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A MADNESS TO THE METHOD:
A DEFENSE OF DIVINE INSPIRATION IN THE CASE OF SOCRATES

by

Daniel B. Larkin

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Philosophy

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For my Parents

For Pamela

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Abstract

In contemporary Platonic scholarship, Socrates is quite often depicted as a hyper-rationalist, i.e., an individual that relies upon reason alone in his philosophical pursuits. And, such a position is not entirely unsupported, especially when one considers the rigor with which Socrates engages his interlocutors via the elenctic method, not to mention the charges of impiety and atheism, for which he was found guilty. Yet, while Socrates did indeed hold reason in the highest esteem, when we look to the texts, we find evidence to suggest that he also took seriously the role played by divine inspiration in the pursuit of truth. Not only do we find examples of Socrates recognizing the potential for truth that the divinely inspired seem to exhibit, but further, we find Socrates himself to be the recipient of such divine revelation in the form of his *daimonion*. And, while some scholars have dismissed such references as mere ironic gestures, I argue that these dismissive, and admittedly anachronistic, claims are entirely unfounded. Instead, I propose that Plato recognized, and valued, the role that divine inspiration played in the case of Socrates. Yet, while the divine inspiration experienced by Socrates is seen in a positive light by Plato, given the uniqueness of his situation, Socrates, and his methodology, can no longer be the model upon which philosophical investigation is founded. Thus, recognizing the limitations of Socrates, limitations which are alleviated via divine assistance, Plato, in his late period, develops a new methodology, i.e., collection and division, one which might allow for the definitional knowledge which he seeks without reliance upon divine revelation. Despite this change, however, I maintain

that even in the late Platonic period, Plato still recognizes the value of divine inspiration. As such, Socrates, while perhaps not a philosopher in the unqualified sense according to Plato's later understanding of philosophy, might rightly be understood as a unique individual, one who, through divine inspiration, is given access to truth, albeit a truth he is unable to fully explain.

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Introduction

As the title indicates, this dissertation is a defense of divine inspiration in the case of Socrates. This idea, i.e., that we ought to take seriously the role that divine inspiration plays in Plato's dialogues arose from my reading of Plato's *Sophist*, wherein we find the Eleatic Stranger, replacing Socrates as the main protagonist, attempting to establish a precise definition of Sophistry using the new methodology of collection and division. Interestingly, one of the stranger's attempts towards a definition of the sophist seems to perfectly describe Socrates. And, while the Stranger expresses reservations about such an individual truly being a sophist, the ambiguity we are left with following this definition is quite troubling. Given Socrates' place of prominence throughout Plato's dialogues, that he would now be associated with sophistry, as opposed to the shining example of what a philosopher ought be, seems problematic. Thus, given the fairly drastic change in Plato's methodology that occurs in these late dialogues, one which not only places Socrates in the background, but also exchanges the Socratic elenchos for the method of collection and division, Socrates' status is not altogether clear, an ambiguity that leaves us with the question as to how are we to understand Socrates in Plato's late period. Is this new methodology an indication that Plato's understanding of philosophy has changed? If so, as Socrates is now no longer occupying center stage, does Plato still consider Socrates to be a philosopher? If not a philosopher, then is he a sophist? Surely this cannot be true, for considering Plato's view of sophistry *throughout* his dialogues, that he would associate Socrates with sophistry is cause for concern.

Yet, it must be noted that, despite his consistent disavowal of knowledge, Socrates does *seem* to know things with certainty, not simply specific ideas, such as his claim that in matters of justice we should follow the one and not the many, or that the virtues of piety, justice, temperance and wisdom are interconnected, but further, his ability, when engaged in the elenchos with his interlocutors, somehow always properly to guide the discussion towards what is right. Is Socrates simply feigning ignorance then, as Thrasymachus accused him of in Book I of the Republic? If true, then indeed it would seem that such behavior would make him closer in kind to the very sort of sophist Plato seems to abhor, one who utilizes deception to defeat his opponents in argument.

Given the unpleasantness of such a prospect, I proposed a new thesis, one which would explain Socrates' seemingly inexplicable ability to "know" what is right, while all the while being sincere in his proclaimed state of ignorance. My thesis is this: We must take seriously the role of divine inspiration in the case of Socrates, for, in so doing, we might save Socrates from the dreary fate of Sophistry, all the while gleaning insight into Plato's understanding of Socrates in the late dialogues.

However, as this thesis is dependent upon the idea that his confidence in his beliefs is inexplicable by purely rational means, I first needed to establish that Socrates' methodology of choice, the elenchos, was unable to allow for the acquisition of positive moral doctrine. And, while all who read Plato are well aware of the aporetic nature of the dialogues, specifically the earlier Socratic dialogues wherein we are left without an answer to the inquiry put forth, in recent years, a number of scholars have argued that the elenchos can, and does, allow for Socrates to establish the very sort of positive moral truth that seems to elude him at every turn.

At the center of the newly invigorated debate regarding the merit of the elenchos was Gregory Vlastos, who, after mining through the *Gorgias*, made his “discovery” of a particular passage (479e), wherein, following a long elenctic debate, exclaims,

(T1) Has it not been proved that what was asserted [by myself] is true?

Drawing from this passage and others of a similar vein, Vlastos proceeds to argue that we can take this as evidence in support of the position that the elenchos allows Socrates the ability to establish positive moral doctrine. As my thesis depends on Socrates *inability* to establish positive moral doctrine through the elenchos alone, I spend the majority of Chapter 1 arguing against Vlastos’s position, doing so through raising a series of objections which, I believe, make his position untenable. I conclude the chapter by claiming that the Elenchos is used by Socrates not to establish positive moral truths, but rather, as a tool to expose the inconsistencies in the beliefs of others. Given this conclusion, one which removes the possibility of the elenchos being solely responsible for the confidence with which Socrates carries his moral beliefs, the origin of this conviction still remains uncertain.

With this uncertainty established, that Socrates might be considered a sophist by Plato is not an altogether implausible prospect. Thus, I begin Chapter 2 of my dissertation by focusing on Plato’s *Sophist*, his major work on sophistry, wherein, as noted above, the 6th attempt to define the sophist seems to be an exact description of Socrates. If we are to save Socrates from sophistry, it must be proven that we are not to take this definition as a true definition of the sophist. To accomplish this task, I start first by providing an analysis of the new methodology utilized in the dialogue, that of collection and division, for it is this method of division that the Stranger utilizes to define

the Sophist. Yet, we find that when it comes to defining the sophist, things are not quite so simple. So difficult is this task, in fact, that we are presented with seven attempts to define the sophist, each providing a different conclusion than the last. In his various attempts, the Stranger defines the Sophist as a hunter (of young men), various types of salesmen, a combatant, a cleanser of souls, and finally, a deceitful imitator. And, while it is the 6th definition, i.e., that of the cleanser of souls, that will eventually be associated with Socrates, as my thesis is dependent upon Socrates not carrying the title of sophist, I argue that, despite the varying definitions we are given, it is the seventh and final definition, i.e., the individual who creates the false appearance of being wise, that we are to take as Plato's final, and exclusive, definition of the sophist.

Having argued that the 6th definition should not be considered a proper definition of sophistry, a point which would seem to excuse Socrates from the charge of sophistry, the question remains as to whether or not Socrates is thus to be considered a Philosopher? As I noted above, given the changes in methodology, as well as Socrates' diminished role in the later dialogues, not to mention the similarities between Socrates and the individual described as the noble sophist of the 6th definition, that Socrates is still considered by Plato to be the paradigmatic example of the philosopher is, on my view, very unlikely. Indeed, given the evidence we find in these later dialogues, I argue that Plato has recognized the limitations of the elenchtic method, which, as I argued in Chapter 1, cannot produce positive doctrines, but rather, only expose the inconsistencies in the beliefs of others, and, while that is a necessary component of the philosophical process, if one is to truly establish the sort of definitional knowledge Plato seeks, a new methodology is required, i.e., the method of collection and division. And, while Socrates

does engage in the new method on a couple of occasions, most notably in the late dialogue the *Philebus*, we find that, in comparison to the Eleatic Stranger of the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, Socrates lacks the requisite skill to properly complete the divisions to achieve a proper definition. This failure, coupled with the new requirements Plato sets for philosophy, led me to the conclusion that while Plato does not now consider Socrates to be a sophist, neither does he consider him a philosopher in the unqualified sense.

Given this point, the question arises: How are we to understand Socrates? In answer to this response, I argue in the second half of my dissertation that Plato takes seriously the role of divine inspiration in the case of Socrates. And, while my initial thoughts on this conclusion were of gleeful excitement, when I presented this idea in its nascent stages, I was met with some particularly aggressive dissent from the audience. To suggest that Socrates, the same individual who banished the poets from the kallipolis, would seriously entertain such fantasy was *obviously* absurd! Granted, Socrates does reference his *daimonion* at times, but *surely this is to be taken in jest*, an ironic tongue in cheek reference not to an actual divine entity, but to reason itself. Yet, while this hyper-rationalist understanding of Socrates may fit nicely in our contemporary understanding, one which quite consistently pits philosophy against religion, such views are, on my view, exceptionally anachronistic, not to mention simply unsupported by textual evidence. Indeed, the role of the divine is so prevalent throughout the dialogues that to ignore the role of religion and the divine in the case of Socrates would be akin to, to quote Gregory Vlastos, “a Surgery which kills the patient.”

My defense of divine inspiration in the case of Socrates is thus divided between two chapters. In Chapter 3, I examine the early dialogues, i.e., those dialogues that are

traditionally held to be Socratic in nature, whereas in the final chapter, I turn my attention back to the later dialogues to show that, despite the changes in methodology, and the development of Plato's thought, Plato still holds religion and the concept of divine inspiration in high esteem. Beginning with Chapter 3, my reasoning is divided into two main sections, arguing (1) that the character of Socrates has a sincere reverence for matters of religion, and (2) that Socrates takes seriously the role of divine inspiration. Beginning with the former, when faced with accusations of impiety (and then atheism) in the *Apology*, it would seem that Socrates is making a mockery of the charges, as he cleverly manipulates Meletus into befuddlement. Yet, while it may be true that in manipulating the charges, Socrates' true beliefs are still somewhat ambiguous, we are presented with a significant amount of evidence throughout the early dialogues to suggest that while Socrates may not believe in the gods of Homeric and Hesiodic myth, he *did* believe in the existence of divine beings. And, as we are told, these gods are perfectly wise, and, given the connection Socrates posits between knowledge and morality, these gods are also perfectly moral. Given the obvious disparity between such perfectly moral gods and the somewhat lascivious gods of Homer, such a belief may seem somewhat blasphemous. Yet, I argue that such a conception of the gods, i.e., perfectly wise/moral, was not at all uncommon at the time in Athens. Further, while this belief may not perfectly align with the tradition, it is still clear that Socrates *does* believe in the gods, a point which would save him from the charge of atheism.

Following the defense of Socrates belief on matters of religion/theology, I conclude the chapter with an analysis of divine inspiration in particular. And, while the *daimonion* is perhaps the most obvious example, there are other passages that would

indicate that Socrates takes divine inspiration and revelation quite seriously. For example, in the *Apology*, not only does Socrates admit that the poets have access to the truth through inspiration (albeit a truth they cannot explain), Socrates clearly states that he has a duty to philosophize as he was ordered to do so by the gods. What is important about this claim, and others like it, wherein Socrates follows the command of the gods is that, on such occasions, Socrates does not understand, at least at first, *why* the gods command him to do such things. Yet, despite his lack of understanding, Socrates obeys. Such blind obedience void of immediate understanding becomes particularly problematic for those scholars who would claim that these references to the divine are nothing more than mere allusions to reason dressed up in language of divine reference. On the other hand, if we take his belief in the existence of perfectly wise/moral gods seriously, then his willingness to obey such divine commands blindly (a blind acceptance which is, in and of itself, somewhat uncharacteristic for Socrates) makes much more sense.

Turning our attention to the *daimonion*, we find even more evidence to support this position. For, while there are a number of passages wherein Socrates' *daimonion* offers its advice as to what he ought not do, those instances that are of particular importance to my argument are those where we find Socrates, having decided to perform some action, only to be warned against it by his *daimonion*, a warning that, it should be noted, Socrates *always* heeds. If, as has been noted by scholars such as Martha Nussbaum, we are to take these instances of divine intervention ironically, as mere references to reason itself, then how do we explain odd circumstance of Socrates deciding upon some course of action, a decision which itself would require a deliberative process, only to, when confronted by his *daimonion*, act against his initial decision. In examples

such as these, which are many, we find evidence that Socrates takes his *daimonion* and the advice offered with exceptional sincerity, doing so, in fact, often times *against* his originally intended course of action!

Having argued that we ought to take divine inspiration to play a significant role in the early dialogues, my final chapter focuses upon the late dialogues and the continued importance of divine inspiration in the case of Socrates. As mentioned above, with these later dialogues comes a number of significant changes, most notably the change in methodology, as well as the diminished presence of Socrates. And, while Socrates is not entirely absent, in those dialogues wherein Socrates is once again leading the discussion, it seems to be the case that we are given varying images of Socrates. In the *Theaetetus*, we are presented with Socrates the midwife. In the *Sophist*, as I have argued, we find Socrates the noble sophist. And finally, in the *Philebus*, we find a Socrates who gives up the elenchos for the new method of division! Given these seemingly disparate images, it is difficult to determine precisely how we are to understand Socrates in the eyes of Plato. In answer to this problem, I argue that, while there are indeed differences between the images of Socrates as presented, we find that there is a common thread between them all, and that is a continued reverence for and reliance upon divine inspiration. Indeed, in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates clearly claims that his ability to determine which ideas are good and which are mere wind eggs is due to the god's assistance. In the 6th definition, we find similar connections to the divine, as the "noble sophist" of definition 6 is the individual who is able to purge others of their false beliefs. An ability of this sort would surely be required in order to determine which belief requires purging, just as the midwife maintains. And finally, in the *Philebus*, while Socrates does use the method of division to

determine the varying types of goods, the discussion begins with a moment of revelation, wherein Socrates admits to having received a revelation directly from the gods, a revelation that serves as the initial foundation for the discussion that follows. As such, we once more find a continued reliance upon divine inspiration in the case of Socrates even throughout Plato's late period.

Thus, I believe that these late images provide us with a very interesting insight into Plato's understanding of Socrates, specifically that Plato recognized the role that divine inspiration played in the case of Socrates. And, while this gift provided Socrates with the ability to excel in argumentation, and life, Plato recognized that individuals such as Socrates were exceptionally rare, and as such, a new method was required that could not only lead to the positive doctrines, but further, did so without direct guidance by the divine.

Chapter 1: The Limitations of the Elenchos

Overview of the Elenchos

The guiding question for Chapter 1 is the following: Does the elenctic method of the early Platonic dialogues provide Socrates with knowledge?¹ Considering Socrates' consistent disavowal of knowledge, this question has opened the door to rigorous scholarly debate. Further confounding the issue is the fact that *despite* Socrates' claims to ignorance, there are instances where Socrates expresses his beliefs with such conviction that he seems to contradict his own disavowal of knowledge.² As absolute ignorance regarding the very definitional knowledge he seeks would preclude the possibility of any claims to knowledge by Socrates, many scholars have strived to make sense of this paradox,³ doing so through a careful examination of the elenchos, the methodology of choice for the Socrates of the early dialogues.⁴

At the center of this debate regarding the merit of the elenchos was Gregory Vlastos. Inspired by an unwillingness to accept Socrates as a dogmatist, Vlastos, in his now famous article, "The problem of the elenchus: method is all," proposes a

¹ I will be following the generally agreed upon ordering of the dialogues as noted in Vlastos

² Examples listed by Vlastos (1994 pp. 11-12) include but are not limited to the following: *Crito* 47a-48a – That in matters of justice we should follow not 'the many' but 'the man who knows.' *Ion* – That the poet and rhapsode are guided by madness, not via *technē*.; Protagoras 329e-333b – that piety and justice, temperance and wisdom are inter-entailing.

³ There are those who argue that Socrates is merely feigning his ignorance, relying upon it as a tool to manipulate his interlocutors, not for malicious purposes, but rather to encourage them on, allowing them to believe Socrates is traveling *with them* on their journey towards Truth. See Gulley, (1968) p. 69. This doubtfulness is toyed with by Plato himself through Thrasymachus in Book I of the *Republic* (337a-7), albeit in a much more aggressive manner, as Thrasymachus believes it to be a tactic utilized to avoid answering questions honestly.

⁴ That the elenchos is the *only* methodology used by Socrates is a point of contention amongst scholars. Benson (2000) pp.34-37 and Kahn (1992) pp. 248-253, for example, argue that Socrates employs varying methodologies, e.g., in passages in the *Crito*, wherein Socrates drops the elenchos altogether in favor of a direct form of speech, or in the *Menexenus*, wherein we find Socrates delivering a funeral oration with little to no interaction with his audience.

controversial argument which, he believes, provides sufficient evidence to prove that the elenchos can, and does, allow Socrates to acquire positive moral truths.⁵ As there has been much debate regarding the precise nature of the elenchos, let us first establish the definition of the elenchos as provided by Vlastos:

Socratic elenchos is a search for moral truth by question-and-answer adversary argument in which a thesis is debated only if asserted as the answerer's own belief and is regarded as refuted only if its negation is deduced from his own beliefs.⁶

We find that for Vlastos, while the elenchos is necessarily adversarial, i.e., Socrates must be engaged with an interlocutor in debate; the key component for the elenchos is that it is a *search*, a search limited to moral truths.⁷ In other words, the elenchos is not to be used to determine the truth of mathematical principles, nor is it geared towards more specified practical applications, such as those pertaining to proper diet or medical advice.⁸ Further,

⁵ Vlastos 1983.

⁶ Vlastos 1994, 4

⁷ See Ap. 29c, 28e, and 41b.

⁸ In response, one could look to the *Meno* as evidence to Socrates using the elenchos towards the proving of mathematical principles. Vlastos believes the elenchos as such to be a reduced form, used strictly in a negative sense to correct the "mistakes" of the slave boy. As Vlastos (1991, ch.4 n. 54) explains, the mistakes of the slave boy, "are due to his having placed unthinking trust in suggestions he reads into what Socrates has said." Instead, "the boy must say what he judges for himself to be true *for his own reasons*, prepared to defend it against Socrates." For Vlastos, this use of the elenchos, i.e., one that is strictly "negative" or corrective, in its deployment, is incomplete due to its failure to prove any particular doctrine. Further, it is important to note that on Vlastos' account, the mathematical topic at hand in the *Meno* is indicative of a major change in Plato's thinking and methodology, one which marks a distinct change in the character of Socrates from one concerned solely with moral issues, to a Socrates now interested in more epistemological and metaphysical ideas. For Vlastos (1991, cps. 2 and 3), given this major change in Socrates from the *Meno* onwards, we must be careful to distinguish the Socrates of the early dialogues from the Socrates of the middle and late periods.

However, while I find much of Vlastos' argument regarding the evolution of the character Socrates to be quite compelling, there is evidence to suggest that Socrates, as early as the *Euthyphro*, was very much concerned with epistemological issues, as well as matters of methodology. It is perhaps too long of an argument to make in full here, however, I will point out that we need think only of Socrates' response to Euthyphro's first attempt to define piety. On Socrates' view, Euthyphro's first attempt fails to capture the definition of piety itself, as it is merely an example of an action that might be considered pious. Indeed, given Socrates' attention to acquiring the proper definition, one that satisfies the definitional requirements stipulated by Socrates, it is not altogether clear that we can entirely divorce the

the elenchos is not used to investigate the very nature of the methodology itself. In other words, when engaged in a “What is the *F*?” question, e.g., “What is Piety?” Socrates never debates the conditions for a correct answer, but rather sets those conditions himself, asking only for assent from his interlocutors.⁹

As to what the elenchos *does* focus on, we find that Socrates is quite clear in his own agenda, i.e., that he is searching for truth as it pertains to morality.¹⁰ And, to be sure, Socrates does not discriminate in his pursuit of this truth, as he is willing to talk to anyone who is willing to engage him so long as they adhere to a very rigid condition: that each individual answer his questions honestly.¹¹ Regarding this condition, Vlastos offers three points to explain why it is important that all interlocutors be honest in their answers:¹² (1) To test the honesty of the argument. If the goal of the elenchos is to not simply to win the argument, but to uncover the truth, then it is imperative that all parties offer forward only their own personally held beliefs. If this adherence to truth is not maintained, then the interlocutor is free to argue any position that might give him an advantage. Should this occur, and the interlocutor is particularly skilled in argumentation,

epistemological from the moral in these early dialogues. Further, concerning the claim that the elenchos of the *Meno* is “incomplete,” I will argue in this chapter in full that the elenchos is *never* used in any of the dialogues to successfully prove any doctrine at all, mathematical or otherwise.

⁹ See *Laches* 191e11 – Here, Socrates explains to Laches that the definition of courage to be given must cover all of the agreed upon cases of courage. As Vlastos notes, Socrates does not ask if Laches agrees with these parameters, but rather, simply asks if he understands how they are to proceed. However, given that they have already agreed upon various cases of courage, one could argue that Laches has already assented to the parameters.

¹⁰ Vlastos provides examples to this end from *Republic* 352d, as well as from *Gorgias* 487e-488a and 472c-d

¹¹ See *Gorgias*. 500b: “By the god of friendship, Callicles, don’t think that you can play games with me and answer whatever comes to your head, contrary to your real opinion.” *Republic* I. 346a: “My good man, don’t answer contrary to your real opinion, so that we may get somewhere.”

¹² Vlastos (1994) pp. 9-10

conclusions could be reached that not only fail to uncover the truth, but further, present as “truth” a falsehood.

(2) To test one’s seriousness in their pursuit of the truth. The point here is that in order to guarantee that the interlocutor does indeed value the truth as much as Socrates, the interlocutor must fully invest themselves in the process. By offering their own beliefs, by putting themselves on the line, such dedication is solidified. Thus, if I were to engage in an argument, and was arguing from a position that I did not truly believe, then, if the opposing side began to gain the advantage, the drive to continue defending my position would be lacking. On the other hand, if my position is one I truly believe in, then I will be more rigorous in my responses, and as a result, both parties are able to dig deeper into the question at hand.

(3) The elenchos is not merely a methodology used towards the establishment of moral truths but also one that seeks to effect change in those who participate. Vlastos points to the *Apology* 29e-30a:

And if one of you says...he does care, I will not let him go nor leave him, but will question and examine and refute him. And if he seems to me to not have the virtue he says he has, I shall reproach him for undervaluing the things of greatest value and overvaluing trivial ones.

It is not enough then to simply inquire as to how, in general, humans should live their lives, but further, to ensure that those specific individuals with whom Socrates engages is living the life that they should be *in that moment*. In other words, Socrates is not satisfied with uncovering truth and leaving it available to take or leave. If the interlocutor does not offer their own beliefs to the discussion, if they do not put themselves on the line, if a conclusion is reached regarding a moral truth, and they are not invested, then they are not beholden to the answer. If, on the other hand, the interlocutor is honest throughout the

discussion, then the revelation of an inconsistency in his beliefs should be, at the very least, a cause for self-reflection.

The Elenchos in the *Gorgias*

Following these preliminary stipulations regarding the elenchos in general, Vlastos proceeds to detail the process of what he classifies as the “standard elenchos”.¹³ As Vlastos explains, the traditional understanding of an elenctic dialogue proceeded as follows: (1) Socrates engages with an interlocutor who claims to possess knowledge or expertise in a particular field of moral inquiry, eliciting from them a belief they hold (*p*) regarding this field. (2) With this first belief *p* established, Socrates then draws out additional premises from his interlocutor, *q*, *r*, and *s*. (3) Socrates then proceeds to show that these new premises, in conjunction with the original posited belief, result in the negation of *p*. (4) Thus, the interlocutor is forced to admit that there is an inconsistency in his beliefs. The result of this exchange as it is stated is not the positive assertion of an alternative to the interlocutor’s original belief, but rather the exposure of the inconsistency that exists within the beliefs of the interlocutor.

However, while Vlastos was once a proponent of this model,¹⁴ he offers a substantial amendment by claiming that the elenchos additionally shows the original belief, *p*, to be false, and, consequently, *not-p* to be *true*.¹⁵ In other words, Vlastos claims

¹³ *ibid.* p. 12. Vlastos explains that an alternative to the “standard” elenchos, i.e., the “indirect elenchos”, has been suggested by Robinson. (1953) While Vlastos (1983) dismisses the distinction as Robinson states it, the argument has been taken up by Polansky (1985) and Brickhouse and Smith (1994).

¹⁴ Vlastos, 1956 – Such an understanding of Socrates, Vlastos argues, serves as the perfect representation of the “Sophist of Noble Lineage” (*Soph. 230a-e*) found in the *Sophist*. We find in that description (which will be detailed in depth in Ch. II of this dissertation), the description of a figure that seems to resemble Socrates, albeit one that, despite a lack of his own knowledge, is able to purge his interlocutors of their false beliefs.

¹⁵ Vlastos, 1983

that the elenchos succeeds in establishing positive moral truths. The impetus for this change regarding his own position was the inconsistency within the character of Socrates himself. Put plainly, if the elenchos only succeeded in exposing the inconsistencies within the beliefs of his interlocutors, how could Socrates justify his own moral convictions? In other words, if the elenchos does not allow for the establishment of moral truth, and the elenchos is the only method used by Socrates, then Socrates, in claiming certain things to be true, would himself be a dogmatist.¹⁶

And yet, it is through the “discovery” of a passage in the *Gorgias* that Vlastos believes to have solved the “problem of the elenchos”. The “discovered” passage is found at *Gorgias*479e:

(T1) Has it not been proved that what was asserted [by myself] is true?¹⁷

For Vlastos, this simple question illustrates Socrates’ belief that via the elenchos he has proven his thesis to be true. Yet, this claim of certainty is the capstone of one of the most puzzling arguments in the Platonic corpus, and one that in recent years has been subject to an immense amount of literature.¹⁸

Socrates begins by asking Polus whether it would be better to suffer injustice or inflict injustice. In response, Polus responds with the following thesis:

p To commit injustice is better than to suffer it.¹⁹

¹⁶ Again, that the elenchos is the only methodology used by Socrates is a point of contention. See footnote 4.

¹⁷ οὐκοῦν ἀποδέδεικται ὅτι ἀληθῆ ἐλέγετο. “By myself” (ἐμαυτῷ) added by Vlastos. It should be noted, however, that while Socrates does suggest here that he has proven what was asserted, Polus responds in a non-committal fashion, answering only φαίνεται, i.e., “It appears” or “It seems”.

¹⁸ See Dodds, 1959: 249, Vlastos, 1967: 454-60, Santas, 1979: 233-46, Kahn, 1981: 84-97, and Vlastos, 1991: 139-48

Following this initial thesis, Socrates proceeds on with the elenchos, eliciting from Polus a number of additional premises:²⁰

- q* To commit injustice is baser (αἴσχιον) than to suffer it. (475c5-6)
- r* Doing injustice is more shameful than to suffer it. (474c7-8)
- s* x is finer than y just in case x is more pleasant than y or x is more beneficial than y. (475a5-b2)
- t* Doing injustice is either more painful or more evil than suffering injustice. (475b5-8)
- u* Doing injustice is not more painful than suffering injustice. (475c1-4)
- v* Doing injustice is more evil/worse than suffering it. (475c7-9)

For the purposes of his argument, Vlastos lumps premises *r-v* into a singular premise *r*, and concludes that following the completion of this elenctic episode, we find Polus conceding to Socrates that given set $\{p, q, r\}$, *p* is proven to be false, and thus, not-*p* to be true. Yet, from the evidence given thus far, it is not altogether clear that Socrates has proven not-*p* to be true. In other words, even if premise *q* is inconsistent with premise *p*, why would such inconsistency necessarily require Polus to recognize the falsity of *p*? Could he not abandon premise *q* instead, and admit that it was premise *q* that was false, thereby allowing him to maintain his adherence to his initial belief? According to Vlastos, if this did occur, and the interlocutor backslid on the secondary premises, “he (Socrates) would have the resources to recoup that loss in a further elenchos.”²¹ On Vlastos’s view, the driving force behind the ability of Socrates to expose the inconsistencies of his opponents’ beliefs is not simply his argumentative prowess, but further, that Socrates is in possession of certain moral truths. Indeed, in response to Polus

¹⁹ Translations from Vlastos (1991)

²⁰ This is the summary as provided by Benson, 2000: 81, who himself relied upon Irwin, 1979: 157. Further, for Vlastos’ complete analysis of this argument see Vlastos, 1991: 139-148.

²¹ Vlastos 1994, 22

claiming that it would be difficult to refute a thesis issued by Socrates himself, Socrates responds “Not just difficult, Polus, but impossible: for what is true is never refuted.”²²

To support this view, Vlastos turns his attention to arrival of Callicles, who, in response to the failure of Polus, quickly dispatches with premise *q*, noting that had Polus had the courage to admit the seemingly ugly truth regarding the committing of injustice, he would have won the debate.²³ However, despite his clever attempts to escape the incisive attacks of Socrates, Callicles fails as well. It must be noted that while Socrates manages to deflate the attempts of Callicles, it does not necessarily follow that Socrates would *always* be able to answer future arguments against this position. Could we not imagine an instance where a new interlocutor, one more skilled than both Polus and Callicles, manages to defend the position at hand? In other words, while Socrates has been successful thus far in his elenctic engagements, without textual evidence to support the claim that Socrates will *always* emerge victorious in any given debate, one cannot rule out the possibility of a future interlocutor emerging that would force Socrates to admit defeat.

In response to this potential critique, and in an effort to defend the thesis that it is not merely his argumentative acumen, but rather, his possession of moral truths that allows for Socrates to always win the engagements with his interlocutors, Vlastos cites two additional passages from the *Gorgias* that he believes, when taken in concert, provide sufficient evidence to support the claim that Socrates does believe himself to be in possession of such truths, and further, that it is because of this that he will always emerge

²² *G.* 473b10-11

²³ *G.* 482d7-e2

victorious in any debate that would seek to argue against the truth of the Socratic position. The first of these crucial passages is found at *Gorgias* 474b:

I believe that I and you and the rest of mankind believe that committing injustice is worse [for the agent] than is suffering it.

To properly interpret this passage, Vlastos deems it necessary that we acknowledge two different types of “belief”: *Overt* belief, which is defined as those beliefs we actively think about and posit, and *Covert* belief, which are those beliefs that are entailed by the positing of our overt beliefs. To use Vlastos’ own example, if I overtly believe that a given figure is a Euclidian triangle, then I *covertly* believe that the angles of that triangle will add up to 180 degrees, even if I have yet to learn about this particular aspect of triangular shapes. Applying this division of belief to the argument regarding the suffering of injustice, Vlastos claims that while Polus and Callicles might honestly think themselves to *believe* premise *p* to be true, they hold additional overt beliefs that, when taken together, result in *not-p*. In other words, by positing the whole set of beliefs v_i , they are also *covertly* positing *not-p*, even if they are unaware of doing so.

With this position established, Vlastos offers his second piece of textual evidence.

We read at *Gorgias* 482a-b:

Don’t be astonished that I should say these things. My love, philosophy, is the one you must stop from asserting them. It is she, my friend, who asserts these things you hear from me, and she is much less unstable than is my other love. For the son of Cleinias says now one thing, now another, while philosophy always says the same thing. She says the things you find astonishing; you were yourself present when they were spoken.

So you must either refute her saying those very things that I was asserting – that to commit injustice and do so with impunity is the greatest of all evils – or if you leave this unrefuted, then, by the dog, god of Egypt, Callicles will not agree with you, Callicles, but will dissent from you your whole life long.²⁴

²⁴ *G.* 482a-b

For Vlastos, this passage suggests that unless Callicles is able to refute the Socratic thesis, then Callicles will always be in possession of contradictory beliefs, for, as he is taking as his own the beliefs posited by Polus, i.e., belief set V_i , his currently held beliefs would necessarily indicate that he is also in possession of the covert belief *not-p*.²⁵ Further, the resolute nature of Socrates' claim would indicate that even if the interlocutor retracts or modifies beliefs other than the one Socrates has shown to create an inconsistency, e.g., dropping belief q instead of p , Socrates will always manage to refute their thesis, for, "there will *always* be others in their belief system which entail the Socratic thesis."²⁶

In order to account for the certainty he is attributing to Socrates, Vlastos controversially posits what he describes as two "tremendous" assumptions:

(A) Whoever has a false moral belief will always have at the same time true beliefs entailing the negation of that false belief.

-and-

(B) The set of elenchtically tested moral beliefs held by Socrates at any given moment is consistent.²⁷

Looking first to assumption A , Vlastos begins by restating the claim that regardless of which premise is jettisoned by his interlocutor, as well as whatever new premise is placed in its stead, Socrates will always be able to build a new argument which would reveal that

²⁵ Granted, one could argue that Callicles is not beholden to the belief of *not-p* as the belief set v_i is not his but that of Polus. However, such an occurrence is precisely the reason for the "say what you believe" requirement discussed previously.

²⁶ Vlastos, (1994). P. 24

²⁷ Vlastos 1994, 25

the interlocutor still covertly believes *not-p*. Yet, if this is true, i.e., if Socrates truly believes that his elenctic method is so unequivocally effective, why not argue for proof of such efficacy? In other words, why would Socrates settle for the mere assumption, and not simply use the elenchos to prove to his interlocutors that their efforts are futile in the face of such an effective methodology?

In answer to this concern, Vlastos claims that doing so would be distinctly uncharacteristic of the Socrates of the early Platonic dialogues.²⁸ Whereas the Socrates of dialogues such as the *Meno* and *Republic* does in fact engage in more epistemological and/or metaphysical lines of inquiry, we find that the Socrates of the early dialogues is not only seemingly disinterested in such areas of study, but further, is specifically interested only in matters of morality. As a result of this disposition, questions regarding the nature of a philosophical method itself would, for the Socrates of the early dialogues, be of little concern or importance.²⁹ Yet, Vlastos notes, despite lacking the definitive proof that such an inquiry might yield, Socrates does have, at the very least, empirical evidence to support assumption *A* that arises in the form of his consistent success, as he has always been able to expose the inconsistencies within the beliefs of those individuals who hold what he perceives to be a false belief.³⁰ And, while his impeccable success rate may not be able to definitively *prove* that the beliefs of Socrates are true, given the

²⁸ For a detailed discussion regarding the evolution of the character of Socrates throughout Plato's corpus, see Vlastos 1991, 47-49

²⁹ On this point I find issue with Vlastos' position. To explain, if we take Assumptions *A* and *B* to be taken seriously by Socrates, and further, if these assumptions are instrumental to his method's success in proving moral doctrine, then, if Vlastos is correct regarding the role these assumptions play for Socrates, it would appear that Socrates is fundamentally concerned with questions of methodology.

³⁰ Richard Kraut 1983, rightly notes that "proof" is reserved only for deductive arguments, never for arguments of an inductive nature. For Kraut, this becomes problematic for Vlastos if he is claiming, as Kraut believes him to be, that it is precisely the sort of proof associated with deductive arguments that Socrates seeks via the elenchos.

untenable nature of the oppositional beliefs held by his interlocutors, and his own experience that those who hold and live by the beliefs he *does* think true are happier than those that do not, Vlastos sees no reason why Socrates would not make the further inductive leap regarding the truth of his own beliefs. Finally, if it *were* the case that Socrates himself was in possession of a false belief, then, similar to his interlocutors, his beliefs would eventually be exposed as inconsistent. And, as such inconsistency is never brought to light, Vlastos posits that it is safe to assume that this consistency is evidence to the truth of Socrates' beliefs.³¹

The take away from this is that the sort of consistency of belief that Socrates holds to be of the utmost importance has been found to be absent in all others aside from himself. One might think that this is not a fair claim to make, as it was always the interlocutors, not Socrates, that were the target of the elenchos, i.e., it was always the beliefs *of others* that were subject to Socrates' incisive questioning. The question arises as to how Socrates could, having not gone through the rigor of his own interrogation, positively believe his own beliefs to be true? And, while this claim is not entirely without merit, according to Vlastos, it is simply not the case that his own views have not undergone any investigation. We recall that Socrates, by engaging in the elenchos with others, is subjecting his own views to the very same scrutiny. In discovering that time and time again the views of others have been exposed as inconsistent on account of their false beliefs, and additionally, that it is his views, and his views alone, that seem to maintain consistency despite this exposure to such engagements, Vlastos believes Socrates has sufficient evidence to make assumption *B*, i.e., that the set of elenctically

³¹ This consistency within the beliefs of an individual is of such great importance for Socrates that he declares he would rather be in contradiction with others than be cursed with the sort of internal strife that internal contradictions would cause. See *G.* 482b-c.

tested moral beliefs held by Socrates at any given time is consistent. Remember, however, that for Vlastos, the elenchos is not merely a methodology used by Socrates to expose the inconsistencies within the beliefs of his interlocutors, but rather, it is one that allows for the positing of moral truths. And, for Vlastos, this final step arises through the combination of assumptions *A* and *B*. To explain, if it is the case that the belief set of Socrates has been shown time and time again to be consistent, and further, if the only belief sets that can maintain such consistency are those that lack any false beliefs, then, if Socrates can safely assume his *own* belief set to be consistent (which Vlastos believes he can), then Socrates would be justified in claiming that his own beliefs are *true*. Thus, as it was via elenctic investigation that Socrates was able to establish the truth of his own beliefs, Vlastos argues that Socrates is justified in believing the elenchos to be an effective methodology towards the establishing of moral truths.

