

# *Socrates' Avowals of Knowledge*<sup>1</sup>

DAVID WOLFSDORF

## ABSTRACT

The paper examines Socrates' avowals and disavowals of knowledge in the standardly accepted early Platonic dialogues. All of the pertinent passages are assembled and discussed. It is shown that, in particular, alleged avowals of knowledge have been variously misinterpreted. The evidence either does not concern ethical knowledge or its interpretation has been distorted by abstraction of the passage from context or through failure adequately to appreciate the rhetorical dimensions of the context or the author's dramaturgical interests. Still, six sincere Socratic avowals or assumptions of ethical knowledge occur among the early dialogues. Moreover, it is maintained that in a number of these texts Socrates is committed to the epistemological priority of definitional knowledge of excellence for pertinent non-definitional knowledge (for example, that knowledge of the definition of justice is necessary for knowledge of instances of justice). Thus, there are inconsistencies among Socrates' avowals and disavowals of ethical knowledge. It is argued that the most important recent attempts to resolve Socrates' avowals and disavowals of knowledge (for example, Vlastos's) fail. A novel interpretation is then offered that depends upon a fundamental adjustment in the interpretation of Socrates' utterances in the texts. The practice of assembling all of Socrates' topic-relevant utterances, divorced from context, and attempting to distill from these consistent philosophical principles is rejected as naïve. In contrast, it is argued that Plato uses Socrates in various ways in various texts in order to achieve certain pedagogical objectives. Accordingly, Socrates' utterances do not all have the same hermeneutic status. On this depends the correct interpretation of Socrates' occasional avowals of ethical knowledge as well as the general epistemological, specifically ethical epistemological commitments that Plato intended to advance in the early dialogues. The paper concludes with an explanation of the function of Socrates' occasional avowals of ethical knowledge as well as an account of the ethical epistemological commitments that Plato intended to advance among the early dialogues.

---

*Accepted November 2003*

<sup>1</sup> An anonymous referee for *Phronesis* was the first person to read or comment on this paper. I am grateful to Keimpe Algra and that anonymous scholar for recognizing its value. I would also like to dedicate the piece to Professors Martha Nussbaum, Richard Kraut, and Elizabeth Asmis, who have been supporters of my work for some time now.

I.i. *Introduction*

Scholars who have recently examined the topic of the character Socrates'<sup>2</sup> avowals and disavowals of knowledge in Plato's early dialogues<sup>3</sup> proceed as follows. They assemble Socrates' relevant remarks and attempt to derive from these a consistent set of epistemological principles. It is generally recognized that Socrates' avowals and disavowals of knowledge appear inconsistent. Consequently, interpreters seek subtle unifying principles. For example, Vlastos reconciles the apparent inconsistencies by suggesting that Socrates uses words for knowledge equivocally.<sup>4</sup> Brickhouse and Smith suggest that Socrates disavows knowledge-how, but avows knowledge-that.<sup>5</sup> Reeve and Woodruff suggest that Socrates disavows expertise, but avows some non-expert knowledge.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Kraut accepts that Socrates' remarks are to some extent inconsistent, and he proposes that Socrates' views develop over the course of the early period. Specifically, in *Apology* Socrates holds that definitional knowledge is unnecessary for pertinent non-definitional knowledge, but in *Gorgias* his view has shifted.<sup>7</sup>

Both types of solution, unitarian and developmentalist, are fundamentally ill-conceived because they misinterpret the role of Socrates in Plato's early dialogues. They assume that Plato composed Socrates to maintain a consistent set of beliefs, either in a given dialogue or set of dialogues. The seminal version of this view is the mouthpiece principle, according to which Socrates is Plato's mouthpiece. But in the developmentalist's case, one is similarly bound to explain Socrates' shift of views on the grounds that Plato's views shifted.

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter the character Socrates in Plato's dialogues will be referred to by just "Socrates". When the need to distinguish between the character and the historical person arises, the distinction will be made clear.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase "Plato's early dialogues" is a terminological convenience. It refers to the following standardly conceived and conservatively defined set of texts: *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Meno*, *Protagoras*, and *Republic I*. Admittedly, it is quite controversial whether *Republic I* was written significantly prior to the rest of *Republic*. However, it is clearly modeled on the other early definitional dialogues, or they on it. All the texts in this set are unified in theme and content, and this is a reasonable ground on the basis of which to group them. Whether they are in fact early is irrelevant to this study. See Wolfsdorf (2004a).

<sup>4</sup> Vlastos (1985) reprinted in (1994).

<sup>5</sup> Brickhouse and Smith (1994) 30-45.

<sup>6</sup> Reeve (1989) 14-62; Woodruff (1990) reprinted in Benson (1992) 86-109.

<sup>7</sup> Kraut (1984) 274-9.

These interpreters and others fail to appreciate the extent to which Plato uses Socrates in various ways in various passages and dialogues to achieve various objectives. Plato did not compose his early dialogues to be interpreted by assembling all of Socrates' utterances and deriving from these a systematic philosophy. Of course, many of Socrates' utterances do conform to a consistent set of principles. However, it is a mistake to expect that *all* of his utterances do. This has little to do with conditions such as verbal irony and disingenuousness. Granted, Socrates does not always believe what he says and that the relation between his attitudes and the propositional contents of his utterances is not always straightforward. Still, for various dramaturgical and pedagogical reasons Plato occasionally uses Socrates to make assertions that he, Plato, did not intend to advance.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, an interpretation of Plato's early dialogues that focuses on Socrates' contributions must be sensitive to the fact that these utterances do not all share the same hermeneutic status. In short, the method of interpreting Socrates' avowals and disavowals of knowledge here endorsed is distinctive in that it does not assume that all of Socrates' topic-relevant utterances should be interpreted in the same way, that is, as contributions to a Socratic epistemology. In fact, I am skeptical that the question governing the interpretation of Socrates' avowals and disavowals of knowledge should be "What is Socrates' epistemology?" Instead, I suggest that we should ask what epistemological issues Plato problematizes in particular dialogues and what epistemological commitments he intended advance in those texts in which he does so.

I.ii. *Notation*

Plato's varied use of Socrates jeopardizes the assumption that Socrates has a strict trans-textual identity among the early dialogues. Obviously, verbal cues such as the fact that the Socrateses in these texts are named

<sup>8</sup> Throughout this paper claims are made about what Plato intended to advance. In every case, and unless context states otherwise, this should be understood as shorthand for what Plato intended to advance in a given dialogue as a compelling alternative to the related conventional view that is scrutinized and undermined in that dialogue. For example, in *Protagoras* Plato intended to advance as compelling the view that the components of excellence *qua* epistemic are unified, in contrast to the conventional view that they are disunified and that knowledge is but one component of excellence. This idea is discussed further in Wolfsdorf (2004a).

“Socrates” and share certain philosophical interests, beliefs, and so on, lend support to the hypothesis of a single character Socrates present in a number of texts. But how many or what kinds of shared characteristics are necessary for identity here? Clearly, Plato’s experience of the historical Socrates, who had at least some of these characteristics himself, influenced Plato’s composition of Socrateses. However, the fact that the historical Socrates to some extent serves as a reference point for the Socrateses in the early dialogues does not imply that Plato intended these Socrateses to be identical. For instance, one might paint a series of landscapes based on a real landscape without intending to portray one fictional landscape under different guises, let alone intending to portray the real landscape. Plato had his reasons for creating Socrateses – as opposed to Diogenes or Archelauses – and his relation to the historical Socrates obviously informed these reasons. But Plato’s relation to the historical Socrates need not have bound him to such an extent that in composing his texts the Socrates in one dialogue had to be strictly identifiable with the historical Socrates or that the Socrates in one dialogue had to be strictly identical to the Socrates in another.

This literary-ontological problem relates to the topic of discussion in the following way. If one aims to determine Socrates’ epistemological views by assembling all of Socrates’ topic-relevant utterances, one has presumed a trans-textual identity for the character Socrates. But this puts the cart before the horse. Precisely, it begs the question of how Socrates’ avowals and disavowals of knowledge should be interpreted. Consequently, in assembling and assessing the data, it will be convenient to distinguish among Socrateses in various dialogues. This will be done by appending to the name “Socrates” various subscripts.

For Socrates in a given dialogue, the subscript will consist of the first two letters of the dialogue’s title, for example, “Socrates<sub>CH</sub>” for Socrates-in-*Charmides*. To avoid ambiguity, I refer to Socrates-in-*Euthyphro* and Socrates-in-*Euthydemus* as “Socrates<sub>EU</sub>” and “Socrates<sub>ET</sub>”, and Socrates-in-*Hippias Major* and Socrates-in-*Hippias Minor* as “Socrates<sub>HM</sub>” and “Socrates<sub>HI</sub>” respectively. I refer to Socrates-in-*Republic* as “Socrates<sub>R</sub>” plus, if necessary, the numeral corresponding to the book of *Republic* under discussion, for example, “Socrates<sub>R1</sub>” for Socrates-in-*Republic* I.

I refer to the individuals constituting the set of Socrateses in the early dialogues as “Socrates<sub>ED</sub>”, and I use the form “Socrates<sub>a</sub>” or the plural “Socrateses” to refer to the individuals constituting an indefinite set of Socrateses in the early dialogues, where either context more clearly defines this set or where such clarification is unimportant. (Note that in

the cases of “Socrates<sub>ED</sub>” and “Socrates<sub>a</sub>”, I treat the noun-phrase as a singular, although semantically it may refer to a plurality; for example, “Socrates<sub>ED</sub> is named ‘Socrates’” means that the individuals constituting the set of Socrateses in the early dialogues are named “Socrates”.) Finally, hereafter I use the phrase “the persona Socrates” and the name “Socrates” by themselves to mean the character Socrates, under the assumption that such a trans-textual identity exists; for example, when citing the views of other scholars whose interpretations proceed upon this assumption. These linguistic devices are certainly more cumbersome and inelegant than the traditional use of the name “Socrates” by itself. But the simplicity of traditional usage obscures complexities that here cannot afford to be overlooked. One example should suffice. “Socrates identifies goodness and pleasure” is arguably true for Socrates<sub>PR</sub> (Socrates-in-*Protagoras*), but certainly false for Socrates<sub>GO</sub> (Socrates-in-*Gorgias*).

Granted all this, the discussion will proceed in the following manner. I will begin by delimiting the domain of epistemological concerns that Plato intended to problematize in the early dialogues. I will then assemble all of Socrates’ pertinent avowals and disavowals of knowledge. I will demonstrate that these are inconsistent and that attempts to resolve the inconsistencies fail. Finally, relative to this set, I will explain the epistemological commitments that Plato intended to advance in the early dialogues.

### I.iii. *The Range of Socrates<sub>ED</sub>’s Epistemological Concerns*

In the early dialogues Plato never problematizes general epistemological concerns. Unlike, for instance, Descartes, Plato does not question the grounds of ordinary knowledge or belief. He portrays Socrates<sub>ED</sub> and his interlocutors as claiming to know a number of unremarkable propositions. Instead, it is Socrates<sub>ED</sub>’s skeptical attitude toward ethical propositions and his frequent disavowals of ethical knowledge and of ethical expertise that distinguish him from his interlocutors and that define the character of Plato’s epistemological interests in these texts. Consequently, to the extent that Socrates<sub>ED</sub>’s avowals and disavowals of knowledge are of scholarly interest, it is principally those with ethical content that will concern us.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Brickhouse and Smith make this point as follows: “Nor do we ever see Socrates evincing the least doubt about matters whose epistemological status eventually became matters of great controversy in philosophy: the evidence of the senses, knowledge of other persons, theoretical objects, scientific theories, induction, deduction, and so forth . . .

## II. Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s Disavowals of Ethical Knowledge

Socrates<sub>ED</sub> makes the following disavowals of ethical knowledge:<sup>10</sup>

- (d1)<sup>11</sup> [*Gorgias*] I do not say the things I say as one who knows (εἰδῶς).<sup>12</sup>
- (d2) [*Gorgias*] But my position is always the same: I do not know (οἶδα) how the matter stands . . .<sup>13</sup>
- (d3) [*Apology*] I am wiser than this person; for neither of us seems to know (εἰδέναι) anything fine and good, but he thinks he knows (εἰδέναι) something, whereas he does not, and I, not knowing (οἶδα), do not think of myself as knowing.<sup>14</sup>
- (d4) [*Apology*] I too would put on airs and carry myself with distinction if I knew (ἠπιστάμην) these things. But I do not know (ἐπιστάμαι) them, men of Athens.<sup>15</sup>
- (d5) [*Charmides*] But, Critias, I said, you treat me as though I professed to have knowledge (εἰδέναι) concerning the things about which I am asking questions and as though if I were merely willing I could agree with you. But this is not the case. Rather, I am always inquiring into the proposed statement with you on account of my lack of knowledge (εἰδέναι).<sup>16</sup>

Socrates also never considers the epistemological problems regarding 'ordinary knowledge claims' and their corrigibility, claims based on memory or perception . . . He never claims ignorance of such things; he never accuses others of supposing they have knowledge of such things when they do not." (1994, 34-5)

<sup>10</sup> Throughout the discussion most translations are my own. I have used translations from the Loeb series or Cooper's (1997) most recent edition in a few cases where I see no way or need to improve.

<sup>11</sup> Throughout the discussion, but mainly in the first several sections, I employ this format for the introduction of and reference to passages in the early dialogues. The reader will be reminded, most notably, of Vlastos's style of exposition. An anonymous referee expressed displeasure with this insofar as it contributes to a certain pedestrian and plodding style. In defense, I insist that the format is utterly deliberate and essential to my argument. My aim, as the referee also noted, "is to be absolutely systematic where others have failed to be so."

<sup>12</sup> *Gorg.* 506a3-4. In (d1) Socrates<sub>GO</sub> is discussing the proposition that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it.

<sup>13</sup> *Gorg.* 509a4-5. In (d2) Socrates<sub>GO</sub> is again discussing the proposition that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it.

<sup>14</sup> *Ap.* 21d2-6. In (d3) and (d4) Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is discussing the craft (τέχνη) of human and political excellence.

<sup>15</sup> *Ap.* 20c1-3. See preceding note.

<sup>16</sup> *Charm.* 165b5-c1. In (d5) Socrates<sub>CH</sub> is responding to Critias' assumption that he believes that Critias' proposal that self-control (σωφροσύνη) is self-knowledge is true. More generally, Socrates<sub>CH</sub> is disavowing knowledge of the identity of self-control.

- (d6) [*Charmides*] If I am thoroughly refuting you, I said, how can you be thinking that I am doing it for any other reason than that on account of which I would examine what I myself say, namely for fear of failing to notice that I thought I knew (εἰδέναι) something when I did not know (εἰδῶς) it. And I affirm that this is what I am doing now.<sup>17</sup>
- (d7) [*Hippias Major*] He will ask whether I am not ashamed to dare to discuss matters of fineness when I am so clearly confuted regarding the fine (τὸ καλόν), and I do not know (οἶδα) what in the world the fine is.<sup>18</sup>
- (d8) [*Laches*] Now, I, Lysimachus and Melesias, will be the first to say that I have not had a teacher in this subject . . . And furthermore, up to the present I have been unable to discover the craft myself.<sup>19</sup>
- (d9) [*Laches*] Socrates says that he does not know (ἐπαίειν) about this matter, that he is not competent to judge which one of us is speaking the truth, for he has never discovered or learned these things.<sup>20</sup>
- (d10) [*Laches*] If, then, in the discussions just now I had turned out to be knowledgeable (εἰδῶς), whereas these two had not, then it would be just to invite me, above all, to this work. But as it is, we are all similarly in a state of aporia.<sup>21</sup>
- (d11) [*Lysis*] But what a friend (φίλος) is, we have not yet been able to discover.<sup>22</sup>
- (d12) [*Meno*] I am so far from knowing (εἰδέναι) whether or not it is teachable that I do not at all know (εἰδῶς) what excellence (ἀρετή) is.<sup>23</sup>
- (d13) [*Meno*] Now, I do not know (οἶδα) what excellence is.<sup>24</sup>
- (d14) [*Republic I*] But, with all respect, I said, how could someone respond when he did not know (εἰδῶς) and did not claim to know (εἰδέναι)?<sup>25</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Charm.* 166c7-d3. In (d6) Socrates<sub>CH</sub> is responding to Critias' claim that Socrates is deliberately trying to refute him when he questions Critias concerning the product and then object of self-knowledge.

<sup>18</sup> *Hip. Maj.* 304d5-8. Compare: "'Come, then, could you say what the fine is?' And I, through my worthlessness, was in perplexity, and I was unable to answer him properly." (*Hip. Maj.* 286d1-3) Socrates<sub>HM</sub> is here responding to his alleged friend.

<sup>19</sup> *Lach.* 186b8-c5. In (d8) Socrates<sub>LA</sub> is discussing the craft of making people excellent.

<sup>20</sup> *Lach.* 186d8-e3. In (d9) the subject is again the craft of making people excellent.

<sup>21</sup> *Lach.* 200e2-5. (d10) occurs at the end of the dialogue after Socrates<sub>LA</sub> and his interlocutors have failed to determine a satisfactory definition of courage (ἀνδρεία).

<sup>22</sup> *Lys.* 223b7-8. Compare: "But I am so far from such a possession that I do not know how one person becomes φίλος of another." (*Lys.* 212a4-6) Socrates<sub>LY</sub> is here discussing the fact that he has never acquired a friend, although he has sought one out since he was young.

<sup>23</sup> *Meno* 71a5-7.

<sup>24</sup> *Meno* 80d1.

<sup>25</sup> *Rep.* I 337e4-5. In (d14) Socrates<sub>RI</sub> is defending himself against Thrasymachus'

Summarizing the content of these fourteen cases – Socrates<sub>d</sub> disavows knowledge of the non-definitional ethical proposition that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it (d1, d2); he disavows definitional knowledge of excellence or a (putative) component of excellence (d5-7, d10-14);<sup>26</sup> and he disavows knowledge of a craft of excellence (d3-4, d8-9).

In addition to these disavowals of ethical knowledge, Socrates<sub>d</sub> also disavows certain theological and eschatological knowledge as well as expertise in a number of other fields. I cite these, for they will have some bearing on the interpretation of Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s avowals and disavowals of ethical knowledge.

(d15) [*Apology*] For fearing death, men, is nothing other than thinking one is wise when one is not; for it is thinking that one knows (εἰδέναι) what one does not know (οἶδεν). For no one knows (οἶδε) whether death is not, in fact, the greatest good for a person; and yet people fear it as though they knew that it was the worst thing . . . But I, men, differ from most people perhaps in just this way, and if I am to some degree wiser than others it would be in this: while I do not adequately know (εἰδώς) about things in Hades, I do not think I know (εἰδέναι).<sup>27</sup>

(d15) is expressed as an ethical or axiological claim: it is unclear whether death is good or bad. But Socrates<sub>AP</sub> intends to convey that the obscurity of the value of death is a consequence of the obscurity of what occurs in death, in other words, of what death is.<sup>28</sup>

(d16) [*Euthyphro*] Then what are we to say who admit that we know (εἰδόντι) nothing about these things.<sup>29</sup>

In (d16) Socrates<sub>EU</sub> is discussing conventional views about the activities of the gods as these are conveyed in poetry and similar contexts.

(d17) [*Apology*] For you yourselves have seen these things in Aristophanes' comedy, a certain Socrates there being carried around, claiming that he was walking on air and babbling a lot of other nonsense on subjects about which I myself I know nothing at all. And I do not say this to dishonor such knowledge

accusation that he is unwilling to subject himself to cross-examination regarding the identity of justice (δικαιοσύνη).

<sup>26</sup> Note that in *Euthyphro*, although he never says that he does not know what the holy (τὸ ἅγιον) is per se, Socrates<sub>EU</sub> also commits himself to ignorance of the holy (see *Euth.* 5a7-c5, 15c12, and 15e5-16a4).

<sup>27</sup> *Ap.* 29a4-b6. Compare *Ap.* 37b5-7.

<sup>28</sup> Evidence for this interpretation comes from consideration of Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s reasoning toward the end of *Apology* regarding what might happen in death (40c4 ff.).

(ἐπιστήμην) – if, that is, there is someone who is wise (σοφός) in these matters . . . But for myself, men of Athens, I have no part in them.<sup>30</sup>

In (d17) Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is discussing rhetorical skill, “how to make the weaker argument stronger”, the heavens, and Hades.

