackle Plato's provocative puzzles and use them as opportunities to engage actively in philosophical inquiry.³⁶

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³⁵ I question this label because Socrates himself often refers to his main assumptions as hypotheses.

³⁶ I have revised this conclusion in light of questions raised by Gerald Press in his commentary.

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