The Problem of Consistency

Vlastos on Inconsistency

While I greatly admire the imaginative elegance of Vlastos' argument, I do have a number of deep-seated concerns that I believe present insurmountable problems for his position. The first of these problems I will refer to as the "problem of consistency". We recall that, on Vlastos' view, Socrates is justified in positing his own beliefs as true on account of the consistency of his own set of beliefs. Yet, I would like to dispute this claim, as one can find numerous instances of Socrates expressing inconsistent beliefs throughout the early dialogues.³² Given that Vlastos' argument depends largely upon

³² While incorporating the middle dialogues into this search for inconsistency might have proven to be fruitful, as Vlastos' argument is meant to speak *only* to the Socrates of the early dialogues, we must limit our search to those parameters. As an additional concern, one might argue that we should not hold Socrates accountable for such inconsistency on the grounds that he might simply have revised his own

passages mined from the *Gorgias*, it is an obvious starting point for our investigation, and, to be sure, there is one passage in particular that demands our attention:

And when we've practiced it together, then at last, if we think we should, we'll return to politics, or then we'll deliberate about whatever subject we please, when we're better at deliberating than we are now. *For it's a shameful thing for us, being in the condition we appear to be at present – when we never think the same about the same subjects, the most important ones at that – to sound off as though we're somebodies.*³³

Looking to this passage, it would appear that we are confronted with a blatant admission by Socrates that he does not exclude himself from inconsistency of belief, including himself in that group of people who “never think the same about the same subjects.”³⁴

To be fair, Vlastos does respond to this potential critique, warning us that readers should not be fooled by the ironical nature of Socrates' statement.³⁵ Indeed, according to Vlastos, we can find many instances throughout the dialogues with similar “ironical substitution of ‘we’ for ‘you’.” To begin, let us look to the *Euthyphro*, which contains the first passage Vlastos cites as evidence:

Either we were wrong when we agreed before, or, if we were right then, we are wrong now.³⁶

beliefs as a result of various elenctic encounters. Indeed, Assumption B seems to take this into consideration, as it claims that Socrates beliefs are consistent “at any given time”. Yet, while this is a plausible scenario, not only is there a complete lack of elenctic evidence to support the claim that Socrates used to believe one thing, and then was persuaded to jettison that belief, there *is* evidence, specifically in the *Protagoras* 372d and 376c, of Socrates expressing uncertainty and inconsistency *within the same dialogue*. Therefore, even if we allow for the evolution of Socrates' beliefs, we still find cause to believe that Socrates is not *entirely* consistent regarding his own beliefs.

³³ G.527d. Translation by Donald Zeyl

³⁴ See Kraut 1983, p. 69

³⁵ Vlastos cites Dodd (1959) in support of his claim, who writes on the matter, “This reproach applies of course to Callicles only...but Socrates politely includes himself.”

³⁶ *Eu.* 15c8-9

In this instance, Vlastos claims that context reveals to us that this final usage of the “we” refers only to Euthyphro, and thus, Socrates is excluded from any admission of inconsistency. To illustrate Vlastos’ claim, we look to the text beginning at 15b:

SOCRATES: So the pious is once again that which is dear to the gods.

EUTHYPHRO: Most certainly.

SOCRATES: When you say this, would you be surprised if your arguments seem to move about instead of staying put? And will you accuse me of being Daedalus who makes them move, though you are yourself much more skillful than Daedalus and make them go around in a circle? Or do you not realize your argument has moved around and come again to the same place? You surely remember that earlier the pious and god-loved were shown not to be the same but different from each other. Or do you not remember?

EUTHYPHRO: I do

SOCRATES: Do you then not realize now that you are saying that what is dear to the gods is the pious? Is this not the same as the god-loved? Or is it not?

EUTHYPHRO: It certainly is.

SOCRATES: *Either we were wrong when we agreed before, or if we were right then, we are wrong now.*

What can be gleaned from this is that the agreement to which Socrates is referring is that the pious is *not* the same as the god-loved. Thus, we find that Vlastos is correct in his claim that this instance is not an example of inconsistency in the beliefs of Socrates, as Socrates did not offer his own beliefs regarding the nature of piety, but rather, merely agreed with Euthyphro that the third definition was untenable. This being the case, we can rightly assert that no inconsistency is present.

Vlastos’ position is further bolstered when we look to his second example from the *Charmides*. The moment in question comes at line 175b6-7:

We have admitted that there is knowledge of knowledge although the argument said “No”.

Vlastos argues here that while Socrates seems to be admitting to the joint assertion that there exists a knowledge of knowledge, we should bear in mind that it was Critias who argued this point, while Socrates maintained the contrary. And, when we look to the

argument itself in the text, we find Vlastos to be justified by the text once again. Looking to 169d:

But since his consistently high reputation made him feel ashamed in the eyes of the company and he did not wish to admit to me that he was incapable of dealing with the question I had asked him, he said nothing clear but concealed his predicament. So I, *in order that our argument should go forward*, said “But if this *seems right*, Critias, *let us grant the point* that the existence of a science of science is possible – we can investigate on some other occasion whether this is really the case or not.

We find that it is not the case that Socrates is actually assenting to the position offered by Critias, but is, in fact, merely allowing the claims of Critias to stand in order that they may proceed forward with the discussion.

In one final example from the *Laches*, we find evidence to support Vlastos’ claim that while Socrates does quite often use the plural 1st person pronouns in his argument, we should take this as an instance of Socratic irony, and not as evidence that Socrates has posited any belief of his own that would result in an inconsistency. Looking to *Laches* 194c, we read:

Come along then, Nicias, and, if you can, rescue your friends who are storm tossed by the argument and find themselves in trouble. You see, of course, that our affairs are in a bad way, so state what you think courage is and get us out of our difficulties as well as confirming your own view by putting it into words.

Prima facie it would appear that Socrates is placing himself within the group of those who are flustered by the argument regarding courage. However, upon examining the context within which this statement was made, we find that it was Nicias, not Socrates, who was struggling through the exchange, so much so in fact that not 12 lines earlier at 194a-b a very frustrated Nicias all but admits defeat to Socrates, claiming that while he may wish to continue, he is simply unable to define courage in such a way that would withstand the scrutiny of the *elenchos*. This is in direct contrast to Socrates, who, as

Vlastos comically notes, has been “sailing very smoothly” throughout the exchange, consistently rebutting the attempts of Nicias to the point of exasperation. Given his comfort and poise, it seems incorrect to suggest that Socrates was serious when he placed himself within the group of those who had been “storm-tossed” by the debate.

Further Evidence of Inconsistency

With these examples bolstering his position, I would agree with Vlastos that we cannot simply assume that, given any instance of Socrates’ substitution of the plural pronoun for the singular, we are to take him at his word and attribute the beliefs posited as his own. However, while the textual examples cited above may seem to give us reason to question the seemingly blatant admission of inconstancy we find in the *Gorgias*, it does not follow from this that there exists no instances of inconsistencies within the beliefs of Socrates. However, before we investigate possible discrepancies, I would like to first revisit the passage from the *Gorgias*. In his comments on the 1983 version of Vlastos’ “The Socratic Elenchos,” Richard Kraut suggests that we *should* take Socrates at his word in the *Gorgias*.³⁷ To prove his position, Kraut first looks to other instances where Socrates seems to profess an inconsistency in his beliefs. We look first to the *Protagoras* where we find at 361a-b Socrates to be holding two distinct positions:

(1) That virtue can be taught.

-and-

(2) That virtue is knowledge.

On Kraut’s view, taken together these claims result in an inconsistency within the beliefs of Socrates. Indeed, earlier in the dialogue, Socrates first claims that virtue cannot be taught, only to seemingly waffle on his earlier convictions, and reverse his position.

³⁷ Kraut 1983, 68-70

Further, at 361c-d, Socrates himself admits to this confusion, and urges his interlocutors to push on with him in order to clear up the troubles they have encountered. And, while this apparent inconsistency on the part of Socrates could be dismissed as Socratic irony at work, Kraut believes that such an interpretation is flawed, particularly in the face of additional textual evidence drawn from the *Apology*.

To explain, in the *Apology* we find Socrates consistently denying that he teaches virtue, and, that those who do claim to do so, “are wise with a wisdom more than human.”³⁸ We can glean two important points from this claim. First, that Socrates, on account of his lack of knowledge, could not be teaching virtue, a position that bolsters the claim that Socrates considers virtue to be a kind of knowledge. Second, that Socrates believes that those who *do claim* to teach virtue must be in possession of a wisdom that he qualifies as divine. And, while we might take this line to be a slight against the truth of those claims to knowledge made by other sophists of the time, it is telling that this attack is grounded in the idea that *no one* could teach virtue, as it pertains to a type of knowledge that is divine. Thus, on the one hand, in the *Protagoras*, Socrates asserts plainly that virtue can be taught, while on the other hand, in the *Apology*, Socrates seems to suggest that virtue cannot be taught, for such a task would require the sort of knowledge reserved only for the gods.³⁹ As a result, it appears as if Socrates is expressing sincere doubts about the teachability of virtue. As Kraut concludes, “If Socrates is really

³⁸ *Apology* 20d-e

³⁹ Granted, one could argue that Socrates’ claims here do not necessarily preclude the possibility of an individual possessing the very sort of divine knowledge required regarding virtue, thus allowing virtue to be taught. And, while this point is well taken, there is no textual evidence to support the claim that Socrates has met such a person. Thus, (1) if virtue could be taught only by someone in possession of divine wisdom, and (2) Socrates is not certain if such a person exists, then the claim that Socrates is expressing uncertainty regarding the teachability stands.

doubtful about the teachability of virtue, then he is faced with a dilemma, since (in the *Protagoras*) he takes virtue to be knowledge and thinks that knowledge is teachable.”⁴⁰

As a second piece of evidence, Kraut looks to the *Hippias Minor*, wherein we find Socrates arguing with Hippias regarding the nature of voluntary and involuntary acts of injustice. Looking to 372d-e, we read:

To me, Hippias, it appears entirely the opposite to what you say: Those who harm people and commit injustice and lie and cheat and do wrong voluntarily, rather than involuntarily, are better than those who do so involuntarily. *However, sometimes I believe the opposite, and I go back and forth about all of this – plainly because I do not know.*

On Kraut’s view, while Socrates is confident that his belief that it is better to do injustice involuntarily rather than voluntarily is the correct position, he fully admits that he, at times, “believes the opposite.” Now, to be fair, one could argue that this claim of Socrates is simply a clever ruse designed to further prove his point, and, given the context of the argument that follows this admission of inconsistency, it is easy to construct such an interpretation. To explain, we look to 373b:

EUDICUS: Well, Socrates, I don’t think Hippias will need us to plead with him. For that’s not what he said earlier; he said that he wouldn’t flee from any man’s questioning. Right Hippias? Isn’t that what you said?

HIPPIAS: I did. But Socrates always creates confusion in his arguments, and seems to argue unfairly.

SOCRATES: Oh excellent Hippias, I don’t do that voluntarily, for then I’d be wise and awesome, according to your argument, but involuntarily. So please be lenient with me, for you say that one who acts unfairly involuntarily should be treated with leniency.

Now, given this exchange, one could posit that the earlier admission by Socrates of his own vacillating beliefs was done purposefully, setting the stage to put Hippias to task regarding his own beliefs. As the argument would go, by purposefully admitting

⁴⁰ Kraut 1983, p. 69

inconsistent beliefs (though untrue), thereby causing unfair confusion in the argument, Socrates can then claim he did so *involuntarily*, which would then force Hippias, if Hippias truly stands by his convictions, to treat Socrates with leniency, which would in turn, allow Socrates the room to maneuver more easily through the remainder of the argument.

And, while I admit that this interpretation is appealing, there are a number of issues that arise. First, simply because Socrates is able to use his confusion against his interlocutors to help further the discussion, it does not necessarily follow that his admission of inconsistency is insincere. We recall that it is *Hippias* who suggests that Socrates is being unfair in his tactics, to which Socrates responds by using the views of Hippias against him. The using of one's claims against them is a common tactic of Socrates, and one in which he is particularly adept. Given this point, while his admission of inconsistency could seem to put Socrates at an advantage over his interlocutors, such circumstance does not require we dismiss his earlier claims as fraudulent.

Further, even if we take the admission of inconsistency at 372d to be simply a set-up put into play by Socrates to further his position, he goes on to repeat his inconsistency regarding the point in question at the close of the dialogue. Looking to 376c, the final paragraph of the dialogue, we read:

But given the argument, we can't help having it look that way to us, now, at any rate. However, as I said before, *on these matters I waver back and forth and never believe the same thing*. And it is not surprising at all that I or any other ordinary person *should* waver. But if you wise men are going to do it, too – that means something terrible for us, if we can't stop our wavering even after we've put ourselves in your company.⁴¹

⁴¹ Italics mine.

Faced with this second admission of inconsistent beliefs on the same point, it becomes increasingly difficult to claim that Socrates' earlier position is to be taken as an insincere claim made only to further the discussion. Granted, if the first instance were the only time Socrates made such an admission, then a healthy dose of skepticism may be appropriate. Yet, this second claim comes in the final paragraph of the dialogue, thus precluding the possibility of further discussion between Socrates and his interlocutors. If it is true that his admission of uncertainty is merely a ruse to further the discussion, then what purpose would this identical statement serve given its positioning in the dialogue? Taking this placement and repetition into consideration, it seems plausible that we should take Socrates at his word.⁴²

Inconsistency and the *Daimonion*

With this evidence from the *Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor* and *Protagoras* set before us, I contend that we cannot dismiss Socrates' professions that he holds inconsistent beliefs as merely ironic gestures. As further evidence for this position, there also occur more subtle examples that would cause trouble for Vlastos' position that manifest themselves through Socrates' adherence to the warnings of his *daimonion*.⁴³ To explain this point, we look first to the *Apology* 40a-c where we find Socrates providing a detailed account of his daimonic encounters:

A surprising thing has happened to me, jurymen – you I would rightly call jurymen. At all previous times my familiar prophetic power, my spiritual manifestation, *frequently opposed me, even in small matters when I was about to do something wrong*, but now that, as you can see for yourselves, I was faced with what one

⁴² Further, as Kraut notes, if we can take Socrates at his word when he pleads ignorance at the conclusion of the aporetic dialogues such as the *Euthyphro*, *Laches*, and *Hippias Minor*, then why should we not take him seriously in those instances when he professes an inconsistency in his own beliefs? Kraut, 1983: 70.

⁴³ See Brickhouse and Smith 1994, p. 21, n. 35.

might think, and what is generally thought to be, the worst of evils, my divine sign has not opposed me... Yet in other talks it has often held me back in the middle of my speaking, but now it has opposed no word or deed of mine... those of us who believe death to be an evil are certainly mistaken. I have convincing proof of this, for it is impossible that my familiar sign did not oppose me if I was not about to do what is right.⁴⁴

On the face of it, this passage is merely an explanation by Socrates of the activities of his ever watchful *daimon*, i.e., his guardian angel that watches over him, preventing him time and time again from saying or doing the “wrong thing”. Regarding the case of Socratic consistency, however, this passage is particularly telling, especially when we take into consideration the Socratic claim that no one would ever willingly do wrong.⁴⁵

To explain, we look to the *Protagoras*, wherein Socrates explains that, “...no one goes willingly toward the bad or what he believes to be bad; neither is it in human nature, so it seems, to want to go toward what one believes to be bad instead of good.”⁴⁶ In other words, when one is deliberating about a potential action, one will always do what one believes to be best *at that time*. This is no guarantee that the decided on action is in fact the right thing; however, correctness of action is not the point, but rather the perceived rightness of the action by that individual. On the Socratic view, if this were not the case, then individuals would engage in a particular course of action even if they were well aware of a better method to achieve their goals. This, of course, is absurd according to

⁴⁴ Italics added for emphasis.

⁴⁵ For a full discussion on the intricacies of this thesis, see Norman Gulley 1965. Gulley argues convincingly that of two major formulations of this thesis, (1) *Prot.* 358b-d and (2) *G.* 509e, we should take the formulation from the *Protagoras* to be more Socratic in nature, while the revised account of the *Gorgias* reflects more intently Plato’s own views on the issue. Given this argument, we can rightfully attribute this claim to Socrates.

⁴⁶ *Prot.* 358d

Socrates, and so such errors must be attributed to ignorance, i.e., *false beliefs*. Given this claim, it must be the case that, whenever Socrates was to engage in a particular action, prior to the intervention of his *daimon*, he *falsely believed that action to be the right thing to do*. It was only *after* his *daimon* (who, interestingly, is *never* wrong on Socrates' account) intervenes that he recognizes the error in his beliefs, *changes them*, and then acts in accordance with his new belief on the matter. And, indeed, his beliefs must change, for if they did not change, then he would continue to think that his originally planned course of action was the correct one, and given the Socratic thesis that we always act in accordance with what we believe to be right, he would ignore the advice of his *daimon* (which Socrates never does).

With this argument fully fleshed out before us, the problem for Vlastos' position becomes clear. If, as Vlastos claims, the beliefs of Socrates are always consistent, then it would be impossible for Socrates to believe at one moment that performing action *x* is the right thing to do (which he would necessarily have to believe at that moment), and then, after being influenced by his *daimon*, *change* his belief on the subject and act contrary to his original decided on action. And yet, as we read in the passage above from the *Apology*, Socrates plainly admits to precisely this chain of events, which, when taken in concert with the thesis that no one would willingly do the wrong thing from the *Protagoras*, suggests that not only is Socrates inconsistent in his beliefs, but that *he is aware* of these inconsistencies. And so we recall that, according to Vlastos, the set of moral beliefs held by Socrates is, in fact, true, and, that the truth of these beliefs is contingent upon the consistency thereof, and further, that in order for any set of beliefs to be consistent, it must be void of any false beliefs. However, as the evidence above has

shown, Socrates was in possession of false beliefs, and therefore, as these false beliefs preclude the possibility of consistency⁴⁷, which in turn, precludes the possibility that the belief set is true, Vlastos cannot rightfully claim, on such terms, to be in possession of true beliefs.

The Problem of True Premises

It has thus far been argued that, contra Vlastos, Socrates is not always consistent regarding his beliefs. As has been shown, we find multiple examples throughout the dialogues of Socrates expressing what appear to be contradictory beliefs, in some cases within the same dialogue. Yet, as my major point of contention regarding the elenchos as practiced by Socrates⁴⁸ pertains to its inability to establish or discover moral truths, it will be useful to concede the problem of consistency for now in order that we might see how, even if we concede the point that Socrates is always consistent, the elenchos still does

⁴⁷ One might argue that it is entirely possible (though perhaps not probable) for someone to be entirely consistent in their beliefs even if those beliefs are all entirely false. As an example, we might imagine an individual who believes that he is a cat. All of his actions are founded in this belief set. How he dresses, what he eats, how he approaches relationships with others, etc. And, while in this scenario that individual would *seemingly* be consistent, the major force of Vlastos' position in Assumption A is that not only do we have what Vlastos refers to as "overt" beliefs, i.e., beliefs that we actively hold and acknowledge in any given moment, we are also in possession of "covert" beliefs, i.e., which, as Vlastos explains, are beliefs that are necessarily entailed by our overt beliefs. So, to use Vlastos' example, if I believe Mary to be John's sister, and I believe John is Bill's grandfather, then I *covertly* believe that Mary is Bill's great-aunt, regardless of whether or not I have actively realized or consciously held that particular belief. And, it is precisely by appealing to his interlocutor's covert beliefs that Socrates is so successful in his elenctic encounters. He extracts overt beliefs from his interlocutor and, once posited, is able to draw out the covert beliefs that are entailed by those overt beliefs, beliefs that expose the inconsistencies with the belief set of the interlocutor. Returning then to our example of the individual who actively believes they are a cat, while that individual might be entirely consistent regarding their actively held overt beliefs, they also hold covert beliefs regarding his humanity, even if he is actively unaware of these beliefs. For example, he would recognize that he has outlived every cat he has ever met, that he has two hands with opposable thumbs, that he is capable of speaking and understanding language, etc. If this individual were ever subject to a Socratic investigation, it would be a fairly easy task to expose the inconsistencies within their belief set, as their own life and appearance would stand in direct contradiction to their belief that they are, in fact, a cat.

⁴⁸ It must be noted that while Socrates may be more successful than anyone else in his elenctic endeavors, he advocates for its use by others. See *Ap.* 23c2-7, 38a2-3, and 39c3-d9). See also Brickhouse and Smith 1994, pp. 27-29.

not, and cannot, establish moral truth.⁴⁹ To begin, we recall that for Vlastos, the solution to “the problem of the elenchos,” i.e., how Socrates is able to establish the falsehood of a given belief, is contingent upon the truth of the additional premises agreed to by the interlocutor. Since these additional premises are understood as true, and the conjunction of these premises and the original thesis result in the negation of that thesis, Vlastos claims that Socrates is properly able to establish the thesis to be false, and thus, the opposite of that thesis to be true. For Vlastos, the truth of the additional premises in any given elenctic engagement is assured by the fact that Socrates himself believes them to be true, as opposed to the original thesis, which only the interlocutor, not Socrates, believes to be true.⁵⁰ As explained in section one of this dissertation, Vlastos feels confident in Socrates’s ability to assert this truth claim regarding his own beliefs on account of the consistency of those beliefs, a consistency which, for Vlastos, is only possible if the set of beliefs held by a person are, in fact, true.⁵¹

As could be expected, an array of critiques have been offered in response to this claim regarding the perceived truth of Socrates’ own beliefs, an assertion of truth which, given that these beliefs serve as the premises for his “proof”, Socrates must be able to account for.⁵² Richard Kraut, for one, in his commentary on Vlastos’ original 1983

⁴⁹ While this section of the chapter will be, for the most part, a direct response to Vlastos, it should be noted that Brickhouse and Smith 1994, pp. 18-21 will argue in favor of the positive nature of the elenchos as well, albeit in a significantly different way than Vlastos. For a discussion on this approach, see section 1.4 of this dissertation.

⁵⁰ This particularly efficient summary of Vlastos’ argument was largely derived from Benson (2000). p. 34

⁵¹ For an explanation as to how consistency is dependent upon truth, see note 49.

⁵² These critiques are similarly cited by Hugh Benson 2000, p. 35. However, given his cursory account of each, as well as a failure to address the more salient components of their arguments, I felt it necessary for additional exposition.

version of the essay, suggests that Vlastos needlessly creates his “problem of the elenchos.” On Kraut’s view, when one gives an argument, they need not necessarily explain the reasoning behind their use of the premises contained within. Drawing from Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*,⁵³ Kraut notes:

“...if arguments contain a finite number of steps, and circularity is to be avoided, then every demonstration will contain statements for which no explanation is given...If the only way to prove a proposition is to deduce it from others, then at some point or other demonstration will have to rest on unproved premises, and it would be unreasonable to criticize an alleged proof on the grounds that it rests on undemonstrated premises.”⁵⁴

Given this position, Kraut suggests that to ask Socrates to prove not only the conclusion but also the premises would be to ask him to perform the impossible.

Ronald Polansky follows a different path in his critique, making note of the fact that, despite Vlastos’ arguments to the contrary, Socrates quite often relies upon *endoxa* when positing premises. Given Socrates’ consistent concern regarding the ignorance of the majority,⁵⁵ it is of no surprise that Vlastos would find any reliance by Socrates upon public opinion to be fairly hypocritical. Further, Polansky notes, if Vlastos is correct, and the interlocutors only submit premises that they truly believe, then what possible good could come from an additional appeal to common opinion?⁵⁶ On the one hand, if the interlocutor posits a particular belief *p*, and that belief coincides with public opinion, then nothing is gained by appealing to public opinion. On the other hand, if the interlocutor

⁵³ *Pos. An.* I.3

⁵⁴ Kraut 1983, p. 62

⁵⁵ E.g., *Ap.* 24b-28a and *Crito* 46b-50a.

⁵⁶ Polansky, 1985: 249

posits belief *p*, and that belief stands in contrast to common opinion, then the individual, faced with the overwhelming opposition of the majority, might rescind their initial premise, which would ruin the elenctic encounter on Vlastos's view, as the interlocutor *must* always say what *he* believes. In defense of his position, Vlastos goes so far as to suggest that the only time there is an appeal to common belief it is done by the interlocutor, not Socrates.⁵⁷ For example, in the *Gorgias*, Polus asks, "Socrates, don't you think you've been refuted already when you say things with which no one would agree? *Just ask any of these people here.*"⁵⁸ As Vlastos argues, Socrates rejects this sort of appeal entirely, citing *G.* 472b-c, "If I cannot produce one man – yourself – to witness to my assertions, I believe I shall have accomplished nothing."

However, according to Polansky, while the above example may show Socrates denying Polus in his appeal, such a denial does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that Socrates would dismiss *all* such appeals to common belief. Indeed, it is only one line later at 474b where, in response to Polus, Socrates himself appeals to *endoxa*, as he claims, "...you and I and *the rest of the world*, believe that doing wrong is worse than suffering it, and escaping punishment worse than incurring it."⁵⁹ Indeed, it is precisely such appeals to public opinion that fuel the anger of Callicles, who accuses Socrates of, "...bringing the discussion around to...crowd-pleasing vulgarities."⁶⁰ Thus, Polansky concludes, "even in those contexts in which Socrates questions his interlocutor's too

⁵⁷ Vlastos, 1994, 14 –For additional evidence in support of Vlastos's position, see *La.* 184e and *Cr.* 46d-47d.

⁵⁸ *G.* 473e (Italics added)

⁵⁹ *G.* 474b

⁶⁰ *G.* 382e

facile reliance upon what is universally believed, Socrates employs premises that gain acceptance and plausibility precisely because they are in accord with commonly held views.”⁶¹

Now, while Polansky’s critique is well taken, one could counter that while there is evidence to suggest that Socrates does utilize *endoxa* to bolster his arguments, if the appeals to *endoxa* made by Socrates are in regard to premises that he believes to be true *regardless of public opinion*, then Polansky’s critique is easily dismissed. In other words, simply because a premise falls in line with common opinion, it does not necessarily follow that the premise in question is untrue. While perhaps not common, it is entirely within the realm of possibility that Socrates holds beliefs that happen to be *endoxa* as well. And, while this alignment of *endoxa* and the beliefs of Socrates are quite often *not the case*, if it were to occur, then on Vlastos’s view, Socrates would be entirely free to acknowledge this point to further his own argument.⁶²

Now, while the critiques made by Polansky and Kraut are not especially damaging, that both arguments are directed towards Socrates and his belief that the premises used in the elenchos are true is quite telling. Following these attempts then, if it can be shown that Socrates employs premises which he does *not* believe, then the rigid position of Vlastos becomes much less tenable.⁶³

⁶¹ Polansky, 1985: 251

⁶² Indeed, this very argument is made by Vlastos, which, oddly, Polansky must have neglected to notice. See Vlastos, 1994: 15.

⁶³ This line of argument borrows heavily from the work of Hugh Benson 2005, pp. 47-56. It is important to note that Benson maintains that his position is only at odds with what he perceived to be Vlastos’s original thesis from the 1983 version of the article, i.e., that Socrates can prove a moral truth through a single elenctic episode. Vlastos, in the revised version of his original essay denies that this was his position, claiming instead he has always held a position akin to the “induction” account, first posited by Brickhouse and Smith, 1991. In reviewing the original essay however, it is quite clear that Vlastos is

According to Benson, a particularly clear example of an elenctic episode within which we find premises that Socrates does *not* believe arises early on in the *Euthyphro*.⁶⁴

Benson reconstructs the elenchos as follows:⁶⁵

1. If x is god-loved, then x is pious, and if x is god-hated, then x is impious. (7a6-8)
2. The gods fight with, differ with, and hate each other. (7b2-4)
3. The just and the unjust, the fine and the foul, and the good and the bad are the subjects of difference that make individuals hate each other. (7b6-d10)
4. So, there are some things that some gods consider just, fine, or good and other gods consider unjust, foul, or bad. (7e1-3)
5. The things one considers fine, good, or just, one loves and the opposite of these one hates. (7e6-7)
6. So, the same things are hated and loved by the gods. (8a4-5)
7. So, the same things are god-hated and god-loved. (8a5)
8. So, the same things will be pious and impious. (8a7-8)

With this elenchos laid out before us, we now need to determine if Socrates believes each of the premises to be true.⁶⁶ To begin, premise (2) emerges as immediately problematic, as we earlier find Socrates troubled by Euthyphro's unabashed belief in the stories about the gods, lamenting to Euthyphro that he, "...finds it hard to accept things like that being said about the gods."⁶⁷ Yet, despite this difficulty, Socrates uses premises 2, 4, 6, and 7. Now, if it is the case that Socrates must believe each of the agreed upon premises to be true, then, given his admitted disbelief in the very stories he uses as evidence, it would

arguing for that original thesis, as Vlastos writes, "Here Socrates says in so many words that he has done what Grote and I had maintained he never did in *an elenctic argument*: He says that he has 'proved' his thesis true." (1983: p. 47). Considering Vlastos' own revisions, regardless of his original intentions, this note should be taken as directed *only* in regard to the original essay.

⁶⁴ It should be noted that while Benson explains the point in significantly greater detail, his example from the *Euthyphro* as an instance of Socrates using premises he did not believe to be true was suggested first by Brickhouse and Smith 1994, p. 15, a fact which Benson fails to mention.

⁶⁵ Benson, 2000: 48

⁶⁶ Benson, 2000: 48-50

⁶⁷ *Euth.* 6a7-9

not be possible for him to allow those premises which assume the existence of the gods to stand. As a supplemental point to Benson's argument, even if we allow this premise to stand, regardless of Socrates' expressed difficulty regarding his belief in the gods, we find that immediately following Euthyphro's suggestion of premise (2), Socrates pleads ignorance as to the truth of that premise.⁶⁸ We are left then with two options, neither of which favor Vlastos' interpretation: (1) Socrates allows a premise that conflicts with his own beliefs regarding the gods, or (2), Socrates admits that he knows not whether the premise he allows to stand is in fact true. In either case, we find Socrates granting premises that he does not actively believe to be true.

In addition to the problems that arise from premise 2, Benson also notes that Socrates actively disassociates himself from premise 4, clearly stating to Euthyphro that the premise in question is *κατὰ τὸν σὸν λόγον*, i.e., "according to your (Euthyphro's) argument".⁶⁹ Socrates then reemphasizes this distancing of himself from the premise, reiterating the premise but adding the qualifier *ὡς σὺ φήεις*, i.e., "so you say".⁷⁰ Granted, one could argue that these remarks need not be taken to be attributing premise 4 exclusively to Euthyphro, as it could simply be the case that Socrates wished to make clear that both he and Euthyphro were in agreement regarding the details of the premise. However, when taken in concert with the preceding point regarding Socrates' lack of belief in the stories from which these descriptions of the gods are founded, Benson

⁶⁸ *Euth.* 7a2 – "Whether your answer is true, I do not know yet, but you will obviously show me what you say is true."

⁶⁹ *Euth.* 7e1-3

⁷⁰ *Euth.* 7e9 Translation by Benson, 2000.

believes, and I agree, that the evidence clearly suggests that Socrates is disassociating himself with the view in question.⁷¹

In addition to examples such as the above in which Socrates allows for premises to stand although he has expressed his reservations regarding their alethic status, one can additionally find examples of elenctic encounters wherein Socrates, under the guise of honesty, deceptively posits premises he does not accept. In other words, whereas in the example from the *Euthyphro* Socrates plainly, and repeatedly, admits he does not agree with Euthyphro, we can point to other instances, such as the discussion of courage in the *Protagoras*, where Socrates offers no such admission of skepticism, and yet relies upon certain premises, e.g., (351c2-6) that pleasures are *good* on account of their pleasantness, that, given his stated position on the matter in other dialogues, specifically the *Gorgias*, he simply could not believe to be true without then admitting contradictory beliefs.⁷² To illustrate this point we look to *Protagoras* 353c-354c2, wherein we find Socrates, through a series of suggested scenarios, compelling Protagoras to agree that the goodness of any action or thing is directly determined by the ratio of pleasure over pain that one

⁷¹ Benson notes that one might object (as Vlastos in fact does) to this example due to the failure to distinguish between direct and indirect elenchoi. Quickly stated, Vlastos distinguishes between direct elenchos, those elenchoi that do not use the refutand as a premise from which the negation of the thesis is deduced, and indirect elenchoi, i.e., those elenchoi that *do* use the refutand as a premise from which the negation of the refutand is deduced. Vlastos (1983: 39) specifically labels the first elenchos of the *Euthyphro* as indirect, which, if true, would excuse Socrates from the requirement that he believe the premise set to be true. In response, Benson suggests that such a critique is problematic on two levels. First, Benson objects that the use of the refutand as a premise does not preclude the possibility of deducing the falsehood of that refutand. On Benson's account, this is precisely the format of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, which, as Benson notes, "no one would be inclined to claim that a *reductio* cannot succeed in establishing the falsehood of its refutand. The mere fact that a refutand is used as a premise does not prohibit the *reductio*'s claim to proof or soundness. What matters is whether or not the refutand has the same alethic status as the other premises employed. If it does, then the reduction can do no more than establish inconsistency. If it does not, then the reduction can establish falsehood." (2000, 49-50)

⁷² This bulk of this argument is derived from the work of Richard Kraut, 1984: 262-267. As an additional point, given Vlastos' position that Socrates beliefs must be consistent, such a contradiction is not possible.

experiences via their engagement with that activity or object. And, while in the *Euthyphro* Socrates seems to distance himself from particular premises via a healthy dose of skepticism, in our current example, Socrates explicitly includes himself as sharing these beliefs. Indeed, looking to *Protagoras* 353e5, we find Socrates asking the following:

Does it not seem to you, my good people, *as Protagoras and I maintain*, that these things are bad on account of *nothing other* than the fact that they result in pain and deprive us of other pleasures?⁷³

This passage, along with other similar admissions, seems to suggest that Socrates is professing himself to be, at the very least, in agreement with the hedonist perspective. However, given the substantial amount of evidence to the contrary, specifically his vehement denial of the hedonistic position in the *Gorgias*,⁷⁴ not to mention the ink that has been spilled by scholars arguing against this position,⁷⁵ that Socrates might seriously be considered to be a hedonist seems untenable, let alone that he considered himself one. Given this evidence, I submit that we must understand Socrates to be arguing dishonestly in the *Protagoras*, relying upon subterfuge to achieve his goal of exposing the inconsistencies in the beliefs of his interlocutors.⁷⁶ If this is correct, then once again the requirement that Socrates believe all of his premises to be true reveals itself to be unsupported by the text.

⁷³ Italics added for emphasis.

⁷⁴ Perhaps most notably *G.* 494e9-500e1

⁷⁵ For the most compelling case against Socrates honestly espousing a hedonist view, Vlastos, 1969; 71-88, Santas, 1979; 198-199, and Zeyl, 1980; 250-269.

⁷⁶ Kraut, 1984; 266. Kraut adds that a similar example of dishonesty can be found, in this instance regarding the varying definitions of courage in the *Laches* and *Protagoras*. In the *Laches* (194e11-199e11) Socrates argues against the definition of courage that Protagoras is lead to in the *Protagoras*, i.e., courage is knowledge of what is and is not fearful.

The Problem of Establishing Moral Truths

The *Euthyphro*

It has thus far been argued that two of the conditions of Vlastos' argument, (1) that all of Socrates' beliefs are consistent, and (2) that Socrates must believe all of his premises to be true⁷⁷, are not supported by the text. However, as Vlastos' position centers around the claim that the elenchos is capable of establishing moral truths, let us set aside the previously discussed issues in Vlastos' argument, and turn our attention to actual elenctic encounters to determine if the elenchos as utilized by Socrates is capable of achieving all that Vlastos claims. Granted, there are far too many elenctic arguments found throughout the early dialogues to analyze each elenchos in full.⁷⁸ Thus, on account of the sheer number of elenchoi, I will limit my analysis to selected arguments I believe to be paradigmatic examples, each of which adhering to the standards as stipulated by Vlastos.⁷⁹

Beginning with the *Euthyphro*, we recall from our account of the first elenchos of this dialogue that Vlastos considers this particular elenchos to be of the "indirect" kind, which, as we recall, on Vlastos view, is, unlike the standard "direct" elenchos, unable to

⁷⁷ See Vlastos 1994, ch. 3. "Does Socrates, for his part, believe that *q* and *r* are true? In a standard elenctic argument there can be no doubt of this: it follows from Socrates' conviction that the contradiction does more than expose inconsistency within the interlocutors beliefs - that it refutes his thesis, as we can see, for instance, when Polus is told that the argument which faulted him "proved true" the Socratic thesis against his (*G.* 479e8). Socrates could not have said that unless he were convinced that *q* and *r* which are shown to entail *not-p* are themselves true." Granted, this example is in reference to the elenchos of the *Gorgias* that inspired Vlastos' position. However, given Vlastos' claim that such must be the case in any "standard elenchos," it appears as if this is a universal claim by Vlastos regarding Socrates' belief in the premises, not merely the belief of the interlocutor.

⁷⁸ Vlastos 1994, p.3, citing Robinson 1953, p.24, suggests that one can find 39 elenchoi in the early to middle dialogues.

⁷⁹ For a detailed account of each of the elenchoi from the *Euthyphro*, *Charmides*, and *Laches*, see Benson, 2000, pp.58-95.

establish moral truths. Thus, to be fair to Vlastos' argument, my first example here will be the second elenchos of the Euthyphro (10d1-10d14), an argument Vlastos specifically claims to "*prove* the doctrine, so fundamental for Socrates' rational theology, that pious action is god-loved because it is pious."⁸⁰ The complete second argument of the elenchos proceeds as follows:⁸¹

1. X is pious because it is loved by all of the gods. (10d1-2)
2. X is loved because it is pious. (10d4-6)
3. It is not the case that X is pious because it is loved. (10d6-7)
4. X is a loved thing and god-loved because it is loved by the gods. (10d9-19)
5. It is not the case that x is loved by the gods because it is god-loved. (10e6-7)
6. "Then the god-loved is not the same as the pious, Euthyphro, nor the pious the same as the god-loved, as you say it is, but one differs from the other." (10d12-14)
7. The pious is being loved because it is pious, but it is not pious because it is being loved. (10e2-3)
8. "The god-loved ...is so because it is being loved by the gods, by the very fact of being loved, but it is not being loved because it is god-loved" (10e4-6)
9. "If the god-loved and the pious were the same, then if the pious was being loved because it was pious, the god-loved would also be being loved because it was god-loved; and if the god-loved was god-loved because it was being loved by the gods, then the pious would also be the pious because it was being loved by the gods." (10e9-11a3)
10. "But now you see that they are in opposite cases as being altogether different from each other: the one is such as to be loved because it is being loved, the other is being loved because it is such as to be loved." (11a4-6)

Beginning with claim (6), we find cause for Vlastos to believe that Socrates has been able to prove Euthyphro's posited definition to be false, as we find Socrates being rather clear in his own position:

⁸⁰ Vlastos, 1983; n.32 Italics added for emphasis.

