Socrates' Pursuit of Definitions[1]

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ABSTRACT

"Socrates' Pursuit of Definitions" examines the manner in which Socrates pursues definitions in Plato's early definitional dialogues and advances the following claims. Socrates evaluates definitions (proposed by his interlocutors or himself) by considering their consistency with conditions of the identity of F (F-conditions) to which he is committed. In evaluating proposed definitions, Socrates seeks to determine their truth-value. Socrates evaluates the truth-value of a proposed definition by considering the consistency of the proposed definition with F-conditions that F he believes to be true. (For instance, a proposed definition's inconsistency with one of these gives Socrates reason to believe that the definition is false.) Socrates' belief in the truth of a given F-condition to which he is committed may be based on self-evidence, its endoxic status, experience, or deduction from premises to which he is committed on the basis of any of the previous three. However, Socrates does not consider the epistemological grounds of his commitments to his F-conditions. This is part of a general avoidance of meta-ethical and ethical epistemological issues. Due to his avoidance of these, Socrates' pursuit of true definitions is theoretically naïve. However, Socrates recognizes a certain limitation to his manner of pursuing definitions.

These results are applied to advancing the following further points. (1) Although Socrates has a distinctive manner or style of pursuing definitions, it is inappropriate to ascribe to him a method of doing so in the following sense. The concept of method implies a certain theoretical conception of procedure that Socrates lacks. Moreover, according to Socrates' own conceptual framework, only one who possessed the relevant τέχνη would have a method. (2) Furthermore, Socrates' manner of pursuing definitions is not elenctic just insofar as the word "elenchus" is interpreted to have adversarial connotations; that is inconsistent with Socrates' motives and interests. (3) Socrates' manner of pursuing definitions is consistent among the early definitional dialogues. More specifically, there is no "demise of the elenchus" in a set of transitional dialogues, as Vlastos describes it. First, Socrates' manner of pursuing definitions is not "elenctic" (in the sense described). And, second, the fact that Socrates himself proposes definitions in allegedly post-elenctic dialogues (that is, *Lysis* and *Hippias Major*) is consistent with his manner of pursuing definitions. (4) In the early definitional dialogues,

Socrates does not have a theory of definition. In particular, he lacks a general theoretical ontology. Moreover, while his comments and implicit commitments entail beliefs about some conditions for a satisfactory definition (for example, that the *definiens* must be a uniquely identifying true verbal description), such conditions do not constitute a theory. (5) Although in other early dialogues and in other parts of the definitional dialogues Socrates may express concern over the psychological states and well-being of his interlocutors, in the process of pursuing definitions, Socrates' principal concern is the evaluation of definitions, not the psychologies or lives of his interlocutors. (6) Finally, Socrates is committed to the epistemological priority of definitional knowledge for pertinent non-definitional knowledge. This does present a methodological problem of the kind to which Geach first drew attention. Specifically, according to the manner in which Socrates pursues definitions, it is unclear how he can get from belief that *p* to knowledge that *p*. Although this problem is genuine, Socrates himself is not unaware of such limits of his approach.

In Cratylus *Socrates suggests that a word is an instrument by which we divide up entities according to their natures* (οὐσίαι).[2] *Reminiscent of the Latin derivation of the English word, the Greek word for defining "ὁρίζεσθαι" is derived from the practice of marking the limits of a piece of owned land with boundary stones* (ὅροι). *The philosophically fertile word "οὐσία", having previously been used to denote a piece of property, specifically a piece of owned land, was adapted with these others to metaphysics and semantics. This linguistic history reminds us that the roots of Western philosophy lie among a community of farmers. And so Plato's definitional dialogues mark early steps in the journey from the practical knowledge of agriculture to the theoretical knowledge of practical wisdom.*

I. *Introduction*

Several of Plato's dialogues standardly conceived as belonging to the early period share the following feature. The character Socrates and his interlocutors engage in a discussion focused on answering a question of the form 'What is *F*'? (hereafter referred to as the WF question), where the symbol "*F*" stands for a word designating human excellence (ἀρετή) or a human excellence.[3] The discussion mostly involves proposing answers

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[2] *Crat.* 388b13-c1.