(d18) [*Apology*] They did know (ἠπίσταντο) what I did not know (ἠπιστάμην), and in this regard they were wiser (σοφώτεροι) than I.<sup>31</sup>

In (d18) Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is describing a somewhat unclear defined group of craftsmen. Presumably, this group includes handicraftsmen; and so he is disavowing conventional craft-knowledge, for example, knowledge of shoemaking and architecture.

Finally, on two occasions Socrates<sub>AP</sub> makes very broad disavowals of knowledge:

(d19) [*Apology*] Finally, I went to the craftsmen, for I was aware (ζυγήδη) that I knew (ἐπισταμένω) nothing, so to speak, but that I would discover that they knew (ἐπισταμένους) many fine things.<sup>32</sup>

(d20) [*Apology*] I am aware of being wise (σοφός) in nothing great or small.<sup>33</sup>

(d20) is the most sweeping of Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s disavowals of knowledge. If taken literally, it is inconsistent with Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s claim to possess a certain kind of wisdom (σοφία), namely human wisdom. But if interpreted in its proper context this difficulty dissolves. (d20) expresses Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s reaction to the Delphic Oracle's claim that he is the wisest man. Socrates<sub>AP</sub> says that this claim puzzled him precisely because he was aware of being wise in nothing great or small. However, after testing the Oracle's claim, he came to believe that he did possess a certain wisdom, namely human wisdom. Strictly speaking, then, (d20) is inconsistent with Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s claim to have human wisdom. But this inconsistency is explained by the fact that Socrates<sub>AP</sub> only gained the insight into the character of his wisdom after testing the Oracle.

Another difficulty is whether (d20) is inconsistent with knowledge claims we might presume Socrates<sub>AP</sub> made before he received the oracular pronouncement, namely ordinary knowledge claims such as those that occur elsewhere in *Apology*. In section VI.ii, I argue that (d20) is consistent with Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s ordinary knowledge claims before and after his

<sup>30</sup> *Ap.* 19c2-8.

<sup>31</sup> *Ap.* 22d2-3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ap.* 22c9-d2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ap.* 21b4-5. Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is here remarking on the Delphic Oracle's assertion that

encounter with the Oracle because Socrates<sub>AP</sub> does not consider ordinary knowledge, say, of his name, spatial location, and so on, to be constitutive of any wisdom – and the word I am translating by “wisdom”, namely “σοφία”, should be understood here as referring to expertise. I interpret Socrates<sub>AP</sub>’s disavowal of knowledge in (d19) similarly.

### III.i. *The Evidence for Socrates<sub>ED</sub>’s Avowals of Knowledge*

Vlastos cites six passages where Socrates<sub>d</sub> claims to know some proposition: *Gorg.* 486e5-487a3; *Prot.* 357d7-c1; *Rep.* I 351a5-6; *Gorg.* 512b1-2 and 508e6-509b1; and *Ap.* 29a4-b9. Of these, I suggest that only the last one is a sincere profession of ethical knowledge.

Benson collects twenty-seven additional instances where Socrates<sub>d</sub> allegedly claims knowledge of some kind. Seven of these, all from *Apology*, are derived from Leshner: 18c4-d2, 21a3, 21b4-5, 22c9-d3, 24a4-7, 37b2-8, 37d6-7. Six, again, all from *Apology*, are from Reeve: 28a4-8, 30a5, 30c6-8, 31d6-e1, 33b6-8, 41d3-5. Two are from Brickhouse and Smith: *Ion* 532d8-e4 and *Euthyd.* 296e3-297a2. One is from Kraut: *Euthyd.* 293b7-8 (repeated at 293c2 and 295b2-3). And eleven are from Benson himself: *Gorg.* 521c7-d3; *Prot.* 310b4, 310d2-3, 335a9-b3, 339b4-6, 339c6-7, 356b5-c3, 360e8-361a3; *Hip. Maj.* 304e6-9; *Euth.* 5c4-8, 15d8-e1. Of these I suggest that only five are sincere professions of ethical knowledge: *Euthyd.* 296e3-297a1; *Gorg.* 521c7-d3; *Prot.* 310d2-4; *Ap.* 22c9-d3, and 29a4-b9.

In addition to these instances, Socrates<sub>d</sub> claims knowledge five times and presumes he has knowledge one additional time: *Cri.* 49d2; *Gorg.* 487c1-4, 512d1-2, 522b3-4, 522d8-e1; *Lach.* 190c4-5. Of these, only the last is a sincere avowal of ethical knowledge. In total, then, Socrates<sub>ED</sub> makes six sincere avowals of ethical knowledge.

In this section and the next I consider all of the passages cited, beginning with those that I do not regard as sincere avowals of ethical knowledge, first from Vlastos (III.ii) and then from the other scholars (III.iii). After that, I cite and discuss Socrates<sub>d</sub>’s sincere avowals of ethical knowledge (IV.i).

### III.ii. *Vlastos’ Evidence for Socrates<sub>ED</sub>’s Avowals of Knowledge*

(r1) [*Gorgias*] I know (οἶδ’) well that if you agree with me concerning what my soul believes, these very beliefs are then true. For I think that one who is going

to adequately test the soul concerning right and wrong living must then have three things, all of which you have: knowledge, goodwill, and frankness.<sup>34</sup>

Of whatever Socrates<sub>GO</sub> is claiming knowledge in (r1), it is not an ethical proposition. He is claiming to know that Callicles’ assent to his beliefs will convince him that his beliefs are true. Socrates<sub>GO</sub> is assuming that Callicles has ethical knowledge and will speak frankly about this in an effort to help him gain such knowledge. Accordingly, Callicles will tell Socrates<sub>GO</sub> whether he agrees with his ethical beliefs, and if he does, then this will indicate to Socrates<sub>GO</sub> that his beliefs are true. Thus, Socrates<sub>GO</sub>’s professed knowledge depends upon his conviction that Callicles has knowledge, goodwill, and frankness. Strictly, in fact, it must depend upon his *knowledge* that Callicles has knowledge, goodwill, and frankness. Socrates<sub>GO</sub>’s grounds for even strongly believing that Callicles has knowledge are relatively insecure. And so it seems incredible that he would claim to know that if Callicles agreed with him, the propositions to which agreement was made would be true. Since this is not an ethical proposition, it could be discarded as irrelevant evidence simply on that ground. But it is still worth considering why Socrates<sub>GO</sub> would make such a bold statement about Callicles’ epistemic condition and character before engaging him in discussion.

I suggest that, with regard to the intentions of the dramatic personae, Socrates<sub>GO</sub>’s statement should be interpreted as an expression of (charitable) respect. In other words, given the boldness of Callicles’ assertions, Socrates<sub>GO</sub> is charitably assuming that Callicles knows what he is talking about. In terms of authorial intention, Socrates<sub>GO</sub>’s assumption may be understood as a dramatic device whose function is to demonstrate Callicles’ self-deception. The use of such a device is common among the early writings. When Socrates<sub>d</sub> begins conversation with some interlocutor, for instance, Euthyphro, Hippias, or Laches, he assumes that the interlocutor has knowledge (or wisdom) because the interlocutor claims to. But in the course of the dialogue, it is revealed that such figures do not.

(r2) [*Protagoras*] You yourselves surely know (ἴστε) that wrong action done without knowledge is done with ignorance.<sup>35</sup>

In (r2) Socrates<sub>SPR</sub> attributes knowledge of a proposition to his hypothetical interlocutors, most people, and in doing so he implies that he himself

<sup>34</sup> *Gorg.* 486e5-487a3.

<sup>35</sup> *Prot.* 357d7-e1.

knows this proposition. Indeed, if this is a proposition that most people know, then it would be surprising that Socrates<sub>PR</sub> would be ignorant of it. Again, though, this can hardly be counted as an ethical proposition, even though it contains an ethically significant expression, “wrong action”. It had previously been argued that wrong action is done without knowledge. So this is not the claim here. That is already accepted and assumed. The claim is that what is done without knowledge, namely wrong action, is done with ignorance.<sup>36</sup> Socrates<sub>PR</sub> is simply drawing the reasonable inference from the assumption: not to have knowledge is to be ignorant. The claim that wrong action is done without knowledge is controversial. But that is not what Socrates<sub>PR</sub> is claiming he and everyone else surely know.

(r3) [*Republic* I] for injustice is ignorance – no one could still not know this.<sup>37</sup>

(r3) is an ethical proposition, and Vlastos comments on it: “that is to say, now everyone would know it: *a fortiori* so would Socrates.”<sup>38</sup> Vlastos is correct; if no one could fail to know this, then Socrates<sub>R1</sub> would know it. But it is wrong to interpret the passage as claiming that anyone (who followed the argument) including Socrates<sub>R1</sub> would know that injustice is ignorance. The claim has been lifted from a conditional statement in which it is embedded. When restored to its original context, it can be clearly seen not to be a knowledge claim. The full passage runs:

(r3<sup>1</sup>) But now, I said, if justice is knowledge and excellence, it will easily, I take it, be shown to be also a stronger thing than injustice since injustice is ignorance – no one could still not know this.<sup>39</sup> (my emphasis)

The claim that injustice is ignorance depends upon the assumption that justice is knowledge. Socrates<sub>R1</sub> has argued for this. But he does not claim to know it. As in the case of the previous passage from *Protagoras*, (r2), since ignorance is the opposite of knowledge and injustice is the opposite of justice, it follows that if justice is knowledge, injustice is ignorance. One could only reasonably claim to know that injustice is ignorance if one claimed to know that justice is knowledge. But Socrates<sub>R1</sub> does not claim to know that.

<sup>36</sup> Therefore, the claim should also not to be taken as intentionally making a point about the psychology of action.

<sup>37</sup> *Rep.* I 351a5-6. The verb here is “ἀγνοήσετεν”.

<sup>38</sup> Vlastos (1994) 47.

<sup>39</sup> *Rep.* I 351a3-6.

(r4) [*Gorgias*] he knows (οἶδεν) that for a wicked man it is better not to live, for necessarily he lives badly.<sup>40</sup>

The one who knows in (r4) is a sea pilot. Vlastos comments on him: “Socrates would have no grounds imputing knowledge about anything to [the sea pilot] unless he himself had that knowledge. If he did not believe he knows what he says [the sea pilot] knows, his saying that [the sea pilot does] would be a fraud.”<sup>41</sup> However, we have already seen that Vlastos’s claim is mistaken. In the first *Gorgias* passage considered, (r1), Socrates<sub>GO</sub> attributes knowledge to Calicles while disclaiming such knowledge himself. Similarly, in *Euthyphro* and *Hippias Major* Socrates<sub>EU</sub> and Socrates<sub>HM</sub> assume that Euthyphro and Hippias have knowledge, while Socrates<sub>EU</sub> and Socrates<sub>HM</sub> do not. We have seen that in terms of the dramatic persona’s intentions this may be an expression of respect and that in terms of the author’s intentions it may occur as part of a dramatic device. In an effort to collect passages where Socrates<sub>d</sub> claims ethical knowledge, Vlastos fails to appreciate the rhetorical dimension of the passage here.

The passage arises in consideration of the value of various crafts or forms of expertise (τέχναι). Socrates<sub>GO</sub> aims to convey to Calicles that certain crafts preserve life, but that in doing so they are not supremely valuable, for the preservation of life per se is not of supreme importance. In particular, the craft of sea piloting enables its possessor to convey people from one destination to another and to minimize the dangers of sea transport. However, Socrates<sub>GO</sub> believes that such crafts are of subordinate importance to those that concern themselves with the goodness of the individual, for he believes that a person whose soul is corrupt ought not to exist at all. He compares this with the idea that a person in great pain with an incurable disease, that is, with a bad condition of the body ought not to live. Rhetoric, Socrates<sub>GO</sub> reckons, is a skill of some kind that enables its possessor to preserve his life, for instance, if he is being tried for a capital offense. However, he does not believe that such a skill is of supreme value, again, because he believes that it is more important to live well than simply to live and that rhetoric does not aid one in living well. Accordingly, Socrates<sub>GO</sub> claims that the sea pilot, when, walking on the quay, he considers his life’s work, does not maintain the conceit that what he does is of great value. He then explains the reason:

<sup>40</sup> *Gorg.* 512b1-2.

<sup>41</sup> Vlastos (1985) 48.

For he knows (ἐπίσταται), I think, how to tell which of his passengers he has benefited by not having let them become lost at sea as well as which he has harmed, knowing (εἰδώς) that he has put them ashore in a condition in no way better than when they boarded, neither in body nor soul. So he reckons that if a person suffering from a great and incurable illness has not drowned, this person is wretched because he did not die and that the pilot himself has not benefited him. Moreover, if someone has numerous incurable ailments of the soul, which is more precious than the body, he does not reckon that such a person should live and that he will benefit him by saving him from the sea and from the law court and from whatever else. Rather, he knows that for a wicked man it is better not to live, for necessarily he lives badly.<sup>42</sup>

The point to be stressed here is that, in fact, it is quite implausible to think that a sea pilot would necessarily have these thoughts. Clearly, they are not the thoughts of the average sea pilot, but of Socrates<sub>GO</sub>; and Socrates<sub>GO</sub> is embedding them within the context of the craft of sea piloting to convey the points described above. This is a rhetorical strategy or dramatic device Plato employs frequently enough in his writings. Plato employs it precisely where he wants forcefully to introduce a proposition or set of claims, but without making Socrates<sub>d</sub> claim knowledge of them; for instance, when Socrates<sub>d</sub> attributes a saying to the wise. An example that closely resembles the *Gorgias* passage under consideration occurs in *Protagoras* where Socrates<sub>SPR</sub> is engaged in the interpretation of Simonides' ode. His particularly distorting interpretation of the ode itself cautions against the exegetical imprudence of taking seriously the attribution of his own beliefs to others. He says:

For Simonides is not so badly educated that he would praise a person who willingly did no wrong, as though there were some who did wrong willingly. I am quite sure of this – that none of the wise men considers that anybody ever willingly errs or willingly does bad and foul deeds. Rather, they know (ῖσασιν) well that all who do bad and foul things do them unwillingly.<sup>43</sup>

One can imagine that Vlastos would count this passage as another instance where Socrates<sub>d</sub> claims ethical knowledge, although in an indirect fashion. But actually, it is precisely the attribution of the knowledge to others – although normally this may justify the assumption of the attributer's own commitment to that knowledge – that enables Plato to express the proposition, without having Socrates<sub>d</sub> directly claim knowledge of it.

Thus, in such cases I suggest that although normally the speaker's attribution of knowledge to another may justify the assumption of the attrib-

<sup>42</sup> *Gorg.* 511e6-512b2.

<sup>43</sup> *Prot.* 345d6-e4.

uter's own commitment to that knowledge, such attributions by Socrates<sub>d</sub> are a special case. In short, again here I do not find convincing evidence of Socrates<sub>d</sub> claiming ethical knowledge.

(r5) [*Gorgias*] These matters, as has become evident to us in our preceding exchange, are fixed and – to put it rather crudely – bound with claims of steel and adamant – or so it would at least seem – claims that unless you or someone more vigorous than yourself can unfasten, no one can assert otherwise than I do and still assert well. For my position is the same as always: I do not know (οἶδα) how these matters stand, but of all whom I have encountered, as now, no one is able to state it otherwise and not look ridiculous. And so, once again, I assert that these things are so.<sup>44</sup>

The matter to which Socrates<sub>GO</sub> is referring in (r5) is the proposition that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it (in this section subsequently referred to as “*p1*”). This passage is Vlastos's strongest evidence that Socrates<sub>ED</sub> uses the Greek words for knowledge equivocally, in one sense when he is claiming elenctically justified fallible knowledge (so-called knowledge<sub>E</sub>), in another when he is denying infallible knowledge (so-called knowledge<sub>C</sub>). Vlastos regards the present passage as ostensibly contradictory. On the one hand, Socrates<sub>GO</sub> strongly affirms *p1*; on the other hand, he denies knowledge of it. But this is not a contradiction. However firmly Socrates<sub>GO</sub> is convinced of the truth of *p1*, his conviction and strong affirmation are not equivalent to a knowledge claim. This is precisely the point that the passage conveys: although Socrates<sub>d</sub> may strongly believe an ethical proposition to be true and with great confidence assert it as true, still, this does not imply and it should not be inferred that he believes that he knows that proposition.<sup>45</sup> (I discuss this point in greater depth in section VII.)

In sum, the passages that Vlastos has adduced as evidence of Socrates<sub>d</sub> avowing ethical knowledge fail to convince me. The evidence either does not concern ethical knowledge or its interpretation has been distorted by abstraction from context or through failure adequately to appreciate

<sup>44</sup> *Gorg.* 508e6-509b1.

<sup>45</sup> My position on this matter accords with that of Benson: “the fact that Socrates frequently expresses extreme confidence in various truths . . . is simply a red herring in this context. It has been no part of my account to suggest that Socratic knowledge is to be identified with confidence, extreme or otherwise.” (2000, 227). In contrast, Vlastos claims: “being convinced of *p* is consistent with knowing *p*.” (1994, 43, n. 13). If one knows *p*, one is surely convinced of *p*. But one may be convinced of *p* without knowing *p* or, more importantly, believing one knows *p*. Consistency does not entail implication.



the rhetorical dimensions of the context or the author's dramaturgical interests.

### III.iii. *Other Evidence for Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s Avowals of Knowledge*

Aside from the passages Vlastos cites in support of his view that Socrates<sub>d</sub> avows ethical knowledge, scholars have cited twenty-seven others. Of these, twenty-three are not instances of Socrates<sub>d</sub> sincerely avowing ethical knowledge. Of the seven that Leshner cites, six do not have ethical content (*Ap.* 18c4-d2, 21a3, 21b4-5, 22c9-d3, 24a4-7, 37d6-7); moreover, one is not a knowledge claim (*Ap.* 21a3). One, namely that at 37b2-8, is a genuine ethical knowledge claim. Of the six additional passages Reeve cites, three are not of ethical content (*Ap.* 28a4-8, 30a5, 33b6-8); moreover, they are not knowledge claims, but commands. One is of ethical content, but it is not a knowledge claim (*Ap.* 41d3-5). The remaining two (*Ap.* 30c6-8, 31d6-e1) have ethical content, but they are not knowledge claims; they are commands. Of the additional two passages Brickhouse and Smith cite, one is not an ethical knowledge claim (*Ion* 532d8-e4), but the other is (*Euthyd.* 296e3-297a2). Of the eleven additional passages Benson cites, two are genuine ethical knowledge claims (*Gorg.* 521c7-d3; *Prot.* 310d2-3). Six are not ethical in content (*Prot.* 310b4, 335a9-b3, 339b4-6, 339c6-7, 360e8-361a3, *Euth.* 15d8-e1). One is not a knowledge claim (*Hip. Maj.* 304e6-9). One has ethical content and is a knowledge claim, but it is too absurd to have hermeneutic significance for the interpretation of Socrates<sub>EU</sub>'s ethical epistemology or any ethical epistemology Plato intended to advance (*Euth.* 5c4-8). In section III.iii.i, I discuss Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s knowledge claims of non-ethical content and in section III.iii.ii, the alleged, but in fact non-knowledge claims of ethical content.

#### III.iii.i. *Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s Knowledge Claims of Non-Ethical Content*

Socrates<sub>d</sub> makes at least eleven further knowledge claims of non-ethical content:

- (r6) [*Ion*] I speak nothing other than the truth, as is fitting for a layman. For in regard to this question I just asked you, consider how trivial and commonplace it is – a matter that any person might know (γνώναι) – that the inquiry is the same when one has acquired the whole art.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>46</sup> *Ion* 532d8-e4.

In (r6) Socrates<sub>IO</sub> is explaining to Ion that a person who has acquired a particular expertise (τέχνη) in its entirety is able to discuss and investigate any pertinent matter. The fact that Ion cannot discuss poets other than Homer indicates that he does not possess the expertise of poetry. The passage may be important for our understanding of the conception of expertise that Socrates<sub>d</sub> employs, but the content of the claim is not ethical.

- (r7) [*Euthydemus*] 'Come then, answer me this,' he said, 'Do you know (ἐπίστασαι) anything?' 'Yes, of course,' I replied, 'many things, in fact, though insignificant ones.'<sup>47</sup>

In (r7) Socrates<sub>ET</sub> makes a general claim about what he knows, namely that he knows some things. At the same time, he qualifies the scope of his knowledge by its value. Although he does know some things, they are insignificant. Since the content of what Socrates<sub>ET</sub> is claiming to know is not expressed, it should not be assumed that ethical propositions are among the things he claims to know. Therefore, this passage should not be used as evidence of Socrates<sub>d</sub> avowing ethical knowledge.