⁸¹ This summary follows closely the summary provided by Benson, 2005; p.59, particularly premises 1-6. Further, while one might argue that as premise 2 conflicts directly with premise 1, then we have evidence of Euthyphro failing to posit his actual beliefs, only agreeing to the apparent contradiction to move the elenchos along. However, it could equally be argued that Euthyphro believes *both* premise 1 and 2 at the time of Socrates' inquiries, not fully recognizing the conflict until having gone through the elenchos with Socrates. We find evidence for Euthyphro's own belief in the premise at 10d4, when in response to Socrates' suggestion that a thing is loved because it is pious, Euthyphro emphatically responds that something is loved "for no other reason" than it being Pious.

“Then the god-loved *is not the same* as the pious, Euthyphro, *nor the pious the same as the god-loved, as you say it is*, but one differs from the other.” (10d12-14)

Indeed, *prima facie* this passage seems to support Vlastos’ position. Socrates is seemingly claiming to have undeniably shown Euthyphro’s initial thesis to be false. Yet, as some scholars have shown, this need not be the case. Hugh Benson, for one, suggests that while it may seem to be the case that Socrates is examining (and determining) the truth of Euthyphro’s claim, if we turn our attention to Socrates’ comments immediately preceding the elenchos in question, we find cause to question the standing interpretation as given by Vlastos.⁸² That pivotal line, *Euthyphro* 9d6-8, finds Socrates responding to Euthyphro’s inquiry as to what might stand in the way of their modifying the definition of piety previously posited. In response to this question, Socrates explains:

For my part nothing, Euthyphro, but you look whether on your part this proposal will enable you to teach me most easily what you promised.⁸³

Taking this statement into consideration, we are able to parse out two particularly important points. First, the opening of the passage has Socrates clearly stating that it is not he at all that would be preventing the modification of the definition as previously posited. If the definition in question was to be analyzed for its alethic status, and, as Vlastos claims, Socrates (and Socrates alone) uses the elenchos to determine the truth of any given definition, then it seems incorrect for Socrates to distinctly distance himself from the process. Second, building from this first point, Socrates is clearly requesting that Euthyphro himself look to the definition now under consideration to ensure that he (Euthyphro) agrees with its terms. Given this request, it seems that Socrates is ensuring

⁸² Benson 2000, p. 60-62

⁸³ *Euth.* 9d6-8.

that this new definition to be examined is something to which Euthyphro can agree, i.e., it is a definition Euthyphro believes to be consistent with his own beliefs.⁸⁴

That this elenchos exposes the inconsistency of Euthyphro's beliefs is further emphasized by Socrates in the exchange immediately following the conclusion of the elenchos. As we read at 11b8-c4:

Your statements, Euthyphro, seem to belong to my ancestor, Daedalus. If I were stating them and putting them forward, you would perhaps be making fun of me and say that because of my kinship with him my conclusions in discussion run away and will not stay where one puts them. *As these propositions are yours, however, we need some other jest, for they will not stay put for you, as you say yourself.*⁸⁵

Now, while this passage may further the point that inconsistency is apparent, it is still not certain that Socrates has not also determined the truth (or lack thereof) of a particular doctrine. Yet, following Benson's lead, we might find the evidence required through a careful consideration of the Daedalus analogy used by Socrates in the above passage. To explain, Benson notes that reference to Daedalus is not limited to the *Euthyphro* alone, but is also utilized by Plato in the *Meno*. Looking to the *Meno*, we read:

To acquire an untied work of Daedalus is not worth much, like acquiring a runaway slave, for it does not remain but it is worth much if tied down, for his works are beautiful. What am I thinking of when I say this? True opinions. For true opinions, as long as they remain, are a fine thing, and all they do is good, but they are not willing to remain long, and they escape from a man's mind, so they are not worth much until one ties them down by (giving) an account of reason why... After they are tied down, in the first place they become knowledge, and then remain in place. That is why knowledge is prized higher than correct opinion, and knowledge differs from correct opinion in being tied down.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Benson 2000, p. 61. Once again, I do not dispute the position that Socrates uses the elenchos to establish the inconsistency of the beliefs of his interlocutors.

⁸⁵ *Euth.* 11b8-c4 - Italics added for emphasis.

⁸⁶ *Meno* 97e1-98a8

From this passage we find Plato emphasizing the necessity of stability regarding knowledge, i.e., to claim one is in possession of knowledge, then they must be able to support their beliefs via reason. Similar to the untied Daedalus statues that run away, quickly leaving their owner empty handed, unsubstantiated opinion falters under scrutiny.⁸⁷ Taking this shared analogy into consideration, it is not necessarily the case that Socrates has proven Euthyphro's definition to be false (nor the negation of this definition to be true), but rather, has simply exposed the inconsistency of his beliefs, for had they been true, then his beliefs would have, similar to a secured Daedalus statue, "stayed put".⁸⁸

To further the argument against the elenchos' ability to establish moral truths, let us take as an additional example the very next elenchos of the *Euthyphro* (12e5-13d2), which, *prima facie*, seems to support Vlastos' position. Before providing an argument against this view, however, let us first reconstruct the argument as found in the text:

1. "Piety is the part of the just that is concerned with the care of the gods." (12e5-6)
2. Care for the gods is the same as care for livestock. (13a1-5)
3. "Care in each case has the same effect; it aims at the good and benefit of the object cared for." (13b6-7)
4. Caring for the gods does not make the gods better. (13c6-9)
5. Therefore, Piety is not the same as caring for livestock, namely, providing benefit to the object of care. (13d2)

Again, on first glance, this conclusion seems to suggest that Socrates has proven the thesis offered by *Euthyphro*, i.e., that Piety is the same sort of care as one would have for livestock, to be false. Yet, if we look to the text, we find Socrates expressing his concern

⁸⁷ Benson is careful to note that the epistemology of the *Meno* is distinct from that of the early dialogues, and that we must exercise caution in reading too much of the *Meno* back into the *Euthyphro*. However, Benson rightly claims that, "it would be odd for Plato to use an analogy he had previously used to describe an individual whose belief has been shown to be false to now in the *Meno* describe an individual whose belief is true but nevertheless fails to amount to knowledge. Benson 2000, 61.

⁸⁸ See also Woodruff 1990, 104.

not with the truth of the thesis itself, but rather whether or not this thesis was one that Euthyphro truly believed. In response to Euthyphro's agreement that, on second thought, care for the gods is *not* the same as care for livestock, Socrates notes in relief, "Nor did I think that this is what you meant – far from it – but that is why I asked you what you meant by care of the gods, because *I did not believe you meant this kind of care.*"⁸⁹

According to Benson, this concluding passage provides us with two crucial insights: First, we find that Euthyphro's acceptance of premises 3 and 4 seems incompatible with his accepting of premise 2. To explain, let us take premise 3, i.e., "Care in each case has the same effect; it aims at the good and benefit of the object cared for." (13b6-7) While this may be an acceptable way to understand care in regard to livestock, one could offer an alternative definition of care, e.g., that one cares for cattle in order to benefit themselves. In other words, while it would behoove the cattle owner to ensure his cattle are well fed and healthy, their well-being is a means to an end, i.e., the owner's own benefit. And, while one might argue that even in this scenario the cattle are still being afforded the food and shelter required to make their lives better, if this "care" is implemented only towards their eventual slaughter, it is difficult to maintain the argument that this care is *beneficial* for the animal. Thus, we find premise 3 is potentially incompatible with premise 2.

Second, we find that Socrates once again focuses on precisely what *Euthyphro meant*, not on whether or not the premise itself is true or false.⁹⁰ It is thus not clear that any truth has been established regarding the definition of piety. And, it is this failure to

⁸⁹ *Euth.* 13c6-9

⁹⁰ Benson 2000, 63

establish any positive moral doctrine that arises as the major problem for Vlastos' interpretation. To explain, even if we hypothetically grant that Socrates has "proven" that Euthyphro's definition of piety is untenable, he nevertheless fails to replace it with a working definition of his own. If the elenchos *was* capable of such positive work, then one must inquire as to why the *Euthyphro*, not to mention the majority of the so-called Socratic dialogues, would end in *aporia*. If, as Vlastos has argued, Socrates⁹¹ is entirely concerned with issues of morality, and further, Socrates believes himself capable of establishing the definitional knowledge required to answer the very questions he finds before him, then what reason could he have for leaving them unanswered? Thus, given the absolute lack of such positive doctrine, not to mention the consistent state of *aporia* that is present at the conclusion of these dialogues, Vlastos' claims regarding the positive powers of the elenchos become increasingly difficult to defend.

The *Gorgias*

In addition to the examples above, Benson carefully deconstructs every elenchoi found within the *Euthyphro*, *Charmides*, and *Laches*. In each case, it is shown that there is not sufficient evidence to support the position that the elenchos establishes a positive moral truth. And, while it is not necessary here to further replicate the work of Benson regarding the elenchoi of these early dialogues, we recall that the entire argument as given by Vlastos is dependent upon an argument found within the *Gorgias*, i.e., that it is better to suffer injustice than commit injustice. Given Vlastos' dependence upon various passages from the *Gorgias*, it is necessary then to determine if his interpretation of the

⁹¹ In particular, the Socrates of the early dialogues.

text in question is correct. To do so, I will follow closely the argument against Vlastos as given by Benson, adding detail and correction where I believe appropriate.

To begin, in comparison to the earlier dialogues such as the *Euthyphro* and *Laches*, the *Gorgias* is not a paradigmatic elenctic dialogue.⁹² In the place of the inquisitive, self admittedly ignorant man of the early dialogues, we find a more assertive Socrates, one openly declaring particular beliefs that stand in direct opposition to those of his interlocutors.⁹³ Granted, one could argue that the ignorance displayed in the earlier dialogues was merely a ruse utilized by Socrates to further his own arguments⁹⁴, however, the sincerity of Socrates' claims to ignorance are irrelevant, as the point is not whether or not he is sincere in his claims, but *that he is making and standing by his own claims* that distinguishes the tone of the *Gorgias* from the earlier dialogues. Given this distinction, any textual evidence gleaned from the *Gorgias* that is used to promote a theory incorporating the Socratic dialogues as a whole must be taken with a grain of salt.

As Benson explains:

The point here is not that the *Gorgias* is not an early dialogue or that it fails to provide evidence for the views, methodological or otherwise, for the Socrates of the early dialogues. Rather the point is simply that the *Gorgias* is an unusual early dialogue. As a result, should these passages compel us to understand Socrates as believing that individual elenchoi can establish positive moral doctrines, that maybe due to the special nature of the *Gorgias* rather than due to what is in common with the other early dialogues.⁹⁵

Given the distinct nature of the *Gorgias* then, if there can be found no passages within the earlier dialogues that mirror the positive claims made by the Socrates of the *Gorgias*,

⁹² See Irwin 1979, 6-7, and Vlastos 1983, 70

⁹³ E.g., *G.* 470e as well as 472e-473a1

⁹⁴ See n. 3

⁹⁵ Benson 2000, 81

which I believe, in agreement with Benson, that there are none, then we should not take the elenchos from the *Gorgias*, nor the “truth” it seems to establish, as the paradigmatic example upon which our understanding of the elenchos as a whole is to be understood.⁹⁶

However, even if we ignore the issue of distinction between the *Gorgias* and earlier dialogues, the argument and positive claims that arise therefrom which serve as the foundation of Vlastos’ argument are cause for further concern. To clarify this, let us re-examine the argument in question, which, for the sake of ease of reference, I once again provide here:

- p* To commit injustice is better than to suffer it
- q* To commit injustice is baser (αἰσχίον) than to suffer it. (475c5-6)
- r* Doing injustice is more shameful than to suffer it. (474c7-8)
- s* x is finer than y just in case x is more pleasant than y or x is more beneficial than y. (475a5-b2)
- t* Doing injustice is either more painful or more evil than suffering injustice. (475b5-8)
- u* Doing injustice is not more painful than suffering injustice. (475c1-4)
- v* Doing injustice is more evil/worse than suffering it. (475c7-9)

Putting aside the oft-noted issues regarding the controversy of the argument itself,⁹⁷ the question arises as to whether or not the argument in question, and the premises upon which it is constructed, can meet the standards as set forth by Vlastos. In other words, we recall that on Vlastos’ view, for a particular Socratic elenchos to provide proof for a moral doctrine, Socrates must believe each of the premises contained within the argument to be true.⁹⁸ And, on Benson’s account, this requirement is not met. Benson takes issue

⁹⁶ This point is somewhat conceded by Vlastos himself in his revised version of his article. Vlastos 1994, 33-34.

⁹⁷ For the problems of ambiguity regarding translation, see Irwin 1979, 157. Additionally, for issues regarding the potentially purposive fallaciousness of the argument, see Dodds 1959.

⁹⁸ See n. 78.

first with premise *s*, i.e., that *x* is finer than *y* just in case *x* is more pleasant than *y* or *x* is more beneficial than *y*, a point which Socrates happily seems to accept as an adequate standing definition of the fine.⁹⁹ Yet, in spite of this agreement on the part of Socrates to the truth of the premise in question, whether or not Socrates actually believes this to be true is not entirely certain.¹⁰⁰ According to Benson, the problem arises following Socrates' efforts to, "extract from Polus an account of the fine compatible with his dual claims that doing injustice is better than suffering it (1) and that doing injustice is more shameful/less fine than suffering it."¹⁰¹ Further, as we read at 474d1, Socrates elicits from Polus the additional belief that the "fine" and "good" are necessarily distinct from one another. Yet, as Benson notes, this additional premise regarding the distinction between the good and the fine is a premise that Socrates himself is unable to accept, a position expressed by Socrates in the proceeding passages (474d2-476a1).¹⁰² Given this contradiction, it is not clear that Socrates accepts as true premise *s*. Thus, according to

⁹⁹ Benson cites 475a2-4 as evidence for this, as we find Polus noting in response, "Yes, Socrates, your present definition of the admirable in terms of pleasure and good is an admirable one."

¹⁰⁰ Benson's first attempt to show issue with the certainty of Socrates regarding this premise draws from an assortment of passages from *Greater Hippias*, in particular 286c8-e2 and 304d4-e5, in which Socrates explicitly disavows any knowledge whatsoever regarding the definition of the fine. However, while the textual evidence from the *Greater Hippias* does seem to contradict that from the *Gorgias*, i.e., in the former he pleads ignorance whereas in the latter he seems to have a working definition, such a contradiction does not rule out the possibility that Socrates (or Plato, for that matter) might have changed his mind on the subject between the writing of the *Greater Hippias* and *Gorgias*. And, while cross dialogue evidence can be useful and convincing, in this instance it is my belief that the stronger argument can be made solely from evidence drawn from the *Gorgias*. For Benson's argument on the former, see Benson 2000, 82-83.

¹⁰¹ Benson 2000, 83

¹⁰² Benson 2000, 83 notes that Socrates refusal to accept the position offered by Polus is similarly found in other dialogues, namely: *Protagoras* (359e5-7). Irwin provides similar evidence drawing from *Charmides* 160e, *Laches* 193d-e, *Protagoras* 349e-350b, and *Crito* 48b.

Benson, "... Socrates commitment is open to question, as is his commitment to the soundness of the argument that depends upon it."¹⁰³

As a final, yet simpler point, we find that despite the seemingly powerful claims made by Socrates regarding the establishment of a positive moral doctrine, multiple instances arise that would suggest Socrates is not quite as certain as Vlastos would have us believe.¹⁰⁴ According to Benson, a number of such instances exist. (1) In the lines following 479e8, wherein Socrates claims he has proven his position to be true, we find Socrates immediately backsliding. As we read at 480a1-2, "All right. *If* these things are true, then what is the great use of rhetoric, Polus?" Against Benson, however, one could argue that the conditional nature of Socrates statement above need not be read as uncertainty on Socrates part regarding the truth of his own belief. It could be the case that Socrates, taking into consideration the truth of his own belief, is now delivering a pointed attack upon rhetoric itself, noting that it is through the elenchos, not rhetoric, that the truth can be uncovered.

Yet, while I do find Benson's initial argument to be somewhat problematic, it is the final two pieces of textual evidence he offers that provide the more compelling case. First, following Socrates' claim at 508e7-509a2, where he claims to have built a case that is "clamped down by arguments of iron and adamant," we discover Socrates very quickly

¹⁰³ Benson 2000, 83. Benson furthers his position by noting that if premise *s* is not truly accepted by Socrates, then this premise "infects" the very passages from the *Gorgias* that Vlastos has cited as his evidence for the establishment of positive moral doctrine (479e8: "Has it not been proved that what was asserted [by myself] is true." As well as 508e7-509a2: "These things having become evident in the foregoing arguments, I would say, crude though it may seem to say it, that they have been clamped down and bound by arguments of iron and adamant." Both translations by Vlastos, 1994.

¹⁰⁴ Benson 2000, 83-85.

weakening his resolve, stating, “or so at least it would appear so far”.¹⁰⁵ And, if this disavowal of certainty was not quite enough, we find that not two lines later Socrates reminds his audience of his ignorance of the topic at hand, as he claims to know nothing regarding the issue at hand.¹⁰⁶ As Benson explains, “This (Socrates’ lack of certainty) is at least odd if Socrates had understood his preceding arguments as establishing or proving the thesis that to do injustice and not be punished is worse than suffering injustice. Whatever else Socrates thinks his previous arguments have established he evidently does not think they established knowledge.”¹⁰⁷

To be fair, Vlastos does take this issue into consideration,¹⁰⁸ a problem he believes he resolves through his positing of two distinct types of knowledge: (1) Knowledge_C, which is to be understood as infallible knowledge of which one is absolutely certain, and Knowledge_E, or “knowledge” that is acquired through the elenctic method. For Vlastos, it is only Knowledge_E that Socrates would avow. So, on Vlastos’ account, when Socrates claims to know, for instance, that it is better to suffer injustice than to commit injustices, such “knowing” is of the elenctically provable variety, whereas more profound knowledge, e.g., the definition of the “fine,” would be classified as knowledge_C, which, for Socrates (and Vlastos) would be, if not impossible to truly obtain, at the very least held to much more rigorous standards.

However, I take issue with this distinction as given by Vlastos, for, when we take into consideration the type of knowledge that would seem to fall under the category of

¹⁰⁵ ὡς γοῦν ἄν δόξειεν οὕτωςι

¹⁰⁶ G. 509a4-5 - “And yet, for my part, my account is ever the same: I don’t know how these things are...”

¹⁰⁷ Benson 2000, 84

¹⁰⁸ Vlastos 1994, p. 59-60

Knowledge_C, i.e., moral doctrine and definitional knowledge of the virtues, we find textual evidence that would prove troubling for Vlastos. To explain, looking to the *Apology* 20d-e, we recall that Socrates states that any claiming of knowledge regarding issues of virtue are claiming a kind of knowledge that is beyond human understanding, i.e., divine. And, considering the issue at hand in the *Gorgias* is without question one that pertains to virtue, to say that such knowledge is to be classified as Knowledge_E is problematic, as it is not altogether clear how such knowledge would not be categorized as the sort reserved for Knowledge_C,

Thus, at best it appears that the “proof” established regarding the suffering of injustice is nothing more than an agreement between Socrates and his interlocutor regarding their justified belief on this particular issue. As the issue at hand concerns the suffering of injustice, such a proof would first require that Socrates produce a proper definition of Justice itself. Given Socrates’ lack of definition regarding the basic principles of Justice, it does not seem possible for Socrates to then prove as true in the sense of Knowledge_C that inflicting injustice is always worse than suffering it.

The Problem of Induction

In addition to the issues argued above, there remains one final issue that must be addressed, and that is the problem of induction. According to Vlastos, Socrates is able to posit his own belief set as consistent because never in all his years of questioning has any interlocutor been able to expose inconsistencies therein, in fact quite the contrary. As a result of this perceived consistency, “...he has evidence – as before, *inductive evidence* –

for a further assumption,” i.e., to believe his own beliefs to be consistent.¹⁰⁹ In other words, Socrates’ confidence regarding the consistency of his beliefs is derived entirely from his own experience of never having his beliefs proven inconsistent by an interlocutor.¹¹⁰ However, if this is true, and Socrates is only able to establish the consistency of his beliefs via induction, then a number of additional problems arise.

First, we are faced with the somewhat obvious issue of uncertainty. To explain, we recall that according to Vlastos, the beliefs of Socrates are in fact true on account of their consistency,¹¹¹ which itself is dependent upon the beliefs of Socrates never being exposed as inconsistent via an elenctic engagement. And, while it may be the case that up until a certain point Socrates has never been refuted by an interlocutor, previous victories in these engagements do not guarantee that tomorrow a particularly skilled interlocutor might not rise to the occasion and expose Socrates’ beliefs as inconsistent.¹¹² In other words, while the many previous victories may indeed allow Socrates to be

¹⁰⁹ Vlastos 1983, 55 I again maintain, in agreement with Benson, that despite this appeal to induction, Vlastos, in this earlier version of his essay, argues that individual elenchoi do establish moral truths.

¹¹⁰ A similar position is posited and argued for by Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 18-21. On their account, however, it is precisely because Socrates is unable to acquire knowledge as to *how* his own generalized account is correct that he *must* continue to question others, doing so to determine, “whether anyone can hold an opposing view consistently with his other beliefs... (the) argument is only that repeated elenctic examinations can confirm the untenability of the opposed view and give Socrates grounds for claiming that leading the examined life has constructive doctrinal consequences.” In effect, the purpose of the elenchos is not solely to establish moral truths, as Vlastos claims, but further, and more importantly, to convince the interlocutors that the examined life is the only one worth living, for “only by leading the examined life is one able to uncover those inconsistent beliefs one holds which frustrate their goals.”

¹¹¹ Vlastos 1983, 55

¹¹² It is on this point where Brickhouse and Smith’s version of the induction argument is particularly strong, as, under their interpretation, even if this were to happen, and Socrates’ beliefs were exposed as inconsistent, then the elenchos is still a success, as the errors now exposed in Socrates’ belief set will only aide him in his search for the truth.

justified in his *belief* that his own belief set is true, it in no way actually “proves” the objective truth of his beliefs.¹¹³

Second, we recall that, according to Vlastos, the *Gorgias* provides us with textual evidence to support the claim that the elenchos is able to prove moral doctrines. And, while we already discussed a number of problems with this interpretation from a textual level, if we ignore these inconsistencies for now, we find that the appeal to induction creates problems of its own. To explain, if, as Vlastos claims, Socrates is able to gain evidence for the truth of his beliefs only through induction, then Vlastos is forced to admit that single elenctic arguments do not prove positive moral truths (a point he does concede). In other words, if Socrates must rely upon numerous encounters to posit any particular truth, then the argument found in the *Gorgias*, and the “proof” gleaned from it must be no exception. Therefore, it is not the particular arguments from the *Gorgias* that result in the positing of the truth in question, but rather this particular encounter *in concert with* multiple previous encounters. However, if this is the case, and the “proof” of the *Gorgias* is entirely dependent upon previously held elenctic encounters, then how could the *particular* argument in the *Gorgias* be considered proof of anything as Vlastos seems to argue? Again, the consequence of this is that the evidence found in the *Gorgias* results only in Socrates being justified in his *belief* that his own belief set is true at that moment, a position which, again, considering the future possibility of a particularly skilled interlocutor exposing Socrates’ inconsistencies, arises as deeply problematic for Vlastos.

To explain, the conviction with which Socrates espouses his own beliefs seems at

¹¹³ See Kraut 1983, 59

odds with the explanation provided by Vlastos, i.e., that Socrates is justified in believing his beliefs to be true on account of his previous encounters failing to expose inconsistencies. Given the distinct possibility of a future encounter proving Socrates wrong, not to mention Socrates failure to prove any positive moral doctrine throughout the early dialogues via the elenchos, it would seem that something more would be required to explain the firm conviction with which Socrates expresses his beliefs. And, while it is true that the dialogues provide no evidence of Socrates being exposed as inconsistent, it is not the elenchos that is explicitly considered infallible in the eyes of Socrates, but rather, it is his *daimon* that he finds to unfailingly guide him towards the truth. Given Socrates' recognition of this point, as well as the failure of the elenchos to establish any positive moral doctrine, it is perhaps not through the elenchos alone, but rather the elenchos in concert with divine dispensation that Socrates is able to stand so firm in his convictions. It is this possibility that I will explore in the remainder of this dissertation.

Conclusion

As I have argued, on its own the elenchos is, contra Vlastos, unable to establish positive moral doctrine. Faced with these inadequacies, as well as Socrates' unexplained claims to knowledge, determining how Socrates could avow knowledge requires an investigation into new possibilities. In an effort to take up this challenge, in the remaining chapters I will investigate the relation between Socrates and sophistry, as well as the role that divine inspiration plays for both Socrates and Plato.

Chapter 2: Socrates and Sophistry in the Late Dialogues

As I have argued in the previous chapter, Socrates is not able to achieve knowledge through the elenchos. Given this fact, coupled with Socrates' consistent disavowal of knowledge, the question arises as to how Socrates is able to excel to the point of supremacy in his encounters and debates with others. In other words, if Socrates *had* knowledge, then his ability to dominate any argument would make sense, as his questions would thus be guided by the truth. However, as this is not the case, his ability remains a mystery. As a possible explanation to this phenomenon, some scholars have concluded that Socrates must therefore be considered as a kind of sophist, one skilled in the art of appearing to be wise, when in fact they themselves lack such wisdom.¹ And, such claims are not entirely unfounded, for, if we look to Plato's *Sophist*, his major work on the subject of sophistry, we find that, amongst a variety of possible definitions of the sophist, one definition seems an almost perfect description of Socrates. This point, coupled with the fact that in the *Sophist*, as well as other later Platonic dialogues such as the *Statesman* and the *Laws*, the character of Socrates takes a back seat to the Eleatic and Athenian strangers, has driven some scholars to argue that, at the close of Plato's life, he no longer considers his mentor to meet the standards of the philosopher.

The goal of this chapter, then, is to argue against this claim. In the following I will argue that, despite the apparent similarities between the sixth definition of the sophist as found in the *Sophist* and Socrates, we should not, and cannot, consider Socrates to be a sophist. However, while my aim is to save Socrates from sophistry, I will further argue

¹ Most notably Taylor (2006).

that he also cannot be considered a philosopher in the unqualified sense. On my interpretation, while Plato did, at one point, consider Socrates to be a philosopher, he came to realize that, given the failures of the elenchos, a new methodology was required. I will thus argue that this new methodology of division is, if not the methodology of the philosopher, at the very least a necessary component of philosophy. And, as Socrates was a not a practitioner of this new method, he does not meet the standards that Plato sets for philosophy in the later dialogues.

Defining the Sophist

Looking first to the *Sophist* and Plato's attempts to define sophistry, we find that Socrates has taken a back seat to the Eleatic Stranger, an individual that Theodorus introduces as "very much a philosopher."² Given the task of defining sophistry, the Eleatic Stranger employs a methodology wherein, through a series of subsequent divisions, he is able to further narrow the field of inquiry until the term in question is adequately defined. Yet, as the Stranger is set to begin his investigation into the definition of the sophist, he expresses his concern regarding the difficulty of the task at hand. Thus, in order to ease into the analysis, he suggests to Theaetetus that it would serve them well to first use a model, i.e., an angler, as a starting point for their inquiry.³ As explained by the Stranger, it is decided to begin with the example of the angler, for not only is it an easily recognizable profession, and thus, easily definable, but it is also a profession which, similar to certain conceptions of sophistry, pertains to "hunting".⁴ The

² Soph. 216a3

³ *Soph.* 218c7-e1. See also Gill (2012, 140) – Gill adds that here in the *Sophist* the example of the angler is used for its everydayness, i.e., the ease with which the student would be able to follow the divisions as well as the conclusions drawn. This practice is also utilized in the *Statesman*, with the weaver used as a model for the Statesman.

similarities between the two would thus allow for an easy transition into the primary agenda of defining the sophist.

With the model decided upon, the Stranger begins by positing angling as a type of expertise. From this position, the stranger divides expertise into two broad categories: productive and acquisitive. Recognizing that the art of angling does not deal with production, the stranger divides the acquisitive branch, making further divisions down the line until he is able to isolate angling from all other types of expertise.⁵ Thus, through this method of division, the Stranger was able to discover a precise definition of the angler.⁶

With the definition of the angler now firmly established, the Stranger begins his search for the definition of the sophist by attempting to determine to which sort of expertise sophistry might pertain⁷. As with the angler, the Stranger first determines that sophistry is a sort of acquisitive art, specifically engaged in the “hunting of rich, prominent young men.”⁸ However, while we might agree that this first definition of the sophist as a sort of hunter seems plausible, we quickly discover that our object of inquiry is not so easily defined. To explain, if we retreat back up the branches of division as

⁴ *Soph.* 218e-219a

⁵ For a wonderfully concise model of the divisions see Gill, (2012, 142).

⁶ *Soph.* 221b2-c3 – “Within expertise as a whole one half was acquisitive; half of the acquisitive was taking possession; half of the possession-taking was hunting; half of hunting was animal hunting; half of animal hunting was aquatic hunting; all of the lower portion of aquatic hunting was fishing; half of fishing was hunting by striking; and half of striking was hooking. And the part of hooking that involves a blow drawing a thing upward from underneath is called by a name that’s derived by its similarity to the action itself, i.e., it’s called draw-fishing, or angling – which is what we were searching for.”

⁷ Interestingly, while both Theaetetus and the Stranger agree at the outset that sophistry, similar to angling, requires expertise, as the dialogue comes to a close and the sophist is finally defined, precisely what expertise the sophist has, if any, is called into question. See Gill (2012, 143).

⁸ *Soph.* 223b

given by the Stranger, we discover that the sophist could be seen not merely as (1) a hunter of young men, but also as (2) one who deals in the commerce of *exchange*, i.e., a traveling salesman selling his wisdom to those that would pay for his services.⁹ This kind is then divided into two further kinds of salesman: (3) the stay at home retailer who sells goods of his own, and (4) the salesman that sells goods purchased from others.¹⁰ For the fifth definition we find the sophist defined as (5) a combatant, constantly engaged in discussions of justice, and makes money doing so.¹¹

Moving on to the sixth and seventh definitions, however, we see a break from the mold, positing the expertise of sophistry not as an acquisitive art, but instead as a *separative* and *productive* art, respectively. With these additional definitions, we begin to see the problem that has arisen in the Stranger's attempt in defining sophistry, i.e., the multitude of definitions that are not individually dismissed as erroneous, thus adding to the confusion as to whom the sophist truly is, and how it is that we might recognize him. As Mary Louise Gill explains, the problem is twofold¹². First, unlike the angler, whose activity is easily observable, i.e., one could easily witness the angler fishing with a hook, the activity of the sophist is somewhat complicated, as he seems to engage in a wide-

⁹ The second definition thus reads at 224c-d "We'll say that the expertise of the part of the acquisition, exchange, selling, wholesaling, and soul-wholesaling, dealing in words and learning that have to do with virtue – that's sophistry in its second appearance."

¹⁰ Soph. 224a-d. See also Brown (2010,152). Socrates here is of course exempt from the charge of traveling salesman (as he has practiced his art only in Athens, a point he makes explicit in the *Crito* via his refusal to escape into exile to philosophize elsewhere). Interestingly, as to being a salesman of goods purchased from others, while Socrates is similarly exempt from this charge on account of his never charging for his services, there are occasions that Socrates does use the teachings he has acquired from others, e.g., the account of love given to him by Diotima in the *Symposium*, as well as Aspasia's funeral oration he recites in the *Menexenus*,

¹¹ Soph. 225c - This seems to resemble Socrates quite a bit, particularly in reference to the discussions found in the *Crito* and the *Republic* Book I. However, as Taylor (2006) yet again rightly notes, the combatant referenced here by the stranger is still compensated for their efforts.

¹² Gill (2012, 144).

variety of activities. As a result, it would seem that at the end of each “definition” we are left not with the “essence” of the sophist, but only with what appears to be a singular aspect of his various activities. Second, not only is the essential activity of the sophist difficult to observe, but precisely what that activity would be is up for dispute, for, as is evidenced by the seven varying definitions, there exist a multitude of opinions concerning its nature.

And, for Gill, this problem comes to the fore with the addition of the sixth definition, which, unlike the preceding definitions, places the art of sophistry not under the acquisitive branch, but rather as a “separative” art form. As the Stranger notes, this sixth definition defines the sophist as an individual who is able to purge others of their false beliefs. We read:

They cross-examine someone when he thinks he is saying something though he is saying nothing. Then, since his opinions will vary inconsistently, these people will easily scrutinize them. They will collect his opinions together during the discussion, put them side by side, and show that they conflict with each other at the same time on the same subjects in relation to the same things and in the same respects. The people who are being examined see this, get angry at themselves, and become calmer towards others. They lose their inflated and rigid beliefs about themselves that way, *and no loss is pleasanter to hear or has a more lasting effect on them.*¹³

Given this description, one is immediately reminded of Socrates and the elenctic method. And, while I will return to a more detailed analysis of the relationship between Socrates and this definition later in this chapter, what is important to note here is the impact that this wildly different definition has upon the attempts to pin down the sophist. We have seen the sophist as a hunter, a salesman, and now a cleanser of souls. Given these disparate definitions, a realization is made by the Stranger and Theaetetus that they

¹³ *Soph.* 230b3-c2

have ultimately failed to recognize a crucial aspect of the sophist's talent, one that enables him to *appear* to be an expert in so many fields.

In response to this concern, the Stranger proposes the seventh and final definition of the sophist. To do so, the Stranger inquires not into the nature of the activity itself, but into the *object* of that activity. Specifically, the Stranger notes that the Sophists present themselves to be wise in all lines of inquiry. However, as is made clear in the discussion, to possess knowledge of everything is simply impossible.¹⁴ Therefore, the skill of the sophist is not the possession of all knowledge, but the ability to *produce the appearance* of wisdom as such.¹⁵ In effect, the sophist is merely an imitator of the wise man. Yet, with this seventh definition a problem arises that requires addressing: As the *techne* of the sophist seems to be the production of false appearances, how is such a production possible?

The Seventh Definition and the Production of False Appearances

Non-Being as Difference

Regarding the production of false appearances, we find that the problem is as follows: If the Sophist is defined as an individual who produces false appearances, then, in effect, the sophist produces *that which is not*. Yet, it would seem to be the case that if one is producing *something*, then they must be producing something *that is*. Thus, we are seemingly presented with a contradiction, for how could something that *is not*, be something *that is*?¹⁶ As the above conclusion seems to reduce to an absurdity, the

¹⁴ Soph. 233a-234b

¹⁵ Soph. 233c

¹⁶ Soph. 237e "Therefore don't we have to refuse to admit that a person like that speaks but says nothing? Instead, don't we have to deny that anyone who tries to utter *that which is not* is even speaking?"

Stranger is faced with the task of explaining how the Sophist is able to produce something *that is not*.

As a possible answer to this concern, we turn to the recent work of Mary Louise Gill.¹⁷ According to Gill, the Stranger explains that in instances of negation, e.g., “I am *not* hungry,” the negation is in reference to the predicate term, not the subject.¹⁸

Understood in this manner, negation is not indicating the non-being, i.e., non-existence, of the term in question, but rather as an indication of difference. Looking to the text of the *Sophist*, we find the following explanation:

It seems then that when we say *that which is not*, we don't say something contrary to *that which is*, but only something *different* from it...It's like this. When we speak of something as not large, does it seem to you that we indicate the small rather than the equal...So we won't agree with somebody who says that negation signifies a contrary. We will only admit this much: When “not” and “non-“ are prefixed to names that follow them, they indicate something other than the names, or rather, other than the things to which the names following the negation are applied.¹⁹

Understood in this way, negation is not to be considered an assignment of non-existence, and as a result, we can avoid the Parmenidean problem of non-being²⁰. To explain, if negation is understood to imply opposites, then when we say that something *is-not*, we are implying the thing's non-existence, an implication that would result in the absurd conclusion noted above. However, if negation is merely an indicator of difference as the Stranger now suggests, then the negation is not in reference to the existence of the thing

¹⁷ Gill, M. (2012) *Philosophos*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

¹⁸ See Gill (2012: 158)

¹⁹ *Soph.* 257b3-c4. As is pointed out by Olga Alieva (2010: 87), this argument as made by Plato is a precursor to Aristotle's own argument against the Parmenidean problem of non-being. See *Sophistical Refutations* 166b37-a7.

²⁰ DK28B2 – Here Parmenides makes clear that he believes being and non-being to be opposites.

itself, but rather, as an indication that the subject in question is *different from* the predicate attached to it. In a sense, difference applied in this way serves as a sort of categorizing tool, distinguishing various aspects of the subject in question, e.g., size, shape, temperature, etc.²¹

To help clarify this understanding of difference, we look to the example as given by the Stranger, i.e., the not-beautiful. According to the Stranger, when we are discussing the not-beautiful, we are pointing to a thing that is *different from* the beautiful.²² As the stranger explains:

Isn't it in the following way that *the not beautiful* turns out to be, namely, by being both marked off within one kind of *those that are*, and also set over against one of *those that are*... Then it seems that *the not beautiful* is a sort of setting of a being over against a being... Then, according to this account, is the beautiful more a being than the not beautiful?²³

The point being put forth by the Stranger here is that when we are discussing the not-beautiful, we are not expressing a form of non-existence, but rather a thing in and of itself, i.e., the not-beautiful, as set against that from which it is different. In other words, both the *beautiful* and *not-beautiful* “equally are.”²⁴ For example, when we say, “The Painting is not beautiful,” we are not merely distinguishing it from the Beautiful, but we *are further* establishing that it has its own distinct qualities within the realm of

²¹ And, while the discussion of difference as non-being is here being investigated by the Stranger to justify the final definition of the sophist as the producer of false-appearances, we find that this understanding of non-being as difference serves another purpose, one absolutely essential to the new methodology of collection and division itself, as it allows for the very distinctions between categories required for division. See Morgan (1993, 100)

²² Soph. 257d9-11

²³ Soph. 257e1-10

²⁴ Soph. 258a1.

aesthetics.²⁵ Given this explanation, we can now see how non-being in the form of difference does not imply the non-existence of that thing in question, but rather, implies merely a difference *from*, albeit a difference within a specific field.²⁶

The Making of False Statements

Thus far the stranger has managed to show the possibility of speaking of that which is not, specifically in the form of difference. However, we recall that it is not through the speaking of things that are not *in general* that defines the sophist, but rather his ability to make false statements through the production of appearances, specifically his ability to produce the appearance of wisdom. To account for this, we must first investigate the possibility of making false statements.²⁷ To begin, we admit that, in the simplest of terms, insofar as someone is making a statement, they are making a statement about *something*. And, we find that for Plato, in their most basic form all statements consist of (1) a subject, that which the statement is about, and (2) a predicate, which makes a claim regarding the subject in question.