[3] Throughout the paper I use the symbol "*F*" as a notation for the variable whose values are derived from the domain of words that designate the entities Socrates and his interlocutors investigate in the early definitional dialogues, namely, "ἀνδρεία", "σωφροσύνη", "δικαιοσύνη", "τὸ καλόν" or "κάλλος", "τὸ ὅσιον" or "ὁσιότης", "ἀρετή", and "φιλία". In *Plato's Earlier Dialectic* (1941) the first major book of the twentieth century exclusively to focus on Plato's early writings, Richard Robinson used the symbol "x" for the same purpose. More recently, Plato scholars have used the sym-

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to this question (that is, definitions of *F*) and evaluating these.[4] Accordingly, I refer to these texts as Plato's early definitional dialogues. They include *Charmides, Laches, Lysis, Euthyphro, Hippias Major, Meno,* and *Republic I.*

This paper focuses on the manner in which Socrates pursues definitions of *F*. This topic can be viewed as intersecting the familiar topic of Socrates' method in the early dialogues. That subject ultimately owes its current vitality to Gregory Vlastos' paper, "The Socratic Elenchus", which has galvanized a number of searching treatments.[5] I will begin the discussion by reconsidering the basic data: the way Socrates evaluates

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bols "*F*" and "*F*-ness". In these cases the symbols derive from quantificational logic. The italicized capital letter is used to schematize a predicate. The excellence-terms (also called virtue-terms) are not predicates, but adjectival or characterizing general terms. However, since both predicates and adjectival or characterizing general terms are thought to designate properties and the excellence-terms are assumed to do so, the predicate symbol is used. "*F*-ness" or "the *F*" is preferred to "*F*" in order to make clear the distinction between the noun and the corresponding adjective, viz. "δικαιοσύνη" and "δίκαιον". But, simply for elegance, I prefer "*F*" for the noun and "*f*" for the corresponding adjective.

[4] Precisely, pursuit of definitions occupies approximately 57% of these texts, about 138 Stephanus pages out of a possible 243; about 26 of about 36.5 Stephanus pages in *Charmides* (or about 72%); about 15.5 of about 34 Stephanus pages in *Laches* (or about 45%); about 14 of about 26 Stephanus pages in *Lysis* (or about %53); about 17 of about 22.5 Stephanus pages in *Euthyphro* (or about 75%); about 27 of about 36.5 Stephanus pages in *Hippias Major* (or about 73%); about 12.5 of about 45 Stephanus pages in *Meno* (or about 28%); about 26 of about 42.5 Stephanus pages in *Republic I* (or about 61%). These measurements are based on counting the number of pages between the first time Socrates poses the WF question and the rejection of the final definition. In *Meno*, the span covers the text until Meno poses his paradox. In *Lysis*, Socrates never poses an initial WF question, although it is clear that the principal aim of the inquiry is to determine what friendship is. The content of the entire dialogue could arguably be said to contribute to this aim. But the direct and explicit argument and inquiry pertaining to this question begins at 212b when Socrates asks Menexenus who is φίλος to whom. Sedley (1989) argues that in fact the inquiry in *Lysis* is motivated by the question "Who is φίλος to whom?" But, despite Sedley's philological arguments, the dialogue is obviously concerned to examine the nature of φιλία and is a definitional dialogue. In *Republic I* Socrates also does not initially pose a WF question. Although it is obvious that the initial movement of the inquiry is motivated by an attempt to answer this question. The pertinent span of text in the measurement runs from Socrates' articulation of Cephalus' conception of δικαιοσύνη at 331c until the final refutation of Thrasymachus' definition, the good of the stronger, at 347e.

[5] Vlastos (1983) with postscript "Afterthoughts on the Socratic Elenchus" at 71-4. The paper is reprinted in (1994) with appendix, "The Demise of the Elenchus in the *Euthydemus, Lysis,* and *Hippias Major*". Cf. also Kraut (1983); Brickhouse and Smith

definitions. I will then turn to the central areas of controversy: why Socrates evaluates definitions, the so-called "problem of the elenchus", and the epistemic status of the premises Socrates uses in evaluating definitions. Finally, I will briefly touch upon the ramifications of my results for some related questions: whether Socrates has a method and, if so, whether it is elenctic; whether Socrates' manner of pursuing definitions is consistent among the early dialogues; whether Socrates has a theory of definition; whether Socrates evaluates definitions or people; and whether Socrates' manner of pursuing definitions is logical.