- (r8) [*Protagoras*] For I know (οἶδα) that if this were clear [that is, what excellence is and whether it has parts], then that other question concerning which you and I have drawn out such a long discussion – I denying and you claiming that excellence can be taught – would be cleared up satisfactorily.<sup>48</sup>

In (r8) Socrates<sub>PR</sub> is claiming to know something about the logico-epistemological relation between two ethical propositions, that knowing the one (that is, whether excellence is knowledge) would enable one to know the other (that is, that excellence is teachable). This passage may provide support for the claim that Socrates<sub>PR</sub> is committed to the sufficiency, if not necessity, of definitional knowledge of excellence for pertinent non-definitional ethical knowledge. But Socrates<sub>PR</sub> is not claiming to know either one of the ethical propositions.

- (r9) [*Apology*] Besides, these accusers are many and have already been making their accusations for a long time, and moreover, they spoke to you when you were at an age when you would most easily believe them – some of you as children and youths – and the case they prosecuted went completely by default since there was no defense. But the most unreasonable thing of all is this, that it is not possible to know (εἰδέναι) and speak their names, except when one of them happens to be a comic poet.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> *Euthyd.* 293b7-8.

<sup>48</sup> *Prot.* 360e8-361a3.

<sup>49</sup> *Ap.* 18c4-d2.

In (r9) Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is implying that members of the jury and he know that Aristophanes was partly responsible for the impression of him that the jurors received when they were young. The content of the knowledge claim is not ethical.

(r10) [*Apology*] What in the world is the god saying? What riddle is he making? For I am aware (ξύνουίδα) that I am wise in nothing great or small.<sup>50</sup>

(r10) contains evidence for both Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s avowal and disavowal of knowledge, and I have already discussed it above among other disavowals of knowledge. However, as far as it contains an avowal of knowledge, Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is not avowing knowledge of any ethical matters.

(r11) [*Apology*] There you have the truth, men of Athens, and I speak without hiding anything from you, great or small, and I am not lying. And yet I know (οἶδα) quite well that I am incurring hatred by just that conduct.<sup>51</sup>

In (r11) Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is claiming to know something about the psychology of the jurors, but he is not claiming to know anything specifically ethical.

(r12) [*Apology*] For I know (οἶδα) well that wherever I go, as here, the young will listen to my talk.<sup>52</sup>

(r13) [*Protagoras*] Then, I, recognizing (γινούς) his voice, said, 'Hello, Hippocrates!'<sup>53</sup>

(r14) [*Protagoras*] Then I perceived (ἔγνων) that he was not pleased with himself in making his former answers and that he would not be willing to play the role of respondent in discussion.<sup>54</sup>

(r15) [*Protagoras*] 'Do you know the ode or should I recite the whole thing?' To this I replied, 'there is no need; I know (ἐπίσταμαι) it.'<sup>55</sup>

(r16) [*Protagoras*] 'Do you notice that this and the former are statements of the same person?' 'I know (Οἶδα),' I said.<sup>56</sup>

(r17) [*Euthyphro*] But now I know (οἶδα) that you think you know what the holy (τὸ ὅσιον) is and what it is not.<sup>57</sup>

In (r17) Socrates<sub>EU</sub> is claiming to know something about Euthyphro's psychological state, specifically about Euthyphro's belief about his own knowledge. Socrates<sub>EU</sub>'s attitude toward Euthyphro's psychological state may be reasonable, given that Euthyphro has professed to be an expert in theological matters. But Socrates<sub>EU</sub> is not here claiming to have knowledge of any ethical proposition.

In sum, most of the preceding citations contain ordinary knowledge claims. One contains a general claim to know things of no significance (r7). Eight are ordinary knowledge claims (r9), (r13), (r15), (r16), four of which are based on psychological observations (r11), (r12), (r13), (r17). The remaining three have logico-epistemological content (r6), (r8), (r10).

### III.iii.ii. *Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s Alleged Knowledge Claims of Ethical Content*

Socrates<sub>d</sub> makes nine claims that have ethical content and that seem to be knowledge claims, but in fact are not.

(r18) [*Apology*] Know well (εὖ ἴστε) that what I said before is true, that great hatred has arisen against me and in the minds of many persons. And it is this that will cause my condemnation – if it is to cause it – not Meletus or Anytus, but the prejudice and dislike of the multitude.<sup>58</sup>

(r19) [*Apology*] For know well (εὖ ἴστε) that the divine commands these things [that is, Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s philosophical activity].<sup>59</sup>

(r20) [*Apology*] but if anyone says that he has ever learned from me or heard anything privately from me that all the others did not, know well (εὖ ἴστε) that he is lying.<sup>60</sup>

(r21) [*Apology*] For know well (εὖ γὰρ ἴστε) that if you kill me, I being such a man as I say I am, you will not injure me so much as yourselves, for neither Meletus nor Anytus could injure me. That would not be possible; for I believe it is not permitted by the divine that a better man be injured by a worse man.<sup>61</sup>

(r22) [*Apology*] For know (εὖ γὰρ ἴστε), men of Athens, if I had tried to go into politics, I would have been put to death long ago and should have done no good to you or myself.<sup>62</sup>

(r18-20) are not ethical in content, but I have chosen to discuss them with (r21-22) because all the passages have a similar syntactical form. Rather

<sup>50</sup> *Ap.* 21b4-5.

<sup>51</sup> *Ap.* 24a4-7.

<sup>52</sup> *Ap.* 37d6-7. In (r12) Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is claiming to know how the young will behave, but he is not claiming that he knows anything ethical.

<sup>53</sup> *Prbt.* 310b4-5. (r13) has no ethical content.

<sup>54</sup> *Prot.* 335a9-b2. (r14) is a psychological observation, but not an ethical one.

<sup>55</sup> *Prot.* 339b4-5. (r15) lacks ethical content.

<sup>56</sup> *Prot.* 339c6-7. (r16) lacks ethical content.

<sup>57</sup> *Euth.* 15d8-e1.

<sup>58</sup> *Ap.* 28a4-8.

<sup>59</sup> *Ap.* 30a5.

<sup>60</sup> *Ap.* 33b6-8.

<sup>61</sup> *Ap.* 30c6-8.

<sup>62</sup> *Ap.* 31d6-e1.

than claiming to know something, Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is commanding his audience to know it. This form of expression is idiomatic and akin to our expression “rest assured [that]”. The speaker uses the expression to instill confidence in his audience of the proposition that follows. For instance, in responding to the “What-is-*F*?” question, Laches says: “know well (εὖ ἴσθι) that if a man were willing to remain in rank, defend against the enemy, and not flee, he would be courageous.”<sup>63</sup> And Hippias says, “know well (εὖ ἴσθι), Socrates, if I must speak the truth, a beautiful young woman is beautiful.”<sup>64</sup> Lamb and Fowler translate the expressions as “you may be sure” and “rest assured” respectively.<sup>65</sup> Of course, in both instances, the speakers, Laches and Hippias, do believe that they know the propositions they are persuading Socrates<sub>LA</sub> and Socrates<sub>HM</sub> respectively to accept. But it cannot be inferred in general that one who uses this form of expression believes that he knows the proposition he is persuading his audience to accept.

(r21) supports this point. Socrates<sub>AP</sub> encourages his audience to accept that if they kill him, they will injure themselves more than him. But, then, he expresses his explanation of this as a belief claim rather than a knowledge claim: “For I believe (οἶμαι) it is not permitted by the divine that a better man be injured by a worse man.” Moreover, in his ensuing statements Socrates<sub>AP</sub> continues to explain himself with belief claims rather than knowledge claims: “Perhaps he thinks he would thus inflict great injuries on me . . . but I do not believe so (οἶμαι);”<sup>66</sup> “For I think (μοι δοκεῖ) the divine fastened me upon the city.”<sup>67</sup> In short, one who employs the expression “εὖ ἴσθι” or “εὖ ἴστε” may believe he knows what he is persuading his audience to accept, but he need not. And given the particular difficulties of Socrates<sub>d</sub>’s epistemic commitments, it is most reasonable not to assume that when he uses these expressions he is implying that he knows the given propositions.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>63</sup> *Lach.* 190e5-6.

<sup>64</sup> *Hip. Maj.* 287e3-4.

<sup>65</sup> (1924) 47; (1926) 361.

<sup>66</sup> *Ap.* 30d2-4.

<sup>67</sup> *Ap.* 30e5-6.

<sup>68</sup> It may be objected that whereas in the case of (r21) Socrates<sub>AP</sub> proceeds to explain himself with belief claims, in the case of (r22) he explains himself by saying: “Do not be angry with me for speaking the truth (λέγοντι τἀληθῆ).” (31e1) Therefore, in this case, it seems more reasonable to infer that Socrates<sub>AP</sub> believes that he knows the proposition in (r22). Two replies can be made to this suggestion. One is that Socrates<sub>d</sub> can believe *p* is true, without believing he knows *p*. As we have seen in our discussion of (r5), Socrates<sub>GO</sub> explicitly indicates this. But the more reasonable

(r23) [*Apology*] You know (ἴστε) Chaerephon, I believe.<sup>69</sup>

In (r23) Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is not claiming to know anything, he is claiming that the jurors most likely know who Chaerephon is.

(r24) [*Protagoras*] If [you weigh] the pleasant against the painful, and the painful is outbalanced by the pleasant – whether the near by the remote or the remote by the near – you must take that course of action which is pleasant; but if the pleasant is outweighed by the painful, then you should not take that course of action. Can it, I say, be otherwise than this, men? I know (οἶδ’) that they [that is, οἱ πολλοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων]<sup>70</sup> would be unable (ἄν ἔχοιεν) to say anything else.<sup>71</sup>

(r24) is more controversial. Regarding the final sentence – if Socrates<sub>AP</sub> knows that they could state no alternative, presumably this implies that he knows the case must be so, that is, that one must take the more pleasant course of action. But Socrates<sub>PR</sub>’s commitment to hedonism has been much debated. It is quite unclear that Socrates<sub>PR</sub> is committed to the premises that lead up to this conclusion, principally, the premise that pleasure and goodness are identical. If he is not, then he is merely drawing logical inferences from premises, knowledge of which he does not in fact claim. Instead, he would merely be claiming that one who was committed to such premises would be compelled to the conclusion given and therefore could state no alternative.

(r25) [*Apology*] But, judges, you also must be disposed toward death with good hope and must bear in mind this truth: nothing bad can come to a good man, neither in life nor after death, and the divine does not neglect his affairs. So, too, that which has now befallen me has not occurred by chance, but it is clear to me that it was better for me to die now and to be freed from troubles. That is the reason why the sign never interfered with me.<sup>72</sup>

he has done good to the city, but that one who opposes the will or interests of the city will inevitably lose his life. In other words, the only way to make headway as a social revolutionary is by avoiding established political arenas and confining one’s activity to one’s private sphere. Socrates<sub>AP</sub>’s emphasis, then, is on facts about political conditions, not on the ethical value of his activity. So even if we were prepared to infer that Socrates<sub>AP</sub> believes he knows some of the propositional content in (r22), it would be that. Finally, his belief that he knows that is quite consistent with some of his other observations about the behavior of his fellow citizens such as in (r11). On the other hand, (a2) lends some support for interpreting the ethical aspect of (r22) as implying that Socrates implies that he has done good for the city. I discuss this problem further below.

<sup>69</sup> *Ap.* 21a3.

<sup>70</sup> *Prot.* 352d5.

<sup>71</sup> *Prot.* 356b5-c3.

Reeve cites (r25) as an “explicit” knowledge claim. If it were, it would be of an ethical proposition. But it is not. Nowhere does Socrates<sub>AP</sub> claim to know that nothing bad can befall a good man in life or death. He clearly does claim this to be true. But that he is convinced of its truth on account of the silence of his divine sign does not imply that he believes that he knows it.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Socrates<sub>GO</sub> claims that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it, but he denies knowledge of this. Of course, Socrates<sub>GO</sub>’s and Socrates<sub>AP</sub>’s epistemological commitments in this one regard need not be identical. But to the extent that there is evidence to assess the matter, I suggest that they are.<sup>74</sup>

(r26) [*Hippias Major*] So, I think, Hippias, that I have been benefited by conversation with both of you, for I think I know (δοκῶ μοι εἰδέναι) the meaning of the saying ‘fine things are difficult’.<sup>75</sup>

This passage should not be interpreted as a sincere profession of the literal content of the proposition that beautiful things are difficult or as a profession of knowledge. Socrates<sub>HM</sub> is concluding the investigation on a witty and ironic note. By citing the saying, he is merely conveying that the investigation has been difficult and that it is difficult to achieve something of value, in this case, the definition of the fine. At the same time, his statement comes immediately after the following statement:

So whenever I go home to my house and he hears me saying these things, he asks me whether I am not ashamed, daring to discuss fine practices when I am so clearly refuted concerning the fine that I do not even know what it is. ‘And yet how are you to know,’ he will say, ‘whether someone has made a fine speech or done anything whatsoever when you are ignorant of what the fine is?’<sup>76</sup>

Socrates<sub>HM</sub>’s final line ironically contrasts with the main content of the passage. Although Hippias and he have failed to determine what the fine is, the saying with which he concludes the investigation is, according to a literal interpretation, a claim about the nature of fine entities. Therefore, the qualification of his knowledge claim with the verb “δοκεῖν” – “I think I know the meaning of the saying” – may serve as an acknowledgement of this irony.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>73</sup> I discuss this topic further in section VII.

<sup>74</sup> I discuss this topic further in section VII.

<sup>75</sup> *Hip. Maj.* 304e6-9.

<sup>76</sup> *Hip. Maj.* 304d4-e1.

<sup>77</sup> This conclusion is similar to Socrates<sub>LY</sub>’s concluding statement: “Today, Lysis and Menexenus, we have made ourselves ridiculous – I, an old man, and you as well. For I believe these others will go away and tell how we believe we are friends of one

Finally, in considering Socrates<sub>ED</sub>’s alleged claims of knowledge, it is important to respond to a contention that Beversluis raises regarding the scope of Socrates<sub>ED</sub>’s knowledge claims. Beversluis cites the same six examples of Socrates<sub>ED</sub> avowing ethical knowledge that Vlastos does.<sup>78</sup> As noted, of the six passages of Socrates<sub>d</sub> avowing ethical knowledge that Vlastos cites, only one is genuine. However, Beversluis claims that “the case for ascribing some moral knowledge to Socrates does not depend on a handful of texts containing a tiny range of strong epistemic verbs such as *oïda*, *epaio*, *epistēmai*, or *gignosko*. In addition to these passages in which Socrates advances explicit knowledge-claims, there are numerous others which contain implicit knowledge-claim indicators, i.e., semantically different but epistemically equivalent modes of expression.”<sup>79</sup> Consequently, Beversluis cites a number of passages where Socrates<sub>ED</sub> does not explicitly claim to know a given proposition, but which, as he believes, contain implicit knowledge claim indicators. It is worth pausing over this point and these passages to clarify why in my evaluation of Socrates<sub>ED</sub>’s alleged knowledge claims I reject those that do not contain “strong epistemic verbs”.

In support of his view, Beversluis cites the following passages:

- (b1) [*Gorgias*] it has been proved (ἀποδέδεικται) true.<sup>80</sup>
- (b2) [*Republic* I] the just man has revealed (ἀναπέφανται) himself to us as good and wise and the unjust man as ignorant and bad.<sup>81</sup>
- (b3) [*Gorgias*] [the previous argument] has rightly compelled (ὀρθῶς ἀναγκασθῆναι) them to agree that no one does wrong voluntarily.<sup>82</sup>
- (b4) [*Gorgias*] the self-controlled man, being, as we have now demonstrated (διήλοθoμεν), just and courageous and holy, must be completely good.<sup>83</sup>
- (b5) [*Lysis*] we can now tell who our friends are, for the argument shows (σημαίνει) us that it must be those who are good.<sup>84</sup>
- (b6) [*Gorgias*] [In response to Polus’ admission that it will be difficult to refute the Socratic thesis that, of all wrongdoers, those who escape punishment are the

another – for I count myself in with you. But what a friend is, we have not yet succeeded in discovering.” (*Lys.* 223b3-8)

<sup>78</sup> (1987) 219.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* 219.

<sup>80</sup> *Gorg.* 479e8.

<sup>81</sup> *Rep.* I 350c10-11.

<sup>82</sup> *Gorg.* 509e4.

<sup>83</sup> *Gorg.* 507c1-5.

<sup>84</sup> *Lys.* 214d8-e1.

unhappiest, Socrates replies] “Not difficult . . . but impossible (ἀδύνατον), for the truth is never refuted.”<sup>85</sup>

In considering these passages it is useful to refer back to (r5). In that passage Socrates<sub>GO</sub> explicitly contrasts the fact that “these matters, as has become evident to us in our preceding exchange, have been fixed and bound with claims of adamant and steel”, and the fact that “as always, I do not know how these matters stand.” That is to say, despite the force of the argument, which compels Socrates<sub>GO</sub> to accept the conclusion, and the fact that he has reached the same conclusion numerous times and therefore believes that “no one can assert otherwise than I do and still assert well”, he still disavows knowledge of the matter. I interpret the passage as among the most compelling evidence among the early dialogues (outside of *Meno*) that Socrates<sub>ED</sub> tends to distinguish knowledge from true belief and knowledge from strong conviction in the truth of a proposition on the basis of a putatively strong argument for it.<sup>86</sup> Accordingly, although Socrates<sub>d</sub> may strongly believe that a given argument compels him to accept a given conclusion and in fact he does strongly accept that conclusion, this does not imply that he therefore believes that he knows the conclusion.

In this regard, it should be added that interpretations of “ἀποδέδεικται” and “ἀνάγκη” that imply proof and necessity in the strict logico-deductive sense in which these concepts are used by philosophers now is grossly anachronistic. Consider (b4). Actually, Socrates<sub>GO</sub>’s expression in the passage is even stronger than Beversluis cites. Socrates<sub>GO</sub> begins by saying that “therefore, it follows of much necessity (πολλή ἀνάγκη) that . . .” The phrase “πολλή ἀνάγκη” is revealing, for what sense is there in conceiving of necessity as coming in degrees?<sup>87</sup> Such a phrase should be interpreted as implying that the argument strongly convinces the discussant(s). Similarly, verbs such as “ἀποδέδεικται” should be interpreted as implying that on the basis of the argument a certain proposition appears to the discussant(s) to be the case.

This point is well brought out by consideration of the larger passage in which (b3) is embedded. In fact, (b3) is not well cited, for the passage in

<sup>85</sup> In Beversluis (1987) this is incorrectly cited as coming from *Gorg.* 476b10-11. It comes from *Gorg.* 473b10-11.

<sup>86</sup> Precisely what Socrates<sub>GO</sub> (or Socrates<sub>ED</sub>) understands the distinction to entail is discussed in section VII.

<sup>87</sup> Obviously, distinctions such as logical and nomological necessity have no place here.

which it is embedded undermines the force Beversluis would ascribe to it. The broader passage is:

I really must have your answer on this particular point, Callicles – whether you think that Polus and I were correct in finding ourselves forced to admit, as we did in the preceding argument, that no one does wrong of his own wish, but that all who do wrong do it against their will.<sup>88</sup>

The fact that Socrates<sub>GO</sub> allows the possibility that Callicles could disagree indicates that the “force” of the argument that compelled Socrates<sub>GO</sub> and Polus to the particular conclusion might not be persuasive to another person – not necessarily because that person is irrational, but because the argument itself may have weaknesses that those who have accepted the argument cannot see.

In sum, then, (b1-6) are not evidence of Socrates<sub>d</sub> avowing ethical knowledge. And, more generally, few of the many passages that commentators have cited as evidence of Socrates<sub>ED</sub> avowing ethical knowledge are genuine.

#### III.iv. Additional Knowledge Claims

Five additional knowledge claims that I have collected are not of ethical content.