Further, as the Stranger explains, if we merely list subjects in a row, e.g., “lion stag horse”, or similarly list predicates, e.g., “walks runs sleeps,” we would be uttering nonsense; words strung together void of any meaning. Thus, we must properly *weave* the verbs with nouns,²⁸ and it is only through this weaving of subject with predicate that we produce meaningful speech. Thus, for Plato, to “say something” requires more than

²⁵ Gill (2012: 160-161).

²⁶ It should be mentioned that Gill (2012) pushes this line much further into an investigation of the metaphysical implications of these conclusions. However, this line of argument is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

²⁷ This very succinct account is borrowed from Gill (2012, 167-168)

²⁸ Soph. 262d4.

simply uttering words, but rather it requires organizing these words in such a manner that they produce meaning. Thus, to reiterate the initial point, to *speak* is to speak *about something*.

If we take this to be true, i.e., that all statements are necessarily about something, then the question arises as to how it would be possible to make a *false* statement.²⁹ In other words, if one is to make a false statement, would it not be the case that such a statement, being false, would necessarily be making a claim about that which is *not*? Yet, as discussed above, to state that *which-is-not* is not as absurd as it may first appear, especially when we recognize, as Plato has established, that any reference to that which-is-not is need not be a reference to non-existence, but rather as an indicator of difference regarding the subject of the statement in question. So, to use the Stranger's example from the *Sophist*, if I were to say "Theaetetus sits," we find that the assigned action of "sitting" does correspond rightly to the subject "Theaetetus". Thus, I would be making a statement that is true, that *is*.

If, however, I were to say "Theaetetus flies," we would find that the statement is false, as, according to Gill, "flying specifies something *different* from what is the case about Theaetetus (namely, sitting)."³⁰ To fully unpack this point, we must revisit our earlier discussion of negative predication, as it is here, in the discussion of false statement, that its importance becomes most apparent. To begin, we note that for both statements, i.e., "Theaetetus flies" and "Theaetetus sits," we do have predicates and

²⁹ For an exceptionally detailed account of false statements in the *Sophist*, see Hestir, (2003).

³⁰ Gill (2012, 167) Italics added. See also Crivelli (2012, 249-252). Here Crivelli takes a similar line to Gill. He writes, "Plato's solution assumes that a person who speaks falsely says what is not in that he or she says about something what is not about it to be." In other words, it is to say something about the subject that is different from those things that are true of the subject.

nouns to which these predicates are assigned, and further, both statements are making claims, thereby meeting the requirements for speech as stipulated by the Stranger. However, we find that, on the Stranger's account, statements such as "Theaetetus sits" are *true* because the predicate properly describes a singular action associated with the subject. On the other hand, statements such as "Theaetetus flies" are false because the predicate is *not* associated with the subject *in any way*, i.e., flying is a sort of action that is different from the *entire* set of actions engaged in by Theaetetus. In other words, while true statements need only reflect individual aspects of the subject to which they correspond, when it comes to false statements, it must be clear that the claim being made is universal, i.e., the claim made is entirely different from those things *that are* in relation to the subject.³¹

The Production of False Appearances

Having established non-being as a form of difference, a position which consequently allowed for the possibility of false statements, all that remains for the Stranger to address regarding the seventh definition of the sophist is the sophist's ability to produce false appearances.³² He begins by returning to their initial division of copy-making into two distinct types: likeness-making and appearance making. And, while earlier attempts concerning where to place the Sophist resulted in confusion on account

³¹ This distinction is an important one. See Frede (1992, 420) "Only thus can Plato say that the false statement says, speaks of, something other than *any* of the things that are, that is, something other than any of the things that are in relation to the given subject. For it is clear that it will not do simply to say of false statement that it speaks of something other than it is. To be false it has to speak of something of any of the things that are, namely in reference to the given subject." For a contrary view on the issue of universality of false statements, see David Keyt, "Plato on Falsity: *Sophist* 263B," in *Exegesis and Argument, Phronesis, Supplementary Volume I*, A. Mourelatos and R. Rorty, eds. (1973, 295), and J. M. E. Moravcsik, "Being and Meaning in the Sophist," *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 14 (1962, 69).

³² *Soph.* 264c. We find here the Stranger noting that such a task should not be too troublesome, especially considering the work they have just completed regarding the nature of statements and non-being.

of issues regarding the possibility of falsity, with these issues now put to rest, the investigation into the Sophist as a producer of false appearances can finally begin.³³

First, however, we must focus on precisely what the Stranger means by an “appearance”.

Looking to the dialogue we find that the Stranger makes clear a connection between two distinct types of judgment, i.e., our ability to affirm or deny. The first, *doxa*, refers to the affirmation or denial of a particular statement silently thought of within our own minds.³⁴ Such judgments are rightly classified as our beliefs. Yet, as the Stranger notes, there is another sort of judgment, *phantasia*, one that occurs not exclusively internally, but in concert with sense perception.³⁵ Thus, the stranger concludes:

So, since there is true and false speech, and, of the processes just mentioned, thinking appeared to be the soul’s conversation with itself, belief the conclusion of thinking, and what we call appearing the blending of perception and belief, it follows that since these are all the same kind of thing as speech, some of them must be false.

In other words, just as we make judgments regarding the veracity of our own beliefs, so too do we make judgments in matters of appearance, i.e., we affirm or deny the truth of those things that appear to us, often times mistaking certain appearances as true that are in fact not. So, just as when walking through the desert one might mistakenly judge there to be water on the horizon (when in fact it is merely an optical illusion), so too might one mistakenly deem statements made by others to be wise, when in fact, quite the opposite is true.

³³ Soph. 264c1-4

³⁴ Soph. 263e-264b

³⁵ Soph. 264a3

Given this understanding of the production of false appearances, the seventh and final definition of the sophist finally comes into view. After once again utilizing the method of collection and division to distinguish the sophist from other sorts of appearance makers, the final definition is given as follows:

Imitation of the contrary speech producing, insincere and unknowing sort, of the appearance making kind of copy making, the word juggling part of production that is marked off as human and not divine.³⁶

Put plainly, the sophist is the individual that, via the imitation of the wise man, produces the false appearance that he himself is wise.

Critiques of the Seventh Definition

Considering the *Sophist* abruptly ends with the positing of this seventh definition of the sophist, one could argue that Plato intended us to take this as the definitive definition, thereby relegating the preceding six divisions as failed attempts to define a notoriously slippery figure. Yet, as the positing of such a definitive answer to the chosen line of inquiry is particularly uncommon for Plato, many scholars are reluctant to accept this conclusion at face value. Granted, there are many differences worth noting between the early so-called “Socratic” dialogues and those dialogues that make up much of Plato’s later works, such as the *Sophist* or *Statesman*. For one, we find in the latter that Socrates no longer holds sway in the discussion. In his place we find other characters, such as the Eleatic Stranger in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, or the Athenian Stranger of the *Laws*, taking center stage.³⁷ And, it is perhaps this Socratic absence that allows for another

³⁶ *Soph.* 268a-c

³⁷ This point is especially interesting when we take into consideration that in the *Theaetetus*, the dialogue immediately preceding the *Sophist*, with Socrates leading the conversation, the discussion ends in aporia. It is only when he is replaced by the Stranger in the *Sophist* and *Statesman* that more conclusive results are achieved. Given the connection between these dialogues, both thematically and dramatically, I believe this distinction is indicative of a major shift for Plato regarding his understanding as to the

major stylistic shift for Plato, for, while earlier works, e.g., the *Euthyphro* or *Laches*, conclude in *aporia*, as we come to the close of Plato's canon, we are presented with, at least on the surface, conclusions resembling more definitive answers to the proposed inquiries.³⁸ Taking the *Sophist* again as our example, we find that the final exchange between the Stranger and Theaetetus consists of the seventh definition of the sophist as given by the Stranger followed by a resounding, single word of agreement from Theaetetus.³⁹ Yet, despite this apparently conclusive ending that would seem to suggest that we take this seventh definition to be the true definition of sophistry, many scholars have taken issue with this claim, offering critiques against this line of thinking. And, as the seventh definition plays heavily into my argument regarding how we are to understand Socrates in the eyes of Plato, it is necessary to address these concerns in turn.

Different Sophists or Different Aspects?

One of the most compelling cases against the view that the *Sophist* provides us with a viable definition of the sophist comes from Lesley Brown, who, in her article "Definition and Division in Plato's *Sophist*,"⁴⁰ poses the question as to whether the seven definitions presented are intended as separate, but correct, definitions of the sophist⁴¹, or,

limitations of the Socratic method, and the importance of developing a methodology that produces positive, as opposed to merely negative, results.

³⁸ One could argue that even in these later dialogues, we are still to take the conclusions given as ironical, i.e., given to us plainly as to encourage rebuttals. However, given the slow shift we find over the entire canon from the strictly aporetic conclusions of the early dialogues to the more definitive conclusions (in particular those found in the *Laws*), more evidence would have to be given to support such an interpretation.

³⁹ Soph. 268c4-d3

⁴⁰ Brown, L. (2010) "Definition and Division in Plato's *Sophist*." D. Charles (ed.), *Definition in Greek Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 151-171.

⁴¹ See Moravcsik, J. M. E. (1973), 'Plato's Method of Division' in J. M. E. Moravcsik (ed.), *Patterns in Plato's Thought*, Dordrecht. P. 173

are they to be viewed as a collective assessment, each individual definition gleaning insight into a particular aspect of the sophist?⁴² Beginning with the latter, we find that according to Brown, those that would argue in favor of the collective assessment model of definition do so by claiming that just as there are “unique ways of identifying the number two, so also with sophistry.”⁴³

As a means of clarifying this point, we might take as our example the idea of a “professor”. Granted, the idea of “professor” might be most readily identified with one who conducts research. However, one might also think of the professor as a teacher, or perhaps a mentor, etc. Through this example we might see that each of these characterizations are properly associated with being a professor, albeit distinctly different from one another. Yet, while examples such as these might make this view appear viable, Brown, in my view, rightly notes that to say that *Plato* accepts the idea of disparate, yet correct, characterizations of *any* term, let alone sophistry, would seem contrary to his entire project up to this point. Indeed, we need only look to *any* dialogue that precedes the *Sophist* to find evidence that would suggest that Plato’s understanding of definitional knowledge requires that we find the *essential* characteristic; the defining nature of the object of inquiry. Returning then to our example of “professor,” I would argue that while it is true that the professor as a researcher is distinctly different from the professor as a teacher insofar as, in these particular roles, they have entirely different

⁴² See Cornford, F. M. (1935), *Plato’s Theory of Knowledge*, London. And Notomi, N. (1999), *The Unity of Plato’s Sophist*, Cambridge.

⁴³ Brown (2010, 158). See Moravcsik (1973, 166) “The existence of a plurality of divisions is in no way an argument against their being grounded in reality.”

responsibilities,⁴⁴ if we dig deeper (as Plato would have us do), we find that there must be some essential characteristic that cuts to the heart of what it means to be a professor qua professor, and it is *that singular* trait that should stand as the unifying aspect which unites the supposedly disparate characterizations.

Yet, as I have made clear above, the *Sophist* is an atypical dialogue for Plato. Given the drastic change in methodology, as well as Socrates' absence, one could argue that perhaps we should take these changes as signs that Plato's own views of definition have changed as well. However, even if we were to examine the *Sophist* in isolation from the rest of the Platonic corpus, such a view remains untenable. The problem, as Brown explains, arises as a result of glaring inconsistencies between the various definitions.⁴⁵ Now, one might make the case that the existence of inconsistencies between the definitions does not preclude the possibility of each distinct definition rightfully holding the title of sophist. Indeed, as the argument would proceed, each of the seven definitions is not intended to define *the* sophist, but rather one of many *aspects of* sophistry. Thus, on this view, the inconsistencies are not a detriment to understanding, but rather necessary if we are to truly understand the breadth of the sophistic spectrum. To limit ourselves to one single definition at the exclusion of others is to deny ourselves complete knowledge.

⁴⁴ Let alone external factors, e.g., how they are viewed by others.

⁴⁵ Brown (2010, 158-160)

And, while I can appreciate the merits of this line of reasoning, it is ultimately undone due to lack of textual evidence. We once more look to Brown, who explains precisely how, despite appeals to the contrary:⁴⁶

...Definitions 1–5 locate sophistry within acquisitive *techne*, while the seventh proclaims it to be a branch of productive art. If, as the evidence suggests, all divisions are intended to be exclusive, even where not exhaustive, it follows that sophistry cannot be truly characterized both as a branch of acquisitive art and as a branch of productive art...But are divisions intended to be exclusive?...the evidence in the *Sophist* and *Politicus* strongly suggests that Plato envisages that one and the same kind cannot appear on both sides of a given division. Consider, for instance, the initial division of *technai* into acquisitive and productive. The very definition of acquisitive art at 219c1–8 includes the clause ‘does not produce (*demiourgei*) anything, but. . . .’ *In other words, to be acquisitive is to be not productive.*⁴⁷

Thus, following Brown’s argument, once a division is made and followed, such as placing the seventh definition in the productive branch as opposed to the acquisitive branch, then we must see those kinds in the alternative branch as entirely distinct from the kinds in the productive branch. To make clear the importance of maintaining this exclusivity between branch divisions, we need only take the simpler example of defining a particular species of animal, e.g., a dog.

To begin, one of the earliest divisions we must make in our efforts towards defining a dog is whether or not the animal in question, in this instance a dog, is a mammal or reptile or fish, etc. Upon concluding that a dog, based upon particular traits, properly falls into the branch of mammal, it would be rather odd indeed to suggest that there is also an equally correct characterization of a dog that is a reptile. As being a

⁴⁶ Cohen in Moravcsik (1973, 189). “It allows for the multiplicity of correct characterizations by division. Characterization by division consists of giving an entailment chain linking the Form to be characterized with the selected genus. It is clear that there can be more than one correct entailment-chain since the parts produced by division need not be exclusive or exhaustive.”

⁴⁷ Brown (2010, 159) Italics added for emphasis.

mammal precludes the possibility of one being a reptile, we can see more clearly that Plato intends these divisions to indicate exclusivity. Indeed, if we *were* to end up with a definition of “dog” that was situated within the reptilian branch, such a positioning should alarm us to a mistake that has been made on *our* part, i.e., in our haste or misunderstanding we failed to make the proper divisions.

Returning then to the issue of the inconsistencies between the varying definitions of the sophist, we find that given Definitions 1-5 are situated in the acquisitive branch, and definition seven is in the productive branch, and further, that any specific kind cannot rightfully be located in two branches of the same division, it is not possible that Plato could hold the position that each of the seven characterizations rightfully defines sophistry. Thus, as Brown pithily concludes, “However tricky a character the sophist is, sophistry cannot have incompatible properties.”⁴⁸

Given the problems that arise for the aspect model of the seven divisions, Brown suggests that perhaps it is the case that each definition is not to be understood as various aspects of sophistry, but rather as seven distinct definitions of those individuals who have historically been *labeled as* a sophist. And, considering the cast of characters labeled as such throughout Plato’s works, we find that this proposed theory is not without merit. For example, Protagoras was labeled a sophist on account of his charging a fee in exchange for his “knowledge” (Definition 4), whereas the battle-ready, combative Thrasymachus from Book I of the *Republic* seems to perfectly embody the sophist of Definition 5. Indeed, even Socrates seems to fit the mold of sophist under this multiple definition interpretation, for upon first glance, Definition 6 seems perfectly modeled after the Socratic method. Given these disparate characters all being branded with the title

⁴⁸ Brown (2010, 159)

“sophist,” it stands to reason that each definition should be taken as its own distinct, yet *correct*, definition of a type of sophist.

Despite the attractiveness of this interpretation, upon investigation we find once again that it lacks textual support. To explain, we return to our original example of the angler. We recall that in the attempt to pin down the precise definition of the angler, the Stranger began with the most general field regarding professions, i.e., *techne*, which was then divided into two respective branches, productive and acquisitive, with angling falling into the latter. After following eight additional divisions down the branch, we finally land on the angler, a specific definition that arose as a result of a branching downward from the most general of categories. And, the same pattern has consistently followed for each attempt at defining the sophist. And so, while it is true that the Stranger began with the intention of defining the sophist at the outset, he did not begin the process of division with “sophist” at the top, dividing down to discern the different types that exist under that particular heading. As Brown notes, “...sophistry is consistently treated as the *endpoint* of a division, as something to be divided down to, not as a generic kind whose branches are to be discerned.”⁴⁹ To say otherwise would be to misunderstand the nature of the method of division itself, a mistake that would result in the listing of generic possible descriptions of those individuals who could be called *a* sophist, as opposed to a definitive conclusion to our inquiries regarding the definition of *the* sophist.

⁴⁹ Brown (2010, 160) Italics added for emphasis. See also Gill (2012, 147) “He (The Stranger) and Theaetetus carefully defined the sophist in terms of his many activities, but none of those make him what he is. They have so far missed the essence of the sophist, and for that reason they mistakenly call him by many names instead of one.”

Considering these issues, I would suggest that a more plausible solution to the problem of the multiple definitions can be found through an examination of the text itself,⁵⁰ for, if we look to 232a, we read:

Well then, suppose people apply the name of a single sort of expertise to someone, but he appears to have expert knowledge of lots of things. In a case like that don't you notice something's wrong with the way he appears? Isn't it obvious that if someone takes him to be an expert at many things, *then that observer can't be seeing clearly what it is in his expertise that all of those many pieces of learning focus on—which is why he calls him by many names instead of one?*⁵¹

In other words, the mistake is not in the division process, but in our own haste in labeling. To be sure, each of the original six definitions concluded with “the sophist” as the endpoint. However, each of these definitions could also be labeled in other ways, such as a hunter (Def. 1), a salesman (Def. 2 -4), a Combatant (Def. 5). As such, we have not yet gotten to the heart of sophistry in these definitions, for we have not yet found that one thing that it possesses as set against all other things.

This interpretation, i.e., that the multitude of definitions is the result of human error, is further bolstered by the very nature of the subject whom they seek. To explain, if we can take the seventh definition as the true definition of the sophist, i.e., that the sophist is that individual who is, through the production of false appearances, able to pass himself off as a wise man, then, would it not be the case that, given his “talent” of presenting himself as that which he is not, we might have trouble distinguishing what it is that he *is*? Put plainly, of all the individuals we might attempt to define, would it not be the sophist, by his very nature, who would emerge as the most difficult to pin down?

⁵⁰ Gill (2012, 146-147)

⁵¹ *Soph.* 232a Italics added for emphasis.

The Seventh Definition as the Correct Definition

Are we then to take the seventh definition as the “true” definition of the sophist? Such a view is favored by a number of scholars, in particular Cornford (1935) and Notomi (1999).⁵² And, while I am inclined to accept this view, those who favor this interpretation vary widely in their approach, and thus, a quick overview is warranted. Beginning with Cornford, we find that while the seventh definition will ultimately emerge as the true definition, he argues that the preceding six divisions are not to merely be discarded as failed attempts towards definition, but rather as an essential step towards the success of the final division. Cornford suggests:

...these first six definitions actually, though not formally, serve the purpose of a Collection preliminary to the seventh. They bring us before the types to be surveyed before we can fix upon the really fundamental character of Sophistry. The name Sophist has been loosely applied to various classes...The early Divisions analyze and characterize each of these types and so provide a survey of the field within which we must discover the really fundamental trait, the generic form that will finally yield the correct definition of Sophistry.⁵³

Thus, as the Stranger realizes that the word “sophist” has been used to describe a wide range of persons and/or activities, and, if the effort towards proper definition is to be achieved, it is important to examine each of these different sorts of persons, as it is only when this task is achieved that one would be in the proper position to discover the unifying trait which remains subtly hidden under the surface. And, as we move through each of the definitions, we find that each seems particularly pointed towards particular individuals within the Platonic corpus. In Divisions I- IV, those divisions that associate

⁵² Gill (2012) seems to accept that the seventh view is *intended* by Plato to be understood as the true definition. Yet, despite this point, Gill ultimately finds issue with Plato’s labeling of sophistry understood in this way as a *techné*. This issue is also taken up by Brown (2010), though Brown argues more emphatically against the seventh definition (or any of the definitions, for that matter) as being considered the true definition of sophistry. See also Morgan (1993).

⁵³ Cornford (1935, 187)

sophistry with the hunter or salesman, we are reminded of those caricatures of Protagoras and Gorgias, men who, despite their fame and fortune, are ridiculed and belittled by Socrates in the dialogues that bear their names. Division V, the contentious disputer, once more reminds us of the likes of Thrasymachus, the man who joined the discussion of justice not to discover the truth (as perhaps was Glaucon's intention following his departure), but rather simply to win the day.⁵⁴ Division VI, of course, points towards the practice of *elenchos*, and thus, to Socrates, which, for Cornford does not present a problem, for again, these preliminary definitions are not necessarily true attempts towards definition, but merely an effort to round-up, as it were, all those that have been labeled as such. Cornford thus concludes, "Division VII is the only one that goes to the heart of the matter and starts from the right genus. It defines, not any particular class of persons, *but a whole tendency of thought*, the essence of sophistry."⁵⁵ For Cornford then, while the six divisions leading up to the final definition are necessary to the goal of identifying the sophist, we should not take their individual traits to be seen as a part of sophistry itself.

Notomi (1999), for his part, while essentially in agreement with Cornford regarding the truth of the seventh definition, presents a more subtle interpretation, one which takes a sort of middle-ground between Cornford and those whose viewed Divisions 1-5 as integral parts of sophistry itself.⁵⁶ On Notomi's view, while the seventh definition should be taken as the "true appearance" of the sophist, "each of the first five

⁵⁴ Indeed, this characterization seems a perfect representation of the individual who's led not by the rational part of his soul, but rather the spirited. A point that could not have been a coincidence given the context of the *Republic*.

⁵⁵ Cornford (1935, 173)

⁵⁶ Division six, which is widely agreed to be referring to Socrates, is typically dismissed from consideration.

definitions remains a true appearance *seen from a certain viewpoint*.⁵⁷ In other words, the earlier definitions are, in a sense, connected to the art of sophistry. Notomi explains this position as follows: If an individual is not trained in the method of division, then they are not in the proper position, i.e., they do not have the proper point of view to see things clearly. As a result, a particular thing may *appear* to them to be similar to something else, e.g., a hunter of young men to that of a sophist, and yet, given their disadvantageous point of view, they mistake the *appearance* for the *thing itself*. In simpler terms, on Notomi's view, each of the first five definitions is "true" only from a certain perspective, though not, as is the seventh definition, true in an unqualified sense.

And, as evidence to this position, Notomi recalls the discussion on the appearance of beauty from 236b4-7, which reads:

Now, what do we call the thing which appears to be like a beautiful thing, because it is not seen from a beautiful viewpoint, but is not like what it is said to be like, for those who can see such a large thing properly? Since, while appearing to be like it, it is not really like, don't we call it an apparition?

Drawing from this, Notomi concludes, "Although an apparition *appears* beautiful to those who see it from a bad viewpoint, those who have good sight can tell its *apparent* likeness from the true likeness."⁵⁸

Yet, it seems to me that in using this passage as evidence, Notomi hoists himself on his own petard. To explain, Notomi's argument as I understand it unfolds as follows: (1) The majority is not properly trained in the method of division, and as a result, cannot properly discern apparent similarities, or likeness, from true likeness. (2) Just as it is difficult to clearly make out the objects in a room that is not well lit, a lack of dialectical

⁵⁷ Notomi (1999, 277-278)

⁵⁸ Notomi (199, 278)

training puts individuals at a disadvantage in their ability to properly identify kinds. (3) The activities described in Def. 1-5, i.e., the hunting of young men, selling of virtue/knowledge, and combative argumentation, are all activities that the sophist potentially engages in. (4) From this disadvantaged point of view, the “appearances of the sophist” in Def. 1-5 appear true in a certain way, as they each “represent at least some aspects of the sophist’s art.” (5) Thus, while the appearances of Def. 1-5 remain “true”, only the seventh definition is the “true appearance” of the sophist in the unqualified sense.

If my reading of Notomi is correct, however, I find it to be particularly problematic, especially when we take into consideration the textual evidence he himself supplies to support his conclusions. To explain, when examining the passage at 236b4, we find the Stranger explaining that the thing in question, which is *not* beautiful, is only seen as beautiful because it is not seen from the proper viewpoint. In other words, the thing *appears* to be beautiful, *when in fact it is not*. Thus, the appearance of beauty *is false*. If this is true, then I cannot see how Notomi can claim that the appearances of the sophist in Def. 1-5 are *true*.

As Notomi argues, the appearances of the sophist in Def. 1-5 are true, but only from a “certain viewpoint.” Further, this “viewpoint” as Notomi describes it, is the view taken by those who are untrained in the dialectic, i.e., who are not properly equipped to discern similarities between kinds. Thus, if (1) the appearances of the Def. 1-5 are true only if they are taken from a “certain viewpoint,” and (2) this “viewpoint” is, by Notomi’s own admission, the view seen by the person who is unable to properly assess that which they are surveying, then, would the result not be the same as the untrained

person who believes the thing to be beautiful when in fact it is not? In other words, if the “truth” of the appearances of Def. 1-5 is dependent upon the observer analyzing the appearance from an admitted position of ignorance, then how could those appearances be considered true? At *best*, it would seem to me that one could claim that, given the limited point of view, such appearances *might* be true, and that, with proper training, this truth could eventually be determined. However, as Notomi makes the much harder claim in asserting that they *are* true, his position remains problematic.⁵⁹

Thus, once again we find that any attempt to include definitions 1-5 into a working definition of sophistry ultimately fails, nuanced as it may be. As a result, it would appear as if the seventh definition of sophistry should be taken as Plato’s final view on the matter, understood in isolation from all previous definitions.

The Problem of Sophistry as a *techne*.

In the above treatment, I have argued that any attempt to include the original five divisions in a working definition of sophistry is untenable, including Notomi’s hybrid interpretation. Further, if the seventh definition is the correct definition, and the sophist is that individual who produces false appearances, then it would stand to reason that he would appear to us as so many things that he is not. In fact, it would be his very nature to do just that.⁶⁰ However, despite the strength of this position, one additional problem arises for this interpretation that is difficult to overcome, i.e., the problem of expertise.⁶¹ As Gill expresses the problem, “The final definition seems complete but is marred in a

⁵⁹ For additional critiques on Notomi’s view, see Liu, W. (2013). “Plato’s Attempts at Defining Sophistry” Presented at the Frontiers of Philosophy in China conference. 23 Feb. 2013.

⁶⁰ See p.19, also n. 49

⁶¹ This issue is discussed in both Gill (2012, 170-171), as well as Brown (2010, 164-8).

crucial respect, because the sophist has the mere *appearance* of expertise.”⁶² To explain, we recall that the seventh definition of sophistry is the end result of numerous divisions that begin with the division of *techné* itself. And, as each species derived must be a part of the genus above it, as well all preceding divisions on the branch, placing the seventh definition within the productive branch of *techné* would be to claim that sophistry as such would itself be a *techné*.⁶³ The question then arises as to whether or not this seventh definition meets the standards of *techné* as given by Plato.

Gill, looking back to the discussion of *techné* in the *Gorgias*, concludes that such a definition of sophistry cannot meet the rigid standards Plato sets for *techné*. Recalling the discussion on whether oratory⁶⁴ is a craft⁶⁵, we find Socrates explaining to Polus that he does not believe oratory to be a craft at all, but rather a “knack” (*tribe*). He continues on to say it is a sort of flattery, a method used to appease those that would listen, lulling them into satisfaction, which, in turn, makes them amenable to suggestion. And, yet, while the orator speaks as if he knows what is best for his audience, for Socrates it is precisely knowledge of this sort that he lacks. We read at *Gorgias* 465a:

...because it guesses at what's pleasant with no consideration for what's best. And I say that it is not a craft, but a knack, *because it has no account of the nature of whatever things it applies by which it applies them*, so that it is unable to state the cause of each thing. *And I refuse to call anything that lacks such an account a craft.*

⁶² Gill (2012, 170)

⁶³ See Franklin (2011, 12) “Again, that species are called parts of their genera indicates that each species is to be contained entirely within the proximate genus and thus also entirely within all of the genera above it. It is, therefore, a problem that the Stranger divides the genus of disputation (antilogike) into a species ‘[that] isn't carried out in any systematic or expert way’”

⁶⁴ Which for Gill, along with persuasion, is labeled sophistry's “product”.

⁶⁵ *Gorgias* 463a-d.

The problem for the seventh definition then, as Gill notes, is that in the 5th branch of the division⁶⁶ the Stranger distinguishes between those who know what they are imitating, and those who imitate out of ignorance. Given that the seventh is a species that falls under the branch of the ignorant imitator, the question arises as to how this individual, one who does not *know* that which they imitate, and thus, does not meet the requirements Plato places upon the possession of a craft, could rightfully be situated as a species of the productive *techne*.⁶⁷ Given his proposed ignorance, it would seem that he should be disqualified entirely from the very branch in which he is placed.

A further critique against positing sophistry as a craft arises from Brown, who adds that in addition to the possession of an account, any craft must also be goal oriented.⁶⁸ For instance, the goal of the ship builder is to build a ship, just as the goal of the doctor is to promote health in their patients. And, on Brown's view, sophistry lacks

⁶⁶ *Soph.* 267b5-d2

⁶⁷ Gill (2012: 171)

⁶⁸ Brown (2010, 164) For a discussion on the complexities regarding what qualifies as *techne*, see Roochnik (1992: 185-192). Here Roochnik argues, contra Irwin (1977), that *techne* is not limited to productive knowledge, e.g., carpentry, sculpture, etc., but also should include theoretical knowledge, e.g., mathematics. On Roochnik's view, the issue with interpreting *techne* as "craft" in the strict sense requires that all craft be goal oriented in the sense that they "produce something". And, while the completed, i.e., produced, ship stands as testimony to the ship builders craft, when we look to more theoretical fields such as mathematics, Roochnik argues that the answer to an equation, e.g., 4 in response to 2+2, "is meaningless in and of itself and so cannot be used to measure the calculative *techne*." In other words, it would seem that the theoretical knowledge of mathematics, i.e., the ability to come to the correct answer, should be used as the measure of *techne*, not simply that it produces answers. And, while I am inclined to agree with Roochnik regarding the limiting of *techne* to what is strictly productive in this narrow sense, especially when considering passages from the *Charmides* 166a5-b3, not to mention the *Sophist* itself, wherein Plato distinctly distinguishes two additional branches of *techne* outside of the productive branch, I ultimately believe that despite his critique, *techne* must still be goal oriented. In other words, yes, we would say that a doctor's theoretical knowledge of medicine should stand distinct from the results of his practice, in other words, *that he knows how to heal someone* should be understood as distinct from the health of his patient. However, if a doctor has the knowledge and yet has the goal of using it to *harm* his patients, then it would be difficult to see how he could be understood as the true practitioner of medicine. Thus, while *techne* need not be limited to the production of tangible things (such as a house or a ship), I would more readily side with Irwin, for, under my reading, to be considered a craft, that craft must also be properly aligned toward a goal. See for example the discussion of fields of study in *Republic* VII, e.g., the discussion of astronomy at 527d-530c. See also Irwin (1977, 227)

such a goal. To explain this point, we must recall that we are looking for that essential characteristic, the singular thing that distinguishes sophistry from all other *technai*. Yet, if we comb through the preliminary definitions: Definition 1, the hunter, Definitions 2-4, the salesman of his wares, Definition 5, the argumentative combatant who seeks glory or fortune, in none of these do we find a goal that is unique to sophistry. In fact, with all save Definition 5, the goal is singularly the acquisition of money, with Definition 5 differing only in that we must add the desire for glory as well.

Turning our attention then to the seventh definition, Brown argues that similar issues arise. We recall that, according to the final definition, the sophist is the individual who produces false images, specifically the beliefs instilled in his audience that he is wise. However, Brown writes:

“...*producing deceptive images is not his goal*. His goal is not, *de dicto*, to create false beliefs; rather it is to create a belief in his own wisdom. That the belief is a false one follows from the fact the sophist is a *sham* wise person. Deception is the means to his goal, but not his goal. Once this is spelled out, it becomes clear why sophistry is not a genuine *techne*.⁶⁹

To fully illustrate Brown’s position here, let us look to the counter example of the medical doctor. The medical doctor is in possession of a particular kind of knowledge, specifically how to promote health. Further, the goal of medicine is to promote health in individuals. This example thus illustrates that for any activity to be considered a *techne*, the knowledge must properly align with the goal. Granted, there can be additional benefits, such as wages, that one receives for their efforts, but, as we read in *Rep.* 345d1-5, we need to distinguish such additional benefits from the craft itself. Looking to the text:

⁶⁹ Brown (2010: 166)

Then this benefit, receiving wages, doesn't result from their own craft, but rather, if we were to examine this precisely, medicine promotes health, and wage-earning provides wages; house building provides a house and wage-earning, which accompanies it, provides a wage; and so on with the other crafts. *Each of them does its own work and benefits the thing it is set over.*

The point here is that Plato is quite clear that each *techne* must be associated with a particular goal unto itself. Any additional goals must be considered as external to the craft itself. So, (1) while medicine might carry with it compensation in the form of wages, and, (2) while the individual who seems to be practicing medicine might do so *for those wages*, in doing so he is acting not as a doctor, but as a wage earner. To practice medicine in the true sense is to do so for the health of the patient.

With this evidence in place, Brown's argument appears quite compelling. If we are to take the seventh definition of sophistry as the true definition, then, Brown argues, it cannot be considered a true *techne* since it fails to meet this requirement. To explain, the ultimate goal of the sophist of definition seven is to be perceived of as a wise man. However, his "skill" is that he is able to produce the false appearance that he is in fact wise. To accomplish his task, he utilizes deception, fooling his audience into believing him to be something that he is not. Thus, Brown notes, "Deception is the means to his goal, but it is not his goal."⁷⁰ If his goal were strictly *to deceive* his audience, then perhaps this point would be moot. However, as his goal is not to deceive, but rather to be considered wise, Brown argues that we must consider his skill set as a means to another end, and just as the person practicing medicine only for money is not truly practicing the craft of medicine, Brown argues that we must similarly disregard sophistry as defined in Definition 7 as a true *techne*.

⁷⁰ Brown (2010, 166)

Yet, while I agree with Brown that expertise as defined by Plato does require a proper goal, I ultimately find issue with her argument, specifically regarding her view that the activity of sophistry is not properly aligned with the correct goal. To explain, we recall Brown's claim that, "His goal is not, *de dicto*, to create false beliefs; rather it is to create a belief in his own wisdom...Deception is the means to his goal, but it is not his goal."⁷¹ Thus, on Brown's argument, the goal of the sophist is to produce the belief in others that he is a wise person, accomplishing this through the production of false appearances, specifically in the form of false statements. Granted, his goal is not, as Brown notes, to create false beliefs *in general*, but to create the very specific belief that he is wise.

However, the problem with Brown's argument is that the sophist as described does not deceive his audience with *general* false statements, but rather specifically tailored false statements designed for him to appear *wise* and thus to *promote the belief that he is wise*. It is important to remember here that, according to this definition, the sophist of Definition 7 *knows he is not wise*.⁷² Considering this awareness, he is not producing false appearances in order to produce the *true appearance* that he is wise, as such a true appearance would have to be *true*. And, considering the sophist knows that, or at the very least fears that, he is not wise, his goal is still to produce the *false appearance* that he is wise, doing so through the production of false statements (appearances) that make him appear to be something that he is not, i.e., the wise man. As such, while I am largely in agreement with Brown's general argument regarding the

⁷¹ Brown (2010, 166)

⁷² *Soph.* 268a1-4

definition of sophistry, I do not find her argument regarding the failure of the seventh definition to be compelling.

Yet, despite the weakness of Brown's case, I do agree with Gill that, (1) given the admitted lack of knowledge the sophist of Definition 7 is professed to have, coupled with (2) Plato's requirement that all those with an expertise be able to provide an account thereof, it seems to be the case that Definition 7 cannot rightly be situated under the genus of expertise. In response to this dilemma, I would still contend that we should take the seventh definition of the sophist as the true definition of sophistry. I make this claim for the following reasons: (1) As has been shown, all attempts to include any of the other definitions into an amalgamate definition have failed, including Notomi's more nuanced, hybrid attempt. (2) While Gill's point regarding expertise requiring an account is one that admittedly presents considerable difficulty, we might perhaps take this to be Plato subtly showing us, (without directly *telling* us), that, similar to his views from the *Gorgias*, sophistry is not a *techne*, and yet, the very trouble with sophistry, and perhaps its most dangerous quality, is how closely it resembles one.⁷³ Indeed, if the seventh definition is correct, and the sophist is the person who, like the magician, produces the appearance of that which is not, would it not stand to reason that, given their ability, we would be likely to mistake sophistry as a *techne*? Indeed, this is precisely the danger of sophistry. And, given this danger, the need for philosophy is imperative, for, if we

⁷³ Such an act on Plato's part should be of no surprise, especially considering the importance he places on the individual's own struggle in the learning process, i.e., that we must work through it ourselves. Such a view is quite readily seen in two of his most readily recognized examples: The slave boy from the *Meno* and, of course, the struggle to escape the Cave.

ourselves are not wise enough to recognize the imposter, then how could we ever know for sure that we are not being fooled?⁷⁴

Is Socrates a Sophist?