The theses I will be defending in the main body of the paper are these:

- Socrates evaluates definitions (proposed by his interlocutors or himself) by considering their consistency with conditions for the identity of F (hereafter F-conditions) to which he is committed.
- In evaluating proposed definitions, Socrates seeks to determine their truth-value.
- Socrates evaluates the truth-value of a proposed definition by considering the consistency of the proposed definition with F-conditions he believes to be true. (For instance, a proposed definition's inconsistency with one of these gives Socrates reason to believe that the definition is false.)
- Socrates' belief in the truth of a given F-condition to which he is committed may be based on self-evidence, its endoxic status, experience, or deduction from premises to which he is committed on the basis of any of the previous three. However, Socrates does not consider the epistemological grounds of his commitments to his F-conditions. This is part of a broad avoidance of meta-ethical and ethical epistemological issues. Due to his avoidance of these, Socrates' pursuit of true definitions is theoretically naïve. However, Socrates recognizes a certain limitation to his manner of pursuing definitions.

II. Socrates' Responses to Definitions

Twenty-seven definitions of F are discussed in the early definitional dialogues.[6] Four in *Charmides*: quietness; modesty; doing one's own thing

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(1984); Polansky (1985); Benson (1987), (1990); Brickhouse and Smith (1991); Gentzler (1994); Brickhouse and Smith (1994) 3-29; Benson (1995); Benson in Lehrer (1996); Adams (1998); Scott (2002).

[6] Of course, these are not the only definitions in the early dialogues or the early

(which is reinterpreted as doing good things); and self-knowledge (which is reinterpreted as knowledge of knowledge). Three in *Laches*: remaining in rank, defending against the enemy, and not fleeing; toughness of the soul; and knowledge of what is to be feared and dared. Two in *Lysis*: the neither-good-nor-bad loves the good on account of the presence of the bad; the neither-good-nor-bad loves the ultimate good on account of desire. Four in *Euthyphro*: prosecuting one who commits sacrilege regardless of the prosecutor's relation to the offender; that which is god-beloved; that which is loved by all the gods; attention to the gods (which is reinterpreted as service to the gods). Seven in *Hippias Major*: a beautiful woman; gold; to be rich, healthy, honored by the Greeks, to live to old age, and to bury one's parents; decorousness; utility; benefit; aesthetic pleasure (reinterpreted as beneficial pleasure). Three in *Meno*: managing political affairs (for a man) and managing domestic affairs (for a woman); being able to govern people; desiring what is fine and being able to procure it. Four in *Republic I*: telling the truth and returning what one takes; doing what is fitting (reinterpreted as aiding friends and harming enemies); aiding a friend who is good and harming an enemy who is bad; what is good for the stronger.[7]

Of these, Socrates offers six; and these are confined to *Lysis* and the last four definitions in *Hippias Major*.[8] Otherwise, Socrates' responses to definitions or the arguments Socrates develops in response to the definitions may be distinguished as having two basic forms. In most cases (twenty-six of twenty-seven) Socrates rejects the definition because it does

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definitions dialogues. In *Laches* Socrates defines speed; in *Republic I* he defines function; in *Gorgias* he defines rhetoric; in *Meno* he defines shape and color.

[7] There is certainly some room for debate about exactly how many definitions are tested in the various dialogues. For instance, cf. Schmidt's appendix A (1998, 153-8) where he discusses several possible interpretations of the number of definitions in *Charmides*. One sticking point, as I have indicated above, is that Socrates sometimes responds to definitions by reinterpreting them. In these cases, I have chosen to count the original definition and its reinterpretation(s) as a single definition. Another question is whether to count as definitions Laches', Euthyphro's, and Meno's first responses to the WF question. For instance, Allen (1970) does not, whereas in the case of *Laches* Saunders (1987) does. Cf. also Carpenter and Polansky's remarks: "In those dialogues dominated by the search for a definition of some moral notion, the interlocutor often begins with an attempted definition that seems to fail as a definition." (in Scott 2002, 93) I treat these responses as definitions for reasons that will become clear below. To a large extent, though, my decisions correspond with those of other scholars.