- (r27) [*Crito*] I know (οἶδα) that there are few who believe or will believe this [namely the proposition that one ought not to requite wrong with wrong or do wrong to anyone].<sup>89</sup>
- (r28) [*Gorgias*] I know (οἶδα), Callicles, that four of you have formed a partnership in wisdom – you, Tisander of Aphidnae, Andron, son of Androtion, and Nausicydes of Cholarges.<sup>90</sup>
- (r29) [*Gorgias*] I know (οἶδ’) you would claim to be a better man and of better birth.<sup>91</sup>
- (r30) [*Gorgias*] However, I know (οἶδα) that I would suffer this if I were brought to court.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>88</sup> *Gorg.* 509e2-7.

<sup>89</sup> *Cri.* 49d2. (r27) is a claim to know the psychological states of Socrates<sub>CR</sub>’s contemporaries in general, but it is not of ethical content.

<sup>90</sup> *Gorg.* 487c1-4. (r28) is more or less an ordinary empirical claim about the activities of these four men.

<sup>91</sup> *Gorg.* 512d1-2. (r29) is a claim of psychological knowledge, but lacking specifically ethical content.

<sup>92</sup> *Gorg.* 522b3-4.

(r30) is a claim of psychological knowledge regarding the character of Socrates<sub>GO</sub>'s contemporaries, but it lacks ethical content. Socrates<sub>GO</sub> claims to know that he would be unable to make a "successful" defense of himself if he were ever brought to court. He has spent his time encouraging his contemporaries to attend to their ethical improvement, rather than catering to their pleasures. Consequently, if he were ever on trial he would be unable to appeal to such "benefits" of his social conduct to support his defense, and so he would be condemned.

(r31) [*Gorgias*] If I reached my end through a lack of flattering rhetoric, I know (οἶδα) well that you would see me bear my death with ease.<sup>93</sup>

Finally, (r31) is a claim of knowledge about Socrates<sub>GO</sub>'s own psychology, specifically his attitude toward condemnation by his peers. He recognizes that failure to succeed in such a suit would indicate nothing about his ethical conduct. And since he regards one's ethical character as supremely valuable and one's physical existence as relatively trivial, the loss of his life would not perturb him. (r31) is not an ethical knowledge claim, however, for although it implies Socrates<sub>GO</sub>'s values, Socrates<sub>GO</sub> is not claiming to know the ethical value of any particular thing.

#### IV.i. Sincere Claims of Ethical Knowledge

Socrates<sub>ED</sub> makes five sincere avowals of ethical knowledge and one sincere presumption of ethical knowledge.

(a1) [*Euthydemus*] '... how am I to say I know certain things, Euthydemus; for instance that good men are unjust? Come, tell me, do I know this or not?' 'You know it certainly,' he said. 'What?' I said. 'That good men are not unjust.' 'Yes,' I said. 'I have known ([ἐπίσταμαι] ἐγώ) that for a long time; but that is not what I asked.'<sup>94</sup>

In (a1) Socrates<sub>ET</sub> is claiming knowledge of the ethical proposition that good men are just.

(a2) [*Gorgias*] But I know (οἶδα) this – if I am ever brought to court and stand in any such danger as you mention, it will be some villain who brings me there. For no honest man would prosecute a person who had done no wrong.<sup>95</sup>

Socrates<sub>GO</sub> implies in (a2) that he knows he has done no wrong and that if he ever were brought to court for wrongdoing it would be by a dishonest person.

(a3) [*Protagoras*] Then I, recognizing (γινώσκων) his [Hippocrates'] courage and excitement, said to him, 'Well, what is that to you? Protagoras has not wronged you has he?'<sup>96</sup>

Assuming in (a3) that the participle "γινώσκων" may be taken to imply knowledge, then Socrates<sub>PR</sub> identifies an instance of the ethical property courage as manifest in Hippocrates' behavior.

(a4.1) [*Apology*] For fearing death, men, is nothing other than thinking one is wise when one is not, for it is thinking that one knows what one does not know. For no one knows whether death is not, in fact, the greatest good for a person; and yet people fear it as though they knew well that it was the worst thing. Yet is this not the most reprehensible ignorance, not to know what one thinks one knows? But I, men, differ from most people perhaps in just this way, and if I am to some degree wiser than others, it would be in this: while I do not adequately know about things in Hades, I do not think I know. But I do know (οἶδα) that to do injustice and to disobey someone better than myself, whether god or man, is bad and foul.<sup>97</sup>

Later in the text Socrates<sub>AP</sub> reaffirms this knowledge claim in a similar way by contrasting it with his ignorance of the value of death and the afterlife:

(a4.2) [*Apology*] Since, then, I am convinced that I have not done anyone an injustice, I am hardly going to do myself injustice and to say of myself that I deserve something bad and to propose some such penalty for myself. What should I fear? That I should suffer the penalty Meletus proposes, of which I say I do not know if it is good or bad? Instead of this, should I choose to suffer something that I know (οἶδ') is bad...?<sup>98</sup>

In short, then, (a4.1-2) provides clear and uncontrovertible evidence of Socrates<sub>AP</sub> affirming knowledge of the ethical proposition that it is bad and foul to commit injustice and to disobey anyone better than oneself. Socrates<sub>AP</sub> affirms knowledge of this proposition explicitly once and somewhat more obliquely again; and in both cases he makes the affirmation in clear contrast to some other proposition of which he disclaims knowledge.

<sup>93</sup> *Gorg.* 522d7-e1.

<sup>94</sup> *Euthyd.* 296e3-297a1.

<sup>95</sup> *Gorg.* 521c7-d3.

<sup>96</sup> *Prot.* 310d-4

<sup>97</sup> *Ap.* 29a4-b9.

<sup>98</sup> *Ap.* 37b2-8.

(a5) [*Apology*] Finally, I went to the craftsmen, for I was aware (ζυνήδην) that I knew nothing, so to speak, but that I would discover that they knew many fine things.<sup>99</sup>

In (a5) Socrates<sub>AP</sub> claims to know two things: that he knows nothing and that he will find that the craftsmen know many fine things. I have discussed the former knowledge claim above among his disavowals of knowledge. The content of the latter claim is ethical insofar as Socrates<sub>AP</sub> claims to know that he will find the craftsmen possessing fine (καλά) knowledge.

His statement continues:

And I was not wrong, for they did know what I did not, and in this respect they were wiser than I.<sup>100</sup>

Those things that the craftsmen know, for which Socrates<sub>AP</sub> considers them wiser than himself, which he predicted they would know, and which he predicted would be fine (καλά), are expertise in various craft-fields, such as shoemaking, architecture, and so on.

(a6) [*Laches*] [Soc:] Then we must begin by knowing what excellence is, for if we had no idea what excellence is, then how could we serve as counselors on how best to acquire it? [Lach:] We couldn't by any means, Socrates. [Soc:] Then we agree that we know what it is. [Lach:] Yes, we agree.<sup>101</sup>

In (a6) Socrates<sub>LA</sub> assumes that Laches and he know what excellence is. In sum, Socrates<sub>d</sub> claims or presumes to know or implies knowing the following propositions:

Good men are just.  
Socrates has done no wrong.<sup>102</sup>  
Hippocrates has courage.  
It is wrong to commit injustice by disobeying a superior, whether god or man.  
The craftsmen know many fine things.  
What excellence is.

<sup>99</sup> *Ap.* 22c9-d3.

<sup>100</sup> *Ap.* 22d2-4.

<sup>101</sup> *Lach.* 190b7-c5.

<sup>102</sup> As we saw, Socrates<sub>GO</sub> also claims to know the proposition that no honest man would prosecute a person who had done no wrong. But I think this can be explained as knowledge about a psychological trait, honesty, rather than a specifically ethical knowledge claim.

IV.ii. *Inconsistent Avowals  
and Disavowals of Ethical Knowledge*

Having gathered and evaluated Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s avowals and disavowals of knowledge, it is now possible to consider whether they are consistent. There is one direct inconsistency. Socrates<sub>ME</sub> disavows knowing what excellence is (d12-13). However, Socrates<sub>LA</sub> presumes that he knows what excellence is (a6). The inconsistency is striking because Socrates<sub>ME</sub> strongly insists on his ignorance of excellence, whereas Socrates<sub>LA</sub>'s presumption to know its identity is rather nonchalant. From the broader context in which it is expressed, Socrates<sub>LA</sub> seems to base his presumption on the fact that such a claim – to know what excellence is – is commonsensical. After presuming that Laches and he know what excellence is, he says the following:

Then, let's not investigate the whole of excellence, excellent sir. That may be a bit too much work. Instead, let's consider whether we have adequate knowledge of a part of it. I think this will make our inquiry easier . . . Then which part should we choose? Clearly the part that is thought (δοκεῖ) to pertain to fighting in arms. And most people think (δοκεῖ τοῖς πολλοῖς) this is courage.<sup>103</sup>

It is explicitly indicated that Socrates<sub>LA</sub>'s grounds for thinking that excellence has parts and that courage is the part of excellence that pertains to fighting in arms are commonsensical. That is to say, Socrates<sub>LA</sub>'s point of departure for the investigation is common opinion. This is especially noteworthy in view of the direction that this investigation takes – specifically, that it ends with a view of courage as identical to excellence. It is also remarkable, given the content of *Protagoras* concerning the relation of the components of excellence. Even if one agrees with interpreters such as Woodruff, Vlastos, Brickhouse and Smith, and Ferejohn, that Socrates<sub>d</sub> does not regard the components of excellence as identical, still, the conception of the components of excellence and their relation that Socrates<sub>d</sub> advances – on their interpretation – is very different from the conventional one. So this by no means explains why Socrates<sub>LA</sub> orients the investigation here as he does. Moreover, although Socrates<sub>LA</sub> never claims to know the particular properties that constitute excellence, toward the end of the dialogues he gives an account of excellence:

Now, do you think, my friend, that such a person would lack excellence in any way if he knew all good things and how they have come to be. how they will

<sup>103</sup> *Lach.* 190c8-d5.

come to be, and how they had come to be, and similarly with bad things? Do you think this person would lack self-control or justice or holiness, who alone can guard carefully against what is fearful and what is not with respect to men and gods, and who can acquire good things because he knows how to conduct himself correctly with respect to gods and men?<sup>104</sup>

This is the most explicit and elaborate account of excellence that Socrates<sub>ED</sub> offers. Again, Socrates<sub>LA</sub> does not here claim to know that excellence is this knowledge, but it is suggestive that he gives this account and that earlier in the investigation he presumes to know what excellence is.

Aside from this one striking inconsistency, there are no other direct inconsistencies among the early dialogues. However, there are a number of indirect inconsistencies. Specifically, in several dialogues Socrates<sub>d</sub> expresses a commitment to the epistemological priority of definitional knowledge for pertinent non-definitional knowledge. This principle can be expressed as:

(PD) If one does not know what *F* is, then one cannot know anything about *F*.

It is controversial whether Socrates<sub>d</sub> is in fact committed to (PD). Elsewhere, I have defended my view that he is.<sup>105</sup> Here I will state the significance of the conclusions for Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s avowals and disavowals of knowledge.

Note that (PD) is analyzed as a conjunction of two propositions:

- (P) If one does not know what *F* is, then one cannot know, for any *x*, whether *x* is an instance of *F*.
- (D) If one does not know what *F* is, then one cannot know, for any property *P*, whether *F* has *P*.

In several so-called elenctic dialogues (*Laches*, *Republic* I, *Euthyphro*) Socrates<sub>d</sub> make claims that reflect a commitment to (P) and (D).<sup>106</sup> In several so-called transitional dialogues (*Hippias Major*, *Lysis*, *Meno*) Socrates<sub>d</sub> make claims that reflect a commitment to (P) and (D).<sup>107</sup> There is no methodological distinction between Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s pursuit of definitions

<sup>104</sup> *Lach.* 199d4-e1.

<sup>105</sup> Wolfsdorf (2003c). My discussion is much indebted to Benson (1990) and Prior (1998).

<sup>106</sup> *Lach.* 190b7-c2; *Rep.* I 354c1-3; *Euth.* 6e3-6, 15d4-e1. Compare also *Prot.* 312c1-4; *Gorg.* 463c3-6; consider also *Gorg.* 462c10-d2; *Charm.* 176a6-b1.

<sup>107</sup> *Hip. Maj.* 286c8-d2, 304d5-e2; *Lys.* 223b4-8; *Meno* 71a5-b7, 100b4-6.

in the so-called elenctic and transitional dialogues.<sup>108</sup> Therefore, I suggest that in dialogues scattered throughout the early period, including all of the early definitional dialogues, Plato intended to advance (PD). But although Plato intended to advance (PD) and he portrays Socrates<sub>d</sub> as pursuing definitional knowledge of *F*, Socrates<sub>d</sub> does not commit the so-called Socratic fallacy. According to the Socratic fallacy, Socrates<sub>d</sub> is committed to (P), yet illogically, in pursuing definitions of *F* he employs examples that he assumes he knows are of *F*. Rather, I maintain that Socrates<sub>d</sub> employs putatively true beliefs about examples and properties of *F* in order to pursue definitional knowledge of *F*. In fact, there is no passage in the early definitional dialogues where Socrates<sub>d</sub> claims to know any of the *definiendum*'s properties or that any *x* is an instance of the *definiendum*.

In sum, then, in all the definitional dialogues, Plato advances (PD). The set of Socrateses that is committed to (PD) does not overlap the set of Socrateses that avows non-definitional ethical knowledge. But, more generally, to the extent that Socrates<sub>ED</sub> is committed to (PD), this commitment is inconsistent with the extent of his avowals of non-definitional ethical knowledge. Specifically, Socrates<sub>ET</sub> could not know that good men are just if he did not know what goodness and justice were. Socrates<sub>AP</sub> could not know that he has done no wrong if he did not know what badness (and so excellence) was. Socrates<sub>PR</sub> could not know that Hippocrates has courage if he did not know what courage was. Socrates<sub>AP</sub> could not know that it was wrong to commit injustice and more specifically that disobeying a superior, whether god or man, was a kind of injustice if he did not know what injustice and badness were. Socrates<sub>AP</sub> could not know that the craftsmen knew many fine things if he did not know what the fine was. Furthermore, to the extent that Socrates<sub>ED</sub> is committed to (PD), Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s knowledge claims are inconsistent with Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s denials of definitional knowledge in *Republic* I, *Hippias Major*, and *Meno*, as well as Socrates<sub>LA</sub>'s conclusion when he fails to discover what courage is.

#### V.i. Interpretations of Avowals and Disavowals of Knowledge

Numerous scholars have attempted to explain and resolve the inconsistencies among Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s avowals and disavowals of knowledge and commitment to (PD). But their explanations are unsatisfactory.

<sup>108</sup> Wolfsdorf (2003b).



V.ii. *Vlastos's Solution*

Vlastos's attempt to distinguish the methodology and commitment to (PD) of Socrates<sub>d</sub> in the so-called elenctic and transitional dialogues is untenable. Aside from this, Vlastos also suggests that when Socrates avows knowledge, he means that he has elenctically justified, but fallible knowledge (so-called knowledge<sub>E</sub>), and when he disavows knowledge, he means that he does not have certainty (so-called knowledge<sub>C</sub>).<sup>109</sup> Vlastos's position is based on the following claims:

- (v1) Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s avowals and disavowals of ethical knowledge are ostensibly contradictory.
- (v2) Socrates<sub>ED</sub> claims to have proved ethical propositions; this implies that he knows they are true, and yet he disavows knowing them.<sup>110</sup>
- (v3) Socrates<sub>AP</sub> explicitly makes a distinction between two kinds of knowledge, human and divine knowledge, and this distinction is equivalent to the distinction between elenctically justified, but fallible knowledge and certainty.<sup>111</sup>
- (v4) There is a tradition in Greek thought of denigrating human cognitive capacities and also of conceiving of knowledge as extremely difficult to achieve, and so Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s position is consistent with traditional thought.<sup>112</sup>
- (v5) There are poetic and philosophical precedents for the ambiguous use of words for knowing, and so Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s usage is consistent with precedents.<sup>113</sup>

(v2) is based on Vlastos's interpretation of (r5). As we have seen, his interpretation of this passage is incorrect. In (r5) Socrates<sub>GO</sub> does not claim to know that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it. Rather, he asserts his strong conviction that the proposition is true; however, he explicitly distinguishes this conviction from the belief that he knows it. It may also be noted that Vlastos's emphasis on the epistemic significance of Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s

<sup>109</sup> (1994) 48-58. "Similarly we could go through all the texts in Plato's elenctic dialogues in which 'know,' 'knowledge,' 'wise,' and 'wisdom' occur – all those I cited earlier and all those others I have had no occasion to cite – resolving their ambiguities in the same way. So understood, all of those statements will make sense. Socrates will never be contradicting himself by saying or implying, that he both has and hasn't knowledge, for he will not be saying, or implying, that he does and doesn't have knowledge<sub>E</sub> (i.e., elenctically justified knowledge) or that he does and doesn't have knowledge<sub>C</sub> (i.e., certainty), but only that he does have knowledge<sub>E</sub> and does not have knowledge<sub>C</sub>."

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* 58-60.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* 61-2.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* 62-4.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* 64-6.

claim to have "proved" this proposition is anachronistic.<sup>114</sup> Socrates<sub>GO</sub> (and, more generally, Socrates<sub>ED</sub>) has no strict logical conception of proof, but merely the pre-theoretical and commonsensical conception that evidence *compels* belief. The argument he has conducted with Callicles shows or compels his belief in the truth of the proposition, but again, he explicitly distinguishes his belief in the truth of the proposition from his knowledge of it.<sup>115</sup>

It is also questionable whether Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s distinction of human wisdom (ἀνθρωπίνῃ σοφία) from divine wisdom (θεῖα σοφία) is equivalent to the distinction between knowledge<sub>E</sub> and knowledge<sub>C</sub>. The main problem is that the very notion of elenctically justified, but fallible knowledge is unfounded since in fact Socrates<sub>ED</sub> never claims to know an ethical proposition and then qualifies his claim in some way suggestive of this concept of fallible elenctic justification. (r5) is Vlastos's strongest evidence in support of this, but again, his interpretation of (r5) is wrong. Moreover, Socrates<sub>ED</sub> never claims to know any ethical proposition as a result of some argument he makes for it.<sup>116</sup> On the six occasions where he claims knowledge of an ethical proposition, the knowledge claim is unsupported by any argument.<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, there is a reasonable alternative interpretation of Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s claim of human wisdom in *Apology*, namely one involving the distinction between ethical knowledge (including ethical expertise) and the knowledge that one does not have the former.<sup>118</sup>

Given this, (v4) does not lend significant support to Vlastos's position since it is consistent with Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s disavowals of ethical knowledge, but it in no way explains his avowals.

Finally, (v5) is weak support for a couple of reasons. Vlastos only cites one passage from Greek literature, Euripides' *Bacchae* 395, as evidence

<sup>114</sup> Consider the implication in the following question: "Is [Socrates] retracting his claim to have proved – and thus shown that he knows – that his doctrine is true?" (*ibid.* 59).

<sup>115</sup> I discuss the grounds of this distinction in section VII.

<sup>116</sup> See Benson (2000) 232: "Socrates never in the early dialogues employs an elenchos on behalf of the truths Socrates claims to know"; compare Irwin (1992) 248-9.

<sup>117</sup> Compare Brickhouse and Smith's comment: "some of Socrates' claims of moral knowledge do not receive the same qualification as does his claim to the 'reasons of iron and adamant' in the *Gorgias*." (1994, 35) However, Brickhouse and Smith may also be faulted for inferring that here Socrates claims knowledge. Consider also Benson (2000) 233; Woodruff (1992) 89; Reeve (1989) 56, n. 64; and Leshner (1987) 279. The last three citations are from Benson (2000) 233, n. 34.

<sup>118</sup> I discuss this interpretation in section VI.ii.

of the equivocal use of a word for knowledge or knowing. Moreover, such equivocation in Greek literature, especially poetry, but for example also in Thucydides, is by no means restricted to concepts of knowledge. Rather, it is a relatively widely applied rhetorical trope – as it is in English.<sup>119</sup> But although Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s avowals and disavowals are inconsistent, he never claims and disclaims knowledge of the same thing in the same dialogue or *a fortiori* in the same passage. In other words, he never employs words for knowing in a similar rhetorical fashion in order to distinguish two kinds of knowledge or to draw attention to the ambiguity of language. So the prevalence of such a trope and an instance of its application to concepts of knowledge in Euripides should not persuade us that Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s epistemic discourse should be interpreted similarly.