I have thus far argued that we should consider the seventh definition of the sophist to be Plato's true definition of sophistry. With this argument in place we are now ready to ask the question laid out at the beginning of this chapter: Is Socrates a Sophist? As many scholars have noted the similarities of many of these definitions to the character of Socrates, the question demands to be addressed. And while I ultimately conclude that Socrates is *not* a sophist, others have taken the contrary position. To prove my position then, I will look to confront the work of C.C.W. Taylor, who strenuously argues that the *Sophist* offers evidence to suggest that Plato did consider Socrates to be a sophist, albeit of the sort unique unto himself.⁷⁵ Proceeding then through the seven definitions once again with Socrates in mind, we begin with the Definition 1, which, we recall, describes the sophist as the hunter of prominent young men. Taylor notes that while this may be construed as a nod towards figures such as Protagoras,⁷⁶ we recall that in the very dialogue that shares Protagoras' name, it is *Socrates* who is accused of precisely this sort of hunting!⁷⁷ And, while accusations by unnamed characters⁷⁸ should not be blindly taken as evidence, if we turn our attention to the *Theaetetus*, we find Socrates himself

⁷⁴ I grant that this interpretation requires more work to flesh out fully, however, such a detailed investigation is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

⁷⁵ Taylor (2006)

⁷⁶ Prot. 315a – “Following behind and trying to listen to what was being said were a group of what seemed to be mostly foreigners, *men whom Protagoras collects from the various cities he travels through.*” Italics added for emphasis.

⁷⁷ Prot. 309a. Indeed, the dialogue opens with this accusation.

⁷⁸ Prot. 309a – The accuser is simply labeled as “friend” (εταίρος)

inquiring to Theodorus about those “young men that are thought likely to become distinguished.”⁷⁹ And so, while Socrates *is* portrayed as a hunter of young men, he is so portrayed in a qualified sense, namely, that he is interested not in their money, but rather their intellect.⁸⁰

It must be noted that this distinction is paramount, for as we recall in the Stranger’s account of definition one, the sophist as the hunter of young men does so not for their intellect, but for their money.⁸¹ And, while Taylor argues that the professional aspect of a particular skill, i.e., whether or not one is paid, is irrelevant to the activity itself, in this instance I must disagree. To explain, I do agree with Taylor that in certain examples, e.g., playing the guitar, whether or not one is paid does not impact the activity of playing the guitar itself. So, on Taylor’s view, since both Socrates and Protagoras engage in the activity of hunting prominent young men, that one is paid and the other is not does not provide sufficient evidence to exclude Socrates from the charge of sophistry as such.⁸² Yet, while Taylor is correct in this sense, what he fails to recognize is that sophistry is being defined here as a *techne*, which, as I have argued above requires both an account (knowledge), *as well as the proper goal*. And, in the description of the sophist of Def. 1, we find that wage earning is not merely an ancillary characteristic, but the *final* division. It is *that he hunts for money* that distinguishes him from all other kinds. We read at 232a:

⁷⁹ *Theat.* 143d

⁸⁰ Taylor also references *Charmides* 153d

⁸¹ *Soph.* 223a2

⁸² Taylor (2006, 160) See also Gill (2012: 144) Here Gill sees the final division as separating Sophistry from Flattery. However, on my reading, the Stranger defines flattery as the act of pleasing people so as to be granted free room and board, as opposed to sophistry, which seeks wages.

Stranger - “But does not the kind of wage earning that actually earns money, though it claims to deal with people for the sake of virtue, *deserve to be called a different name?* What name? Try and tell me.”

Theaetetus – “It’s obvious. I think we have found the sophist.”

Therefore, (1) Given the goal of the hunter of Def. 1 is money, whereas for Socrates it is the acquisition of knowledge, and (2) the goal of any *techne* is essential to its definition, contra Taylor we absolutely can distinguish Socrates from the sophist of Definition 1.

In his examination Def. 2-4, Taylor again speculates on the similarities between Socrates and the sophist as depicted therein, though, again, given that these definitions explicitly depict the sophist as a merchant, Taylor seems more willing to admit the inherent discrepancy between such individuals and Socrates. Similarly, Taylor admits that Def. 5, the oral combatant, resembles Socrates insofar as he is typically associated with such activity. However, once more, Taylor readily admits that despite the similarities between the sophist of Def. 5 and Socrates, given the former is paid for his services, whereas Socrates is not, we must distinguish Socrates accordingly.

Following the brief dismissal of the preliminary definitions, Taylor finally moves on to the infamous 6th definition.⁸³ As this definition is one of great importance for my argument as a whole, we see it again below in its entirety:

They cross-examine someone when he thinks he is saying something though he is saying nothing. Then, since his opinions will vary inconsistently, these people will easily scrutinize them. They will collect his opinions together during the discussion, put them side by side, and show that they conflict with each other at the same time on the same subjects in relation to the same things and in the same respects. The people who are being examined see this, get angry at themselves, and become calmer towards others. They lose their

⁸³ It should be noted that Taylor’s numbering of the definitions differs from my account (which follows the ordering of Gill (2012) and Brown (2010), amongst others). In Taylor’s text, there are only two types of merchants, not three, thus explaining the numerical differences. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will refer to the definitions as discussed by Taylor in the order I have prescribed.

inflated and rigid beliefs about themselves that way, *and no loss is pleasanter to hear or has a more lasting effect on them.*⁸⁴

Given this description, we need only recall any of the exchanges between Socrates and his interlocutors in the Socratic dialogues to recognize the similarities between this description and the individual who practices the elenchos. These obvious similarities, coupled with the more positive outlook on the practice described⁸⁵, leave little doubt that this sixth definition is meant as a direct nod to Socrates.⁸⁶ Perhaps in recognition of this similarity to the revered figure of Socrates,⁸⁷ the Stranger is quick to reassess the figure described, noting that such sophistry does not deserve to be associated with such a person as described by the sixth definition. Yet, when faced with the similarities between this individual and sophistry as understood thus far in the discussion, the Stranger reluctantly acquiesces, but not completely, noting that such a practice is, “nothing other than our *noble sophistry.*”⁸⁸

Given this labeling, Taylor concludes that the sixth definition, one which clearly depicts the Socratic elenchos, is:

...properly conceived as sophistry of a kind; a very different kind, clearly, from that practiced by Protagoras or Prodicus, but a kind of sophistry for all that. That is

⁸⁴ Soph. 230b3-c2

⁸⁵ Taylor draws our attention to the cleansing aspect of the definition, in particular the care for the souls of others, a characteristic unsurprisingly lacking in all other definitions.

⁸⁶ While there is a fair level of scholarly dispute regarding whether or not the 6th definition is to be taken to mean that Plato considers Socrates to actually be a sophist, most scholars generally *do agree* that, at the very least, the sixth definition is referring to Socrates. For arguments against the view the Def. 6 is in reference to Socrates, see G.B. Kerferd (1954), and the response to Kerferd by Trevaskis (1955). While I ultimately side with Trevaskis, Kerferd’s argument is intriguing to say the least.

⁸⁷ And, while it would be humorous if this reassessment of the sixth definition as “noble” was made by the Stranger only out of politeness to Socrates (considering he is supposedly still standing amongst them), I highly doubt such is the case.

⁸⁸ Soph. 231b7

to say, when it comes to classifying the activity of sophistry, it is more illuminating to place it on the sophistic side than on the philosophical.⁸⁹

Before attempting to justify this claim, Taylor first moves on to the seventh and final definition, an individual that Taylor likens to a magician; a description that seems to fit quite nicely for the individual that, through the production of false appearances, produces the false beliefs in the minds of his audience. Taylor also asks that we pay special attention to the particulars of the sophist of Def. 7, specifically that he, “uses short speeches in private conversation to force the person talking to him to contradict himself.”⁹⁰

With this established, Taylor posits that for Plato, this method of argumentation, i.e., the exposure of inconsistencies in belief via the *elenchos*, is one of the distinctive marks of sophistry, and, as such, Plato’s argument, “must be that ‘noble sophistry’ is more like sophistry *tout court* than it is like philosophy, since it shares one of the most distinctive marks of sophistry...while it does not share the most distinctive mark of philosophy.”⁹¹ Immediately following this claim, Taylor admits that he does not know with certainty what the “distinctive mark of philosophy” is. Thus, he suggests that:

...the answer *must be* that philosophy is comprehensive knowledge of the nature of reality, which, the practitioner of purgative *elenchos* depicted in the dialogues, i.e., Socrates, by his own confession lacks.⁹²

Yet, as Taylor asks, if Socrates is not a philosopher, then how, if he lacks the necessary knowledge, is he able to excel in the purging of the false beliefs of others? In other

⁸⁹ Taylor (2006: 164)

⁹⁰ Soph. 268b2-3

⁹¹ Taylor (2006, 166-167)

⁹² Taylor (2006, 167)

words, for Socrates to determine which beliefs are inconsistent, would he not need *some* knowledge? Given Socrates' consistent disavowal of knowledge, that he is so successful in this practice is mysterious, to say the least. In answer to this puzzle, Taylor posits that Socrates *is* to be considered a magician, i.e., "someone possessed of unaccountable powers".⁹³

Thus, Taylor concludes:

Socrates' success in guiding self-critical thought to the elimination of false beliefs had then to be ascribed not to philosophy as he had previously believed but to a special sort of 'divine dispensation'. Socrates is then a magician, an individual with an unaccountable power of divining the truth and leading others to it, and by the same token no longer, by Platonic standards, a philosopher, but a very special, and very noble, sophist.⁹⁴

Saving Socrates from Sophistry

Socrates is not a Sophist

While I find Taylor's argument to be fascinating, I ultimately cannot agree with his conclusion that we must consider Socrates to be a sophist, regardless of how "special" we are to consider him as such.⁹⁵ Many objections to this argument are three-fold: First, given the argument against the problem of an amalgamate definition I have constructed above, that Taylor takes the 6th and 7th definition in concert raises concern. Second, I

⁹³ Taylor (2006: 167) See also Nehamas (1998: 85-91)

⁹⁴ Taylor (2006: 168) See Also D. Frede (1996: 223). Frede notes that the sixth definition "seems to represent something like Plato's last word on Socrates." And, it is this image that forms the basis of her argument regarding Socrates in her article on the character of Socrates in the *Philebus*. This will be discussed in Sect. 2.5.2.

⁹⁵ I should also note here that I *do* agree with him on other aspects of his conclusion, specifically that Socrates' ability is bestowed upon him by "divine inspiration". However, I believe that Taylor, along with Burnyeat (1977) (who also made similar intimations), do not push this line far enough. The 4th chapter of this dissertation will thus pick up where I believe they left off, offering a full defense of the idea that Plato, in the later dialogues, attributed this "unaccountable" ability of Socrates to divine inspiration. If I am correct, then, while his ability may be "unaccountable" in the Platonic sense, it is not left *unexplainable*.

have also argued that for Plato, the definition of any kind is not determined by multiple unessential characteristics, but rather a singular essential trait. As a result, even if we allow the association of definitions, it must be *one* trait that links them all *as* sophists, not multiple characteristics, as Taylor suggests. Third, Taylor's argument hinges on the point that Socrates is closer in kind to the sophist than philosopher on account of (1) the elenchos being one of the "distinctive marks of sophistry," and, (2) that the distinctive mark of philosophy is a "comprehensive knowledge of the nature of reality"⁹⁶ On this last point, I will first acknowledge that a major goal of the *Sophist* is to distinguish between sophistry and philosophy, and, as such, these considerations on the nature of philosophy could and should contribute to our understanding of sophistry. However, considering Taylor's labeling of Socrates as a sophist is dependent upon these "distinctive marks" that sophistry and philosophy bear, his lack of an account regarding his position on philosophy is particularly problematic.

While I will take each of these objections in turn, I will note that, considering that I have addressed the first two objections in detail leading up to Taylor's position, these initial objections will be brief. That said, let us address first the problem of multiple "sophists". As we recall, it is not possible that there be multiple accounts as to what it means to be a sophist, as each of these kinds represented in the varying definitions, while similar in certain aspects (hence their mislabeling), also exhibit contradictory qualities. And, the problem of inconsistency is particularly problematic in this instance, for, unlike Def. 1-5 which all stem from the acquisitive branch of *techne*, the 6th and 7th definitions

⁹⁶ A point which Taylor posits with no argument. Granted, he does indicate that he is not certain as to what philosophy is in a definitive sense, however, considering his labeling of Socrates as sophist is dependent upon these "distinctive marks" that sophistry and philosophy bear, his lack of an account is particularly problematic.

are entirely disparate in that they fall under the separative and productive branches, respectively. And, while this may at first seem inconsequential, if we take a different example, for instance, the difference between a wolf and a komodo dragon, the severity of the problem becomes clear.

To explain, for both animals, we begin by dividing down from the original category of “Animal”. Upon doing so, we find that the very first division distinguishes between “mammals” and “reptiles,” with wolves falling under the former, and komodo dragons under the latter. And, while it could be argued that, at the end of our divisions, there are a lot of similarities, e.g., both animals are quadrupeds, both animals have lungs (as opposed to gills), both animals are hunters, etc., considering our goal was to define “wolf,” not “4 –legged animals that hunt,” to say that we should consider a komodo dragon to be of the same species as wolf is preposterous, regardless of their similarities. Taking this into consideration, we must apply the same standards to the sophist. And, given the disparity between the separative branch (Def. 6) and the productive branch (Def. 7), it is simply incorrect to say that they are both sophists, despite the similarities that may seem apparent.⁹⁷

A similar critique could also be offered for my second objection, i.e., that the sophist would have multiple “distinctive marks”. To explain, I will concede that any kind will, of course, have a variety of aspects and traits that we could rightly attribute to that kind in question. Returning to the example above, wolves do exhibit behavior that is characteristic of being a wolf. Wolves hunt in packs (unlike panthers), each wolf pack

⁹⁷ See *Soph.* 219c1-8. I will also add that, at the very least, it is incorrect to say they are both sophists using the evidence as given by Plato. In other words, if we were to define sophist under a particular genus, we could, possibly, then divide *that* definition further into types. However, since Plato has the sixth in seventh definition in different branches of the genus of *techné*, such an option is not available.

has a mix of males and females (unlike lion prides, which have only one male per pride), etc. However, while these aspects could correctly be used to distinguish wolves from other animals in a very *general* sense, these characteristics are not what define a wolf as a *Wolf*. As argued above, definitional knowledge in the Platonic sense does not allow for different *kinds* of the thing in question in the unqualified sense, as such openness would lead to a level of relativity. So, while we might say that there are different kinds of wolves in the qualified sense, e.g., Grey wolf, Timber wolf, etc., we must recognize that, for Plato, that these different sorts are still called wolves is dependent upon each distinct kind of wolf sharing in the *essential trait* of what it means to be a Wolf, whatever that trait may be.

Returning then to the problem of the sophist and the allowance of multiple “distinctive marks,” the problem presents itself clearly. On the one hand, if we say that there is no essential trait to sophistry, but rather a collection of distinctive traits that allow for proper identification, then would this not open the door for false-positives regarding who is a sophist? In other words, returning to the example of the wolf, if we are not depending upon an essential characteristic to determine what is or is not a wolf, then how would we ever determine the difference between a wolf or a dog?⁹⁸ On the other hand, if we admit that there must be a *essential* quality that defines sophistry, then it matters not how many similarities Socrates shares with the sophists, for, as long as he lacks that essential trait that makes a sophist a Sophist, just as a dog is not a wolf, neither could Socrates be a sophist.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ See Soph. 231a5. Plato himself discusses the difficulty of determining between these two types, and the importance of distinguishing between the two.

⁹⁹ See Soph. 264d9-265a1

The Problem of Philosophy as Knowledge.

In addition to the problems listed above, I find further issue with Taylor's exclusion of Socrates from the practice of philosophy, a feat accomplished through Taylor's defining of philosophy as the possession of a "comprehensive knowledge of the nature of reality." Now, to begin, I must first admit that I am in agreement with Taylor that, at this stage of Plato's thought, Socrates cannot be considered a philosopher in the *unqualified* sense. However, before I give my argument in defense of this point, I must first address the problem with Taylor's definition of philosophy, which, I will argue, is untenable and thus cannot be used in his argument against Socrates.

We recall that Taylor defines philosophy as having a comprehensive knowledge of the nature of reality. And, to be sure, such a definition would seem to fit into a traditional Platonic understanding as to the goal of philosophy.¹⁰⁰ The problem with Taylor's claim, however, is that his definition of philosophy requires that the philosopher be defined solely on the basis of his *possession of knowledge*.¹⁰¹ The problem with such a limited definition in this context is that Taylor does not indicate *how* the philosopher obtains such knowledge. Such an omission of the philosopher's methodology is of particular significance when we consider that it was on account of Socrates' *methodology* that Taylor labeled him a sophist. In other words, if it were the case that Taylor labels

¹⁰⁰ Indeed, if we look to the divided line of the Republic (509d-513), it would seem that the ascension to the understanding of the Forms would be the bar of success against which we measure the philosopher.

¹⁰¹ As an aside, it must also be noted that, even if the person in possession of knowledge was a proper definition of the philosopher, that such a person could attain *comprehensive* knowledge is itself problematic. Not only do we find at *Soph.* 233a the Stranger dismissing the possibility of a person knowing everything (the problems of which could be extended to knowing *everything* about any particular subject), but further, considering the topic in question, i.e., the nature of reality, that knowledge of such sort is even knowable is a point of contention. For discussion on the distinction between human and divine knowledge, see Vlastos (1995, 61-63).

Socrates a sophist on account of his lack of knowledge regarding the nature of reality, then it would make more sense to juxtapose against this definition of sophistry the requirement of such knowledge if one is to be considered a philosopher. However, as Taylor uses the *methodology* of Socrates as the determining factor in his sophistry, for the accusation of sophistry to stand, he needs to equally give an account of the philosopher's method as well.

To explain, we recall that philosophy, on Taylor's view, requires only that the individual possess knowledge on the nature of reality. As such, the question of methodology is of critical importance here, for, if the philosopher is measured only on his *comprehensive* knowledge of the nature of reality, then one must ask: What title do we give to those who are *on their way* towards the acquisition of such knowledge? Given Taylor's use of methodology to condemn Socrates, he seems to believe that there is, at the very least, a *wrong* way to achieve such knowledge. Given this implied statement, it would stand to reason that there must then be a *right* way, i.e., a correct methodology that is used by the individual on their way to becoming a philosopher.¹⁰² However, as Taylor makes no such claims regarding the correct methodology that must be used towards the attainment of the required knowledge, then it is not possible for him to say conclusively that any method, including the elenchos, could not, given enough time and skill, eventually allow for the procurement of this knowledge. And, while I have argued extensively against the ability of the elenchos to acquire such knowledge, since Taylor sets no such limitations, he is unable to disqualify Socrates as a philosopher on such grounds, as he leaves open the possibility that Socrates could, via the elenchos,

¹⁰² I find this problem particularly ironic then, as Taylor himself makes special note of Socrates' unaccountable talent for discerning what is false, without himself knowing what is true!

eventually obtain knowledge pertaining to the nature of reality.

Is Socrates a Philosopher?

Yet, despite the problems that arise from Taylor's interpretation of Plato's conception of philosophy, with the possibility of Socrates being a sophist now undone, the question does remain: Does Plato consider Socrates to be a philosopher? While we may be inclined to answer in the affirmative, since the promised dialogue on the subject of the "philosopher" was never delivered,¹⁰³ Plato's later standards for philosophy remain frustratingly uncertain. As a result of this uncertainty, a rigorous scholarly debate has emerged regarding Plato's understanding of philosophy. And, given the attention paid by Plato in the later dialogues to the method of division, it is of no surprise that this debate centers around the role this new method plays (if any) in the work of philosophy.

On the one hand, there are those who believe that the advent of this methodology indicates a sea change in Plato's thought regarding philosophy itself, suggesting that this new tool introduced to us by Plato is to be considered *the* method of the true philosopher.¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, there are those who make a softer claim, acknowledging the importance of the new method of division, while also recognizing that it is not *the* method of the philosopher, but *part* of the philosophical process to be used with other methods such as the elenchos or the dialectic of the middle dialogues.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Soph. 217b2 – Gill (2012, 5) suggests that this omission on Plato's part is not accidental. By withholding the final piece of the puzzle, by denying us the "answer," Plato continues on as he always has, showing us the way without simply handing us the answer. As Gill writes, "Plato uses the devious strategy I have attributed to him because, by making his audience work very hard to dig out his meaning, he fosters in them (and us, his modern readers) a skill in reading and a competence in using dialectical techniques and developing new ones." See also, Frede (1996, 150).

¹⁰⁴ See Morgan (1990, 99)

Finally, there are those, such as Gilbert Ryle, who argue the contrary, dismissing the method of division as nothing more than a rudimentary tool designed, “for the special benefit of the philosophically innocent novices who were at that moment getting their freshman’s training in the ABC of thinking.”¹⁰⁶ And, while I cannot help but admire the zeal with which Professor Ryle unabashedly rejects of the method of division, given the evidence to the contrary, I cannot agree with his conclusion. Therefore, since we must consider the method of division to be, at the very least, a necessary component of Plato’s later understanding of philosophy, when we consider Socrates’ lack of engagement with the method of division, Plato could not have considered him to be a philosopher in the unqualified sense.¹⁰⁷

Defending the Method of Division

In order to defend the thesis that we must consider the method of division as a necessary component of philosophy as understood in the later dialogues, I look to the work of J.L Ackrill, who, in his article, “In Defence of Platonic Division,” takes on the method’s most vocal opponents, Gilbert Ryle.¹⁰⁸ And, while I must commend Ackrill on

¹⁰⁵ Gill (2012), Ackrill (1997) It should be noted that determining precisely what the “dialectic” of Plato’s middle period entails is a matter of debate for scholars. For recent work on the issue, see Benson (2016).

¹⁰⁶ Ryle (1966, 139)

¹⁰⁷ I am inclined to make this softer claim here, agreeing with Morgan (1990) that perhaps we must distinguish between “proper philosophy” and “philosophy in general.” It is only the former, however, that could rightfully be called the method of a true philosopher.

¹⁰⁸ Ackrill (1997), Ryle (1939) and (1966) - Ryle’s full objection summarized by him as follows: “First of all it can only be applied to concepts of the genus-species or determinable-determinate sort, and it is not concepts of this sort that in general, if ever, engender philosophical problems. And, next, most generic concepts do not subdivide into two polarly opposed species; usually there are numerous of a genus or subspecies of a species. And the question whether a sort divides into two or seventeen sub-sorts is, in general, a purely empirical question. So nearly any case of a philosopher’s operation by division could be upset by the subsequent empirical discovery of sorts lying on neither side of the philosopher’s boundary lines. And finally, there is room for almost any amount of arbitrariness from the selection from the ladders of sorts *en route* for the definition of a given

his thorough response to Ryle's many objections, for our purposes here I will focus on Ryle's most pressing objections which can be paraphrased as follows: (1) That the method of division forces dichotomous division upon kinds.

(2) As the method of division is limited to genus-species determinations, it cannot be applied to philosophically interesting problems.

Beginning with Ryle's first objection, i.e., that the method forces dichotomous divisions, we find that there is a significant stock of evidence to the contrary of this claim. Granted, the majority of the divisions we have seen thus far in the *Sophist* do seem to follow a pattern of bifurcation. However, we need not look far at all for evidence to the contrary to this, e.g., the division *techne* into *three* distinct branches: acquisitive, separative, and productive. Yet, despite this immediate (and prominent) example, as well as other similar examples to be found in the *Philebus*,¹⁰⁹ the *Phaedrus*,¹¹⁰ and others, Ackrill notes that we also find textual evidence that Plato does not demand dichotomous division, but rather *recommends* it for the purposes of clarity. Looking to the *Philebus* 16d, we read:¹¹¹

We ought, whatever it be that we are dealing with, to assume a single form and

concept...there are many tolerable and no perfect ways of defining most of the sort-concepts that we employ.

A chain of *summa genera*, *genera*, *species*, *sub-species* and *varieties* is not itself a chain of premises and conclusions. But what is more, it cannot in general be deductively established or established by reduction ad absurdum. The work of a Linnaeus cannot be done *a priori*. How could Plato who knew exactly what question-answer arguments were really like bring himself to say, if he did say, that the philosophically valuable results of such arguments are kind-ladders?" (136)

¹⁰⁹ *Phil.* 16c2-3 – Sound is divided into three kinds

¹¹⁰ *Phaed.* 238a-c – Madness is divided into multiple kinds.

¹¹¹ Ackrill additionally points to less direct evidence from the *Phaedrus* (265e), which Ackrill suggests, "stresses the crucial importance of following the natural articulation of the item under examination. However, upon examination of this passage in particular, while I agree with Ackrill that there is no *explicit* demand that the divisions be dichotomous, the examples Socrates gives do seem to suggest such bifurcation. E.g., that body parts "naturally come in pairs," and that we ought to "cut up each kind according to its species along its natural joints," which, would seem to suggest dividing by two. As such, while I agree with Ackrill's argument in general, this evidence in particular is somewhat troublesome.

search for it, for we shall find it there contained; then if we have laid hold of that, we must go on from one form to look for two, *if the case admits of their being two, otherwise three or some other number of forms.*

Furthering this point, Ackrill draws from additional evidence in the *Statesman* 287c:

It is difficult to cut them into two...so since we cannot bisect, let us divide them as we should carve a sacrificial victim into limbs. For we ought always to cut into *the number as near as possible to two.*

Thus, while it is indeed the case that the majority of divisions are dichotomous, we can clearly see that there is no *requirement* that they be as such. However, as the goal of the method of division is to define a kind in the most precise way possible, it would make sense that we ought strive to make as few divisions as possible, for, as Ackrill explains, “a slapdash division into a lot of species will very probably cause important similarities and groupings to escape notice.”¹¹²

In contrast to his first critique, Ryle’s second objection, i.e., that the method of division is not equipped to handle philosophically interesting problems, presents a more pressing challenge. For Ryle, we need only look to the *Sophist* as evidence to this claim, for, once the method of division has failed to capture the sophist, the Stranger halts the process, recommending that the need to first determine if false-statements are possible, a determination which required the discussion of non-being as discussed in section 1 of this chapter. Given the discussion of non-being is not undertaken by the method of division, and, given the importance that the concept of non-being plays for Plato’s larger metaphysical system, Ryle argues that, when it comes to truly important philosophical concepts, the method of division simply falls short.¹¹³

¹¹² Ackrill (1997, 103)

¹¹³ Ryle (1966, 140-144)

While I agree with Ryle that the division would seem ill-equipped to handle the problem of non-being as discussed in the *Sophist*, such shortcomings do not seem to me to be grounds for dismissal for the method as a whole, let alone evidence that it is unable to handle important philosophical problems.¹¹⁴ To suggest this is to have an exceptionally narrow, and perhaps even anachronistic, understanding as to what would qualify as “philosophically important” for Plato. To explain, when we look back to dialogues such as the *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, *Menexenus*, *Republic*, or even as far back as the *Apology*, we are inundated with warnings about the trappings of sophistry. One consistent theme that rings true in each of these dialogues is that the sophist is not only dangerous, but cunning as well. And, this latter quality makes him all the more dangerous, as it is through this crafty charm that he is able to convince others that he is wise; that he knows what is *right*.¹¹⁵ Given the harm that such individuals can inflict, that we should be able to recognize them is of the utmost importance, as such individuals pose a direct threat to the success of the *polis*. So, while defining the sophist for what he is may not share the grander metaphysical or epistemological ramifications as discovering the form of non-being, to say that such a determination is unimportant is to say that *Plato* did not consider matters of politics to be philosophically important. And, while there is an argument to be made that Plato’s interests shifted over the course of his life,¹¹⁶ given

¹¹⁴ Ackrill offers an alternative critique than my own here, suggesting that Ryle does not take into consideration the fungible nature of many Platonic terms.

¹¹⁵ See Men. 235a-c - “Each time, as I listen and fall under their spell, I become a different man – I’m convinced that I have become taller and nobler and better looking all of a sudden...And this high and mighty feeling remains with me more than three days. The speaker’s words and voice sink into my ears with so much resonance that it is *only with difficulty* that on the third or fourth day *I recover myself* and realize where I am...This is how clever our orators are.”

¹¹⁶ See Vlastos (1991: ch.4)

the consistent attention given to politics throughout the entirety of the Platonic corpus,¹¹⁷ it is entirely anachronistic to suggest Plato thought otherwise.

This is not to say that Ryle's objections should be entirely dismissed, for, I would allow that there are certain philosophical problems that are perhaps better handled by other methodologies, and, to be sure, we might take the discussion of non-being in the *Sophist* as evidence to this claim. However, despite its ineffectiveness in certain areas, Plato provides ample evidence to support the claim that he came to consider it to be an essential part of philosophy as a whole.

However, while I do admit that Plato does, on occasion, resort to varying methodologies depending upon the direction of the discussion, it does not then follow that Plato considers the method of division as unable to handle more metaphysical inquiries. Indeed, we find an ample supply of compelling evidence in the affirmative position taken by Plato regarding division. Beginning with the dialogue that has occupied much of our discussion here, the *Sophist*, we find the Stranger describing the method of division as follows:

And what name shall we give to this science? ...Have we stumbled unawares upon the free man's knowledge and, in seeking for the Sophist, chanced to find the Philosopher first?

THEAETETUS – How do you Mean?

STRANGER – Dividing according to Kinds, not taking the same Form for a different one or a different one for the same – is this not the business of Dialectic? ... and the man that can do that discerns clearly one Form everywhere extended through many, where each one lies apart, and *many* Forms, different from one another, embraced from without by one Form; and again *one* Form connected in a unity through many wholes, and *many* Forms, entirely marked off apart. That means knowing how to distinguish, Kind by Kind, in what ways the several Kinds

¹¹⁷ A point made all the more clear when we consider the *Laws*.

can or cannot combine.¹¹⁸

Following this thorough description of the method of division, the Stranger concludes that we should, “assign this *dialectical* activity only to someone who has a pure and just love of wisdom,” and further that, “...We’ll find that the philosopher will always be in a location like this...”¹¹⁹ Given this evidence, it is difficult to see how Plato could *not* have associated division with dialectic. Further, as we can see from the laudatory remarks issued by the Stranger, the description of this method is one very closely associated with the determination of *what is*, or, in other words, Being itself.¹²⁰

And, while the praise for the method as found in the *Sophist* is perhaps not as effusive in other dialogues, we do indeed find evidence in the *Statesman* as well.¹²¹

Looking then to that text, we read:

But what most people, I think, fail to realize is this: some of the things there are have sensible likenesses, easy to recognize, and these can be indicated without difficulty when anyone wishes in reply to a request for a *logos* of such a thing to avoid trouble and indicate them easily without a *logos*. *But the greatest and most important things* have no images fashioned with clarity for men; to content the enquirer’s mind there is nothing to show which can be fitted to a sense perception as to give adequate satisfaction. *This is why we must practice the ability to give and receive a logos of each thing.* The incorporeals, the finest and greatest of things, are clearly shown only by a *logos* and in no other way; and it is for the sake of them that all our present discussions are taking place.¹²²

As we can see from this passage, it is clear that Plato intends for the method of division

¹¹⁸ Soph. 253c-e. Cornford’s (1935) translation as used by Ackrill (1997)

¹¹⁹ Soph. 253e3-5. Translation by White (1997).

¹²⁰ *Soph.* 254a7 - The Stranger notes that the individual described, “uses reasoning to stay near the form *being*.” See also Gill (2012, 241)

¹²¹ Ackrill also draws from both the *Phaedrus* 265d-e, and *Philebus* 16b-17b for further evidence to support his argument. In both instances, we clearly see Socrates praising the method of division, in both instances attributing a divine element to the methodology.

¹²² *Statesman* 285d-286b – Italics added for emphasis.

to be utilized for the “greatest and most important things”. Granted, we do find the Stranger recommending that division be used on easier examples, e.g., weaving. However, as Ackrill notes, the reasoning behind this recommendation is to prepare the budding dialectician for those matters that are of greater importance, inquiries that, as we have found, are significantly more challenging in scale.¹²³ Once again we find that, based upon textual evidence to the contrary, Ryle’s argument that division need be excluded from philosophy on the grounds of its ineffectiveness falls flat.

Conclusion

Drawing from the evidence above, I would argue that we must conclude that the method of division needs to be considered a necessary part of philosophy as understood by Plato in the later dialogues. Thus, while we have saved Socrates from sophistry, if we are to make the claim that he is a philosopher, then we need to show that Socrates not only practiced this method, but did so successfully.¹²⁴

To begin, we recall that in these later dialogues, Socrates has largely been removed from view, taking a back seat to the Stranger, and, it is the *Stranger* that guides us deftly through the complicated process of division in both the *Sophist*, as well as the following *Statesman*. Yet, if we turn our attention to the *Philebus*, we find Socrates once again at center stage, not only guiding the discussion, but doing so with a “new” methodology, one which Socrates refers to as the “divine method”. And, in his

¹²³ Ackrill (1997, 98) I would add that we see this notion at work in the *Sophist*, as the Stranger begins with the Angler, which is only done to prepare Theaetetus for the investigation into Sophistry, a difficult task, to be sure, and one that carries significantly more philosophical import.

¹²⁴ Theoretically, *anyone* could use the method of division. However, as was evidenced in our discussion of the *Sophist*, only the true dialectician, one trained properly in the methodology, will be able to use it properly. And, it is only this person, the individual that is, “capable of adequately discriminating a single Form spread out all through a lot of other things,” (Soph. 253d4-7) that can rightfully be called the Philosopher. (253e3-5)

description, we find Socrates not only professing his love for this efficient methodology, but further *confessing* that it, “has often escaped me, *and left me behind, alone and helpless.*”¹²⁵ And, while admissions of ignorance or perplexity are nothing new for Socrates, scholars such as Dorothea Frede have argued that the context of this admission in particular carries a deeper meaning.¹²⁶ To explain, we find that when faced with the challenge of differentiating between various types of pleasures and knowledge, Socrates suggests that such a task is best tackled through a new method which, recalling an earlier passage I have cited above, Socrates describes as follows:

We ought whatever it be that we are dealing with, to assume a single form and search for it, for we shall find it there contained; and if we have laid hold of that, *we must go on from one form to look for two*, if the case admits of there being two, otherwise for three or some other number of forms: and we must do the same again with each of the ‘ones’ thus reached, until we come to see not merely that the one that we started with is a one and unlimited many, but also just how many it is.¹²⁷

As we can clearly see, this method that Socrates describes as a “gift from the gods” is in fact the method of division as we find in the *Sophist*. Yet, as Frede notes, despite the praise he has bestowed upon it, Socrates very quickly abandons the new methodology, explaining that they need not continue on in such fashion, as he has been struck with divine inspiration, gifted by the gods with new information that will allow them to move forward in their discussion of pleasure and knowledge.¹²⁸ This bizarre turn of events rightly prompts Frede to question Plato’s motives here, for, if Plato was to have the discussion move forward not through the division process, but from Socratic inspiration, why would he go through the trouble of having Socrates not only introduce the method,

¹²⁵ *Phil.* 16b6-7

¹²⁶ D. Frede (1996, 232).

¹²⁷ *Phil.* 16d

¹²⁸ *Phil.* 20b3-5. This point will be addressed in significant detail in Chapter. 4 of this dissertation.

but clumsily attempt to use it as well?¹²⁹ And, according to Frede:

The answer must be that Plato is very concerned with clearly demarcating what Socrates is *not* doing here. Although he is following some of the injunctions of dialectic proper, he is not going to treat the problem in the way that a real expert would have to deal with it. *He is not presented as a master dialectician.*¹³⁰

Further, not only does the *Philebus* present Socrates as lacking the skills necessary to properly engage in division, when Socrates *does* contribute to the progress of the discussion, he does so through borrowing ideas from others,¹³¹ or simply stating ideas as facts while asking Protarchus to approve as verification¹³² Given this evidence, just as the *Sophist* went through great pains to distinguish the sophist as set against the philosopher, I would argue that we must similarly understand the *Philebus* to be Plato's attempt to distinguish Socrates from his new understanding of the true philosopher.

Yet, if this is true, if the *Philebus* serves the double purpose of expressing Plato's view that Socrates can no longer be considered a philosopher, then what are we to make of Socrates? In answer to this question, in the final chapter of my dissertation I will present the argument that, as the skill of Socrates cannot be accounted for by philosophy or sophistry as defined in the late dialogues, Plato must have attributed his ability to divine inspiration.

¹²⁹ D. Frede (1996, 229-232)

¹³⁰ D. Frede (1996, 233)

¹³¹ *Phil.* 44c

¹³² *Phil.* 31b8 – See also D. Frede (1996, 38 n. 38) Frede notes that on account of these varied measures, “It is impossible to show in detail the means by which Socrates brings about his results.”

Chapter 3: Socrates and Divine Inspiration in the Early Dialogues

The Problem of Socratic Piety

While I have argued that the elenchos ultimately fails in the establishment or uncovering of the definitional knowledge, we find that such failures do not faze Socrates. Instead he remains steadfastly committed to the utilization of reason to accomplish the very goals that elude him.¹ Yet, while Socrates' unflinching faith in the rational process is not in question, it is also quite clear that Socrates was not averse to accepting help from more unconventional sources², i.e., divine influence. To the modern eye, this distributed reverence for both reason and the divine may seem problematic, as religion and reason are most often set in diametric opposition.³ For Socrates, however, religion and reason are not at odds, but rather emerge as two sides of the same coin, seamlessly working in tandem towards the acquisition of knowledge.⁴ And, looking to the early dialogues we are indeed presented with an array of evidence in support of this position: (1) Socrates'

¹ Vlastos (1991, 157) cites *Cr.* 45b. "Not now for the first time, but always, I am the sort of man who is persuaded by nothing in me except the proposition which appears to me to be the best *when I reason* about it."

² Interestingly, given the religious climate of the time in Athens, an appeal to the divine would be *entirely* conventional. For an account of religion in Socratic Athens, see Vlastos (1991: 157-78), Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 182-87), and McPherran (1996, 19-28). Vlastos however, suggests that the religious views of Socrates are distinctly *unconventional*, as Vlastos argues that Socrates invents a new understanding of the divine, one of benevolent, omniscient gods as opposed to the more anthropomorphized fallible gods of the Homeric/Hesiodic tradition. For a counter argument to Vlastos, see Wildberg (2002). While Wildberg agrees with Vlastos that Socrates' conception of the divine is distinct from the traditional view, such an understanding of the gods predates Socrates.