### V.iii. Brickhouse and Smith's Solution

Brickhouse and Smith offer the alternative interpretation that Socrates<sub>ED</sub> distinguishes between knowing that some ethical proposition is the case and knowing how it is the case (or why it is the case). The latter knowledge entails ethical expertise; however, one may know some ethical propositions without having ethical expertise. Accordingly, an ethical expert is able to judge all cases properly, whereas a non-expert may know some instances of excellence or badness, but the non-expert will not be able to judge difficult cases (for example, borderline cases).<sup>120</sup>

There are two fundamental problems with this interpretation. One is the textual evidence in support of the distinction between knowing-that and knowing-how, specifically as it relates to Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s avowals and disavowals of knowledge. The other, which follows from this, is that this position is incompatible with Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s commitment to (PD). Brickhouse and Smith deny that Socrates<sub>PD</sub> is committed to (PD). Instead, they argue that Socrates<sub>ED</sub> is committed to the following principle:

<sup>119</sup> Compare the following lines from Euripides. "I do not know how one should inquire into *eugeneia*. For I say that those who are courageous and just in nature are *eugenesteroi*, even if they are slaves, than those who are empty show." (*Melanippe*, Fr. 495.40-3 Nauck) "I can say little good about *eugeneia*. In my eyes the good man is *eugenēs*, and the unjust man is base-born, even though his father be greater than Zeus." (*Diktys*, Fr. 336 Nauck); "For even if I was born poor, in no way will I display an *ethos dysgenes*." (*Electra* 362-3) The citations and translations are drawn from Donlan (1980).

<sup>120</sup> Brickhouse and Smith (1994) 36 ff.

(PD<sub>BS</sub>) If one lacks definitional knowledge of *F*, one cannot be an expert in *F*.<sup>121</sup>

As noted, their denial of Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s commitment to (PD) is untenable. Furthermore, their argument that Socrates<sub>ED</sub> denies knowledge-how (as opposed to knowledge-that) is based on a weak philological argument. In the *Gorgias* passage (r5), after expressing his strong conviction that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it, Socrates<sub>GO</sub> denies knowing this. His words are:

(bs1) [*Gorgias*] What I say is always the same, that I do not know *how these things are* (οὐκ οἶδα ὅπως ἔχει).<sup>122</sup>

Brickhouse and Smith draw attention to the fact that the object of the verb "οἶδα" is the indirect question "ὅπως ἔχει". They suggest that this should be interpreted literally as "I do not know how these things are" and distinguished from the claim that Socrates<sub>GO</sub> doesn't know that suffering injustice is better than doing it.

In addition to this passage, they cite two further passages:

(bs2) [*Euthyphro*] But, by Zeus, do you think that you have such precise knowledge about divine matters, *how they are* (ὅπη ἔχει), and about holy and unholy things, that when those things happened as you say, you are not afraid of doing something unholy yourself by prosecuting your father?<sup>123</sup>

(bs3) [*Charmides*] Or do you not think that it is a common good to all human beings for it to become evident *how each of the things is* (ἐκαστον τῶν ὄντων ὅπη ἔχει)?<sup>124</sup>

I suggest that the distinction between knowing-that and knowing-how does not explain Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s avowals and disavowals of ethical knowledge. Specifically, the use of the verb "ἔχειν" with an adverb (in these cases the relative adverbs "ὅπως" and "ὅπη") as the object of a word for knowing or knowledge is merely an alternative form of expression for using an expression equivalent to knowing-that. Consider (d15):

For fearing death, men, is nothing other than thinking one is wise (σοφός) when one is not, for it is thinking that one knows what one does not know (εἰδέναι ἃ οὐκ οἶδεν). For no one knows whether death is not, in fact, the greatest good . . . But I, men, differ from most people perhaps in just this way, and if I am to some degree wiser than anyone it would be in this: while I do not adequately

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* 45-55.

<sup>122</sup> The translation and italics are from *ibid.* 39.

<sup>123</sup> The translation and italics are from *ibid.* 42 (from *Euth.* 4e4-8).

<sup>124</sup> The translation and italics are from *ibid.* 43 (from *Charm.* 166d6).

know about things in Hades (οὐκ εἰδῶς ἰκανῶς περὶ τῶν ἐν Ἅιδου), I do not think I know.

Socrates<sub>AP</sub> first implies that wisdom (σοφία) entails knowing what is the case (ἄ), precisely, knowing the proposition that death is good (or bad). He then says that he is ignorant concerning things in Hades (περὶ τῶν ἐν Ἅιδου). Thus, he interchangeably uses, as objects of verbs of knowing, expressions in the grammatical forms of a direct object clause (relative clause beginning with “ἄ”) and a prepositional phrase (beginning with “περὶ”).

In (d18) he says:

They did know what (ἄ) I did not, and in this regard they were wiser than I.

Here the object of the verb for knowing is the relative clause beginning with “ἄ”, yet Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is describing the expertise of the craftsmen. Again, in (d19) he says:

For I was aware that I knew nothing, so to speak, but that I would discover that they knew many fine things.

Here the object of the verb for knowing is a noun phrase “πολλὰ καὶ καλὰ”, yet Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is describing the expertise of the craftsmen.

A similar interchangeability in the use of kinds of object expressions following words for knowing is involved in the broader passage in which (bs2) is embedded:

[Euth:] This, Socrates, is how badly they know how the divine is disposed regarding what is holy and unholy (εἰδότες . . . τὸ θεῖον ὡς ἔχει τοῦ ὁσίου τε πέρι καὶ τοῦ ἀνοσίου). [Soc:] But, in the name of Zeus, do you think you know so accurately about divine matters, how they are (ἐπίστασθαι περὶ τῶν θείων, ὅπη ἔχει), both regarding holy things and unholy things (καὶ τῶν ὁσίων τε καὶ ἀνοσίων) that . . . [Euth:] I should be of no use, Socrates . . . if I did not accurately know all such things (τὰ τοιαῦτα πάντα . . . εἰδείην).<sup>125</sup>

Note how easily and without any explanation Euthyphro and Socrates<sub>EU</sub> move between these various object-expressions following verbs of knowing. This suggests that neither one thinks that the distinct object-expressions entail distinct epistemic commitments.

Further evidence in support of my contention can be gained from a passage in *Gorgias* where Socrates<sub>GO</sub> expresses the same idea that Socrates<sub>CH</sub> expresses in (bs3), only using a different form of expression:

I think we ought to compete with one another in attempting to gain a knowledge of what is true and what is false (τὸ ἀληθὲς τί ἐστὶ . . . καὶ τί ψεῦδος) concerning the topics we are discussing, for it is a common good for all that this (αὐτό) becomes clear.<sup>126</sup>

Thus, whereas in *Charmides* the idea is conveyed using the indirect question beginning with the relative adverb “ὅπη”, in *Gorgias* the object of the word for knowing – that is, also, the “this” (αὐτό), clarity about which is a common good – is expressed as an indirect question beginning with “τί”. Moreover, knowing *that* is conceived as knowing its truth-value. Still further, the very proposition that they are discussing is that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it. So when Socrates<sub>GO</sub> later in (r5) asserts that it is true that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it, but that he doesn't know “ὅπη ἔχει”, he simply means that he doesn't *know* that it is true.

In short, Brickhouse and Smith's philological argument is untenable, as is their view that Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s avowals and disavowals are to be explained by a distinction between knowing-that and knowing-how. A consequence of this is that it also undermines their interpretation of Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s commitment to (PD<sub>BS</sub>) – which is to be expected since, I have noted, Socrates<sub>ED</sub> is not committed to (PD<sub>BS</sub>) in any case.

#### V.iv. Reeve's Solution

Reeve's solution may be viewed as a hybrid of Brickhouse and Smith's and Vlastos's.<sup>127</sup> It is similar to Brickhouse and Smith's in its suggestion that Socrates<sub>ED</sub> disavows expert knowledge and avows non-expert knowledge.<sup>128</sup> Specifically, definitional knowledge is necessary for expertise,<sup>129</sup> and at least part of Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s claim of human wisdom amounts to a claim of knowledge of lack of definitional knowledge of *F*.<sup>130</sup> While Reeve also overlooks Socrates<sub>LA</sub>'s presumption to know what excellence is, his solution can explain (a6). Precisely, Reeve claims that one distinctive feature of expertise or craft-knowledge is its certainty or infallibility.<sup>131</sup> Moreover, like Vlastos's distinction of knowledge<sub>E</sub> and knowledge<sub>C</sub>, Reeve distinguishes so-called elenchus-resistant and elenchus-proof

<sup>126</sup> *Gorg.* 505e4-6.

<sup>127</sup> Although, of course, chronologically, Reeve's book precedes Brickhouse and Smith's.

<sup>128</sup> Reeve (1989) 53 ff.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.* 38-42.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* 33.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* 45.

<sup>125</sup> *Euth.* 4e1-5a2.

knowledge, and he claims that Socrates<sub>ED</sub> “does not have elenchus-proof knowledge . . . but only *elenchus-resistant* knowledge”.<sup>132</sup> In his case, elenchus-resistant knowledge is like “ordinary knowledge – justified, true belief, or whatever”. Moreover, the Socratic elenchus is conceived as capable of justifying unconventional ethical propositions because it derives these from conventionally accepted, “obviously true” ethical propositions. Consequently, Socrates<sub>ED</sub> has a kind of knowledge about excellence, just not the infallible kind.<sup>133</sup> Socrates<sub>ED</sub> cannot be sure that although his propositions have not “thus far . . . proved irrefutable . . . they will not be refuted in the future.”<sup>134</sup>

Reeve’s argument contains an inconsistency. Like Vlastos, Reeve speaks of Socrates<sub>ED</sub> as claiming to *prove* certain propositions true,<sup>135</sup> and, like Beversluis and Vlastos, he misinterprets passages such as (r5) as indicating that Socrates<sub>d</sub> claims knowledge of a given proposition as a result of an argument for it. (Again, Socrates<sub>d</sub> never claims to know an ethical proposition as the result of an argument for it.) Furthermore, at one point Reeve says that “proofs are one thing, explanations are another.”<sup>136</sup> Thus, he allows that Socratic elenchus can prove propositions true (and thus that Socrates<sub>ED</sub> can know them to be true – though, confusingly and inconsistently, this must mean elenchus-resistant, not elenchus-proof knowledge), but he argues that Socrates<sub>ED</sub> cannot explain *how* they are true. This finally suggests that elenchus-proof knowledge entails infallible explanation. In this respect Reeve also misinterprets the phrase “οὐκ οἶδα ὅπως ἔχει” in (r5) in the same way that, we have seen, Brickhouse and Smith do. Still, it appears that Reeve’s remarks that Socrates<sub>ED</sub> claims to prove propositions true are infelicitous and misleading, for what he wants to convey is that Socrates<sub>ED</sub> does not believe he has *irrefutably* shown that *p* is true, just that he has fallible justification for *p*’s truth.

Reeve’s argument, then, also depends upon Socrates<sub>ED</sub> using words for knowing and knowledge equivocally. Like Vlastos, Reeve thinks Socrates<sub>AP</sub>’s distinction of human and divine wisdom provides evidence for this. But Reeve is bound to interpret Socrates<sub>AP</sub>’s claim to human wisdom as consisting of two components: knowledge of lack of *expert* knowledge of excellence (including knowledge of lack of *expert* knowledge of the definition

of excellence), and non-expert (that is, elenctically justified fallible) knowledge of excellence. But whereas there is clear and direct evidence that Socrates<sub>AP</sub>’s conception of his human wisdom entails knowledge of lack of knowledge about *F*<sup>137</sup> – although not necessarily expert knowledge about *F* – there is no clear or direct or good evidence that it involves the other component. In this regard, note the way that Reeve makes the transition in his argument:

Human wisdom seems, then, to consist, at least in part, in recognizing that one does not possess any expert knowledge of virtue when one does not. *But there must, surely, be more to it than that.* Otherwise it seems that anyone who recognized that he lacked such knowledge would possess human wisdom and be as wise as Socrates, even if his recognition was a result of general skepticism or below-normal intelligence. What is the missing ingredient?<sup>138</sup> (my italics)

But is the reason given, that otherwise anyone could be as wise as Socrates<sub>AP</sub>, a compelling reason why there should be more to it than that? Socrates<sub>AP</sub> explicitly says that Delphi was making an example of him to show that human wisdom is worth little or nothing and that what distinguished him from those he interviewed was their belief that they had ethical knowledge, while they did not, whereas he did not think he did.

Finally, Reeve ignores Socrates<sub>d</sub>’s commitment to (PD). This is explicable just to the extent that Reeve’s study focuses on *Apology*. But it would certainly be noteworthy if Socrates<sub>AP</sub>’s conception of knowledge differed from that of Socrateses in other early dialogues. Although Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is not a member of the set of Socrateses who are committed to (PD), those Socrateses’ commitment to (PD) further undermines Reeve’s argument.

#### V.v. Leshner, Kraut, Irwin, Benson, and Nozick’s Solutions

A number of other interpretations have been offered, but they fail in various ways to address or resolve the pertinent evidence. For instance, Leshner argues that it is consistent for Socrates<sub>ED</sub> to claim to have some knowledge about ethical actions, but to disclaim knowledge about “virtue and the good”.<sup>139</sup> This position depends upon denying Socrates<sub>ED</sub>’s commitment to (D) – which, again, has been noted to be untenable. Moreover, it fails to address Socrates<sub>LA</sub>’s presumption in *Laches* to know what excellence is.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.* 52.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.* 61.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.* 52.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.* 50.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.* 53.

<sup>137</sup> *Ap.* 20d6-e3, c1-3, 21d6-7, 22c6-8, d4-e1, 29e1-3, 29e3-30a2.

<sup>138</sup> (1992) 35.

<sup>139</sup> Leshner (1987) 282 ff.

Kraut's solution is a developmentalist one. He suggests that in (putatively) earlier early dialogues such as *Apology* Plato and so Socrates<sub>d</sub> was not committed to (PD), but that in later early dialogues such as *Gorgias*, he was.<sup>140</sup> Aside from the difficulty of establishing a chronology for the early writings, I have already noted that Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s utterances indicate a commitment to (PD) in several early writings that have not been regarded as late early dialogues. Kraut also fails to address Socrates<sub>LA</sub>'s presumption to know what excellence is. Furthermore, Kraut's proposal that Socrates<sub>GO</sub> is committed to (PD) in *Gorgias* is based on a misinterpretation of (r5), like that of Vlastos and others, that in (r5) Socrates<sub>GO</sub> claims knowledge that it is better to suffer harm than to do it.

Irwin suggests that Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s knowledge claims do not "really state claim[s] to knowledge". Rather, "in speaking of human wisdom Socrates insists that what he has is not real wisdom at all, but simply the closest that he can come to wisdom; we may explain [his knowledge claims] in the same way."<sup>141</sup> Ironically, Irwin's position is actually quite like Vlastos's just insofar as Socrates<sub>ED</sub> must then use verbs for knowing in two different ways. When he claims to know something, he means that he has human knowledge of it, and when he disclaims knowledge, he means that he lacks knowledge proper (which is what the gods have). Irwin's argument is cursory and hardly touches upon the complexities of the problem. His position is clearly based on Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s distinction of human and divine knowledge. But Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s description of his human wisdom is distinguished by its restricted content (knowing that he is not wise), rather than the nature of its epistemological justification ("the closest that [humans] can come to wisdom").<sup>142</sup> Aside from this, there is no evidence in support of Irwin's position, and so there is no reason to accept it.

Benson's solution is to dismiss Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s occasional avowals of knowledge as instances where Socrates<sub>d</sub> had made "misstatements . . . in the heat of the moment or in the manner of the vulgar."<sup>143</sup> In other words, Plato has carelessly made Socrates<sub>d</sub> say something to which he did not really want to convey Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s commitment, or Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s statements are made in keeping with common forms of expression and do not reflect his considered philosophical views. Indeed, the set of Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s avowals of ethical knowledge is even smaller than Benson thinks. And most instances,

<sup>140</sup> Kraut (1984) 274-9.

<sup>141</sup> Irwin (1995) 29.

<sup>142</sup> Again, I discuss this interpretation in section VI.ii.

<sup>143</sup> Benson (2000) 238.

for example (a1), (a2), (a3), and perhaps (a5) and (a6), might be amenable to this interpretation. On the other hand, (a4.1-2) clearly is not. Socrates<sub>AP</sub> twice repeats his claim to know that it is wrong to disobey a superior, whether god or man. Moreover, he expresses this knowledge claim in contrast to his ignorance of the value of death. Thus, it is unreasonable to explain away (a4.1-2) as Benson suggests. Insofar as it cannot be neutralized as such, it remains a reasonable conjecture that at least some of the other avowals might be explicable on different grounds. Finally, another problem with Benson's solution must also be noted. As we have seen, Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s avowals of knowledge of non-ethical propositions are *not* at all rare. Thus, it is necessary to explain why Plato allows Socrates<sub>ED</sub> relatively often to claim non-ethical knowledge, but ethical knowledge quite rarely.

Nozick's solution to some extent depends on dubious generalizations that overlook important evidence. For instance, he claims:

Socrates does not (generally) deny knowledge of the Socratic doctrines (it is better to suffer injustice than to do it, etc.) but of the answers to the 'What is F?' questions he pursues with others. His superior wisdom then resides in his knowing that he doesn't know, and cannot produce, the correct answer to these 'What is F?' questions. Not knowing these things is compatible with his knowing other things.<sup>144</sup>

These remarks overlook (a6) and (r5). Moreover, they suggest that Socrates<sub>ED</sub> generally avows knowledge of Socratic doctrines such as that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it. But in fact Socrates<sub>ED</sub> never avows such knowledge – and, again, at (r5) he explicitly disavows it. Furthermore, when in *Apology* Socrates<sub>AP</sub> claims to have human wisdom and he distinguishes himself from other citizens in this regard, he says nothing about defining *F*. In fact, remarkably, in *Apology* there is no mention of the "What-is-*F*?" question or of the significance of definitional knowledge. Still further, whether or not having definitional knowledge of excellence is in fact compatible with having non-definitional ethical knowledge, Socrates<sub>d</sub> happens to make claims that commit him to (PD). So he himself believes that definitional knowledge of excellence is necessary for non-definitional ethical knowledge. On the other hand, Nozick seems to commit himself to the position that Socrates<sub>ED</sub> views definitional knowledge as necessary for expertise.<sup>145</sup> But he provides no evidence for interpreting Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s claims in this way.

<sup>144</sup> Nozick (1995) 144.

<sup>145</sup> For instance, he writes: "The Socratic search for the definition of a concept *F*

In sum, despite several proposed interpretations, the inconsistencies among Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s commitment to (PD) and Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s avowals and disavowals of ethical knowledge remain unresolved.

#### VI.i. Plato's Uses of Socrates<sub>ED</sub><sup>146</sup>

The inconsistencies among Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s avowals and disavowals of ethical knowledge are just one example of inconsistencies among Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s utterances and beliefs. Indeed, inconsistencies among Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s utterances are legion, and a good deal of scholarship on the early dialogues is devoted to resolving these. For example, in *Protagoras* Socrates<sub>PR</sub> argues that holiness and justice are identical or very similar; in *Gorgias* Socrates<sub>GO</sub> implies that they are distinct; in *Euthyphro* Socrates<sub>EU</sub> says that holiness is a part of justice.<sup>147</sup> In *Protagoras* Socrates<sub>PR</sub> argues that courage is the knowledge of what is to be feared and dared; in *Laches* Socrates<sub>LA</sub> argues against this view.<sup>148</sup> In *Hippias Major* Socrates<sub>HM</sub> rejects a conception of beauty as beneficial pleasure; in *Gorgias* Socrates<sub>GO</sub> suggests that beauty is beneficial pleasure.<sup>149</sup> In *Gorgias* Socrates<sub>GO</sub> says that like is friend to like; in *Lysis* Socrates<sub>LY</sub> argues against this conception of friendship.<sup>150</sup>

In addition to inter-textual inconsistencies there are numerous intra-textual inconsistencies. For example, early in *Apology* Socrates<sub>AP</sub> emphasizes that he does not know the value of death. However, at the end of *Apology*, although he continues to disavow knowledge of the value of death, the outcome of the trial persuades him that death is a good thing. Thus, his conviction regarding the positive value of death shifts in the course of the text.<sup>151</sup> In *Lysis* Socrates<sub>LY</sub> initially believes that the cause of friendship is the presence of badness in that which is neither good nor bad. He then rejects this view and suggests that friendship could occur if badness did

is a search for necessary and sufficient conditions that provide a standard that can be utilized to decide whether F applies in any given case. However, when people often are able to apply the concept F to particular cases, judging whether or not it applies, why is an explicit standard necessary? An explicit standard can help to judge difficult cases or borderline ones." (*ibid.*, 148)

<sup>146</sup> The contents of this section are heavily drawn from Wolfsdorf (2004a).

<sup>147</sup> *Prdt.* 330c1-332a1; *Gorg.* 507b1-3; *Euth.* 12d5-e2.

<sup>148</sup> *Prot.* 360d4-5; *Lach.* 196c10 ff.

<sup>149</sup> *Hip. Maj.* 303e8 ff.; *Gorg.* 474d3-475a8.

<sup>150</sup> *Gorg.* 510b2-4; *Lys.* 213e3-215a4; 222b6-8.

<sup>151</sup> *Ap.* 29a4-b1; 40b7-c3.

not exist because desire is the cause of friendship. To put it simply, Socrates<sub>LY</sub>'s conception of the cause of friendship is different at different points in the discussion.<sup>152</sup> In *Charmides* Socrates<sub>CH</sub> initially thinks that it would be a great good if each member of society performed only those tasks in which he were knowledgeable. Subsequently, he suggests that only the knowledge of good and bad would bring happiness to society.<sup>153</sup>

Some instances of inconsistency might be resolvable by appeal to verbal irony or some form of disingenuousness. Some might be resolvable by appeal to subtle unifying principles. Some might be resolvable by appeal to developmentalism. And some might be resolvable by appeal to Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s dialectical use of propositions or concepts. But even so, many inconsistencies will remain. And specifically, in the case of Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s avowals and disavowals of ethical knowledge, I believe that none of these solutions is acceptable. Instead, I suggest an alternative approach to interpreting them. The approach follows a central conclusion of another paper:<sup>154</sup> Plato uses Socrates<sub>ED</sub> in various ways in various dialogues and passages of dialogues to achieve various objectives.

Although I cannot here provide a full explanation and defense of this claim, it will be helpful to elaborate a bit. Generally speaking, Plato's intended audience for the early dialogues must have mainly been drawn from the Athenian leisured class.<sup>155</sup> This is obvious from the fact that serious pursuit of philosophy (as Plato conceived this discursive practice)<sup>156</sup> would have required means for ample leisure time. Also, many of the dialogues are set in locations that only the wealthy would have frequented. Moreover, the personae are engaged in costly or simply distinctly upper-class activities.

The dialogues appear to have targeted the young adults of this social class as well as the adults themselves. This is probable from the prevalent theme of educating the youth and the role of youths in many of the texts.<sup>157</sup> Moreover, foreigners might have constituted a part of the intended

<sup>152</sup> *Lys.* 218b8-c2; 218c5 ff.

<sup>153</sup> *Charm.* 171e6-172a3; 172c4-d5.

<sup>154</sup> Wolfsdorf (2004a).

<sup>155</sup> Davies (1971, xvii-xxxi) argues that this group consisted of approximately twelve hundred adult Athenian males.

<sup>156</sup> In the early dialogues, philosophy is conceived as the pursuit of ethical knowledge through logically governed argumentation.

<sup>157</sup> In *Apology* Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is on trial in part for corrupting the youth. In *Euthyphro* Socrates<sub>EU</sub> announces that Meletus is prosecuting for corrupting the youth. In *Charmides* Socrates<sub>CH</sub> is concerned with the state of the youth in Athens. In *Laches*,

audience. But the abundance of topical allusions suggests that familiarity with Athenian social history was necessary for comprehending the important historical dimension of the texts.<sup>158</sup>

The early dialogues were not written for philosophers. Rather, their target audience consisted of potential adherents of philosophy. This is particularly evident from a common organizational feature of the dialogues that I call “ $\alpha$ -structure”.  $\alpha$ -structure serves a linear pedagogical function: to lead the intended audience from a conventional or traditional conception of a given topic to a novel, unconventional, Socratic-Platonic<sup>159</sup> conception of that topic. In the case of non-aporetic dialogues, the discussion concludes by affirming the Socratic-Platonic conception. In the case of aporetic dialogues, the discussion advances toward such a conception without confirming it.

In fact, *aporia* often results from a conflict of conventional and novel views.<sup>160</sup> For example, at the beginning of the investigation in *Laches* it is assumed that courage is a part of excellence, a conventional view. At the end of the discussion courage is interpreted as the knowledge of good and bad. The final definition is rejected because it is thought that excellence is the knowledge of good and bad and therefore that courage and excellence would be identical. Similarly, in *Lysis* the traditional view of friendship based on likeness is introduced and refuted early in the discussion. By the end of the investigation, Socrates<sub>LY</sub> has developed a novel conception of friendship based on the concept of belonging (*οικειότης*). However, in offering a final articulation of this view, *Lysis* and *Menexenus* confusedly suggest that the good is friend to the good, the bad to the bad, and the neither-good-nor-bad to the neither-good-nor-bad. This suggestion, which Socrates<sub>LY</sub>'s novel conception of friendship does not compel, conflicts with the refutation of friendship based on likeness; and so the investigation ends.

---

Lysimachus and Melesias are seeking the proper education for their sons. In *Protagoras* Hippocrates is seeking to be educated by Protagoras. In *Lysis* Socrates<sub>LY</sub> is focused on the youth *Lysis* and *Menexenus*.

<sup>158</sup> Note that, aside from the famous itinerant teachers, the foreigners represented in the early dialogues are resident aliens. *Euthyphro* is an exception although Naxos, his home, was under Athenian jurisdiction. *Meno* is also an exception.

<sup>159</sup> By “Socratic-Platonic” I mean a view identifiable with the historical Socrates or with one that Plato intended to advance. In fact, these may be identical in some cases. In any event, the views Plato advances in these texts clearly are indebted to the historical Socrates.

<sup>160</sup> Wolfsdorf (1997). In *Lysis* in particular, see also Wolfsdorf (2004b).

Other examples of  $\alpha$ -structure include the following. *Apology* begins with Socrates<sub>AP</sub> clarifying the popular conception of himself and his guilt for impiety and corrupting the youth. It ends with his clarification and justification of his mission and his innocence. The investigation in *Charmides* begins with Charmides' popular conceptions of self-control as quietness and modesty and concludes with a conception of self-control as a kind of epistemic state. *Crito* begins with Crito's suggestion that Socrates<sub>CR</sub> should escape from prison, a suggestion explicitly based on an appeal to common opinion. It ends with Socrates<sub>CR</sub>'s argument for why he should not escape. *Ion* begins with the false assumption that, as an inspired rhapsode, *Ion* has knowledge; it ends with the view that he does not have knowledge and that knowledge and divine inspiration are distinct. The investigation of the relation of the components of excellence in *Protagoras* begins with the conventional conception that the principal components of excellence are indeed distinct and not identical to knowledge. It concludes with the unconventional conception that the putative parts of excellence are similar, if not identical and a kind of knowledge. The investigation of justice in *Republic I* begins with traditional conceptions of justice as truth-telling, returning what one takes, and aiding friends and harming enemies, and, before Thrasymachus enters the discussion to advance his radical conception, Socrates<sub>R1</sub> argues against the traditional conceptions.

$\alpha$ -structure pervades the early dialogues. It operates as a broad structuring principle organizing entire discussions as well as parts of these. It also operates in relation to lesser aspects of the dialogues. For example, in all the early dialogues in which Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s interlocutor is an alleged expert – namely, *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphro*, *Laches*, *Ion* – the dialogue begins by conveying an impression of that figure as wise. However, in the course of the investigation, the figure is revealed as ignorant insofar as he is unable to provide a satisfactory solution to the main problem under consideration. Similarly, Thrasymachus, *Meno*, and *Critias* are revealed as unable to offer satisfactory accounts of justice, excellence, and self-control respectively.

Some scholars have also observed the following related characteristic of the dialogues. In those texts in which Socrates<sub>d</sub> engages more than one interlocutor, the views of successive interlocutors are increasingly more sophisticated or unconventional or difficult.<sup>161</sup> For instance, *Critias*' views

---

<sup>161</sup> Benson (1990b, 25-6): “In the *Hippias Major*, while Hippias' first three answers may be ‘simple-minded and easy to refute’, they are all propounded by Hippias him-

are more sophisticated than Charmides, Nicias' more unconventional than Laches', Thrasymachus' more difficult to answer than Cephalus' or Polemarchus'. Moreover, in some cases, the views of a single interlocutor are more sophisticated toward the end of the investigation than toward the beginning. This might be explained in view of the fact that the interlocutor has gained insight from the intervening discussion. But this condition can be extremely pronounced, as in the case of Hippias in *Hippias Major*.<sup>162</sup> Even given the content of the discussion, it seems implausible that certain of Hippias' later remarks are psychologically consistent with his earlier ones.<sup>163</sup> Instead, the operation of  $\alpha$ -structure seems to be a more reasonable explanation.

Generally speaking, the contrast between conventional or traditional views and Socratic-Platonic views about which the dialogues are organized according to  $\alpha$ -structure corresponds to the opposition of philosophy (as Plato conceived it) and non-philosophy that is a pervasive dramatic theme of all the early dialogues, insofar as conventional or traditional views represent social, political, and, broadly, established authoritative positions that Plato sought to criticize.<sup>164</sup> This is true as much of the early non-aporetic dialogues as of the aporetic dialogues; and it occurs both with regard to the specific propositions debated in the discussions and with regard to the grounds of those discussions. Precisely, with respect to the latter point, the value of the rational justification of ethical belief is often either implicitly or explicitly contrasted with the disvalue of the following alternative grounds of ethical belief. For a given ethical proposition  $p$ , it is unsatisfactory to maintain  $p$  merely because  $p$  is a common opinion or the opinion of the majority, a traditional opinion, the opinion of an allegedly wise person or expert, or because  $p$  has been expressed in a rhetorically compelling man-

self. It is true that the next four answers are suggested by Socrates, but this fits a pattern well established in the elenctic dialogues: the second stage of the dialogue examines more sophisticated answers suggested by Socrates himself (cf. *Euthph.* 11e) or by a second interlocutor when one is available (cf. *La.* 194c and *Chrm.* 161b)."

<sup>162</sup> Consider Hippias' initial failure to distinguish the questions "What is fine ( $\kappa\alpha\lambda\acute{o}\nu$ )?" and "What is the fine ( $\tau\acute{o}$   $\kappa\alpha\lambda\acute{o}\nu$ )?" and the simple-minded answers he initially offers. Socrates<sub>HM</sub> himself (through his alter ego) criticizes Hippias' definitions as simple-minded. (*Hip. Maj.* 293d8) Contrast this with Hippias' relatively sophisticated criticism of Socrates<sub>HM</sub>'s method late in the investigation. (*Hip. Maj.* 301b2-c3)

<sup>163</sup> In particular, I am thinking of Hippias' critique of Socrates<sub>HM</sub>'s method at *Hip. Maj.* 301b2-c3.

<sup>164</sup> On this dichotomy, see Nightingale (1995); Wolfsdorf (1997), (2004a).

ner. In short, the early dialogues expose as inadequate conventional and traditional views as well as the traditional or conventional grounds upon which such views are maintained.

In sum, then, Plato composed the early dialogues according to  $\alpha$ -structure for propaedeutic reasons, to turn his readers from one mode of life, the non-philosophical, to another, the philosophical. More precisely, he attempted to engage his intended audience in the doxastic condition in which he found them, namely, committed to conventional or traditional beliefs and modes of life. Accordingly, the dialogues tend to begin with the expression or affirmation of such beliefs. In the course of the texts, these views are scrutinized, undermined, and rejected. In the process, novel, Socratic-Platonic views are introduced. The latter are often introduced as means of criticizing the former. Thus, the reader is, ideally, led through a critique of his own views. He is impressed by the problems of the grounds of his belief, and he is shown, if not superior beliefs, at least an alternative and superior manner of grounding his belief and, more generally, of orienting his life.

The prevalence of  $\alpha$ -structure and the notion that the target audience of the early dialogues consisted not of adherents of philosophy, but of potential adherents also relates to an important point regarding the relation of the early dialogues to one another. Although the topics treated among the various texts are related and overlapping, each of the dialogues functions as a self-contained exploration. Contrast this with a textbook the understanding of whose successive chapters logically depends upon the understanding of prior ones. As an intellectual-pedagogical edifice, the early dialogues are not structured so that one must pass through the bottom stories to arrive at the top. The intellectual baseline or point of departure of each text is more or less the same. Consequently, it seems that Plato did not intend the early dialogues to be read in a particular order. Rather, each text serves as a fresh occasion to explore a given ethical or ethical-epistemological topic, and, again, that exploration begins with conventional and traditional opinions. In short, then, the early dialogues share a *common doxastic baseline* (as I will hereafter call it).

Although Plato's principle use of Socrates<sub>a</sub> is to assert claims that Plato intended to advance in a given dialogue, Plato occasionally makes Socrates<sub>a</sub> assert conventional or traditional views that he did not intend to advance. In such cases, he does so simply for the sake of convenience. More precisely, such instances are explicable in view of the fact that the early dialogues largely function independently of one another and that the doxastic baseline of each text is conventional or traditional opinion. Such



conventional or traditional assertions may also function according to  $\alpha$ -structure,<sup>165</sup> but they need not. They may simply be employed in passages whose objective is the investigation, problematization, or advancement of some *other* view. When a given Socratic assertion satisfies the following three conditions, this provides strong support that Plato did not intend to advance it as compelling. First, the opinion asserted is conventional or traditional; however, it is not scrutinized or contested within the passage or text in which it is employed. Second, in another text Socrates<sub>d</sub> does problematize or even refute it. Third, Socrates<sub>d</sub> does not repeat the assertion in several dialogues.

Whereas the function of  $\alpha$ -structure serves, in particular, to explain certain intra-textual inconsistencies in Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s assertions, the doxastic baseline of the texts serves to explain a number of inter-textual inconsistencies. For example, in *Gorgias* Socrates<sub>GO</sub> assumes that friendship is based on likeness. The assumption is employed, for convenience, to advance a different point, namely, that in befriending a tyrant one corrupts one's soul. The argument begins with the assumption that in order to avoid suffering harm one must either be a ruler or a tyrant in one's own city or else a supporter of the existing government.<sup>166</sup> Socrates<sub>GO</sub> then suggests that because friendship is based on likeness, to become a friend of a tyrant one must make oneself like a tyrant and thereby corrupt one's soul.

In *Gorgias* Socrates<sub>GO</sub> does not problematize the nature of friendship. In *Lysis* Socrates<sub>LY</sub> does problematize the nature of friendship; this is the central topic of the text. Furthermore, Socrates<sub>GO</sub>'s view of friendship in *Gorgias* is conventional, whereas early in the investigation in *Lysis* Socrates<sub>LY</sub> argues against the view that friendship is based on likeness. In contrast, the view of friendship based on belonging – toward which the investigation develops – is unconventional. Furthermore, the argument in *Gorgias* is *ad hominem* or *ad hoc* in that Plato did not intend to advance the proposition that in order to avoid suffering injustice one must either be a ruler or tyrant or a supporter of the existing government. Rather, evidence from both *Gorgias* and other dialogues such as *Apology* suggests that Plato intended to advance the view that the conventional conception of harm is unsatisfactory and, accordingly, that no harm can come to a good person. These considerations support the view that neither in *Lysis* nor in *Gorgias*

<sup>165</sup> By this I mean that Socrates<sub>d</sub> might make a claim at the beginning of a dialogue that he subsequently refutes later in the dialogue. I believe this is how a number of inter-textual inconsistencies should be resolved.

<sup>166</sup> *Gorg.* 510a6-10.

Plato intended to advance the view that friendship is based on likeness – even though in *Gorgias* Socrates<sub>GO</sub> assumes that friendship is based on likeness.

Another example is Socrates<sub>EU</sub>'s claim in *Euthyphro* that holiness is a part of justice. In *Euthyphro* Socrates<sub>EU</sub> problematizes the nature of holiness. However, he does not problematize the relation of the components of excellence. Socrates<sub>EU</sub> does not argue that holiness is a part of justice. He simply asserts it. He does so in an effort to assist Euthyphro in understanding the distinction between forms and the individuals that instantiate them. In *Protagoras*, Socrates<sub>PR</sub> does problematize the relation of the components of excellence, and this topic is central to the discussion. Moreover, he argues for the unconventional view that holiness and justice are identical or at least very similar. Furthermore, evidence from other early dialogues such as *Charmides* and *Laches* suggests that Plato intended to advance the view that the components of excellence are identical or at least more closely related than the conventional conception Protagoras expresses. In *Euthyphro* Socrates<sub>EU</sub>'s view of the relation of holiness and justice is conventional or commonsensical, at least within the legalistic context of the dialogue. Socrates<sub>EU</sub> and Euthyphro are engaged in suits concerning matters of impiety. Insofar as matters of justice are conceived as coextensive with matters of positive law, matters of holiness clearly do form a subset of judicial matters. In short, there is good reason to believe that Plato did not intend to advance the view that holiness is a part of justice, even though in *Euthyphro* Socrates<sub>EU</sub> says that it is.

In sum, Plato sometimes conveniently put conventional or traditional views into Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s mouth, but without intending to advance those views. Of course, Socrates<sub>d</sub> occasionally also asserts conventional or traditional views that Plato did intend to advance, for example, the view that the components of excellence are good and fine. But in this case it is clear that Plato intended to advance that view for the following reasons. First, Socrates<sub>d</sub> never refutes it. Second, Socrates<sub>d</sub> repeats the view in several dialogues. And third, in *Republic* I, when Thrasymachus suggests that justice is not a component of excellence and so not good or fine, Socrates<sub>R1</sub> is shocked and argues forcefully against him. In short, it is necessary to evaluate Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s conventional or traditional assertions in view of their functions within the dialogues in which they occur. In particular, this involves the recognition that the early dialogues share a particular doxastic baseline.

VI.ii. *Interpreting Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s Avowals of Ethical Knowledge*

The variety of uses of Socrates<sub>ED</sub> results in some degree of inconsistency among Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s utterances and beliefs. But while such inconsistencies have troubled contemporary interpreters, they would not have troubled Plato. This is because Plato did not intend the early dialogues to be interpreted, as some modern scholars have attempted to do, by assembling all of Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s utterances and deriving from these a set of philosophical principles. That misguided approach to the dialogues clearly is influenced by the practice of interpreting most philosophical texts. In most cases, the author's objective is to disseminate his views. Moreover, the content of the sentences of most philosophical texts can easily be identified with the author's beliefs. But Plato's writings obviously are not of this kind. Still, consciously or unconsciously, subtly or egregiously, commentators continue to approach the texts in this way. This inappropriate mode of conceptualization inevitably yields unsatisfactory results.

Given that almost all of the discussions in the early dialogues concentrate on ethical topics and that Plato uses Socrates<sub>ED</sub> in various ways, some inconsistency among Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s avowals and disavowals of ethical knowledge is understandable and even expectable. Furthermore, while commentators have focused on determining Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s epistemological or ethical epistemological commitments, it is more sensible to focus on why Plato composed Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s ethical epistemological assertions as they stand and what Plato's objectives were in portraying Socrates<sub>d</sub> as maintaining particular ethical epistemological commitments in particular dialogues and among dialogues.

To begin, then, it must be emphasized that Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s ethical knowledge claims are rare. Only on six occasions among the early dialogues Socrates<sub>d</sub> claims or presumes to have some ethical knowledge. Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s disavowals of ethical knowledge are more abundant – especially when one considers (d1'-14) in light of Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s commitment to (PD). Consequently, although Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s disavowals of ethical knowledge are unconventional, his avowals of ethical knowledge are irregular. In other words, it seems that Plato intended to portray Socrates<sub>ED</sub> fairly consistently as disavowing ethical knowledge. I emphasize that this includes knowledge of ethical propositions as well as ethical expertise.

Why did Plato tend to portray Socrates<sub>ED</sub> as disavowing ethical knowledge? Precisely because he intended to problematize ethical knowledge claims and the grounds of those claims in general. In short, he intended to broach the problem of ethical knowledge in a serious way and thereby

to encourage philosophy, which he conceived as the pursuit of human excellence. Specifically, Plato intended to advance the view that understanding and rational argumentation should support one's ethical beliefs. Moreover, Plato intended to advance the view that definitional knowledge of excellence is necessary for pertinent non-definitional knowledge (and, again, this includes knowledge of both ethical propositions and ethical expertise).