³ While the list of philosophers who express antagonistic views of faith and religion is perhaps too long to list, we find support for this hostile dichotomy from the religious perspective as well. For example, we might look to the works of Kierkegaard, notably in *Fear and Trembling*, wherein it is clearly expressed that reason stands in the way of faith. Considering Kierkegaard's position that it is through faith alone that one is able to experience freedom, such a hindrance is especially problematic.

⁴ On Vlastos view (1991, 157 n. 3), Socrates must understand religion and reason to be in "perfect harmony," a point that has merit considering it was precisely in adherence to divine command that Socrates began to practice philosophy in the first place. See *Ap.* 33c.

consistent reference and acquiescence to the instruction of his *daimonion*, referred to as a divine voice⁵ or sign,⁶ one which consistently warns him against performing actions that would be to his detriment, (2) his adherence to the commands of the gods received via the oracle, an obligation he equates with the duties of a soldier standing a post,⁷ and (3) his recognition of the divine gifts as exhibited in other individuals, specifically divinely inspired artists who seem to have access to the truth, despite being unable to provide an account for such abilities.⁸

Yet, despite this evidence, some scholars are quick to dismiss these more fantastical leanings of Socrates as instances of irony, i.e., tongue-in-cheek references to the supernatural designed to appeal to the irrational minds of the majority.⁹ Interpretations in this line see Socrates as a staunch atheist, a hyper-rationalist entirely void of any religious feeling or belief.¹⁰ Martha Nussbaum, for one, argues that Socrates is so dismissive of religious belief, that his claim that the “unexamined life is not worth living” can be seen as a condemnation of religion in its entirety, for, as religious lives

⁵ *Ap.* 31d1-3 and *Phdr.* 242c2

⁶ *Ap.* 40b1; *Eud.* 272e2; *Phdr.* 242b9.

⁷ McPherran (1996, 209) See *Ap.* 33c4-8; 23b; 37e-38a

⁸ See *Ion* 534a, as well as *Laws* 719c.

⁹ Nussbaum (1985, 234) See also McPherran (2005: 14) McPherran notes that even Aristotle fails to mention Socrates' *daimonion*, not the sincerity he attributes to the prophetic nature of dreams. He further notes that *Rhetoric* 1419a6-19 is evidence that Aristotle would have been aware of the *daimonion*. From Aristotle we read, “For instance, Socrates, when accused by Meletus of not believing in the gods, asked whether he did not say that there was a divine something; and when Meletus said yes, Socrates went on to ask if divine beings were not either children of the gods or something godlike. When Meletus again said yes, Socrates rejoined, ‘Is there a man, then, who can admit that the children of the gods exist without at the same time admitting that the gods exist?’”

¹⁰ For the arguments on this position, see Nussbaum (1985, 234-235) and Nehamas (1987, 304-305).

“lack a rational basis,” then such lives are not worth living.¹¹ Further, in response to Socrates’ consistent appeal to his *daimonion*, a Socratic practice that would seem to undermine her anti-religious position, Nussbaum suggests that in these moments Socrates is not appealing to a god in the proper sense, but to reason itself, explaining that, “what is really happening is that reason itself is being made a new god...” and that any reference to the *daimonion* is but an, “...ironic way of alluding to the supreme authority of dissuasive reasoning and elenctic argument.”¹² And, according to Nussbaum, this supplanting of the gods with reason is so obviously true, that Meletus or “any Athenian” would immediately recognize Socrates’ not-so-hidden agenda. On Nussbaum’s interpretation then, Socrates is indeed guilty of the charge of impiety, for, in declaring reason as the divine, he would not only be denying the gods of Athens, but of all divine entities.

Alexander Nehamas, for his part, offers a different line of critique, arguing against Socrates’ acceptance of the perfection of divine wisdom. For Nehamas, while Socrates does unquestionably listen to his *daimonion*, he exhibits uncertainty in other matters, specifically the message given to him via the oracle.¹³ For instance, while it is true that Socrates attributes his mission’s provenance to the god’s command, he does not accept the oracle’s message blindly, and instead proceeds to investigate the veracity of the oracle’s claim that he is the wisest of the Athenians.¹⁴ As Nehamas explains, “It is

¹¹ Nussbaum (1985,234)

¹² Nussbaum (1985, 234)

¹³ Nehamas (1987, 304-306) – Here Nehamas is directly critiquing Kraut (1981: 549) who claims the contrary, i.e., that Socrates exhibits absolute submission and obedience to the god.

¹⁴ *Ap.* 21c1

only after his many conversations with the politicians, the poets, and the artisans that Socrates came to see that the god might have been right to proclaim him wise on the grounds that he, at least, was aware of his ignorance.”¹⁵ Thus, Nehamas concludes, while we may be presented with the appearance of Socrates’ adherence to divine command, when carefully examined we discover that, despite appearances, Socrates only does what *he* has determined, *through reason alone*, to be right.

The result of the arguments above is that of a secularized Socrates. However, while such a religion-less figure may be appealing for a contemporary worldview,¹⁶ one which quite often pits philosophy and religion at odds with one another, such an understanding of Socrates is not only anachronistic, but is also not supported by textual evidence, a point of contention which has not gone unnoticed in recent scholarship.¹⁷ Stefan Buttner, for one, notes that when we look to the disciples of Plato, e.g., Philip of Opus, Xenocrates, and Aristotle, they “refer to Plato’s statements on enthusiasm without a suggestion that there is any doubt about their seriousness.”¹⁸ This consistent lack of dismissal regarding issues of inspiration by contemporaries of Plato ought encourage us to be cautious when asserting our contemporary views upon these classical works.

¹⁵ Nehamas (1987, 305)

¹⁶ McPherran (2005, n.7) McPherran notes that there have only been twelve records regarding the *daimonion* in the *Philosopher’s Index* from 1940-2004. See also, Todd (2001) and Joyal (2000)

¹⁷ See Vlastos (1991, 158), as McPherran (1996, 6). Upon examining the religious climate of 5th century Athens, one wherein religion is inextricably interwoven into every aspect of life, to suggest that Socrates would be so absolutely and obviously dismissive of this, despite his words and actions suggesting the contrary, is extremely problematic. While a detailed account of the religion in 5th century Athens is beyond the scope of this paper, for a detailed account see McPherran (1996: 19-28, 144-160) as well as Dodds (1951).

¹⁸ Buttner (2005, 112) – Buttner supports his claim through the following evidence: (1) On Philip of Opus and Xenocrates see Heinze (1892: 92-96), (2) For Aristotle see *EE* 8,2 as well as Maritou (1994, 83-100) and Schirren (2005). (3). On Xenophon see Berry (1940, 42-48) See also McPherran (2005,14) Xenophon *Mem* I 5-9, wherein we find Socrates depicted as sending his student enthusiastically to oracles.

Gregory Vlastos, as well, argues vehemently against those who would oppose the idea of a religious Socrates. For Vlastos, given the extensive evidence in support of Socrates' acceptance of the supernatural, to ignore these references to the religious affinities of Socrates would be akin to a, "surgery which kills the patient." In other words, the religious aspect of Socrates is so ubiquitously interwoven into Plato's representation of the character as a whole, that to deny this is to deny the entirety of Plato's testimony on the life of Socrates.¹⁹ On Vlastos' view, the Socrates of the early Platonic dialogues "subscribes unquestioningly"²⁰ to a belief in divine beings, entities with power and wisdom that far exceeds our own.²¹ In fact, it is precisely *because* of this unabashed belief that Socrates has dedicated himself to a life of philosophy at all. We read in the *Apology*:

To do this (philosophy) has, as I say, been enjoined upon me by the god, by means of oracles and dreams, and in every other way that a divine manifestation has ever ordered a man to do anything. *This is true*, gentleman, and can easily be established.²²

¹⁹ Vlastos (1991, 158) also adds that such excision of the religious would also preclude our use of the testimony of Xenophon as well. And, this point is well taken, especially when considering evidence such as is found at *Mem. IV.8.1*, wherein we find that Socrates' *daimonion* not only warns Socrates what *not* to do, but further, providing positive information as well. Thus, we find in Xenophon a presentation of Socrates that lends even more credibility to the wisdom of the gods, let alone their involvement in Socrates' life. See also McPherran (1996, 8) and Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 177-179).

²⁰ As Vlastos (1991, 158 n. 6) notes, never once in the Socratic dialogues (or the works of Xenophon, for that matter) does Socrates question the existence of the gods.

²¹ Indeed, the gap between human wisdom and divine wisdom is a point of consistent concern for Socrates, as, on Socrates view, only the gods are truly in possession of wisdom. (*Ap.* 23a5-6) And, given Socrates belief that the wisdom is directly linked to virtue, if the gods possess true wisdom, then it follows that they must be truly virtuous. See Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 179). Vlastos (1991, 164) argues that the assignment of infinite wisdom does not necessarily lend itself to virtue. As Vlastos explains, "It may only lead one to conclude that god transcends the difference between good and evil, and, with Aristotle (*Nic. Eth.* 1178b8), that to ascribe moral attributes to god is to demean him." Vlastos attributes Socrates' association of wisdom with right action as a product of his singular focus upon practical knowledge, a narrow view that allows for such oversight on Socrates' part.

²² *Ap.* 33c4-8

In this evidence, we thus find a *direct link* between philosophy and religion, as it is only because of the latter that Socrates claims to engage in the former.

Further, if we take these explicit moments of reverence for the divine as ironical, as Nussbaum insists we must, a more serious problem arises. As McPherran rightly notes:

...to reread them all as sly tongue-in-cheek verbal pandering or as simply allegorical in intent would be to employ a principle of interpretation that, once loosed upon the texts, would know no end, rendering every Socratic utterance fatally indeterminate.²³

Granted, the excision of the religious side of Socrates would result in a cleaner, easier to understand individual, one that fits squarely into the philosopher's box. Yet, Socrates is not clean²⁴, nor simple, nor easily understood.

Thus, if we are to avoid the slippery slope McPherran warns us against, we must accept Socrates as he is presented, i.e., a man who values reasoned argument *but also* acknowledges the superiority of divine wisdom. In the following then, I will argue in favor of this thesis, doing so through an analysis of Socratic theology and Plato's account of divine inspiration throughout the early dialogues. In doing so, I aim to prove that we must recognize Socrates as an individual who not only acknowledged the validity of divine revelation, but as one who *utilized* such dispensation, *in concert with* reason, as an effective, if not necessary, aspect of his philosophical inquiries.²⁵

²³ McPherran (1996, 7)

²⁴ A point which can similarly be applied to his physical appearance as well. We need only think of *Symposium* 215b, wherein Socrates is described as resembling a Satyr, a mythical beast that is as far a cry from beauty as one could imagine. See also *Theaetetus* 143e.

²⁵ McPherran (1996, 9-10, and Ch. 4)

Socratic Theology

Socrates as a Religious Skeptic

If Socrates is in fact guilty of the charge of atheism, then any reference made to matters of divine intervention are, at best, allusions to reason itself veiled in religious phrasing²⁶, or, at worst, empty gestures, i.e., mere trickery used as a ploy to convince the ignorant masses.²⁷ Thus, before we investigate the specifics of divine inspiration in the early dialogues, as my argument is contingent upon Socrates taking such divine intervention seriously, it is necessary to first prove that Socrates was in fact religious, or, at the very least, was not an atheist.

To begin, we recall the introductory remarks of this chapter, wherein it was noted that contemporary depictions of Socrates quite often hail him as a champion of reason, i.e., an individual who epitomizes the philosophical life, always seeking the truth even under pain of death. Indeed, one could argue that Socrates applies this doubt to religion as well, as he often does not seem to fit the standard of the devoutly faithful Athenian citizen.²⁸ We need only look to the *Euthyphro*, wherein he is depicted as a critic of the Homeric tradition. For example, we find that, when responding to Euthyphro's description of the gods as capable of violent and vengeful action, Socrates notes:

²⁶ Nussbaum (1985, 234)

²⁷ One might argue that we find evidence of this dishonest hand-waving in the *Apology* 26a-d, wherein we see Socrates manipulating Meletus to alter the charge of "not honoring the gods of the state" to atheism. For Vlastos (1991, 166 n.41), Socrates orchestrates this manipulation of the charges to insulate himself from facing the original charge, of which, on Vlastos' view, he is unequivocally guilty. See also Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 184) and McPherran (1996, 130-142).

²⁸ Again, there existed a variety of religious sects and influences in Athens at the time, including, but not limited to the Homeric tradition, the practices of Eleusian cults, Orphism, and Pythagoreanism. See McPherran (1996, 26-27) And, while the existence of these varying traditions do complicate the matter of understanding the traditional religious practices/beliefs of 5th century Athens, for our purposes here, we need only concern ourselves with the charges Socrates faced, i.e., failing to honor the gods of the city, and/or atheism.

Indeed, Euthyphro, this is the reason why I am a defendant in the case, *because I find it hard to accept things like that being said about the gods*, and it is likely the reason I shall be told I do wrong.²⁹

Yet, while this admission of uncertainty may appear as direct evidence that Socrates has issue with the traditional gods, held on its own this uncertainty does not require that we consider Socrates to be offering a critique of religion as a whole. In fact, given Socrates singular interest in matters of ethics,³⁰ such a critique would be beyond the scope of Socrates' philosophical purview, a point Plato himself makes quite clear in the *Phaedrus*.³¹ In response to Phaedrus' inquiry as to Socrates' belief in the myth of Boreus, Socrates replies as follows:

Actually it would not be out of place for me to reject it, as our intellectuals do. I could tell a clever story: I could claim that a gust of the North Wind blew her over the rocks where she was playing with Pharmaceia... Now, Phaedrus, such explanations are amusing enough, but they are a job for a man I cannot envy at all. He'd have to be far too ingenious and work too hard—mainly because after that he will have to go on and give a rational account of the form of the Hippocentaurs, and then of the Chimera; and a whole flood of Gorgons and Pegasuses and other monsters... Anyone who does not believe in them, who wants to explain them away and make them plausible by means of some rough ingenuity, will need a great deal of time.³²

Now, to be sure, if we look only to this first half of Socrates' response, one *could* interpret such a reply as Socrates mocking the myth as a whole, pointing out the

²⁹ *Euth.* 6a4-6

³⁰ See Aristotle, *Metaph.* 987b1-2 "But Socrates, occupying himself with ethical questions, and *not at all with nature as a whole...*". For an extensive argument in favor of (1) the necessary distinction between the Socrates of Plato's early period and the Socrates of Plato's middle period, and (2) that the Socrates of the early period is solely interested in matters of ethics, see Vlastos (1991, Ch. 2, 3, and 4).

³¹ See Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 188-189) While I agree with Brickhouse and Smith that caution must be exercised when using middle and late dialogues to justify claims in the early dialogues, given the context of this passage, i.e., that it is direct relation to similar critiques made in the *Euthyphro* regarding his trouble accepting certain aspects of Homeric mythology, I believe such use to be appropriate here.

³² *Phdr.* 229c5-e4.

impossibility of providing a rational account of such inventive fantasy, thus once more seeming to belittle those that would believe such foolishness. However, if we push forward to the conclusion of Socrates' response, we find that it is difficult to maintain such an interpretation. Returning to the text, Socrates concludes:

But I have no time for such things; and the reason my friend, is this. I am still unable, as the Delphic inscription orders, to know myself; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into other things before I have understood that. This is why I do not concern myself with them. *I accept what is generally believed, and, as I was saying, I look not into them but into my own self...*³³

From this final passage, we can glean two important points: (1) That Socrates clearly admits to unquestionably accepting, at the very least, various aspects of mythology that are generally believed by the people of the polis, and (2) that he does not have time, inclination, *nor ability*, to properly critique them. Thus, Socrates as depicted here is a far cry from the so-called "philosopher" that militantly mocks religion and its followers. Far from holding such disdain, we are presented with a Socrates who consistently professes to have a strong belief in the gods, and, importantly, *a belief that extends beyond the scope of his own reason.*

What Socrates Believed

Yet, even with this evidence of Socrates' belief set before us, the question arises as to *precisely what it is* that Socrates believes regarding the gods. In answer to this question, we find that, first, and perhaps most importantly, Socrates claims that the gods are unquestionably wise.³⁴ And, given Socrates' belief that there is a direct correlation between knowledge and right action, as the gods have perfect knowledge, it follows that

³³ *Phdr.* 229e2-230a3. Italics added for emphasis.

³⁴ *Ap.* 23a4-b2. See Brickhouse and Smith (1994: 179-181), Vlastos (1991, 162-166), and McPherran (1996, 133-144)

they are also perfectly moral.³⁵ Thus, unlike the gods as depicted by Homer, gods who exhibit vengeful action upon those who fall out of their favor, the gods of Socrates can do no harm.³⁶ Evidence for this is expressed quite clearly in the *Republic*, where we read:

Now, a god is really good, isn't he, and must be described as such?...And surely nothing good is harmful, is it?...And can what isn't harmful do harm?...Or can what does no harm do anything bad?...And can what does nothing bad be the cause of anything bad?...Moreover, the good is beneficial?...It is the cause of doing well?...*The good isn't the cause of all things, then but only good ones; it isn't the cause of bad ones...* Therefore, *since a god is good, he is not—as most people claim—the cause of everything that happen to human beings but of only a few things, for good things are fewer than bad ones in our lives. He alone is responsible for the good things, but we must find some other cause for the bad ones, not a god.*³⁷

Given this understanding of the divine, one which posits the gods as perfectly knowledgeable, and thus perfectly moral, it is perfectly logical that Socrates would hold the commands of the gods in such high esteem. Had he not truly believed in the gods'

³⁵ On this point I agree with the argument given by Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 68-72). However, there admittedly exists healthy disagreement between scholars on how one should interpret Socrates' belief in the unity of virtues. For a summary of these oppositional views, see Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 68 n. 52 and n. 52, as well as 179 n. 5 and n. 6). Vlastos (1991, 163-164), for his part, while in agreement that the gods are omnibenevolent, argues that this is not a necessary result of omniscience. According to Vlastos, "To allow one's gods infinitely potent intellect is not of itself to allow them flawlessly moral will. It may lead one to conclude, with Heraclitus, that god transcends the difference between good and evil." Thus, on Vlastos' view, the conclusion drawn by Socrates regarding the gods benevolence is the result of Socrates' personal belief that the highest form of wisdom is not theoretical, but rather, practical. Given this caveat, Socrates, and the fact that Socrates "could not have tolerated a double standard of morality, one for men, another for the gods," Socrates concludes that Reason is consistent across the board for all beings, human and divine.

³⁶ This follows logically from Socrates views on the harm of retribution as found in the *Cr.* 49b10-c1. As is rightly noted by Brickhouse and Smith (1994), this logic provides insight into Socrates' disbelief as expressed to Euthyphro regarding the depiction of the gods as constantly disagreeing with one another (*Euth.* 6a6-8). If the gods truly have knowledge of the good, and this knowledge is shared by all gods, then it would not be possible for such disagreements to occur.

³⁷ *Rep.* 379b1-c6. Again, as the *Republic* is a middle dialogue, caution should be exercised when using passages such as these as evidence for interpreting the early dialogues. For example, while the reasoning as laid out in the passage above will lead to the banishment of the poets, as their affinities for Homeric myth affirms the possibility of malicious divine action, the Socrates of the early dialogues never calls for such censorship (See Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 181). However, with this difference taken into consideration, I contend that, given the consistency between the early dialogues and the *Republic* regarding the perfection of divine wisdom, this evidence is acceptable.

perfection, let alone their existence, then why would he so unwaveringly heed the advice of his divine sign, a protective agent that never provides the reasons behind its suggestive force? Given the fact that Socrates faces the death penalty on account of his unending line of questioning *everything*, to suggest that he would blindly listen to the command of a god if he did not thoroughly believe in the superiority of that god's wisdom, let alone its existence, is absurd.

The Problem of Divine Creation

While the set of beliefs as given above would appear to save Socrates from the charge of atheism, the issue is not entirely resolved as a problem remains that still requires our address, namely, Nussbaum's claim that all references to the divine should be taken as instances of Socratic irony.³⁸ This suggestion³⁹ by Nussbaum hinges on the premise that, as the religion of Athens at the time, and those that would follow it, would not be entirely rational, the fact that Socrates is positing a divine entity that is itself perfectly rational would amount to the creation of a "new god," which, as Nussbaum makes clear, is not meant to be understood as a divine entity, but rather as an allusion to reason itself. Under this interpretation, it would make sense for Socrates to always obey the dictates of his *daimonion*, as doing so would be to follow the dictates of reason, which only Socrates is able to recognize clearly. Thus, if Nussbaum is correct in her

³⁸ For a thorough overview of development of the concept of irony throughout ancient Greek culture and philosophy, see Vlastos (1991, 21- 44). Vlastos concludes that we must distinguish between "simple" and "complex" irony, the former is when "what is said just isn't what is meant," whereas in the latter, "what is said both is and isn't what is meant." Vlastos uses Socrates' disavowal of knowledge as an example of complex irony, for, while it is true that Socrates lacks knowledge of a *certain kind*, i.e., definitional knowledge on matters of moral principles, it is false that he is ignorant of *all knowledge*, as he is able to justifiably believe certain things, e.g., his name. This distinction between types of knowledge is further developed in Vlastos (1991, Ch.4).

³⁹ Nussbaum (1985, 234) admits that she can, "...do no more than map out the bare outlines of an argument."

reasoning, then despite the direct appeals made by Socrates to the divine, all such appeals were merely veiled references to reason itself. Socrates would thus be an atheist, and all mention of the divine, even his appeal to the *daimonion* must be considered as instances of irony.⁴⁰ As will be shown, however, this position is untenable once subjected to more rigorous analysis.

To begin my response against Nussbaum, it must first be noted that many scholars have offered similar, though not identical, accounts of Socrates' and his "creation of new gods". For Vlastos, this issue regarding the creation of new gods is so pressing that Socrates himself is concerned about this specific charge levied against him, i.e., that he disbelieves in the gods of the state and creates new ones.⁴¹ And, to an extent, Socrates seems to accept as true the former of the two charges, for, as Vlastos suggests, when challenged by Meletus on the charge of impiety, Socrates cleverly manipulates his accuser to change his charge to atheism, doing so to avoid addressing the original charge of not honoring the city's gods, for which he is surely guilty.⁴² Thus, on Vlastos' view at least, the moral gods of Socrates discussed above seem to be completely at odds with the traditional gods of Homeric and Hesiodic mythology.

Yet, does this posited difference in kind between the gods of Homer and the Socratic gods provide reason enough to justify Nussbaum's claim that, given these differences, Socrates must be alluding not to gods but to reason itself? In other words, Nussbaum's critique is based on the notion that the Socratic view of the gods is *so*

⁴⁰ Nussbaum (1985, 235)

⁴¹ Euth. 2b – "They say I am a god-maker. For disbelieving in the old gods and producing new ones."

⁴² Vlastos (1991, 166 n.41) and McPherran (1996). For an argument to the contrary see Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 184-186).

radically distinct from the traditional gods, that to suggest that Socrates is referring to such gods is implausible. The question thus arises: Are the moral gods of Socrates so radical as to be unrecognizable from the accepted gods of 5th century Athens? If it can be shown that Socrates' views are not quite as radical as Nussbaum (and to a lesser extent, Vlastos) would suggest, then her claim that all Socratic reference to the divine are instances of irony begins to fall.

In answer to this question then we turn first to the work of Mark McPherran, who notes that it is important to first recognize that "religion" in 5th century Athens is distinctly different in kind than modern/contemporary religious practice and belief.⁴³ The most important distinctions are as follows: (1) Greek religion did not have a standard text, e.g., the Bible. (2) Greek religion did not have an organized church. (3) There did not exist a standard set of religious practices that were strictly enforced by religious clergy. Given the lack of these more regulatory aspects of religion, McPherran notes, it is not a belief in specific doctrine that qualifies one's piety, but rather, "correct, timely observance of ancestral tradition by maintaining and participating in a host of activities."⁴⁴ Drawing from these distinctions, it is important to note the following two points: First, that while a belief in the *existence* of the gods was required, there was no universal standard in place regarding the essence or activity of those gods. Second, that so long as one consistently followed the practices and traditions, coupled with a belief in

⁴³ McPherran (1996, 19-28 and 142-144). See also, Dodd (1951) and Van Riel (2005, 31-33)

⁴⁴ McPherran (1996, 21) While such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, the link between cult practices and Socrates' conviction on the grounds of impiety has been argued for compellingly by McPherran (1996, 144-160) See also Van Riel (2005, 31)

the existence of the gods, they would, for all intents and purposes, be considered pious in the eyes of the state.

Given these conditions, that Socrates would openly criticize the gods as depicted in the Homeric and Hesiodic tradition would not have been as shocking as some scholars have claimed, as it would have been entirely common for beliefs regarding the gods to vary.⁴⁵ Further, McPherran notes, there is little to no evidence that anyone was ever prosecuted for exhibiting skepticism regarding the veracity of Homer's account of the gods. Indeed, the "common" conception of religion had been subject to consistent criticism by the likes of Pythagoras, Xenophanes, Pindar, and Heraclitus.⁴⁶ As the Homeric tradition and the gods depicted therein was not left wanting for criticism, it seems odd that the positing of perfectly moral gods would be so entirely radical as to warrant persecution.⁴⁷ Indeed, had the moralization of the gods been as shockingly revolutionary as many scholars have claimed, would not we have found evidence in the text to support this view?

To answer this question we might look to the work of Brickhouse and Smith, specifically their reading of Plato's *Euthyphro*. On their reading, when confronted with Socrates' uncertainty regarding the veracity of Homeric myth on account of the Homeric gods' lacking perfect morality, Euthyphro is not only unfazed, but even *concedes* Socrates' point, recognizing the difficulty such issues cause.⁴⁸ And, while it is necessary to take Euthyphro's reaction with a grain of salt given he too is a character created by

⁴⁵ McPherran (1996, 142). See also Dodd (1951, 142-144).

⁴⁶ Lefkowitz (1989, 241-244)

⁴⁷ Van Riel (2005, 32)

⁴⁸ Brickhouse and Smith (1991, 183) See *Euth.* 6b5-c7.

Plato utilized to serve specific purposes within the context of that dialogue,⁴⁹ if we turn our attention to the *Apology*, a dialogue focusing directly on the charges levied upon Socrates, nowhere do we find any attention given specifically to the issue of Socrates' positing of perfectly moral gods. Now, to be sure, Socrates is charged with failing to honor the gods of the city. Yet, when directly asked by Socrates to clarify precisely what this means, Meletus explains that the charge of impiety is actually the result of Socrates' alleged atheism.⁵⁰ While some scholars have suggested that this revised charge was the result of clever manipulation on the part of Socrates,⁵¹ if it were the case that the *original* charges came to be as a result of Socrates' creation of new, perfectly moral gods, then why would no one, Meletus, Anytus, Lycon, or even the jurors present, make any mention of this?⁵² Admittedly, this point does carry with it a great deal of speculation, however, if the moralization of the gods was so egregious as to warrant the charge of impiety, that it would never be mentioned at all, by the accusers or even Socrates himself, seems unlikely.

Despite the unlikelihood of such omissions going unnoticed at the actual trial, we must once more note that Plato, as author of the *Apology*, cannot escape his own biases. However, while the works of Plato may present problems of positive prejudice, surely

⁴⁹ McPherran (1996, 142. n.169) – McPherran finds issue with Euthyphro's non-reaction for two reasons: (1) Euthyphro is not only Plato's creation (and thus carries Plato's own bias, even if not explicitly), but the character of Euthyphro is there to play a part that would serve to push the argument regarding Piety in a specific direction. (2) Euthyphro is also depicted as an atypical individual regarding piety. As such, that he expresses no shock at Socrates unconventional views is not at all surprising.

⁵⁰ *Ap.* 26c7

⁵¹ See n. 26.

⁵² Brickhouse and Smith (1991, 186). Brickhouse and Smith note the fact that disturbances and outcries were common occurrences at trials of this sort. And, in fact, Socrates consistently must appeal to the jury to avoid such disruptions. See *Ap.* 17d1, 20e4, 21a5, 27b1. Also, see Bers (1985) for more on the nature of these disturbances.

those writers who manifested disdain for Socrates would not omit such damning details. And yet, when we look to the account of Aristophanes, perhaps the most famous of all of Socrates' critics, we again find no mention of the problem of the moralization of the gods.⁵³ Instead, Aristophanes' caricature of Socrates in the *Clouds* presents him as an atheist, directly associating him with the so-called "natural-philosophers". Again, had the issue been the moralization of the gods, why would Aristophanes, an individual who was not only not apologetic, but *critical* of Socrates, fail to bring this to light?⁵⁴ Thus, according to Brickhouse and Smith, this lack of attention to the moralization of the gods on the part of Socrates' accusers and detractors, coupled with Socrates' own *consistent* reference to his own beliefs on this point at his trial (which, again, go unchallenged or flagged by his accusers),⁵⁵ provide evidence to suggest that such beliefs were of no real concern in the legal sense.

As a final point on the matter, many scholars have additionally argued that Socrates' moralistic conception of the gods were not only not unique, but gaining in popularity.⁵⁶ McPherran, drawing from the *Phaedrus* (229c), states that not only was it becoming quite commonplace to doubt the Homeric tradition, but further that there were, "...also affirmations of the justice and morality of the gods, gods with such appellations as 'Zeus Meilichios,' 'Zeus Xenios,' and 'Delphic Apollo who cannot lie.'"⁵⁷ This

⁵³ Brickhouse and Smith (1991, 183)

⁵⁴ For an argument against these points McPherran (1996, 157 n. 218 and 219).

⁵⁵ Brickhouse and Smith (1991, 184) *Ap.* 21b6-7 – The gods do not lie, and *Ap.* 23a5-6 – The gods are truly wise.

⁵⁶ See McPherran (1996, 143), Wildberg (2002), and Van Riel (2006)

⁵⁷ See also, Lefkowitz (1989, 244)

position is echoed by Gerd Van Riel, who argues that throughout the 5th century BCE, we find that the common conception of the gods had evolved away from the more conflict ridden gods of Homer, and towards gods possessing of upright character and virtue.⁵⁸ Finally, we might also look to the work of Christian Wildberg, who, through rigorous analysis, argues that the moralized conception of the gods is not, as Vlastos argues, born from Socrates alone, but rather, is present throughout the literature of 5th century Athens, most notably in the works of Sophocles.⁵⁹ Following from this evidence, we find the fact that Socrates would grant the gods the attributes of perfect reason and morality is not altogether shocking, nor uncommon. As a result, Nussbaum's claim that such attribution of perfect reason would require that Socrates be referring to reason itself, as opposed to actual divine beings, is significantly weakened.

Yet, while the above argument does well to prove that the Socratic conception of the gods was not as revolutionary as has been suggested, it does not completely solve the original problem posed by Nussbaum. Indeed, one might argue that simply because the rest of the population is willing to take seriously the positing of perfectly rational or moral gods, this acceptance by the populace does not necessarily guarantee that *Socrates* truly accepts this. Thus, it is still not yet certain that we ought take Socrates seriously regarding his reference to the divine. To accomplish this task, I will investigate both Socrates' *daimonion*, as well as other forms of divination, Socrates understanding of poets, diviners, and oracle-givers. Through this analysis, it will be made clear that not

⁵⁸ Van Riel (2006, 32)

⁵⁹ Wildberg (2002) – It should be noted that in his commentary on Wildberg's article, David Kasdan argues quite convincingly *against* many of Wildberg's points. However, the intricacies of this debate exceed the scope of this paper.

only must we take Socrates' reference to the divine sincerely, but further, that such divine inspiration plays a fundamental role in his quest for knowledge.

Preliminary Remarks on Inspiration

To begin this defense regarding the sincerity with which Plato recognizes divine inspiration, it is necessary to first lay some basic groundwork. As it is the task of this analysis to refute the claim that all references to divine inspiration need be taken as ironic, I will follow the lead of Stefan Buttner, who explains as follows:

(The) essential criterion for taking a passage of Plato which refers to enthusiasm as being free of irony is that the passage is integral to a context of which one can assume that it represents authentic Platonic teaching. It is then probable that the statement concerning enthusiasm is intended to be serious, above all when statements occur in more than one dialogue in comparable contexts.⁶⁰

As such, in what follows then, I will take care to make note of the context of each passage to ensure that the mention of divine inspiration is sincere.

The Problem of the Oracle and Inspired Dreams

Before delving into the problem of Socrates' *daimonion*, I want to begin with an account of other instances of divine inspiration removed from Socrates own internal divine sign. While it may seem odd to put aside the more obvious example of inspiration for later review, we recall that Nussbaum's suggestion that we need to take *all* instances of Socratic reference to the divine as ironic is directly linked to her assertion that such reference to the "divine" is in reality a winked reference to reason itself. Under Nussbaum's interpretation then, it would not be too far a stretch to suggest that the *daimonion* is not at all considered by Socrates to be an actual divine spirit, but rather nothing more than a veiled reference to reason, disguised as such to appeal to the

⁶⁰ Buttner (2005, 113)

religious sentiment of the mob.⁶¹ To avoid this pitfall, I will start with Socrates' recognition of instances of divine inspiration removed from the personal nature of the *daimonion*. The purpose of this account will be to show that Socrates clearly distinguishes between reason and divine inspiration, a distinction that is deeply problematic for Nussbaum's position.⁶²

To begin, we first revisit the oft-cited passage from the *Apology*, where we find that, in response to questions regarding his need to philosophize, an endeavor for which he now faces the death sentence, Socrates explains:

To do this (philosophize) has, as I say, *been enjoined upon me by the god, by means of oracles and dreams*, and in every other way that a divine manifestation has ever ordered a man to do anything. *This is true*, gentlemen, and can easily be established.⁶³

Looking to this passage, it is important to note two items: (1) Socrates is confident in the necessity of his philosophical mission on account of its provenance arising from the *command* of the god. (2) Socrates expresses confidence in the ability of oracles and dreams to delineate the truth.

Given Socrates consistent disavowal of knowledge, whether feigned or not, that Socrates would so brazenly assert his confidence in his duty to philosophize on account of the command by the god should strike the reader as a bit out of character. Note, in his explanation to the judges, Socrates does not say that, despite his initial befuddlement by

⁶¹ That Socrates would do this is enigmatic, however, considering it is, on his understanding, in large part due his consistent reference to his own private divine sign that he is charged with impiety in the first place, a point which, evidence suggests, he would have recognized as potentially problematic for garnering sympathy from the jury. See *Euth.* 3b5-9 and 5a7-8 and *Ap.* 31d1-2. See also McPherran (1996, 169-174)

⁶² I will here largely follow the overview as succinctly laid out by Brickhouse and Smith (1991, 195-201).

⁶³ *Ap.* 33c4-7 – Italics added for emphasis

the message received by the oracle, he has managed via his own rational process of elenctic testing to determine that he has a duty to philosophize. Rather, he asserts clearly that his duty to philosophize is in fact *the truth*, a point that he confidently asserts on account of its connection to divine command.⁶⁴ Further, he is so absolutely assured of the moral justification for his actions, which, again, is due to their divine sanction, that he remains committed to that duty despite the threat of death.⁶⁵

Yet, while the evidence from the *Apology* is of particular interest to my argument, the most compelling evidence regarding Socrates' confidence in dreams and oracles as being capable of revealing the truth is not found in the *Apology*, but rather, the *Phaedo*.⁶⁶ At *Phaedo* 60d8-61b8, we read:

...but I tried to find out the meaning of certain dreams and to satisfy my conscience in case it was this kind of art they were frequently bidding me to practice. The dreams were something like this: The same dream often came to me in the past, now in one shape, now in another, but saying the same thing: 'Socrates, ' it said, 'practice and cultivate the arts.' In the past I imagined that it was instructing and advising me to do what I am doing, such as those who encourage runners in a race, that the dream was thus bidding me to do the very thing I was doing, namely to practice the art of philosophy...But now, after my trial took place...I thought that in case my dream was bidding me to practice this popular art, I should not disobey it but compose poetry. *I thought it safer not to leave here until I satisfied my conscience by writing poems in obedience to the dream.*⁶⁷

From this passage we can glean a number of important points: (1) We once again find Socrates taking seriously the messages to be decoded from dreams. Indeed, in this

⁶⁴ Brickhouse and Smith (1991, 195-196)

⁶⁵ *Ap.* 28d6-29d5 – See McPherran (1996, 178)

⁶⁶ McPherran (1996, 178) – Further, while not as convincing as the evidence gleaned from the *Phaedo* or *Apology*, we also find evidence at *Crito* 44a5-b4, wherein we find that, based upon a dream, Socrates is confident that the arrival of the ship from Delos would be delayed, an act not lacking in importance given its arrival would mark the final countdown to his own demise.

⁶⁷ *Phd.* 60d8-61b8

example in particular, Socrates likens the message of his dreams to that of commands that one need obey. (2) We find Socrates speaking with a sense of urgency regarding that obedience. He explains that while he *thought* he was already doing the dream's bidding by philosophizing, following the unfortunate events that have transpired in his trial and present circumstances, he is now uncertain he was correct in his interpretation. As a result, as he believes the dreams may have been bidding him to perform a *different* art form, he has decided to write poetry as he awaits his death, a decision made, in part, to *guarantee his safety*. What we find here is a level of consistency between this passage and those found in the *Apology* as to Socrates' consistent adherence in his belief that we must stand in obedience to the gods.

And, it is this final point that I find most striking for two reasons: (1) It illustrates the seriousness with which Socrates recognizes the importance of obeying the gods, i.e., that even while facing death, he is writing poetry *out of fear* that he had misinterpreted the god's original command. This grave concern with properly following the god's command is quite telling.⁶⁸ (2) Such an attempt to appease the god is one that is done *contra* Socrates' originally conceived conclusions. To explain, if one were to take up Nussbaum's position, one could argue that when Socrates says that he has a duty to philosophize on account of the god's command, he does not mean this literally, but rather that it is by his own understanding of reason itself that he recognizes the necessity of philosophizing.⁶⁹ In other words, given the logical conclusions he has drawn through

⁶⁸ As his change to poetry is done out of concern for his own safety (despite him already facing the death penalty), if Socrates did not believe in the gods, precisely what it is that he would fear is something of a mystery.