For the most part, Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s assertions contribute to the advancement of these views. Yet there are six irregularities. How are these to be explained? As I have discussed elsewhere<sup>167</sup> and to some extent explained above, occasionally, for the sake of convenience Plato makes Socrates<sub>d</sub> express conventional or traditional positions that Plato did not intend to advance. Such assertions fit into the stream of dialogue without disrupting it. As such, they do not provoke a need for further justification, which would detract from the aims of the text. Note, in particular, that none of Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s avowals of ethical knowledge is intra-textually inconsistent. This specifically indicates that Plato did not intend to problematize the given avowal in the text as such. Moreover, Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s ethical knowledge claims are themselves conventional – both in terms of their content and their epistemic attitude. It is his disavowals of ethical knowledge that are unconventional and novel.

These considerations explain Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s occasional ethical knowledge claims. In four of the six cases (a1-3, 6), Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s claim to know a given ethical proposition is made in a context where Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s ethical epistemological commitments are tangential to the concerns and objectives of the text; and again, Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s claim is commonsensical and conventional. In the two remaining cases (a4-5), Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s ethical epistemological commitments are rather central to the interests of the text (*Apology*). Even so, both claims are commonsensical and conventional, and as such, they are not intended to and in fact do not create difficulties for the ethical epistemological topic that is explicitly problematized and the ethical epistemological position that Socrates<sub>d</sub> is used explicitly to advance in that text.

Socrates<sub>ET</sub>'s knowledge claim in (a1) occurs in response to Euthydemus' and Dionysodorus' assertion that both they and Socrates<sub>ET</sub> know everything. The argument they employ to justify this claim obviously is

<sup>167</sup> Wolfsdorf (2004a).

fallacious, and Socrates<sub>ET</sub> recognizes this. In responding to it, Socrates<sub>ET</sub> suggests that one cannot know a false proposition. In order to clarify this point he cites an uncontroversial proposition whose negation would arouse incredulity. In this context, then, the particular content of the proposition is insignificant. Socrates<sub>ET</sub> chooses the proposition that good men are not unjust on the assumption that his interlocutors will also grant this to be true. Notably, in *Euthydemus* there is no discussion pertaining to (PD), and there is no discussion in this passage of whether good men are in fact just or of the identity of goodness or justice. Again, the specific content of the proposition is tangential to the broader context in which it occurs. Its principal significance to the context in which it occurs is that it is a proposition commonly accepted as true.

Socrates<sub>PR</sub>'s claim in (a3) to recognize Hippocrates' courage does not occur in a context where Socrates<sub>PR</sub>'s ethical epistemological commitments are at issue. Socrates<sub>PR</sub> is simply remarking on Hippocrates' excitement and interest in Protagoras' arrival in Athens. Although, of course, the identity of courage plays a central role in the subsequent investigation in *Protagoras*, Socrates<sub>PR</sub>'s remark occurs much earlier in dialogue, well before the question of the identity of courage has been raised. Furthermore, no connection is made or even vaguely suggested between this early remark and the later discussion of the identity of courage. Rather, the remark is made in a casual, non-theoretical, non-investigative context. As such, it should be interpreted as a conventional knowledge claim and simply as irrelevant to the real ethical and ethical epistemological issues that are introduced later in the dialogue and elsewhere among the early dialogues.

Socrates<sub>GO</sub>'s knowledge claim in (a2) occurs in a discussion about political roles. Specifically, the discussion concerns whether one should work toward the happiness of one's fellow citizens, as they conceive this, or whether one should work to make them genuinely happy. Calicles suggests that if one does not attempt to make one's fellow citizens (subjectively) happy, one risks incurring their animosity. Socrates<sub>GO</sub> acknowledges that one might suffer the misfortune of being indicted by one's fellow citizens even though one's political motivations were to make them (objectively) happy. However, he claims to know that if this were to befall him, his prosecutor would be a dishonest person and a villain.

Socrates<sub>GO</sub>'s claim is not exactly conventional in content. It is not a view that anyone might be expected to claim to know. However, it is reasonable to expect that any citizen who thought of himself as working for society's benefit would in defense of himself make a strong claim that one who prosecuted him for his actions would be unjust. Thus, the significance

of the claim should be interpreted as lying in its propositional content rather than in the epistemic status to which the verb "οἶδα" strictly commits the speaker and the ethical epistemological significance of that commitment. Notably, the claim occurs outside of any discussion pertaining to ethical epistemology, and as such it does not substantially engage issues of ethical epistemology.

(a4.1-2) and (a5) both occur in *Apology* where ethical epistemological issues are central to the discussion in general. In fact, they both occur in passages concerned with ethical epistemological issues. Yet consideration of the passages reveals that in both cases Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s knowledge claims are rather conventional and that in the context of the ethical epistemological distinctions Socrates<sub>AP</sub> makes in *Apology*, they are neither inconsistent nor problematic.

In (a5) Socrates<sub>AP</sub> claims to know that the craftsmen know many fine things. Strictly speaking, this claim is inconsistent with Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s commitment to (PD). However, Socrates<sub>AP</sub> says nothing pertaining to (PD). Thus, (a5) is not intra-textually inconsistent as such. Of course, it will still be objected that (a5) is inter-textually inconsistent, given my own argument that Plato portrays Socrates<sub>d</sub> as committed to (PD). Granted, (a5) is inter-textually inconsistent. However, such inconsistency would not have troubled Plato, just as he was not troubled by the inconsistency between Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s commitment to (PD) and (a1-3).

Furthermore, Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s claim to know that the craftsmen know many fine things is conventional. Which of his fellow citizens would disagree? The significance of the passage thus lies not in the epistemic attitude toward the proposition, but in the content of the proposition and specifically in the distinction between what the craftsmen know and what Socrates<sub>AP</sub> knows. Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is saying that he does not have the sort of fine expertise that the craftsmen have.

(a4.1-2) is typically taken as the strongest evidence of Socrates<sub>ED</sub> claiming ethical knowledge. In these passages Socrates<sub>AP</sub> explicitly and directly contrasts his knowledge that it is wrong to do injustice by disobeying a superior with his ignorance of the afterlife. So in these passages the emphasis is both on the aspect of the propositional attitude as epistemic and the proposition itself. Accordingly, it is necessary to address the following questions. How can Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s knowledge claims in (a4.1-2 – and, perhaps, a5) be consistent with his distinction of human and divine wisdom (σοφία) and his disavowals of knowledge in *Apology*? What is the function of this distinction in *Apology*, and is it significant for a general ethical epistemological perspective Plato intended to advance?

Finally, why does Plato make Socrates<sub>AP</sub> assert such a strong ethical knowledge claim in *Apology*?

It has been seen that Socrates<sub>d</sub> makes seven disavowals of knowledge in *Apology* (d3-4, 15, 17-20). In (d3-4) Socrates<sub>AP</sub> disavows the craft (τέχνη) of human and political excellence. In (d15) he disavows knowledge of the value of death and the afterlife. In (d17) he disavows rhetorical skill. In (d18) he disavows craft expertise. So in all but one of these cases, (d15), Socrates<sub>AP</sub> disavows expertise of some kind or another. In (d19-20) his disavowals appear to be more sweeping. In both cases he claims to know nothing: "Finally, I went to the craftsmen, for I was aware that I knew nothing, so to speak, but that I would discover that they knew many fine things"; "I am aware of being wise (σοφός) in nothing great or small." I suggest that in these two cases Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is disavowing expertise, not all knowledge.

In (d19), Socrates<sub>AP</sub> says that he knows nothing, but he qualifies this statement with the phrase "ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν" ("so to speak"). I suggest that by this qualification he means that relative to the kind of knowledge that the craftsmen have, namely expertise, he knows nothing. In short, he has no expertise. This interpretation is supported by the fact that Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is here explicitly contrasting his epistemic state with that of craftsmen and by the more general fact that Socrates<sub>AP</sub> clearly commits himself to a number of common knowledge claims throughout his speech.<sup>168</sup>

Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s claim in (d20) occurs in response to the Delphic Oracle's pronouncement that Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is the wisest of men. After Chaerephon informed him that Delphi had said that he was the wisest of men, Socrates<sub>AP</sub> says that he was baffled because he was aware of "being wise (σοφός) in nothing great or small." Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s disavowal of all σοφία cannot be interpreted here as a disavowal of all knowledge. If that were the case, then this would blatantly contradict his commonsensical knowledge claims elsewhere in *Apology*. Instead, I suggest that the words "σοφία" and "σοφός" and their derivatives are being used here to refer to expertise, not merely to the knowledge of any given proposition. This usage of "σοφία", its cognates and derivatives, is perfectly acceptable Greek. And while Socrates<sub>AP</sub> does not always use "σοφία" in this particular way, the reason I have just given as well as the broader content of his speech support this interpretation.

When Socrates<sub>AP</sub> takes up the accusations against him, beginning with his first accusers, he defends himself against a view of himself as a

sophist.<sup>169</sup> This is to say, Socrates<sub>AP</sub> defends himself against a view of himself as having a certain kind of expertise and as occupying himself with certain fields of understanding and as teaching in those fields. So when he disavows this knowledge, he identifies Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, and Evenus as the kind of people who possess it.<sup>170</sup> Once he has distinguished himself from this group of well-known sophists, he explains how he acquired the kind of reputation that would lead to his being associated with such figures. It is here that he defines the kind of knowledge or understanding he does have as "σοφίαν τινά" ("a kind of wisdom")<sup>171</sup> and more specifically as "ἀνθρώπινη σοφία" ("human wisdom").<sup>172</sup> However, he qualifies this identification by saying that "perhaps" (ἴσως) he has human wisdom, and immediately afterward he says: "my σοφία – if it is σοφία".<sup>173</sup> His point in these qualifications is that the Oracle identified him as the wisest of men, and thus he is bound to consider himself wise. However, at the time that he received the message he was "aware of himself as being σοφός in nothing great or small." His claim here, then, suggests that he is not disavowing all knowledge, including common knowledge, say, that his name is "Socrates" and that he is an Athenian, but that he has a specialized body of knowledge that would distinguish him from his peers in the way that the sophists or other experts are distinguished. Furthermore, the expression "nothing great or small" ("οὔτε μέγα οὔτε μικρόν") characterizes the relative importance of various kinds of expertise. For instance, Socrates<sub>AP</sub> regards ethical expertise as great, indeed, divine, whereas he regards the common crafts, say, cobbling and pottery-making, as relatively unimportant.<sup>174</sup> Thus, in denying σοφία great or small, he means to deny having any specialized knowledge whatsoever. Finally, when he does explain what his human σοφία amounts to,

<sup>169</sup> So his prosecutors' statement is characteristic of sophistic intellectual activity: "Socrates is a criminal and a busybody, investigating the things beneath the heavens and making the weaker argument stronger and teaching others these same things." (*Ap.* 19b4-c1)

<sup>170</sup> *Ap.* 19e1-4, 20a2-c3.

<sup>171</sup> *Ap.* 20d7.

<sup>172</sup> *Ap.* 20d8.

<sup>173</sup> *Ap.* 20e7.

<sup>174</sup> Of course, he does characterize craftspeople as knowing many fine things, but again, he relativizes the value of their knowledge: "But, men of Athens, the good craftsmen also seemed to me to have the same failing as the poets. Because of practicing his art well, each one thought he was very wise in other *most important* (τὰ μέγιστα) matters, and this folly of theirs obscured that wisdom." (*Ap.* 22d4-e1)

<sup>168</sup> Compare Leshner (1987) 280.

he describes it as involving not thinking that one knows what one does not know.<sup>175</sup> And he interprets the Oracle's pronouncement as indicating that "ἀνθρώπινη σοφία is of little or no value" and that human wisdom lies in recognizing that one is "like Socrates . . . truly of little worth with respect to σοφία."<sup>176</sup> Thus, the kind of wisdom Socrates<sub>AP</sub> admits he has is really no wisdom at all. Rather, it is an appreciation of the limitations of human understanding and, above all, an appreciation of his ignorance of true σοφία, that is, expertise, specifically the σοφία that the gods possess and that is σοφία of the most important things, ethical expertise.

Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s knowledge claims in (a4.1-2) are consistent with his distinction of human and divine wisdom insofar as in claiming to know that it is wrong to do injustice, and so forth, he is not claiming to have ethical expertise. But the question is on what grounds Socrates<sub>AP</sub> can claim to know a non-definitional ethical proposition if he is committed to (PD) and disavows definitional knowledge. As noted, in *Apology* Socrates<sub>AP</sub> says nothing that commits him to (PD). Furthermore – although it may be presumed that when he interviewed the politicians, poets, and craftsmen, he posed "What-is-F?" questions to them – in *Apology* there is no mention of the "What-is-F?" question or of the importance of definitional knowledge. Kraut has interpreted this developmentally as indicating that Plato ascribed (PD) and the necessity of definitional knowledge for pertinent non-definitional knowledge to Socrates<sub>d</sub> only in dialogues composed at some point later than *Apology*. But a developmentalist hypothesis is unnecessary. Instead, the absence in *Apology* of reference to (PD) may simply be explained as deriving from a choice Plato made about what he wished to include in Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s speech and so what he wanted to convey and emphasize in this particular text. Of course, strictly speaking, (a4.1-2 and a5) do contradict Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s commitment to (PD) in other

<sup>175</sup> With regard to the politicians – "I am wiser than this man, for neither of us really knows anything fine and good, but this man thinks he knows something, when he does not; whereas, as I do not know anything, I do not think I do. I seem, then, in just this little thing to be wiser than this man at any rate, that what I do not know I do not think I know either." (*Ap.* 21d2-7) With regard to the poets – "So I went away from them also thinking that I was superior to them in the same thing in which I excelled the politicians." (*Ap.* 22c6-8) Finally, in the case of the craftsmen, Socrates<sub>AP</sub> determines that he is wiser than they, for although he does not possess their craft-knowledge, they additionally believe they have wisdom that they do not, and so Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s awareness of his epistemic limitations makes him wiser than they. (*Ap.* 22d4-e5)

<sup>176</sup> *Ap.* 23a6-7, b2-4.

texts. But Plato need not have been concerned about this. Again, Plato need not have intended his early dialogues to be interpreted by assembling *all* of Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s remarks on a given topic and attempting to distill from these a consistent set of principles pertaining to this topic.

Even if one grants this, it will still be wondered why Plato makes Socrates<sub>AP</sub> assert such a strong ethical knowledge claim (a4.1-2) in *Apology*. In answering this, it is useful to consider the content of the claim and the context in which it occurs. (a4.1) occurs in response to the question of whether Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is not troubled by the fact that he has engaged in a pursuit that may lead to his death. Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s response is that, just as it would have been wrong for him, through fear of death, to have abandoned his military posts at Potidaea, Amphipolis, and Delium, it would have been wrong, through fear of death, to abandon the post to which the divine appointed him.<sup>177</sup> He supports this claim by two further points: he does not know whether death is to be feared, and he does know that it is wrong to commit injustice by disobeying one's superior whether god or man. In asserting these two points he is also assuming that the divine would not have compelled him to follow a course of action that was harmful; and since the divine is superior to him, it would be wrong for him to disobey the divine injunction upon him to philosophize. Thus, these points also reflect Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s assumption, already introduced in his speech, that the divine has ethical expertise.

For the jurors and the intended audience of *Apology*, (a4.1) is itself a commonsensical ethical knowledge claim. As one must obey one's superior in, say, military rank, so humans must obey the divine. From a conventional perspective, then, Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s claim to know this is unremarkable. It would not, in their eyes, signify that he had ethical expertise, let alone qualify him as an ethical expert; nor, of course, does he conceive of it as such. In contrast, (d15) – the claim that he does not know the value of death and the afterlife – is unconventional. The strong contrast Socrates<sub>AP</sub> makes in claiming to know the one and not know the other is, among other things, supposed to highlight the piety and justice (conventionally conceived) of his conduct in contrast to that of the jurors. Since Socrates<sub>AP</sub> has suggested that he is superior to his peers insofar as he does not think that he knows what he does not know, their prosecution of him for impiety is an act of injustice, for they are disobeying their human superior. In contrast, Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s philosophical activity is an act

<sup>177</sup> *Ap.* 28d6-29a1.

of piety because he is obeying the divine. Thus, by condemning him, his peers are acting both unjustly and impiously. Furthermore, by calling into question the justification for fearing death, Plato is conveying Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s courage (conventionally conceived) and the extent to which reason governs Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s conduct. In contrast, Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s peers, in wondering how he could risk his life for philosophy, reveal both their cowardice in respect of their apprehension of death and their two-fold ignorance in thinking they know that death is bad when they do not. Thus, Socrates<sub>AP</sub> analogizes his suggestion that death may not be something bad with his earlier point about human wisdom, that is, not thinking one knows what one does not know.

In sum, then, Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s knowledge claims in (a4.1-2 – and also a5) are consistent with his distinction of human and divine wisdom because (a4.1-2) and (a5) are conventional claims that neither constitute nor reflect ethical expertise. Moreover, they do not conflict with Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s claim of human wisdom simply because they are unrelated to this claim. In contrast to Reeve, I believe that Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s claim of human wisdom only amounts to drawing the limits of his knowledge, that is, knowing what he does not know. Furthermore, the consistency of Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s avowals and disavowals of ethical knowledge and Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s distinction of divine and human wisdom in *Apology* need not be interpreted as supporting an alternative interpretation than the one I am suggesting of Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s avowals and disavowals of ethical knowledge more generally. Specifically, one can interpret Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s knowledge claim in (a4.1-2) in particular as serving specific objectives that Plato has in *Apology*, while also acknowledging that the strict inter-textual inconsistency between (a4.1-2) and (a5) and Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s commitment to (PD) and disavowals of knowledge in other texts would not have bothered Plato and so are hermeneutically innocuous.

The content of *Apology* is often treated as a sort of hermeneutic guide for the interpretation of the other early dialogues, especially for the early definitional dialogues.<sup>178</sup> This tendency is rooted in the assumption that in its portrayal of Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s own defense of his discursive activity, the text is especially serviceable to clarifying the nature of the discursive activity

<sup>178</sup> For example, Benson uses *Apology* to clarify the "aims of the elenchus" (2000, 17-31); Vlastos uses the distinction between human and divine wisdom to buttress his explanation of Socrates' avowals and disavowals of knowledge (1994, 61-2). Reeve uses *Apology* to draw general conclusions about Socrates' ethical epistemology (1989, *passim*).

in which Plato portrays Socrates<sub>d</sub> as engaged in the other early dialogues. As I have mentioned, the fact that Socrates<sub>AP</sub> says nothing about definitional knowledge or the "What-is-*F*?" question or pertaining to (PD) should encourage the view that *Apology* does not provide a hermeneutic guide or an especially precise one for the interpretation of the other early dialogues as such. Moreover, although in my view the distinction between human and divine wisdom in *Apology* unproblematically maps onto Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s ethical epistemological commitments in other dialogues,<sup>179</sup> the phrase "ἀνθρώπινη σοφία" simply does not occur outside of *Apology*. This suggests that although the content of *Apology* is consistent with that of the other early dialogues in this respect, Plato did not consider it important to advance this manner of characterizing Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s ethical epistemological commitments elsewhere. And yet if *Apology* were a guide for interpreting the other early dialogues, one would expect some reference to the distinction elsewhere. In fact, it seems that Plato found the distinction useful for conveying a particular point in *Apology*, and that is all.

The last knowledge claim to be explained is (a6). (a6) is remarkable in that it is the only passage in the early dialogues where Socrates<sub>LA</sub> claims or presumes to know the identity of excellence or a component of excellence. Furthermore, the claim is not tangential to the broader discussion in the text. It is important for the ensuing investigation insofar as Socrates<sub>LA</sub> later employs his view of excellence in the refutation of the final definition of courage. On the other hand, as we have seen, the context in which (a6) is expressed is noteworthy as distinctive in the way that Socrates<sub>LA</sub> defines the character of the investigation according to popular views of courage and excellence. I suggest that (a6) can be explained accordingly as follows.

The investigation in *Laches* conforms to  $\alpha$ -structure in the following way. The investigation begins with popular conceptions of excellence and courage, but by the end of the investigation the conception of at least courage is unconventional. Yet this unconventional conception is refuted precisely because it conflicts with the conventional view that excellence has parts and that courage is a part of excellence. In this respect, as described above, the aporetic conclusion in *Laches* is similar to that in *Lysis*. The investigation in *Lysis* moves from the popular conception of friendship as based on likeness ( $\delta\mu\iota\omicron\tau\eta\varsigma$ ) to an unconventional conception of friendship based on belonging. However, the investigation ends in aporia, without confirming this novel conception of friendship, because in the final

<sup>179</sup> This point is developed in section VII.

between the conception of ἐπιστήμη with which Plato operates and the conception of propositional knowledge familiar to contemporary philosophers. The fundamental difference between Plato's conception of ἐπιστήμη and appropriately justified true belief is that the former entails understanding and so the capacity to explain the subject matter known. In contrast, someone who has propositional knowledge (as contemporary philosophers understand this condition) can of course communicate the content of the known proposition as well as justify grounds for believing it. Yet he cannot necessarily explain the proposition.<sup>182</sup>

In short, for Plato, ἐπιστήμη entails the capacity to explain what is known. In other words, ἐπιστήμη requires a λόγος (explanation or account). As such, Prior has called the kind of knowledge with which Plato is concerned "rational knowledge". This differs from the kind of knowledge to which Geach refers when he argues against Socrates' commitment to (PD) that we "know heaps of things without being able to define the terms in which we express our knowledge."<sup>183</sup> Granted, a *definitional* account is not necessary for every kind of knowledge claim, but, Plato thinks, it is for (non-definitional) ethical knowledge claims. Moreover, for other kinds of knowledge claims, *some* form of explanation remains necessary.

Some have spoken of Plato's conception of knowledge as not merely rational, but scientific. But that characterization is misleading. As we have seen, Socrates makes many ordinary knowledge claims throughout the early dialogues. A good example is (r7):

'Come, then, answer me this,' [Euthydemus] said. 'Do you know (ἐπίστασαι) anything?' 'Yes, of course,' I [Socrates<sub>ET</sub>] replied, 'many things, in fact, although insignificant ones.'<sup>184</sup>

Socrates<sub>ET</sub> is not alluding to anything distinctly scientific here. Again, even if all instances of knowledge entail the ability to give some kind of expla-

discussion of this subject." (*ibid.* n. 44, 147). But as I have discussed elsewhere (Wolfsdorf, 2003c), Vlastos' argument is unpersuasive.

<sup>182</sup> The view that Plato's conception of knowledge in the early dialogues (and in later dialogues) is more like our conception of understanding than knowledge has been defended by Moravcsik (1978); Fine (1979); Burnyeat (1980a), (1980b) at 186; (1990) 213; Smith (1998); Prior (1998); and most recently and comprehensively by Benson (2000) *passim*, for example, 216-21. Consider in particular *Meno* 98a; *Phaed.* 76d; *Rep.* VII 531e, 534b; *Theaet.* 202d.

<sup>183</sup> Geach (1966).

<sup>184</sup> *Euthyd.* 293b7-8.

nation, the ability to provide a definition needn't be a necessary component of explanation in all cases. Prior notes this:

The right response to the question 'How do you know it's raining?' might be, 'I'm looking out the window at the raining coming down right now.' The right response to 'How do you know Susan lives on this street?' might be, 'I've given her a ride home dozens of times.'<sup>185</sup>

In cases such as these, the appropriate λόγοι are non-definitional. So in (r15), when Socrates<sub>PR</sub> confirms that he knows Simonides' Scopas ode – "Do you know the ode, or should I recite the whole thing?" To this, I replied, 'there is no need; I know (ἐπίσταμαι) it.'<sup>186</sup> – his knowledge surely does not entail the ability to define anything, but, presumably, just the ability to recite the ode. In short, ἐπιστήμη requires explanation, but the kind of explanation required depends upon the content or object of knowledge.

Socrates<sub>EU</sub>'s remarks in *Euthyphro* shed some light on this point:

If you and I were to disagree about number, for instance, which of two numbers were greater, would the disagreement about these matters make us enemies and make us angry with each other, or should we not quickly settle it by resorting to arithmetic? . . . Then, too, if we were to disagree about the relative sizes of things, we should quickly put an end to the disagreement by measuring? . . . And we should, I suppose, come to terms about relative weights by weighing? . . . But about what would a disagreement be which we could not settle and which would cause us to be enemies and be angry with each other? Perhaps you cannot give an answer offhand, but let me suggest it. Is it not about right and wrong and fine and base and good and bad?<sup>187</sup>

It is made explicit here that there are different sorts of procedures for the dis/confirmation of different sorts of knowledge claims. And this suggests that the character of explanation for a given kind of knowledge claim will be related to the character of the dis/confirmation procedure pertinent to that domain of knowledge.

Consider this suggestion in light of the following remarks from *Gorgias*. Socrates<sub>GO</sub> argues that the conditions of one who has *learned* and one who has come to believe are not identical. He explains the distinction with the claim that belief can be true or false, whereas *knowledge*

<sup>185</sup> Prior (1998) 104.

<sup>186</sup> *Prot.* 339b4-5.

<sup>187</sup> *Euth.* 7b7-d2.

between the conception of ἐπιστήμη with which Plato operates and the conception of propositional knowledge familiar to contemporary philosophers. The fundamental difference between Plato's conception of ἐπιστήμη and appropriately justified true belief is that the former entails understanding and so the capacity to explain the subject matter known. In contrast, someone who has propositional knowledge (as contemporary philosophers understand this condition) can of course communicate the content of the known proposition as well as justify grounds for believing it. Yet he cannot necessarily explain the proposition.<sup>182</sup>

In short, for Plato, ἐπιστήμη entails the capacity to explain what is known. In other words, ἐπιστήμη requires a λόγος (explanation or account). As such, Prior has called the kind of knowledge with which Plato is concerned "rational knowledge". This differs from the kind of knowledge to which Geach refers when he argues against Socrates' commitment to (PD) that we "know heaps of things without being able to define the terms in which we express our knowledge."<sup>183</sup> Granted, a *definitional* account is not necessary for every kind of knowledge claim, but, Plato thinks, it is for (non-definitional) ethical knowledge claims. Moreover, for other kinds of knowledge claims, *some* form of explanation remains necessary.

Some have spoken of Plato's conception of knowledge as not merely rational, but scientific. But that characterization is misleading. As we have seen, Socrates makes many ordinary knowledge claims throughout the early dialogues. A good example is (r7):

'Come, then, answer me this,' [Euthydemus] said. 'Do you know (ἐπίστασαι) anything?' 'Yes, of course,' I [Socrates<sub>ET</sub>] replied, 'many things, in fact, although insignificant ones.'<sup>184</sup>

Socrates<sub>ET</sub> is not alluding to anything distinctly scientific here. Again, even if all instances of knowledge entail the ability to give some kind of expla-

discussion of this subject." (*ibid.* n. 44, 147). But as I have discussed elsewhere (Wolfsdorf, 2003c), Vlastos' argument is unpersuasive.

<sup>182</sup> The view that Plato's conception of knowledge in the early dialogues (and in later dialogues) is more like our conception of understanding than knowledge has been defended by Moravcsik (1978); Fine (1979); Burnyeat (1980a), (1980b) at 186; (1990) 213; Smith (1998); Prior (1998); and most recently and comprehensively by Benson (2000) *passim*, for example, 216-21. Consider in particular *Meno* 98a; *Phaed.* 76d; *Rep.* VII 531e, 534b; *Theaet.* 202d.

<sup>183</sup> Geach (1966).

<sup>184</sup> *Euthyd.* 293b7-8.

nation, the ability to provide a definition needn't be a necessary component of explanation in all cases. Prior notes this:

The right response to the question 'How do you know it's raining?' might be, 'I'm looking out the window at the raining coming down right now.' The right response to 'How do you know Susan lives on this street?' might be, 'I've given her a ride home dozens of times.'<sup>185</sup>

In cases such as these, the appropriate λόγοι are non-definitional. So in (r15), when Socrates<sub>PR</sub> confirms that he knows Simonides' Scopas ode – "Do you know the ode, or should I recite the whole thing?" To this, I replied, 'there is no need; I know (ἐπίσταμαι) it.'<sup>186</sup> – his knowledge surely does not entail the ability to define anything, but, presumably, just the ability to recite the ode. In short, ἐπιστήμη requires explanation, but the kind of explanation required depends upon the content or object of knowledge.

Socrates<sub>EU</sub>'s remarks in *Euthyphro* shed some light on this point:

If you and I were to disagree about number, for instance, which of two numbers were greater, would the disagreement about these matters make us enemies and make us angry with each other, or should we not quickly settle it by resorting to arithmetic? . . . Then, too, if we were to disagree about the relative sizes of things, we should quickly put an end to the disagreement by measuring? . . . And we should, I suppose, come to terms about relative weights by weighing? . . . But about what would a disagreement be which we could not settle and which would cause us to be enemies and be angry with each other? Perhaps you cannot give an answer offhand, but let me suggest it. Is it not about right and wrong and fine and base and good and bad?<sup>187</sup>

It is made explicit here that there are different sorts of procedures for the dis/confirmation of different sorts of knowledge claims. And this suggests that the character of explanation for a given kind of knowledge claim will be related to the character of the dis/confirmation procedure pertinent to that domain of knowledge.

Consider this suggestion in light of the following remarks from *Gorgias*. Socrates<sub>GO</sub> argues that the conditions of one who has *learned* and one who has come to believe are not identical. He explains the distinction with the claim that belief can be true or false, whereas *knowledge*

<sup>185</sup> Prior (1998) 104.

<sup>186</sup> *Prot.* 339b4-5.

<sup>187</sup> *Euth.* 7b7-d2.



can only be true.<sup>188</sup> This implies that knowledge results from learning.<sup>189</sup> Assuming that learning involves coming to know something through a particular explanatory procedure, then that which has come to be known will entail the explanation by which it was learned. Given that much knowledge learned is not learned through definition, it should not be expected that all knowledge entails a *definitional* explanation.

As the examples from the *Euthyphro* passage indicate, in many cases dis/confirmation procedures are uncontroversial. As such, they do not arouse (Socrates<sub>d</sub>'s) epistemological curiosity – even though with the hindsight of the history of epistemology, we can see how fruitful examination of them proves to be. In the early dialogues Socrates<sub>d</sub> does not explore the broad epistemological question of how various things are known or what different kinds of epistemic explanations reveal about kinds of knowledge or knowledge in general. To broach these questions would be to open the field of epistemology in the wide sense that we now take for granted. Unlike Descartes, Socrates<sub>ED</sub> does not question the grounds of ordinary knowledge or belief. He knows that his name is “Socrates”, that he is an Athenian, a father, that this is water, that is wine. But such knowledge simply does not arouse suspicion or interest. It is rather in the domain of ethical claims that his epistemological interest is galvanized. As he notes in the *Euthyphro* passage, the dis/confirmation procedure here is obscure, and indeed, remarkably so. Consequently, it is unclear how to settle ethical disagreement or simply to dis/confirm ethical claims.

I submit that the appeal to definitions is Plato's answer to the problem of adjudicating and dis/confirming ethical knowledge claims (at least non-definitional ethical knowledge claims). As Socrates<sub>EU</sub> says elsewhere in *Euthyphro*, the form (εἶδος) – which is the object of definition – serves as a standard (παράδειγμα) on the basis of which to judge. In a general sense, then, it is this that leads Plato or Socrates<sub>d</sub> to the adoption of (PD), that is, to the adoption of the view that the kind of explanation needed for knowledge of non-definitional ethical propositions is definitional knowledge.<sup>190</sup>

In his discussion of Socrates<sub>ED</sub>'s avowals and disavowals, Vlastos, for instance, misses the point that ἐπιστήμη requires λόγος because he focuses on the element (familiar to modern philosophers) of justification and so on the distinction between fallibility and certainty. But consider

<sup>188</sup> *Gorg.* 454d1-7.

<sup>189</sup> Compare *Gorg.* 460b f.

<sup>190</sup> The point is developed in Wolfsdorf (2003c).

Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s confusion regarding the Oracle's proclamation that he is the wisest Greek. Given his belief in the divine's incapacity for falsehood, Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is convinced of the truth of the claim: “[the god (ὁ θεός)] cannot be lying, for that is not lawful (θέμις) for it.”<sup>191</sup> Yet he lacks understanding of this, and so he cannot claim to know it.

Compare this with Socrates<sub>AP</sub>'s attitude toward death. Initially in his defense-speech Socrates<sub>AP</sub> criticizes the jurors for fearing death since they do not know what death is.<sup>192</sup> Toward the end of his speech, he claims that death is a good thing and that he has strong evidence (μέγα τεκμήριον) of this. His divine monitor did not prevent him from coming to court and delivering his speech; it would have if the outcome of the action were to have been bad.<sup>193</sup> Since Socrates<sub>AP</sub> is being condemned to death, death cannot be a bad thing. However, even though Socrates<sub>AP</sub> expresses his strong belief in this proposition, in the final line of the text, he claims that whether death is a good thing is unclear to all but the divine.<sup>194</sup> This indicates that he concludes his speech with the belief that he does not know whether death is good. The reason that Socrates<sub>AP</sub> does not know whether death is a good thing is that he does not understand what death involves.<sup>195</sup>

In this case, lack of knowledge is due to human experiential limitations, not theoretical difficulties. This would similarly explain why in (d16) and (d17) Socrates<sub>d</sub> disavows particular knowledge about the gods and Hades as well. A definitional λόγος is, then, conceived as particularly appropriate when one encounters certain theoretical difficulties. Accordingly, this must finally be why Socrates<sub>GO</sub> disavows knowledge of the proposition that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it in (r5). Consider the passage once more:

These matters, as has become evident to us in our preceding exchange, are fixed and – to put it rather crudely – bound with arguments of steel and adamant – or so it would seem – arguments that unless you or someone more vigorous than yourself can unfasten, no one can assert otherwise than I do and still assert well. For my position is the same as always, that I do not know how these matters

<sup>191</sup> *Ap.* 21b5-7; cf. McPherran in Scott (2002) 122-3.

<sup>192</sup> *Ap.* 29a3-b2.

<sup>193</sup> *Ap.* 40c1-2.

<sup>194</sup> *Ap.* 42a2-5.

<sup>195</sup> Although this is not the point of his claim in *Apology*, it must also be because he does not know what goodness is.

stand, but that, of all whom I have encountered, as now, no one is able to state it otherwise and not look ridiculous. And so, once again, I assert that these things are so.

If Vlastos were correct, then Socrates<sub>GO</sub>'s disavowal of knowing this proposition would owe to his belief that someone might be able to unfasten his arguments in favor of this proposition. But this cannot be quite the right story or at least not the whole story. Given Plato's commitment to advancing (PD), the fundamental reason for Socrates<sub>GO</sub>'s disavowal must be his lack of the appropriate definitional knowledge. If he had that, then surely he would be confident enough to affirm knowledge that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it. Instead, as he says, "my position is the same as always". By this he must be implying (PD). Ironically, on six occasions among the early dialogues his position is not the same as this. But, of course, in *this* case Plato must be projecting his vision of a trans-textually identical Socrates.

Boston University  
Department of Philosophy

## BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS CITED

- Benson, Hugh H., "The Priority of Definition and the Socratic Elenchus", *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 8 (1990) 19-65.
- ed., *Essays on the Philosophy of Socrates*, Oxford University Press, 1992.
- *Socratic Wisdom*, Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Beverluis, John, "Does Socrates Commit the Socratic Fallacy?", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 24 (1987) 211-23.
- Brickhouse, Thomas C., and Smith, Nicholas D., *Plato's Socrates*, Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Burnyeat, M. F., "Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge", in *Aristotle on Science: The Posterior Analytics*, E. Berti, ed., Padua, 1980a, 97-139.
- "Socrates and the Jury: Paradoxes in Plato's Distinction between Knowledge and Belief", *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 54 (1980b) 173-91.
- *The Theaetetus of Plato*, Hackett Publishing Company, 1990.
- Cooper, John M., ed., *Plato Complete Works*, Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.
- Davies, John Kenyon, *Athenian Propertied Families, 600-300 B.C.*, Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Donlan, Walter, *The Aristocratic Ideal in Ancient Greece*, Coronado Press, 1980.
- Fine, Gail, "Knowledge and Logos in the *Theaetetus*", *Philosophical Review* 88 (1979) 366-97.
- Fowler, H. N., *Plato IV*, Harvard University Press, 1926.
- Geach, P. T., "Plato's *Euthyphro*: Analysis and Commentary", *Monist* 50 (1966) 369-82.
- Irwin, Terence, "Socratic Puzzles", *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 10 (1992) 241-66.
- *Plato's Ethics*, Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Kraut, Richard, *Socrates and the State*, Princeton University Press, 1984.
- Lamb, W. R. M., *Plato II*, Harvard University Press, 1924.
- Leshner, J. H., "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (1987) 275-88.
- McPherran, Mark, "Elenctic Interpretation and the Delphic Oracle", in *Does Socrates have a Method?*, Gary Alan Scott, ed., Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002, 114-44.
- Moravcsik, J. M. E., "Understanding and Knowledge in Plato's Philosophy", *Neue Hefte für Philosophie* 15-16 (1978) 53-69.
- Nails, Debra, *The People of Plato*, Hackett Publishing Company, 2002.
- Nightingale, Andrea Wilson, *Genres in Dialogue*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Nozick, Robert, "Socratic Puzzles", *Phronesis* 40 (1995) 143-55.
- Prior, William, "Plato and the 'Socratic Fallacy'", *Phronesis* 43 (1998) 97-113.
- Reeve, C. D. C., *Socrates in the Apology*, Hackett Publishing Company, 1989.
- Smith, Angela M., "Knowledge and Expertise in the Early Platonic Dialogues", *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 80 (1998) 129-61.
- Vlastos, Gregory, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge", *Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1985) 1-31.
- *Socratic Studies*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Wolfsdorf, David, *Aporia in Plato's Charmides, Laches, and Lysis*, University of Chicago, dissertation, 1997.

- “Comments on Benson: The Method of Hypothesis in the *Meno*”, *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 19 (2003a) 127-43.
- “Socrates’ Pursuit of Definitions”, *Phronesis* 48 (2003b) 271-312.
- “The Socratic Fallacy and the Epistemological Priority of Definitional Knowledge”, 2003c, under review.
- “Interpreting Plato’s Early Dialogues”, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 2004a, forthcoming.
- “Φιλία in Plato’s *Lysis*”, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 2004b, forthcoming.
- Woodruff, Paul, “Plato’s Early Theory of Knowledge”, in *Ancient Greek Epistemology*, S. Everson, ed., Cambridge University Press, 1990, 60-84.

## *Definitions and Paradigms: Laches’ First Definition*

ØYVIND RABBÅS

### ABSTRACT

Laches’ first definition is rejected because it is somehow formally inadequate, but it is not clear exactly how this is so. On my interpretation, the failure of this definition cannot be explained by reference to the distinction between universals and particulars. Rather, it provides a paradigm of courage, which is inadequate because it fails to make clear how it is to be projected into other, non-paradigmatic cases. The definition is interesting because it articulates essential elements of the dominant moral tradition, including both its normative content (it is too conservative and aristocratic) and its form (it is sustained by a certain limited canon of ideals, idols, and images of excellence). Socrates’ elenchus of this definition thus amounts to a challenge to this tradition.

Halfway into the *Laches* Socrates asks the two generals Laches and Nicias what courage (*andreia*) is (190d-e). Laches is the first to reply:

Good heavens, Socrates, there is no difficulty about that [i.e. saying what *andreia* is]: if a man is *willing to remain at his place in the ranks and to resist the enemy without running away* [*etheloi en tē(i) taxei menōn amynesthai tous polemiōus kai mē pheugoi*], then you may rest assured that he is a man of courage. (190e4-6)<sup>1</sup>

This attempt to answer Socrates’ question has received rather short shrift in the scholarly literature. It is commonly regarded as rather naive, like Laches himself, and the result of a simple misunderstanding of what kind of question the ‘What is X?’ question is and of what kind of answer is appropriate. As a result, commentators tend to pass over it swiftly on their way to what they take to be the philosophically more interesting definitions that follow. However, I want to argue that this negative view

*Accepted October 2003*

<sup>1</sup> Translations of the *Laches* are by R. K. Sprague in J. M. Cooper and D. Hutchinson (edd.), *Plato. Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997). I prefer ‘place in the ranks’ to Sprague’s ‘post’ for *taxis*, and ‘resist’ to ‘defend himself against’ for *amynesthai*; the reasons for this will become clear below (n. 11).