⁶⁹ In this line of thinking in particular we find Nussbaum in agreement with the main critique as given by Nehamas (1987, 304-306)

rational processes and arguments, he has come to the irrevocable conclusion that he *must* philosophize.⁷⁰

However, if this were true, and all mention of his divinely decreed duty to philosophize was merely a dressed up metaphor for following the dictates of reason itself, then how could one explain Socrates' actions and frame of mind as depicted in the *Phaedo*? In the passage above, we find Socrates admitting that he *thought* that he was doing as the god commanded. In fact, over time he was able to provide, at the very least, a limited account as to why such philosophical questioning is necessary. However, in the *Phaedo*, we find Socrates admitting that he now does not truly know what the god wanted, and so he is now lending his hand at poetry in a desperate attempt to appease the god should that have been his true command.

Note, Socrates *admits no understanding* aside from recognizing the obligation to comply with the will of the gods, whatever that may be. The point here is not to suggest that Socrates understands the will of the divine, but rather, that he follows those commands even if devoid of understanding.⁷¹ Granted, more often than not, the revelations received from dreams and the oracle are subject to reflective rational assessment. And, further, given the perfect nature of the divine, that command will always, of course, be perfectly rational. However, in this instance, Socrates professes to *not* have a full understanding of the god's will. Thus, that Socrates would attempt to follow the command of the god *without* such grounded understanding makes it difficult to assert that Socrates does not truly believe in the distinction between reason itself and

⁷⁰ An understanding of philosophy that many philosophers today, no doubt, feel themselves.

⁷¹ Granted, A point that will be echoed in the following discussion on the *daimonion*.

those divine beings in possession of it. What justification would Socrates have to act in this manner if not faith in the reason of the god?

Put simply, if Nussbaum is correct, and there is no actual deity external to Socrates that possesses perfect wisdom whose commands Socrates would obey on account of such perfection, then it would follow that Socrates would only act in accordance with reason *as understood by himself*. In other words, if, as Nussbaum claims, Socrates recognizes that (1) wisdom, as opposed to ignorance, as the root from which all action *should* arise, and, (2) there exist(s) no perfectly moral god(s), then (3) when Socrates says that he acts in obedience to the will of the god, he is actually acting by the dictates of reason itself. Thus, when he claims that he *knows* certain things to be true, e.g., that his mission to philosophize is obligatory, he knows these things through reason, i.e., he would *understand* them as true.

However, given his admitted lack of understanding in the *Phaedo*, this position becomes problematic. To explain, we recall that Socrates is now writing poetry due to his own lack of understanding of the divine command. Thus, under Nussbaum's model, Socrates would be acting according to "reason" for reasons that he does not understand. If this is true, from where does the certainty arise? What justification would Socrates have for these actions if he does not understand why he is doing them? Would there not need to be a belief in some entity *in possession of* perfect understanding, and it is through a deferment to their judgment that Socrates derives his confidence? It would seem to me then, given the evidence from the *Phaedo* seen in concert with those passages from the *Apology*, Nussbaum's position that we must consider all references to the divine as ironically veiled references to reason itself cannot hold. Thus, we find Socrates clearly

distinguishing between reason itself, and the sort of knowledge only accessible through divine dispensation.⁷²

The Problem of the Poets and Diviners

The need for this distinction between the sort of knowledge Socrates himself can claim to know, and the sort of truth he receives from divination is clearly illustrated in his account of others who themselves have experienced divine inspiration. Looking first to the *Apology* once more, we read at 22b8-c4:

Regarding the poets, I soon realized that it is not by wisdom that poets do what they do, *but by some natural talent and by inspiration*, like the diviners and oracle givers, who also say many fine things, but know nothing of what they say.⁷³

In reading this passage, it could be interpreted as a condemnation of those mentioned, belittling them through the exposure of their ignorance.⁷⁴ Indeed, Gregory Vlastos, in favor of this interpretation, writes,

For Socrates diviners, seers, oracle-givers, poets are all in the same boat. All of them in his view are know-nothings, or rather worse: unaware of their sorry epistemic state, they set themselves up as repositories of wisdom emanating from a divine, all-wise source. What they say may be true; but even when it is true, they are in no position to discern what there is in it that is true. If their hearer were in a position to discern this, then *he* would have the knowledge denied to them; the knowledge would come from the application of *his reason* to what these people say without reason.⁷⁵

Note, Vlastos is correct that those who are divinely inspired would be unable to properly claim to be in possession of knowledge, as such a claim would require the individual

⁷² I do not here mean that through divine inspiration Socrates is able to claim actual knowledge, for insofar as it came through revelation, he would, as with the poets, lack an account.

⁷³ Italics added for emphasis. Note that Socrates distinguishes between “natural talent” and “inspiration”. Such a distinction, one which sets inspiration *against* that which is *natural*, once again provides evidence to Socrates’ belief in supernatural influence.

⁷⁴ Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 196)

⁷⁵ Vlastos (1991, 170)

provide an account of that knowledge, which, as their insights were gifted to them by the gods, they simply cannot do. So, in this sense, it is true that such individuals “know” nothing about that which they speak. *However*, this lack of knowledge in the strict sense does not preclude the possibility of revealing *the truth*, as Vlastos himself seems to suggest. In other words, there seems to be recognition on the part of Socrates of those individuals who are somehow able to glean and express the *truth* (even if incomplete), regarding beauty, love or even the divine itself, all the while failing to provide any rational account as to how they have come to “know” such things.

As evidence to this, let us look first to the *Ion*, where we read at 534b1-c7:

For of course poets tell us that they gather songs at honey-flowing springs, from glades and gardens of the Muses, and that they bear songs to us as bees carry honey, flying like bees. *And what they say is true*. For a poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until *he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind and his intellect is no longer in him*. As long as a human being has his intellect in his possession he will always lack the power to make poetry or sing prophecy. Therefore, *because it is not by mastery that they make poems or say many lovely things about their subjects, but by divine gift*, each poet is able to compose beautifully only for that which the Muse has aroused in him.⁷⁶

To be sure, this passage once more reveals that the poets lack knowledge, a point that has led many scholars to condemn divine inspiration as the antithesis to the Socratic search for wisdom. However, while I do not deny that Socrates, and by extension Plato, does find issue with those who claim to have knowledge when in fact they do not, a point which is clearly represented in the above passage from the *Ion*, what is of greater interest is that in this very same passage where Socrates denies the poets knowledge, he also admits that what they say *is true*. In other words, that the poets can provide no rational account of what they are saying does not rob those expressions of the truth that they

⁷⁶ Italics added for emphasis.

represent. And, again, these insights into truth are derived directly from divine inspiration, a moment wherein the person's intellect is "no longer in him." They are, in a sense, possessed by the gods, their body a mere conduit for the expression of the wisdom of the divine.⁷⁷

And, this point, i.e., that divine inspiration is akin to momentarily losing one's mind, is positively echoed in other dialogues as well, namely the *Phaedrus* 244a6-d5 wherein we read:

There's no truth to that story that when a lover is available you should give your favors to a man who doesn't love you instead, because he is in control of himself while the lover has lost his head. That would have been fine to say if madness were bad, pure and simple; *but in fact the best things we have come from madness, when it is given as a gift from the god.*

Here again we find Socrates *praising* the revelations brought about through divine revelation. In fact, it is precisely *because* the person is mad, i.e., void of reason, that they are able to produce such truths⁷⁸. Given the limitations of human wisdom and the superiority of divine wisdom,⁷⁹ that the divinely inspired, having been lost of their own reason in those moments of divine inspiration, are thusly able to reveal the truth is of no surprise to Socrates, nor should we suspect him of believing otherwise.⁸⁰ Thus, again, when passages such as these are applied to Nussbaum's suggestion that all references to

⁷⁷ Gonzalez (2011, 96)

⁷⁸ See Gonzales (2011, 105) – Drawing from the *Phaedrus* and the *Ion*, Gonzalez argues that the "philosopher," like the poet, is at his best when exposed to bouts of inspiration. Yet, while the rhapsode remains mired in the ignorance about which they speak, the philosopher pushes forward, attempting to produce order from the truth they do not quite yet understand. Thus, "Philosophy is a constant and irresolvable tension between reason and inspiration and thus between self-control and madness"

⁷⁹ Ap. 20d2-e1

⁸⁰ Plato maintains this position regarding the relation between madness and divine inspiration as late as the *Laws* 719c.

the divine are ironic, we find a problem of incompatibility, as it is precisely *because* the inspired individuals are “out of their mind” that they are able to access these deeper truths. Again, I do concede that this does not grant them knowledge in the purely Platonic sense. However, this is precisely the point. Through these passages we clearly see an absolute distinction between inspiration and reason for Socrates: In the moment of inspiration, the individual is *outside of oneself*, and thus, not accessing truth through their own rational capacity. They did not come to any realization on their own, nor can they provide an account of it after the fact. Given this incompatibility, it is difficult to see how one could claim that they are, in Socrates’ mind, one and the same thing.

The Problem of the *Daimonion*

With the stage now set before us, we turn our attention to the most infamous example of divine inspiration in the works of Plato, Socrates’s *daimonion*. We begin with some basic foundational points of reference. We recall that Socrates’ *daimonion* is described as a divine voice⁸¹ or sign.⁸² We also learn that this divine sign has frequently appeared to Socrates since childhood,⁸³ and has since then offered him consistent, though by no means regular, guidance in the form of apotroptic warnings.⁸⁴ Never in the early dialogues do we find an instance where the *daimonion* has ceded to Socrates any kind of positive knowledge, nor the reasoning behind its admonishments regarding the course of

⁸¹ *Ap.* 31d1-3 and *Phdr.* 242c2

⁸² *Ap.* 40b1; *Eud.* 272e2; *Phdr.* 242b9.

⁸³ *Ap.* 31d2-2

⁸⁴ *Ap.* 31d3-4, *Eu.* 3b-c

action that Socrates should avoid.⁸⁵ Further, these warnings always feature a predictive power that far exceeds the capacity of human reason.⁸⁶ Finally, it appears as though Socrates has an absolute faith in the soundness of the warnings given by the *daimonion*, a point which could be drawn not only from his belief regarding the absolute wisdom of the gods as discussed above, but further, upon his own reflection regarding the outcomes and consequences that followed from his heeding of this advice.⁸⁷

With this foundation in place, the next task before us is to establish that Socrates considers the *daimonion* to be of legitimate epistemological value. As evidence for his claim, we look once more to the work of McPherran, who first turns his attention to the *Apology* 31c4-32a3, wherein we find Socrates discussing his reasoning for avoiding a career in politics.⁸⁸ As Socrates explains, the reasoning for his *daimonion*'s opposition against Socrates engaging in politics, while unknown to Socrates at the time of it warning, is, through the use of basic reasoning, not only proven to be correct, but also quite obvious. Given Socrates affinity for questioning, as well as his distaste for any instance of injustice large or small, it is quite clear that had Socrates engaged in public life, he most assuredly would have met an early demise at the hands of those he would speak against.⁸⁹ Thus, McPherran notes, upon examination of the passage, Socrates does not merely accept the admonishment of his *daimonion*, but, following the instance of the

⁸⁵ McPherran (2005, 16) Yet, while the *daimonion* fails to provide Socrates with the certain moral knowledge he seeks, he is, on McPherran's view, advised on "nonexpert moral knowledge," such as which students he would be ill-advised to take on. See *Tht.* 150e1.

⁸⁶ McPherran (2005, 17) See *Ap.* 31, *Euthd.* 272e-3a

⁸⁷ See Vlastos (1991, 229-232)

⁸⁸ McPherran (2005, 17)

⁸⁹ Similar, of course, to the current circumstances of his trial!

warning, reflects back upon it, subjecting it to the elenchos to determine *why* an activity such as politics, one which was not only obligatory, but further, was a possible opportunity for Socrates to engage in the sort of just activity he sought, would be so adamantly, and consistently, rejected. Socrates is thus able to discover that the advice of his *daimonion* is, upon review, perfectly in line with reason, and not, as could be the case, randomly beneficial. Given this consistency between the advice of the *daimonion* and reason, we find a relationship between the two emerging, one which serves as further evidence towards Socrates on convictions regarding the divine.

As an additional piece of textual evidence, we look to *Apology* 40a3-c3. Here, after having been issued a death sentence, Socrates argues sincerely that this outcome must be for the best, as his *daimonion* had not warned him during his preparation for his trial, nor during his actual defense that his strategy was against his best interest.⁹⁰ Indeed, Socrates notes that the silence of his divine voice in this matter should be recognized as “great proof”⁹¹ that his actions are not only justified, but also morally virtuous. Note that this example differs in that Socrates not only recognizes the warnings of the divine sign regarding potentially damaging action, but further, recognizes the *silence* of the *daimonion* as confirmation that his own reasoned decisions were in fact beneficial or virtuous. What we glean from this is that the assurance that Socrates feels regarding the outcome of his trial (or any action for that matter) arises not from his own deliberation, but from the affirmation, whether by interjection or silence, of his *daimonion*.

Finally, McPherran provides additional evidence in support of this point by drawing from the *Euthydemus* 272e1-3a3. We read:

⁹⁰ McPherran (2005, 19) See also Brickhouse and Smith (1991, 191)

⁹¹ *Ap.* 40c1

As good luck would have it, I was sitting by myself in the undressing room just where you saw me and was already thinking of leaving. But when I got up, my customary divine sign put in an appearance. So I sat down again...

It is important to note here that prior to the arrival of the divine sign, Socrates had, *after a period of deliberation*, decided to leave. Then, with the arrival of the divine sign, this decision to leave was reversed. Here again, it was not the case that after deciding to leave, Socrates realized that he should stay due to his own deliberative process and reconsideration. His decision to stay was based solely on the presence of his divine sign, which, as explained above, never provides Socrates with the reasoning behind the warnings. And yet, despite this lack of understanding the benefit that he would eventually incur from his staying, Socrates trusts in the *daimonion*. Granted, Socrates does have *reason* to trust the *daimonion*, for (1) not only has it never led Socrates astray, but (2) when he reflects back upon those decisions, e.g., his avoidance of politics, he comes to the reasoned conclusion that he made the right decision.⁹² As such, Socrates is justified in making the inductive leap that he should always heed the warnings of his divine voice. However, the point here is that, *in the moment of the warning*, Socrates is left wanting for the rationale behind the warnings issued. Thus, if it is true that all references to the *daimonion* are merely references to reason itself, we are once again left with the bizarre circumstance wherein Socrates would be claiming that he, *through reason*, realized that he should avoid a particular action without understanding the reasons for doing so. The alternative, much more plausible scenario, would be that Socrates does actually believe in the existence of perfectly wise gods, i.e., his *daimonion*, and it is this belief that allows him to act confidently in accordance with the warnings and messages issued therefrom.

⁹² McPherran (2005, 18)

3.4.2 – Objections and Replies

As has been discussed at length, the prominent critique levied against the legitimacy of divine inspiration as a source of epistemological value arises in the form of the reducing of all divine reference to more rationalized phenomena. And, in the case of the *daimonion*, this critique once again comes to the fore. Gregory Vlastos, who himself has argued extensively in favor of recognizing the legitimacy of religious belief and sentiment in the case of Socrates, surprisingly offers a view of the *daimonion* that seems to severely diminishes its role in the philosophical process of Socrates.⁹³ Speaking on the nature of his encounters with his “divine sign” Vlastos explains:

Socrates has a “hunch” – a strong intuitive impression – that a certain belief or action is correct without being able to articulate his grounds for it at the moment.⁹⁴

Drawing from the *Theatetus*, *Euthydemus*, and *Phaedrus*, Vlastos highlights three passages that he believes firmly support his position.⁹⁵ Beginning with *Tht.* 151c, when asked how he is able to determine which students are worth his attention, Socrates responds, “...the *daimonion* which comes to me forbids it in the case of some, allows it in that of others, and they are the ones that make progress.” Thus, Socrates, without fully understanding how, is able to properly choose which students to avoid and which to focus

⁹³ For the full account of Vlastos’ critiques of the epistemological role of the *daimonion* see Vlastos (1991, 223-232 and 280-286). For replies see McPherran (1991, 190-208) and Brickhouse and Smith (1991, 191-194) and (2005, 44-55).

⁹⁴ Vlastos (1991, 283) – It should be noted that Vlastos does distinguish between two types of daemonic encounters, the first, as indicated above, and the second pertaining to those instances where he is able to immediately recognize the rationale behind the *daimonion*’s warning. Instances of such encounters on Vlastos’ account include *Ap.* 31c-32a, wherein Socrates is told to avoid politics, as well as *Ap.* 40a-c, wherein the silence of the *daimonion* serves as an affirmation of Socrates’ actions.

⁹⁵ I agree here with Brickhouse and Smith (2005, 44) that the selection of passages is odd on Vlastos’ part, considering he consistently warns against using passages from later or middle dialogues as evidence towards claims regarding the Socratic dialogues. See Vlastos (1991, Ch. 2 and 3) and Vlastos (1994, Ch. 1).

on. And, Vlastos explains, these “hunches” are, for Socrates, “convincing enough to justify action.”

Vlastos also posits similar accounts for Socrates decision to stay in the palaestra in the *Euthydemus* 272e, as discussed above, as well as his decision to stay and atone for his first speech about love in the *Phaedrus* 242b-c, wherein Socrates explains:

As I was about to cross the stream the customary divine sign came to me – it holds me back from doing what I am about to do on each occasion – and I seemed to hear a voice, forbidding me to leave the spot until I had made atonement for some offense to the god.⁹⁶

On this last point, Vlastos explains that while Socrates does recognize that he does have good reason to atone as indicated, *at the time of the daimonion's admonition*, “those reasons had not yet been clearly articulated in his mind... (and) became articulate only in retrospect.”⁹⁷

And, while this interpretation may not appear immediately problematic for my position, such an interpretation seems to belittle the power of the *daimonion*, as it seems to belittle its epistemological force. As McPherran rightly warns, this interpretation “...has Socrates ‘accepting the supernatural’ in little more than name only.”⁹⁸ Thus, to maintain my position that Socrates considers divine inspiration with the utmost sincerity, it must be demonstrated that the *daimonion* is not merely a “hunch,” nor simple moments of “rational intuition,” but rather is of such great epistemological significance that it is able to rightly challenge secular reasoning.

⁹⁶ Interesting, too, that here Socrates not only heeds the warning of his *daimonion*, but also shows a recognition that he had offended the god, an act that, on his own view, required his repentance.

⁹⁷ Vlastos (1991, 285)

⁹⁸ McPherran (1996, 194) Which is surprising on Vlastos' part considering his argument against those that would seek to detach Socrates from sincere religious belief.

For McPherran, we first find evidence against the reductionist account insofar as there exists not a single instance where Socrates ignores the warning of the *daimonion*. The reason such perfect consistency regarding the *daimonion* is so detrimental to the reductionist account is that we find Socrates not only doubting the assumed “knowledge” of all of his interlocutors, but further, his own beliefs, beliefs which he does not carry lightly.⁹⁹ Indeed, that he takes these warnings as “certain” would indicate that Socrates holds this information in a significantly higher regard than he would any other source of knowledge. The question thus arises as to how this could be justified if, as Vlastos and others have claimed, he considers these warnings as mere “hunches”?

In answer to this concern, McPherran suggests that this certainty on the part of Socrates is justifiable on Socrates’ part due to, “...(his) full confidence that the *daimonion* is always caused by a divinity that would never purposefully mislead him; i.e., it would never warn him away from an action that is not wrong, harmful, or unbeneficial.”¹⁰⁰ And, this absolute confidence is evidenced by Socrates absolute consistency in heeding the command or warning of the *daimonion*. Never once does Socrates ignore the call of his divine sign, nor does Socrates ever stop first to subject the warning to elenctic testing *before* following its advice. Instead, Socrates always *assumes* that the *daimonion* is correct, an uncharacteristic assumption that is made based upon his absolute belief in the perfect wisdom *and* morals of the god.¹⁰¹ Given Socrates’

⁹⁹ For instance, his own consistent disavowal of knowledge. Also, Socrates doubts other forms of revelation as well, e.g., *Phd.* 60d8, wherein he believed his mission in life was to philosophize, only to come to doubt his own interpretation. This last example is of particular importance given it came to him initially through revelation. Thus, we find that it is only the warning of the *daimonion* that Socrates accepts unquestioningly.

¹⁰⁰ McPherran (1996, 199) McPherran cites *Mem.* 1.1.5; and *Thg.* 128d1 as evidence to this claim.

¹⁰¹ McPherran (1996, 200)

caution regarding certainty of knowledge, not to mention his proclivity towards questioning, had these warnings been recognized by Socrates as mere “hunches” one would expect Socrates to have, at the very least, approached the issue with a healthy dose of skepticism.

Yet, this is not the case. McPherran notes that not only does Socrates not ever question the warnings of the *daimonion*, but further, Socrates never even questions whether or not such encounters are in fact with the divine. It would seem then that Socrates belief that he is truly the recipient of divine knowledge is never in question, a point which again lends explanation to his lack of concern regarding the veracity of the content of that message. Again, however, despite this certainty in the truth of the message, Socrates can still not claim knowledge, as he recognizes that the messages received are still subject to his own interpretation, which, given his fallibility as a mortal, would necessarily dilute the purity of the knowledge. And, on McPherran’s view, it is because of this potential fallibility of interpretation that goads Socrates to subject the warnings to elenctic testing, though again, always *after* he obeys the command. Thus, it is not because Socrates doubts the certainty of the wisdom of the god, but rather he doubts his own interpretive skill, and as a result, investigates to the extent his rational powers allow to ensure as great a degree of certainty as is possible.¹⁰²

Thus, McPherran suggests that we understand the *daimonion* as follows:

- (1) After some prior deliberation (or without), Socrates forms the intention to perform some action-token *x* (e.g., Leaving the marketplace)
- (2) Prior to or while engaged in *x*, Socrates receives a daemonic message similar to “No, don’t do *x*,” which he takes as certainly deriving from an all-wise authority.

¹⁰² In this way we gain insight as to how Socrates could appear to honestly disavow all knowledge, while, at the same time, appear to “know” things with such apparent certainty.

- (3) From this, he infers that “doing *x* would be unbeneficial,” something he would claim to know. But this claim, since it rests on Socrates’ experientially warranted presupposition that demonic warnings and his interpretation of them is always accurate, is taken by him to be only a practical, and thus fallible, certainty
- (4) It is more certain, nonetheless, than the results of practical ratiocination in the here and now because of its superior inductive warrant (e.g., Socrates’ recognition of the *daimonion* and the truth of its warning have apparently *never* gone awry in a lifetime of experience of it), a warrant that has convinced Socrates of its divine origin.¹⁰³

On McPherran’s view then, we see the *daimonion* not as a threat to the superiority of reason,¹⁰⁴ but rather as an extra-rational source used in concert with reason. In other words, that Socrates would follow the dictates of the *daimonion* are not to be seen as an *irrational* action, but as entirely rational *because of* his belief in the superior reason of the divine. Yet, it must be noted, that inspiration and reason are complementary does not preclude the reality that they are quite often in conflict, for, considering the warnings are always apotroptic, it stands to reason that Socrates must have already planned on engaging in the very activity he is warned against.¹⁰⁵ As McPherran notes, it is precisely in these moments of conflict that we bear witness to the degree of faith with which Socrates holds the wisdom of the *daimonion*, for, “in these instances his reasons for proceeding are deemed insufficiently compelling by Socrates *simply on the basis of the demonic opposition*.”¹⁰⁶

Given his recognition, McPherran makes clear that it is simply incorrect to assert, as Nussbaum does, that when we witness Socrates reconsider a course of action, a decision which he attributes to the warning of the *daimonion*, that he is doing so as a

¹⁰³ McPherran (1996, 200)

¹⁰⁴ Vlastos (1991, 229)

¹⁰⁵ Such as a life of politics, leaving the palaestra, etc.

¹⁰⁶ McPherran (1996, 205) Italics added for emphasis.

“cover for conclusions rationally arrived at.”¹⁰⁷ That Socrates would be engaging in this unnecessary level of deception¹⁰⁸ is simply not compatible with the overwhelming textual evidence to the contrary, i.e., that not only are there consistent, sincere religious references on the part of Socrates, but further that these beliefs play a major role in his philosophical work.¹⁰⁹ Also, we recall examples as seen in the *Euthydemus*, where, aside from the warning of the *daimonion* we are presented with no discernible cause for Socrates to expect any benefit whatsoever from staying, as the interlocutors with whom he would engage had not yet arrived.¹¹⁰ Indeed, in this instance, to suggest that his decision to stay was nothing more than rational intuition would be to suggest that the “rational” capacities of Socrates are nothing short of clairvoyant!¹¹¹ Finally, McPherran concludes, in addition to the evidence above, we have numerous textual incidences wherein Socrates explicitly mentions experiencing a “rational hunch,” and, in these moments, makes no mention whatsoever of his *daimonion*.¹¹² If, as Vlastos and Nussbaum suggest, the *daimonion* and rational intuition are one and the same, then why would Socrates distinguish them at all?

¹⁰⁷ McPherran, (1996, n. 65)

¹⁰⁸ Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 186) Brickhouse and Smith argue here that if Socrates did not honestly believe in the existence of the gods, then he would in effect be guilty of flagrantly lying to the jury at his trial, especially considering his guarantee that he would speak only the truth. See *Ap.* 18a5-6, 20d5-6, 22b5-6, 28a6, 32a8). Against the strength of this accusation, see McPherran (1996, n. 219)

¹⁰⁹ See *Ap.* 27b3-28a1 and *Ap.* 33c4-7

¹¹⁰ *Euthd.* 272e-273a.

¹¹¹ Brickhouse and Smith (2005, 47) We recall that it is only *after* he decides to stay that his interlocutors even arrive

¹¹² *Lysis* 218c4-8 and 214c4-5, *Euth.* 279c5-6, *Crat.* 411b, and *Phdr.* 242b8-243a3. See also Friedlander (1973)

Given this evidence, evidence that is not only consistent throughout the dialogues, but further, indicates that Socrates does distinguish clearly, through his own actions, between secular reasoning and divine wisdom, we must consider Socratic references to the *daimonion* as sincere.¹¹³

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have argued that we cannot take Socratic references to religion and divine inspiration as ironic. Further, I have argued that Socrates not only believes in the legitimacy of such instances of divination, but further, holds them in such high esteem as to recognize them as a viable source of truth, albeit a source that must, on account of the limitations of human understanding, be reviewed and subject to rigorous analysis to determine the proper interpretation. I argue this on the following grounds: (1) Socrates' belief in perfectly rational, and thus perfectly moral, gods is not, as some have maintained, so radical as to require that Socrates must be an atheist. As was shown, such beliefs, while not traditional in a strict sense, were not entirely uncommon. As such, we should dismiss his beliefs regarding the gods as veiled reference to reason itself. (2)

¹¹³ If we are to take the preceding arguments as true, i.e., that Plato sincerely believes Socrates to be divinely inspired, then the question might be raised as to why Plato himself was not the recipient of such divine assistance. To explain, given the gods' status as perfectly wise beings as depicted in the early dialogues, it cannot be the case that those individuals selected by the gods are done so at random. As such, given Plato's own philosophical ability and mission towards the understanding of the good life, that he should be lacking in the sort of divine assistance given to Socrates may strike us, and Plato for that matter, as odd. As Plato is particularly silent regarding the question of *why* the gods choose one individual over another, any response to this question would be speculative by nature. However, if we turn our attention to the *Ion*, we may actually uncover an answer. Looking to *Ion* 533d-e, we read:

It's a divine power that moves you, as a Magnetic Stone moves iron rings. This stone not only pulls those rings, it also puts power *in* the rings, so that they in turn can do just what the stone does – pull other rings.

Here, while not an answer to the question of why the gods choose one individual over the other, we do find evidence to suggest that Plato may have considered himself to be divinely inspired, albeit indirectly. As the above passage shows us, on Plato's view, those that are inspired are themselves able to inspire others, just as a magnetized ring can move other rings. Thus, as I have argued that Plato sincerely believes Socrates to be inspired directly by the gods, given Plato's relationship to Socrates, it is not to far a stretch to suggest he considered himself to be inspired as such.

There is evidence to suggest that Socrates recognized revelation, whether via dreams or the oracle, as providing a legitimate path to the truth. That this is true is evidenced not only in his own experiences, but further, by his own recognition that certain individuals, e.g., poets, diviners, etc., while lacking in actual knowledge, are able to speak the truth on those ideas given to them via moments of inspiration. (3) His strict adherence to the *daimonion*, whose warnings he *always* obeys despite his lack of understanding at the moment of the event. Again, it is true that Socrates can, and does, subject the admonishments of the *daimonion* after the fact to determine why such a warning was issued. The point, however, is that such reflections are precisely that, reflections after the fact. As such, we find that the motivating force behind Socrates' obedience to the advice of the *daimonion* is his recognition that it is, in fact, originating from a divine being, one which, based on his own beliefs, is in possession of divine wisdom. And, it is this belief, not mere intuition, which allows his confidence in his actions that follow from this provenance.

Chapter 4: Socrates and Divine Inspiration in the Late Dialogues

It has been argued in Chapter 2 of this dissertation that, as Plato transitioned into his late period, the character of Socrates no longer consistently resides at center-stage of the dialogues. In dialogues such as the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, for example, we find in his place the Eleatic Stranger, an individual who utilizes a new methodology, i.e., collection and division, in his efforts towards the acquisition of definitional knowledge. Given the change in cast and methodology of the *Sophist*, *Statesman*, as well as the *Laws*³⁵⁹, it could be argued that Plato finally dismisses the more supernatural aspects of his earlier work, favoring instead the rigidly rational methodology prominently featured therein. Yet, while both the Eleatic Stranger of the *Sophist* and *Statesman* and the Athenian Stranger of the *Laws*, do not themselves directly appeal to the divine for assistance in their philosophical endeavors³⁶⁰, when we turn our attention to those dialogues of the late period where Socrates takes center stage, we are subject once more to a consistent appeal to the divine for assistance in his philosophical endeavor.³⁶¹ Given this disparity, the

³⁵⁹ Indeed, in the *Laws*, Socrates is absent entirely. Also, while the method of collection and division is not used by the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws*, it is, in contrast to the earlier, and even middle periods, similarly rigid and meticulous in its presentation, lacking any traces of the elenctic questioning that drives those earlier dialogues.

³⁶⁰ While it will be argued below, it should be noted here that despite the Athenian Stranger's lack of appeal to the divine for direct assistance in his own presentation of the laws, it is argued consistently throughout the laws that the gods and their supreme wisdom must serve as the foundation for the laws of men.

³⁶¹ I fully acknowledge that much can be said regarding Socrates and divine inspiration in Plato's middle period works. However, as the focus of this dissertation rests upon the role of divine inspiration in the case of Socrates in the late dialogues, an analysis of the middle period will be postponed for a future date. For an excellent overview and analysis of the role of religion and the divine in Plato's middle period, see Morgan (1990). See also Buttner (2011) and Gonzales (2011)

question arises as to Plato's views on Socrates in this late period, in particular the role that divine inspiration plays in the case of Socrates.

To answer this question, however, requires that we address a problem that arises in Plato's late period, i.e., the varying images of Socrates. To explain, in the late dialogues, we are given multiple images of Socrates, all of which are, at least on the surface, distinctly different than the last. In the *Sophist*, for example, we are presented with the image of Socrates as the "noble sophist," i.e., the individual who, through the elenchus, is able to purge his interlocutors of their false beliefs.³⁶² In the *Theaetetus*, on the other hand, a dialogue that serves as the dramatic predecessor to the *Sophist*, we are presented with a slightly different image, i.e., Socrates as midwife. Here, Socrates is able to assist in the delivery of wisdom from within the mind of his interlocutor. And, while this may seem similar to the "noble sophist" as described, given the more positive capacity exhibited by the expertise of mental midwifery, such an image of Socrates appears markedly different from the strictly purgative Socrates of the *Sophist*. Finally, in the *Philebus*, we are yet again presented with a seemingly distinct Socrates, one who takes up the method of collection and division as his weapon of choice in the search for the definition of the good life. As before, this new image of Socrates seems to be set apart from his fellow late period Socratic counterparts, most notably in his apparent acceptance of the superiority of the method of collection and division over his traditional elenctic approach.

³⁶² I have argued extensively in Chapter 2 of this dissertation that, while this is not explicitly stated to be describing Socrates in the dialogue itself, we ought take this description to be a description of Socrates.

Yet, despite these seemingly disparate depictions of Socrates, I would argue that we ought to see these varying images as one and the same character, with each depiction highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of his mentor as Plato has now come to see him. And, while this position will be argued in full in the pages to follow, it is important to note here at the outset that, regardless of the differences in methodology utilized by the varying depictions, there arises a common thread that carries through these late period Socratic dialogues, i.e., Socrates' unwavering appeal and adherence to his divine voice. Given this consistency despite all else, it is my position that Plato maintains his continued belief regarding the influence of divine inspiration in the case of Socrates.

Divine Inspiration and Religion in the Late Dialogues

The Diviner in the *Statesman*

Given the many changes that arise in Plato's late period, before turning our attention to Socrates in particular, it is necessary to first establish that Plato's recognition of the validity of divine inspiration is not limited to a nostalgic portrait of his mentor. To do so, we look first to two dialogues of Plato's late period that do not feature Socrates as its protagonist, the *Statesman* and the *Laws*.

Beginning with the *Statesman*, we find that, in his attempt to determine the precise nature of kingship, the Eleatic stranger notes that a division must be made between two types of expertise regarding the giving of commands: (1) the skill exhibited by individuals who give commands of their own design, and (2) those whose expertise pertains to the distribution of the commands of others.³⁶³ While the true ruler is of course to be associated with the former category, we find that the latter category involves a

³⁶³ *Pol.* 260c1-261a.

variety of individuals, namely, "...the rowers, *the seer*, the herald, and many other sorts of expertise related to these..."³⁶⁴ That Plato considers the diviner (or seer) to be in possession of an *expertise* is of particular importance here, as it shows a consistency of thought that is carried over from the earlier dialogues.³⁶⁵ For one, in the *Ion*, Socrates clearly states that the diviners are in possession of an expertise.³⁶⁶ Further, in the *Laches*, we find that the diviner is given a position of importance on the staff of the general, a point which indicates that the general ought utilize the talents of the diviner in matters of military strategy.³⁶⁷

What, then, is the expertise of the diviner as seen in the *Statesman*? As argued by Brickhouse and Smith, the answer might be derived through an examination of another expertise listed in this division, i.e., the herald.³⁶⁸ To explain, it is the herald's role to properly relay the commands of the ruler to those that ought here these commands. Note, the herald need not know *why* the ruler issued such commands, nor need the herald understand the details or consequences of those commands. The expertise of the herald lies not in possessing an understanding of the commands, but rather, possessing the skills required to properly deliver the commands of others.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁴ *Pol.* 260e1-3. Italics added for emphasis.

³⁶⁵ This connection, and the evidence that follows, has been given by Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 196-97).

³⁶⁶ *Ion* 538d7-e3

³⁶⁷ *Laches* 198e-199a4 As an additional note, in the *Charmides* 173c5-6, Socrates distinguishes between true diviners and false prophets. That this distinction is made is evidence to the sincerity of his belief in the divine and veracity of messages derived therefrom.

³⁶⁸ Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 197)

³⁶⁹ And, while this may seem somewhat simple, it is indeed a skill, as we can easily imagine someone ill-equipped to this task, whether that be due to lack of memory, or even a lack of confidence when challenged on the exact wording of the command issued.

It is in this way then that we ought understand the expertise of the diviner, an individual who not only possesses the ability to properly receive the commands of the gods, but further, is able to correctly deliver this message. Again, similar to the herald, it is not necessary that the diviner *understand* the gods' motives, or even the precise meaning of the message revealed. As such, the diviner, unable to give an account of the divine wisdom he has received, is not himself in possession of knowledge. Yet, despite this lack of knowledge, it is clear from the evidence that the true diviner is not one associated with sophistry or charlatanism, but as someone who, by the Stranger's admission, possesses an expertise that plays a role of importance in the governing of the polis.³⁷⁰

The Divine and the Statesman in the *Statesman*

Looking deeper into the *Statesman*, we find that the role of the divine is not limited to the diviner, but further, is of significant importance to the true ruler as well.³⁷¹ As the stranger explains, in order to establish stability, the rulers must possess the ability to reconcile seemingly incompatible individuals under their rule.³⁷² As an example, the Stranger notes that, if not properly handled, a conflict will inevitably arise between those individuals who are more inclined towards the virtue of courage and those who favor a

³⁷⁰ As Brickhouse and Smith note, this seems to be precisely the point made by Socrates at Apology 22b8-c2, where, Socrates explains that poets, like diviners, are able to create as they do not due to wisdom, but on account of inspiration. And, given my argument regarding the role that divine inspiration plays in the case of Socrates, this oft quoted passage from the *Apology* is perhaps more prescient than coincidental, as we might see this same ability in the nature of Socrates' craft, i.e., his ability to properly guide his interlocutors towards the truth, all the while sincerely denying a personal understanding of the truth towards which he is pointed.

³⁷¹ In this argument I follow closely that of Buttner (2011, 119-120)

³⁷² *Pol.* 308d-309c

more moderate approach. While both courage and moderation are virtues to be praised, given the disparity between the two, the course of favored action between individuals occupying the opposing worldviews will quite often be in conflict. Thus, to avoid this potential confrontation, the ruler must possess the ability to “interweave” the two together to create a harmony that is conducive to each individual, as well as the society at large.

In response to the question posed in the dialogue by Young Socrates as to how the ruler is able to peacefully mix these two dichotomous individuals together, the Stranger explains that the ruler has two options: (1) through creating a mortal bond between the two, i.e., by uniting them through marriage,³⁷³ and (2) by “fitting together that part of their soul that is eternal with a divine bond.”³⁷⁴ To elaborate on precisely what is meant by the forging of a “divine bond,” the stranger explains as follows:

I call divine, when it comes to be in souls, that opinion about what is fine and good, and the opposite of these, *which is really true and guaranteed*; it belongs to the class of the more human... Then we do recognize that it belongs to the statesman and the good legislator alone to be capable of bringing this thing about, by means of the music that belongs to the art of kingship, in those that had their correct share of education.³⁷⁵

Thus, the statesman possesses the ability to instill within his citizens the correct opinions on matters of the Good, Beauty, Justice, etc., which, in turn, will prevent them from veering off into the extreme form of whatever virtue they may naturally favor. So, for instance, lacking in such guidance, the courageous individual will, through unchecked

³⁷³ *Pol* 310b2-4

³⁷⁴ *Pol.* 309c1-2

³⁷⁵ *Pol.* 309c4-d5

aggression, eventually become more of a beast than a man.³⁷⁶ As such, it is the responsibility of the true statesman to introduce the courageous individual to ideas that properly highlight the benefit of a more moderate approach in certain instances, to educate him in such a way as to instill a balance in his soul.³⁷⁷ It is important to note, however, that the Statesman is not claimed to possess the *knowledge* of these things, but rather, merely the correct *opinions*. Thus, we once more are provided the image of the divinely inspired individual who, while lacking knowledge of their own, is in possession of *correct* opinions, i.e., they have access to truth.³⁷⁸ Further, given the sincerity of this description, not to mention the pivotal role this divinely gifted skill of interweaving plays for the stranger in the final definition of the true statesman, that Plato would ironically attribute this ability to divine provenance seems distinctly improbable.³⁷⁹

The Role of Religion in the *Laws*

In addition to the evidence found in the *Statesman*, if we look to the *Laws*, Plato's final, and perhaps most practical text, we find additional evidence in support of the claim that matters of religion, including instances of divine inspiration, are seriously considered by Plato even removed from reference to Socrates. To begin, we look to Book X,

³⁷⁶ *Pol.* 309e1-4

³⁷⁷ While there are indeed differences between the *Republic* and the *Laws*, I would contend that the two texts are, in fact, surprisingly similar, a point which can be seen here in the stated importance that the soul, and the balancing thereof, plays in the establishment of justice in the polis. For more on the similarities between the *Laws* and *Republic*, see Larkin (2015).

³⁷⁸ See Buttner (2011, 120). Buttner adds that such an image of the true statesman, i.e., one that, through a connection to the divine is in possession of correct opinions, and, as such, is able to properly guide his subjects in matters of ethics and morality, is consistent with earlier depictions of the divine ruler, most notably in the *Meno* 98e7-99d.

³⁷⁹ Buttner (2011, 120)

wherein we find the Athenian Stranger³⁸⁰, in an effort to stave off the dangers of atheism, providing an elaborate proof designed to prove that (1) the gods exist, (2) that the gods are concerned with the human race, and (3) that they are not easily swayed by offerings or sacrifices. And, while a detailed analysis of this proof is beyond the scope of this chapter, what is important is the underlying message we might gather from the Stranger's efforts, i.e., that the gods do exist, and that, their supreme wisdom and control over the universe should serve as the basis from which the laws of men be established.³⁸¹ And, while some scholars have argued that the Athenian Stranger's consistent reference to the gods should not be taken literally,³⁸² I would contest that such argumentation is once

³⁸⁰ It has been suggested by some scholars (such as Strauss (1975, 2) and Pangle (1988, 511) that the Athenian Stranger represents Socrates. In support of this position, Aristotle's *Politics* 1265a is often referenced, as, transitioning from his analysis of the *Republic* to the *Laws* Aristotle writes, "Now it is true that all the discourses of Socrates possess brilliance, cleverness, originality and keenness of inquiry, but it is no doubt difficult to be right about everything." However, while this passage might be seen as Aristotle identifying Socrates as the Athenian Stranger, we find that Aristotle never explicitly states this connection. Further, later on in this same passage, Aristotle refers to the author of the *Laws* as "the writer," whereas in his description of the *Republic* the preceding passage, Aristotle consistently identifies Socrates by name. Additionally, given Plato's willingness to use Socrates in other late dialogues, it would seem odd that he would, in his final work, feel the need to hide Socrates behind a curtain of anonymity. In support of this position, see also Cherry (2013, 50-51). On Cherry's view, "What (Aristotle) finds most praiseworthy about the Socratic dialogues – their searching, or zetetic character – seems to be wholly absent from the *Laws*."

³⁸¹ *Laws* 903bb-905d, 907a, 967b. See also Bobonich (2002) 93-96. See also Buttner (2011). Buttner calls attention to *Laws* 811c, wherein, in defense of the legitimization of the constitution thus far constructed, the Stranger notes that their discussion has "not been conducted without a certain breath of the gods." As Buttner argues, considering the context here, it seems unlikely that we are to take this claim ironically. See also 691e and 696b.

³⁸² Strauss (1975, 3-7) and Stalley, (1983, 24-5), both argue that the Stranger's positing of the divine as the basis from which we ought establish the laws of men is nothing more than a veiled reference to the authority of reason itself. Welton (1995, 58-60), posits a similar, though softer claim. On Welton's view, the Stranger's reference to the divine is one of utility, i.e., Plato, understanding the climate of his day, uses an appeal to the divine to supply an authority to the laws that would resonate with the citizens of the polis. However, while it may be the case that references to the particular activities of specific divinities (e.g., that Dionysus gifted wine to men 672a5, or that the gods literally play and dance with humans, 653d4, 654d1) may be taken with a grain of salt, it has already been argued in chapter 4 of this dissertation that a lack of belief in the official gods of mythology does not preclude the possibility that Plato truly believed in the divine. Indeed, there is evidence throughout the dialogues that we ought not take the Homeric depictions of the gods seriously, a point made quite clear in the banning of the poets in Book X of the *Republic*.

more guilty of anachronistic reasoning, i.e., forcing a hyper-rationalist worldview upon Plato and the characters of his dialogues.³⁸³

As evidence to this claim, we find that, on the Stranger's recommendation, those who *dishonor* the gods, whether that offense arise as atheism, theft from a temple, or even the practicing of improper rituals, should be subjected to capital punishment. Thus, following the resolution of the proof for the existence of the gods, the Stranger lays out the details for the punishments to be levied against such individuals. Beginning with atheism, we find that these non-believers are subject to the harshest of punishments, as such an individual, "...deserves to die for his sins not once or twice, but many times..."³⁸⁴ And, this condemnation for atheism should not be taken lightly, for, while there are other offenses Plato believes deserving of capital punishment aside from those pertaining to impiety, e.g., premeditated murder (871d), wounding a family member with the intention of murder (877b7-9), and waging a private war without the backing of the state (955c), that the punishment for atheism should be more severe than the punishment for violent charges is quite telling.³⁸⁵ Yet, perhaps this crime is quite fitting within the context of the *Laws*, as it would seem that, given Plato's belief in the supreme wisdom in the gods, a supreme wisdom that must be the basis for the foundation of the laws of

³⁸³ See Cherry, K (2013, 55-57) Cherry argues that Aristotle, Plato's contemporary and student, takes the role of the divine in Plato's *Laws* quite seriously. On Cherry's view, while not explicitly stated by Aristotle in his direct critique of the *Laws*, when we look to other works, specifically the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *De Anima*, we find evidence that would suggest Aristotle would consider any government established upon a presumed knowledge of the divine would be particularly dangerous.

³⁸⁴ *Laws* 908e2-3.

³⁸⁵ While it is obvious that one cannot be put to death *more than once*, that the atheist is deserving of *multiple* deaths, whereas the individual convicted of pre-meditated murder need only be put to death once, is particularly interesting.

society, insofar as the atheist denies the existence of the divine, and thus, the supreme wisdom contained therein, he arises as a threat to the stability of society itself.³⁸⁶

As an additional example regarding the seriousness with which religion and piety is treated in the *Laws*, we turn our attention to the punishment reserved for temple robbers. Looking to the text, we note first that, if an individual is caught robbing from a temple, and this individual is a foreigner or a slave, that individual will be branded on his face and hands, and will be whipped and exiled from the city. However, as the Stranger explains:

“If a *citizen* is ever shown to be responsible for such a crime – to have perpetrated, that is, some great and unspeakable offense *against the gods* or his parents or the state, *the penalty is death*.³⁸⁷

The reasoning behind the increased severity for the citizen is that, unlike the foreigner or slave, the citizen has been afforded an education, one which, on Plato’s view, would have provided that individual with the required insight to steer him away from such offenses. Thus, given his transgressions *despite* this education, the offender should be considered incurable, and as such, put to death. And, while the death penalty is quite often reserved for those individuals who are deemed incurable after being subject to rehabilitation,³⁸⁸ in the case of the temple robber, they are given no such chance of redemption.

³⁸⁶ *Laws* 908d The Stranger notes that such individuals are often incredibly cunning, and, through the use of beguilement, will persuade other citizens into similarly atheistic worldview. Again, given the laws in the *Laws* are given weight via the authority of divine ordering of the cosmos (upon which they are modeled), a lack of belief in the gods could result, on the Stranger’s view, in anarchy.

³⁸⁷ *Laws* 854e3-6 Italics added for emphasis.

³⁸⁸ E.g., the individual who, despite consistent warning, continues to maintain a private shrine in their house. (910c-d). Another interesting example arises in the atheist whose lack of belief was the result of foolishness, as opposed to the “complete atheist” who uses cunning and guile to disrupt the belief of others. This foolish individual is first sent to the reform center for rehabilitation. However, if, following their rehabilitation, this individual is once again convicted on a similar charge, he is now subject to the death penalty. (908e6-909a7) Note, that both examples pertain to impiety.

The severity of this punishment is made particularly clear when it is compared to that reserved for thieves in general. Looking once more to the text, we read at 8578a1-b4:

Again, a single law and legal penalty should apply to every thief, no matter what his theft is, great or small:

- (a) He must pay twice the value of the stolen article, if he loses the day, and has sufficient surplus property over and above his farm with which to make repayment.
- (b) If he has not, *he must* be kept in prison until he pays up or persuades the man who had him convicted to let him off.
- (c) If a man is convicted of stealing from public sources, *he shall* be released from prison when he has either convinced the state to let him off or paid back twice the amount involved.

The punishment thus prescribed manifests two points of interest: (1) the fact that the common thief is not only spared the death penalty, but is further afforded the chance to atone for his transgressions, and (2) the Stranger's initial insistence that there need be a single law for *every* thief. Beginning with the former, the difference in the severity of punishment between the temple robber and all other thieves once again makes clear the importance that religion and piety play for Plato here in the *Laws*. While the common thief is given the opportunity to pay for his transgressions through monetary means or imprisonment, those foolish enough to rob from temples commit a crime so heinous in the eyes of the Stranger that they are sentenced to death with no chance of rehabilitation or atonement.

The key to understanding why these punishments are so disparate despite the supposed similarity in the crimes committed is perhaps found in the latter point of interest listed above, i.e., the Stranger's insistence that there be a single penalty for every thief. To explain, it would seem to be the case that the temple robber, insofar as he is guilty of *stealing*, should be included in the category of "thief" as indicated by

the stranger in the above passage. However, given the disparity in punishment handed down to the temple robber in comparison to all other thieves, I would contest that such a crime is not one to be associated with common thievery at all. Indeed, given the severity of the punishment, it would seem that theft from the temple is not to be categorized as thievery *simpliciter*, but rather as, first and foremost, an offense against the gods, which, similar to the transgressions of the atheist, is an offense punishable by death.

Given these examples, we find evidence to support the claim that Plato considers crimes against the gods in particular to be of such danger to the community that any individual convicted of such acts should be put to death. Yet, it is not simply atheism nor those who rob from temples that merit such a punishment,³⁸⁹ but also those individuals who merely conduct private sacrificial rituals.³⁹⁰ And, it is this last example that I believe truly shows the sincerity of Plato's religious convictions, for, while the atheist might be construed as an individual who, owing to his lack of belief in the authority of the gods wisdom, seeks to undermine the laws of the polis, it is much more difficult to understand why private sacrifices to the gods would warrant a punishment so harsh as death if the Plato's reverence for the divine³⁹¹ was not sincere. As such, it is difficult to support the claim that we ought not take the Stranger, or Plato, at his word regarding matters of the divine in the *Laws*.

³⁸⁹ Though, it is of note that the atheist deserves to be put to death, "not just once or twice, but many times." (908e)

³⁹⁰ *Laws* 909d5-910d1

³⁹¹ As spoken through the Stranger.

Divine Inspiration in the *Laws*

In addition to the role of religion as discussed above, we also find instances within the *Laws* wherein the Stranger specifically refers to divine inspiration. The distinction to be made between such instances of divine inspiration and the role of religion is that, whereas the established laws are to be modeled after the divine ordering of the cosmos to the extent that is humanly possible, the Stranger also comments upon individual instances of divine inspiration, wherein the individual is, similar to the diviner as described in the *Statesman* and earlier dialogues, the direct recipient of wisdom from the gods. And, given these moments of revelation, by the Stranger's own admission, often do lead to truth, that these instances are mentioned is of particular importance for our purposes here.

To begin, we look to 682a, where we read:

He (Homer) composed these lines...under some sort of inspiration from God. And how true to life they are! This is because poets, as a class are divinely gifted and are inspired when they sing, so that with the help of Graces and Muses they frequently hit on how things really happen.

Here we find direct testimony regarding the ability to those divinely inspired to gain access to truth. Note, however, the Stranger is not claiming that such moments of divine revelation result in the acquisition of knowledge, a point which is once more strikingly consistent with comments regarding divine inspiration as seen in the earlier dialogues, most notably the *Apology*.³⁹² Yet, while the divinely inspired may lack knowledge insofar as he cannot provide an account for that which is gifted to him, he nevertheless stumbles

³⁹² *Ap.* 22c1-3

upon the truth, an occurrence that occurs with such consistency that it cannot be reduced to mere coincidence or luck.

Interestingly, that Plato takes such moments of actual inspiration seriously is made clear in another passage found later in the *Laws*, one that serves as a *warning of the potential dangers* that arise from adhering to the revelations as given by the gods. We read at 719c:

When a poet takes his seat on the tripod of the muse, he cannot control his thoughts. He is like a fountain where the water is allowed to gush forth unchecked. His art is the art of representation, and when he represents men with contrasting characters he is often obliged to contradict himself, and he does not know which of the opposing speeches contains the truth. But for the legislator this is impossible, he must not let his law say two different things on the same subject.

From this passage we might glean a number of important points. First, while the passage does indicate that the inspired poet cannot determine which of his gifted revelations contains the truth, we do find the Stranger indirectly noting that the truth *is revealed*. The problem, then, is not the source of the revelation, nor the potential veracity of such revelation, but rather the inspired individual's lack of understanding. In other words, we are once again given evidence that Plato, through the Stranger, recognizes that the truth can be, and is, revealed through moments of divine inspiration. Second, it is admittedly true that this passage is presented with an admonitory tone, warning us that the legislator cannot rely on divine inspiration in matters of law, as the contradictory accounts that so often accompany revelation would be detrimental to the consistency required for a stable constitution. However, while this warning clearly indicates a hesitancy to rely upon divinely inspired revelation for matters of law, it does not condemn such revelation as chicanery, but rather, once more indicates a sincere belief in its legitimacy, albeit one that should be approached with caution.

Images of Socrates in the Late Dialogues

With the evidence from the *Statesman* and the *Laws* now established, we can proceed on to our analysis of Socrates and the role of divine inspiration in Plato's late dialogues. As noted above, while he is often silent, or even absent, from many of the later dialogues, he is very much present in others, most notably in the *Theaetetus*, a dialogue which dramatically precedes the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, and in the *Philebus*, an oddly "Socratic" dialogue wherein Socrates, though similar in many ways to the Socrates of the early period³⁹³, substitutes the elenchos for the new method of division. In addition to these two obvious examples, I would add a third, i.e., the image of Socrates as indirectly presented via the 6th definition of sophistry as found in the *Sophist*. And, while these three presentations of Socrates may, at first glance, strike us as three distinct representations of Socrates, I would argue that, when viewed through the lens of divine inspiration, these somewhat disparate images of Socrates are revealed as one and the same, each image providing a deeper insight into Plato's late understanding of his mentor, and the role that divine inspiration plays in his philosophical endeavors and ability.

Setting the Stage for Change: Socrates as Midwife in the *Theaetetus*

In terms of chronological events within the dialogues, the *Theaetetus* is the direct predecessor to the *Sophist* and *Statesman*. And, given the *Sophist* and *Statesman* both feature the Eleatic Stranger as its protagonist, it is of note that the *Theaetetus* features

³⁹³ See Frede (1996, 215). Frede notes a number of striking similarities that are almost nostalgic in effect: (1) The dialogue begins abruptly, which recalls similar literary approaches as found in the *Meno* and *Gorgias*. (2) Socrates claims that moral mistakes are involuntary (22b). (3) The different pleasures and kinds of knowledge are afforded the opportunity to speak for themselves, which, as Frede notes, ought remind us of the *Crito*, wherein the Laws themselves are personified.

Socrates front and center, leading a discussion regarding the definition of knowledge. Interestingly, despite its late placement in the Platonic corpus, in many ways the *Theaetetus* may strike the reader as fairly reminiscent of the earlier Socratic dialogues, for not only is the dialogue fairly elenctic in nature, but further, it ends in aporia!³⁹⁴

Yet, despite this familiar *mise-en-scene*, if examined closely, it becomes apparent that this familiarity is actually a forerunner of change for Plato, not only in terms of a break from the middle period³⁹⁵, but also as an indication of the need for new developments, i.e., the methodology found predominantly in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*.³⁹⁶ In defense of this position, let us look first to the image of Socrates we are presented with at the beginning of the dialogue: Socrates as midwife.

Typically speaking, a midwife is an individual who is instrumental in the birthing process, not only in their ability to rightly determine when a woman is pregnant, but further, and more importantly, aides in the delivery of that child. Regarding the

³⁹⁴ *Tht.* 210a8-b2. While the dialogue does successfully determine what knowledge is not, i.e., perception, true judgment, or an account added to true judgment, the discussion fails to find a satisfactory definition of knowledge. Also, given the contextual connection to the *Sophist* and the significant change in cast and methodology that comes with that dialogue, the methodology used by Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, and its failure to achieve satisfactory results in the eyes of the interlocutors, is, I believe, of significant importance. For the contrary position, i.e., that the *Theaetetus* does end with a positive account of knowledge (or at the very least, *human* knowledge) see Sedley (2004).

³⁹⁵ Burnyeat (1992, 57) argues that Plato appears to distance himself from the metaphysical commitments he introduced in his middle period, e.g., the theory of recollection, as well as, to an extent, the theory of the forms. Indeed, we see this at *Tht.* 188a, where the idea of recollection is somewhat dismissed outright. Further, and of particular interest, Burnyeat draws the distinction between the image of the barren midwife in the *Theaetetus* and that of the pregnant Socrates of the *Symposium*. In both dialogues, the imagery of pregnancy and delivery are used to explain the development of ideas, however, whereas in the *Symposium*, Socrates seems to be in possession of the wisdom himself, the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* cannot make such a claim, as he admits that he is barren. I agree with Burnyeat that this revisiting of theme is not coincidental, and would add that this once more indicates that Plato is rethinking and breaking from his more positive account of the Socratic method as found in the middle period.

³⁹⁶ Granted, the method of collection and division is utilized by Socrates in the *Philebus*. However, it is my contention that such use only further proves the point that Socrates is ill equipped to use the methodology, as his inability to utilize it properly shows.

midwifery of Socrates, however, there are some critical differences. As Socrates explains:

The difference is that I attend to men, not women, and that I watch over the labor of their souls, not of their bodies. And the most important thing about my art is the ability to apply all possible tests to the offspring, to determine whether the young mind is being delivered of a phantom, that is, an error, or a fertile truth.³⁹⁷

In short, Socrates aids in the delivery of wisdom, guiding his interlocutors in the development of their own beliefs and ideas. Further, in line with his consistent disavowal of knowledge, Socrates admits that, similar to actual midwives' inability to have children themselves, he is himself barren of all wisdom. Thus, Socrates explains, when an interlocutor does succeed in the discovery of wisdom through their interaction, it is not *from Socrates* that this wisdom arose, but from within the interlocutor alone.³⁹⁸

However, while Socrates adamantly maintains that any wisdom delivered is not his own, he does insist that he plays a critical role in the discovery of truth. As evidence to this claim Socrates points to those individuals who, failing to recognize the role of Socrates in the delivery process, mistakenly believe that the truth was discovered by their work alone. By Socrates' account, these unfortunate pupils who leave his tutelage prematurely, believing themselves to be fully capable of delivering additional truths without the assistance of their former midwife, are destined to fall back into the very ignorance from which he so selflessly delivered them. As Socrates explains:

After they have gone away from me they have resorted to harmful company, with the result that what has remained in them has miscarried; while they have neglected the children I helped them bring forth, and lost them, because they set more value upon

³⁹⁷ *Tht.* 150b7-c3

³⁹⁸ *Tht.* 150d6-7

lies and phantoms than upon the truth; finally they have been set down for ignorant fools, both by themselves and by everyone else.³⁹⁹

Thus, based on this testimony, it is clear that Socrates believes that he plays a fundamental role in the delivery of wisdom from the minds of his interlocutors.

Yet, this certainty on the part of Socrates regarding his role in both the delivery, and rearing, of truth should strike us as perplexing. Given his admitted lack of wisdom, questions arise as to how Socrates is able to (1) exude such confidence in his ability, (2) successfully determine who is (and is not) worthy of his tutelage, and (3) successfully determine which ideas are in fact true. And, similar to the evidence found in the early dialogues regarding Socrates' seemingly inexplicable abilities, we find that the answer to each of these questions arises through an appeal to divine inspiration.

Beginning with the first inquiry regarding the confidence exuded by Socrates regarding his own abilities, we find that, similar to statements made as early as the *Apology*⁴⁰⁰, the reason why the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* engages in such mental midwifery is that he is *compelled* by the god to do so.⁴⁰¹ Indeed, as Socrates notes, not only is his engagement in mental midwifery ordered by the god, but further, it is the god himself that leaves Socrates barren. Thus, given this lack of wisdom, it cannot be the case that Socrates, in recognition of his *own* wisdom, feels obligated to instruct others. Rather, it is divine command alone that serves as the catalyst, spurring him on towards the assisting of young minds in the development of their ideas. And, given Socrates'

³⁹⁹ *Tht.* 150e2-151a

⁴⁰⁰ See Giannopoulou (2013) for a critical comparison of the *Theaetetus* and *Apology*.

⁴⁰¹ *Tht.* 150c9, *Ap.* 30e, 28e, 29d.

belief in the superiority of divine wisdom to human wisdom⁴⁰², a point made clear to Socrates throughout his life via the advice of his *daimonion*, the origin of Socrates' confidence regarding his role as midwife is made quite clear.

Moving now to the question of Socrates's determination of which students are worthy of his assistance, we find once more Socrates directly attributing this ability to the divine. As we read at 151a1-6:

Sometimes (those that leave) come back, wanting my company again, and ready to move heaven and earth to get it. When that happens, in some cases the divine sign that visits me forbids me to associate with them; in others, it permits me, and then they begin to make progress.

We see here, yet again, direct testimony to the involvement of the *daimonion* in the decision making process of Socrates. What is also of interest here is the similarity to the description of the *daimonion* as understood in the early dialogues, both dissuading Socrates from engaging in activities that he ought avoid⁴⁰³, as well as the more positive act of permitting other action.⁴⁰⁴ The point here is that we find a continued acceptance of Socratic appeal to the divine in these later dialogues, an acceptance that is consistent in manner and tone. In other words, if it were the case that Plato were trying to distance himself from the more fantastical aspects of Socrates ability from the early dialogues, one might think that by the time he set out to write the *Theaetetus*, an intricately woven treatise on the nature of human knowledge, such whimsical references to the supernatural would be absent, or at the very least relegated to a significantly diminished role.

⁴⁰² *Ap.* 23a4-b2

⁴⁰³ For example, engaging in a life of politics. See *Ap.* 31c4-32a3

⁴⁰⁴ As we find at *Ap.* 40c1, Socrates notes that the *silence* of his divine sign is to be taken as affirmation of his course of action.

However, given Socrates' consistent and unapologetic appeals to the wisdom of such divine insight, it is difficult to see how such a claim could withstand this blatant textual evidence to the contrary.

Finally, we look to the most interesting of the above concerns, i.e., how Socrates, a man who lacks all wisdom himself, is able to determine which ideas are true, and which are false. To answer this, let us look very briefly to the methodology employed by Socrates in the *Theaetetus*. In the *Theaetetus* we are once more presented with a Socrates who consistently admits his own ignorance, knowing nothing of the topic at hand himself.⁴⁰⁵ And, while this may not seem a remarkable point, we find that such consistent admissions of absolute ignorance are, in a way, a return to form for Socrates. To explain, while the earlier dialogues are rife with such pleas of ignorance, as Plato develops into his middle period, we find a change in the character of Socrates as well.⁴⁰⁶ Specifically, in such middle period dialogues as the *Meno*, *Republic*, and *Symposium*, we find Socrates now holding a variety of metaphysical commitments, e.g., recollection, the forms, etc., that neither the Socrates of the early dialogues, nor the Socrates found in the *Theaetetus* maintain.⁴⁰⁷ Thus, with the image of Socrates as midwife we find Plato giving up on many of the conventions introduced in his middle period, conventions that, I would argue, were used as attempts to build upon the Socratic method, allowing for a more positive methodology, as opposed to one used merely to expose the inconsistencies

⁴⁰⁵ *Tht.* 151c4-d1, 161b1-b4, 161e5-8, 184b

⁴⁰⁶ Vlastos (1991, 46 – 49). See also, Burnyeat (1992)

⁴⁰⁷ See n. 36.

in the beliefs of others.⁴⁰⁸ Thus, the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* does not possess any wisdom of his own. Thus, he does not, and *cannot*, impregnate his interlocutors with his own ideas as sophists do,⁴⁰⁹ but rather, merely assists in the delivery via the elenctic form of questioning more reminiscent of his earlier engagements.

Yet, despite his lack of wisdom, we recall that, in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates *does* claim that he is able to determine which ideas are worthy and which should be discarded. Since such determination cannot be the result of his own wisdom (as he admits none of his own), I would once more suggest that, on the view of Socrates, this inexplicable ability is made possible, at least in part, by divine assistance, a claim which, again, is admitted to by Socrates himself.⁴¹⁰ This claim is supported by a number of factors: (1) As noted above, in his description of his own ability, Socrates consistently refers to divine influence as a major component of his craft. (2) The image of Socrates as midwife that we are presented with in the *Theaetetus* is quite similar to the Socrates of the early dialogues, i.e., an individual who, unlike the more protreptic figure of the middle dialogues, is able to properly guide his interlocutor away from false beliefs without admitting any wisdom of his own, yet, is effectively guided by his divine sign. And, (3) given Plato's acceptance of divine inspiration as a plausible source of assistance in these earlier works,⁴¹¹ when we consider the nostalgic portrayal of Socrates found in the *Theaetetus*, it stands to reason that we ought take Socrates (and thus Plato) at his word regarding the role of the divine in the case of Socrates in the *Theaetetus*.

⁴⁰⁸ See also, Burnyeat (1992, 57).

⁴⁰⁹ *Tht.* 151b

⁴¹⁰ *Tht.* 150d7-e2 See also Burnyeat (1992, 60-61). Burnyeat here points to such a possibility, though he does not strongly commit.

⁴¹¹ See Ch. 3 of this dissertation for extensive arguments in support of this claim.

Evidence from the *Philebus*

Yet, while the *Theaetetus* might provide us with an image of Socrates as reliant upon divine inspiration, the image of the midwife is not the only version of Socrates we are given in the late period. Indeed, in what would seem to be a directly contradictory image to the classically elenctic Socrates of the *Theaetetus*, we find in the *Philebus* a Socrates that seems to do away with the elenchos altogether in favor of the method of collection and division! Yet, despite these disparate appearances, I would argue that the evidence in the *Philebus* only lends additional support to my position. My reasons are as follows: (1) Socrates is not especially adept in his deployment of the method of division, a lack of expertise which I will argue only helps prove my position that Plato does not consider Socrates to be a philosopher in the unqualified sense at this later stage of Plato's development. (2) While Socrates does indeed use the new method of collection and division, to aide in his progress he consistently appeals to, and relies upon, divine assistance. Thus, while the Socrates of the *Philebus*, insofar as he discards the elenchos in favor of the method of collection and division, may, *prima facie*, appear to be in direct opposition to the image of Socrates as depicted in the 6th definition of the *Sophist* (let alone the midwife of the *Theaetetus*), I would argue that upon closer examination, the seemingly different images of Socrates we are given are not as disparate as they might first appear.

Socrates and the Method of Division

It is widely accepted that the *Philebus* should be counted amongst Plato's latest dialogues.⁴¹² Given the dialogue's placement in the corpus, and considering the

⁴¹² See Thesleff (1982, 198-200), Brandwood (1990), and Ledger (1989, 198-199), cited in Frede (1996, 214).

diminished role of Socrates in the late period, the question arises as to why Plato would choose Socrates as his protagonist. In answer to this question, some scholars have suggested that perhaps the reemergence of Socrates is owed to the ethical nature of the discussion at hand.⁴¹³ Yet, while I do agree that the earlier dialogues do *primarily* focus on more practical matters, such concerns are not entirely absent in the late period, especially when taking the overall project of the *Laws* into consideration.⁴¹⁴ If the sole reason for Socrates' resurrection was simply on account of the topic's connection to more traditionally Socratic themes, then it seems odd to render him silent or absent entirely from other dialogues which feature similar connections to earlier dialogues.⁴¹⁵

Given the implausibility of the above suggestion, I would argue that there must exist other reasons as to Plato's selection of Socrates in the *Philebus*. And, in this vein, I agree with Dorothea Frede's claim that Plato's use of Socrates in the *Philebus* was, at least in part, to distinguish Socrates from the master dialectician.⁴¹⁶ To quickly recap, while Socrates does indeed discuss the "divine method" of division, and further, uses it throughout the dialogue to determine the proper ranking of goods,⁴¹⁷ the dialogue ends with Protarchus noting to Socrates that the task is not complete, and that Socrates should

⁴¹³ Waterfield (1980, 271).

⁴¹⁴ Also, as has been noted in Ch. 1 of this dissertation, Socrates' general interest in matters pertaining to ethics does not preclude his interest in other, more theoretical fields of inquiry. See Ch.1, p. 2 n. 8

⁴¹⁵ See Frede (1996, 215) On Frede's view, not only would Socrates, on these grounds, be qualified to lead the discussion regarding the ideal state as found in the *Laws*, but similarly, in the *Timaeus* 19b-20c, Socrates would appear qualified and willing to discuss the ideal state, and yet, passes this duty on to Timaeus and Critias.

⁴¹⁶ See Ch.2, pp. 51-54.

⁴¹⁷ *Phil* 66a-d

continue on to finish what he started.⁴¹⁸ And, while this incomplete result is fairly common (if not expected) for a “Socratic” dialogue, when compared to the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, two dialogues that feature the same method of collection and division, we find the conclusions to be strikingly different, as both dialogues end with a clear agreement that a definition has been reached by the Eleatic Stranger. Looking first to the *Sophist* 268c7-268d, we find the following exchange to close out the dialogue:

VISITOR: Shall we weave his name together from start to finish and tie it up the way we did before?

THEAETETUS: Of Course.

VISITOR: Imitation of the contrary-speech producing, insincere and unknowing sort, of the appearance making kind of copy making, the word juggling part of production that’s marked off as human and not divine. Anyone who says the sophist is of this “blood and family” will be saying, it seems, the complete truth.

THEAETETUS: Absolutely.

Further, a definitive conclusion of this sort is echoed in the *Statesman* as well, for, at the end of the *Statesman*, following the final recap of their efforts towards defining the statesman, Socrates himself responds as follows at 311c4-7: “Another most excellent portrait, visitor, this one that you have *completed* for us, of the man who possesses the art of kingship: the statesman.”⁴¹⁹

We find then a striking contrast between the three dialogues: While all three dialogues feature the method of division, only those wherein it is the Eleatic stranger leading the discussion does the discussion conclude definitively. On the other hand, in the *Philebus*, where it is Socrates, not the Stranger, using the method of division, we are

⁴¹⁸ *Phil.* 67b

⁴¹⁹ Italics added for emphasis.

left wanting, as the dialogue ends in incompleteness. Given this inconclusiveness, I would once more state that this is precisely the point, i.e., that Plato, through his use of Socrates in this way, is demonstrating the need for a mastery of this new method if one is to achieve definitive results. And, given his affinity for Socrates, and the skill exhibited by Socrates throughout Plato's corpus, that Socrates would be shown to be inefficient is perhaps that most compelling way for Plato to emphasize this point.

The Role of Divine Inspiration in the *Philebus*

Yet, while it is true that Socrates ultimately fails to bring about the definitive conclusion presented in other late dialogues, I would argue that we are not to take this failure as an indication that Plato has lost faith in the methodology or ability of his mentor. In fact, I would suggest that, similar to the depictions of Socrates we are given in the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*, the Socrates of the *Philebus* is presented as a reflection of Plato's mature understanding of his teacher, one which, as with those other depictions already described, once more prominently features an attention to the role of divine inspiration in the methodology of Socrates.

To begin, it should be noted that, despite his failure to properly execute the method of division, Socrates is still able to proceed quite far into the discussion. This ability to do so despite his lack of expertise is particularly interesting, especially when we consider Socrates' consistent appeal to the divine throughout the dialogue: (1) The method itself is called, by Socrates, the "divine method" (18b6), (2) there is a prayer for divine assistance to help establish the fourfold division of all being (25b), (3) Socrates consistently refers to the difference between the human and divine mind (22c), and (4)

Socrates appeals to the differences between the divine and human ideal state (33b).⁴²⁰ In this evidence we see, once again, that Socrates, even when utilizing the new, rigid method of division, does not waver from his appreciation of divine assistance.

Yet, while this attention to divine influence should be of no surprise at this point in the case of Socrates, we are presented with one extraordinary piece of textual evidence that demands our attention. Following his praiseful description of the divine method of division, we find, now faced with a potential roadblock in their discussion, Socrates, abandoning the method of division, proclaims that they need not be concerned, as, “some memory has come to my mind *that one of the gods seems to have sent me to help us.*”⁴²¹ This single line is of exceptional importance as, in striking contrast to the apotretic messages of the *daimonion* in which Socrates was warned against a particular course of action, here, in the *Philebus*, we are given textual evidence wherein Socrates is claiming to have received a *positive* message directly from the gods. And, in the context of the dialogue, this revelation bestowed upon Socrates, i.e., that neither pleasure nor knowledge is the good, but rather a third thing which is superior to both, is instrumental for the remainder of the discussion.

Granted, one could argue that such a direct appeal to the divine ought to be taken as an ironic gesture. However, given the staggering amount of evidence that has been presented against such a claim, evidence that is found throughout the entire Platonic corpus, such a claim seems, to me, to be particularly unfounded. Thus, instead of approaching this problem from a skeptic’s perspective, I suggest that we take this moment of positive divine influence with the utmost sincerity, as doing so would provide

⁴²⁰ D. Frede (1996, n.36)

⁴²¹ *Phil.* 20b3-4. Italics added for emphasis.

us insight into how we are to understand Socrates in Plato's later dialogues. To explain, as we have seen, the Socrates of the *Philebus* is presented as not entirely skilled regarding the method of division. And yet, he is able to continue the discussion significantly further than would be expected for someone lacking in expertise. And, while this lack in ability would have crippled other individuals, Socrates, through the direct assistance of the gods, is able to proceed onward.

The point I am attempting to convey here is that, in the *Philebus*, we are given insight into Plato's understanding of his mentor. To explain, as I have argued, as Plato progressed into his late period, his conception of philosophy has evolved. As such, he has come to realize that Socrates can no longer qualify as the embodiment of what the philosopher ought be in an unqualified sense. In short, Plato came to realize that the Socratic method, while useful for tearing down fallacious arguments and exposing inconsistencies in the beliefs of others, is unable to achieve the sort of definitional knowledge he desired. And yet, despite this inability, Socrates does *seem* to know things, i.e., his opinions and instincts always seem to be inexplicably pointed towards the truth. To account for this then, what we find in these late dialogues are images of Socrates wherein the role played by divine inspiration is placed front and center. Here in the *Philebus* we see evidence of Socrates, unable to push forward in the discussion, *directly assisted by the gods*. Whereas others would have faltered, or given up, Socrates, through divine revelation is able to continue. And, it should be noted, that this revelation occurs must be seen as positive in the eyes of Plato. In other words, while it is true that Socrates must rely on divine assistance to proceed in the discussion, such assistance does not

diminish the results of the discussion, especially when one considers the reverence shown by Plato to the wisdom of the gods.

Yet, while Plato does, in the case of Socrates, hold such divine revelation in high esteem, it is my view that he recognizes the limitations and potential pitfalls of reliance upon those few fortunate individuals lucky enough to be so inspired. Indeed, we might glean insight into this view when we consider the ending of the *Philebus*, wherein we recall that, despite Socrates being able to rank the various types of goods, Protarchus reminds him that his task is incomplete. To explain, we recall that in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, an emphasis was placed on maintaining the proper divisions all the way through to the conclusion. In other words, the method of division is so effective because each division can be traced back and explained to any who would inquire. In the *Philebus*, however, we recall that the initial idea that spawned the discussion, i.e., that neither pleasure or knowledge alone was the good, was *given* to Socrates by divine inspiration. As such, this wisdom is not possessed by Socrates, and is thus unexplainable. No account can be given, and so, the division cannot be considered complete. Thus, while *Socrates*, via his divine connection, is able to proceed further in the discussion than the uninspired many, and, while this can be positive given the possibilities such inspiration provide,⁴²² Plato recognizes the need for a methodology that does not rely on the assistance of the divine, hence his development of the method of division.⁴²³

⁴²² See *Phaedrus* 243e-245b. In Socrates' Second Speech, Philosophy is described as a form of madness. See also Gonzales (2011, 102).

⁴²³ Additionally, we are left without the precise ratios between pleasure and knowledge.

Conclusion

Thus, despite the limitations that may be related to reliance upon divine inspiration in matters of philosophy, it is quite clear that, in the case of Socrates, Plato still recognizes its value. Indeed, when we look to the three major images of Socrates presented in the late dialogues, we find that, despite surface discrepancies, the common link between them is their reliance upon and reverence for the divine. As such, we find cause to take seriously the role of the divine in the case of Socrates.

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