[8] Although, Socrates directly and indirectly assists in formulating Euthyphro's fourth definition and Nicias' definition respectively.

not satisfy some F-condition to which Socrates is committed. In the exceptional case, the definition is rejected because it does not satisfy some F-condition to which the interlocutors are committed.[9] Thus, definitions are almost always rejected because they do not satisfy some F-condition to which Socrates is committed.

These F-conditions are as follows. From the investigation in *Charmides*: temperance (σωφροσύνη) is in all instances fine (καλόν);[10] temperance is in all instances good (ἀγαθόν);[11] temperance entails knowledge (for a temperate man knows what he is doing);[12] temperance exists; temperance is beneficial.[13] From *Laches*: courage (ἀνδρεία) is the same in all cases and the common possession of courageous men;[14] courage is a power (δύναμις);[15] courage is in all instances fine;[16] courage is a part of excellence.[17] From *Lysis*: friendship (φιλία) must have an ultimate object;[18] the presence of badness is not the cause of friendship.[19] From *Euthyphro*: holiness (τὸ ὅσιον) is a form (εἶδος), is the same in all instances, and is that because of which all holy entities are holy;[20] holiness is not in any way unholy (or, it is purely holy);[21] the *definiens* must describe the being (οὐσία) of holiness and not something that holiness undergoes (a πάθος).[22] From *Hippias Major*: fineness (τὸ καλόν) is not in any way not-fine (or, it is purely fine);[23] fineness makes entities fine;[24] fineness is

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[9] This is Socrates' second definition of φιλία, which is rejected as inconsistent with the view to which Lysis and Menexenus express commitment that φίλοι are ὁμοῖοι.

[10] The first definition, quietness, is rejected because it does not satisfy this condition.

[11] The second definition, modesty, is rejected because it does not satisfy this condition.

[12] The third definition, reinterpreted as doing good, is rejected because it does not satisfy this condition.

[13] The fourth definition, reinterpreted as knowledge of knowledge and lack of knowledge, is rejected because it does not satisfy these two conditions.

[14] The first definition is rejected because it does not satisfy this condition.

[15] The first definition is rejected because it does not satisfy this condition.

[16] The second definition is rejected because it does not satisfy this condition.

[17] The third definition is rejected because it does not satisfy this condition.

[18] The first definition is rejected because it does not satisfy this condition.

[19] The first definition is rejected because it does not satisfy this condition.

[20] The first definition is rejected because it does not satisfy these conditions.

[21] The second definition is rejected because it does not satisfy this condition.

[22] The third definition is rejected because it does not satisfy this condition.

[23] The first, second, third, and fifth definitions are rejected because they do not satisfy this condition.

[24] The fourth definition is rejected because it does not satisfy this condition.

good.[25] From *Meno*: excellence is the same in all instances and that because of which instances of excellence are such instances;[26] excellence is a property most people do not possess.[27] From *Republic I*: all instances of justice must be just;[28] it is not a function of justice to do harm;[29] justice is beneficial to others.[30]

Of the twenty-six cases where a definition is rejected because it does not satisfy one of these F-conditions, the form of the response to the definition varies in the following ways. Most commonly (twenty-two of twenty-six cases) Socrates elicits his interlocutor's assent to the F-condition to which he, Socrates, is committed, and then his interlocutor's assent to the proposition that describes the *definiens* as not satisfying that condition. In the remaining four cases, Socrates simply tells his interlocutor that the definition is not satisfactory.[31] In these latter cases, it has been argued that the definition (or response to the WF question) is formally as opposed to materially incorrect.[32] The formal/material correctness distinction is reasonable here. Nevertheless, Socrates rejects the responses as unsatisfactory because they do not satisfy some condition regarding the identity of F to which Socrates is committed – in these cases, formal as opposed to material F-conditions.[33]

In fourteen of those twenty-two cases where Socrates elicits his interlocutor's assent to the set of propositions that entails the refutation of the

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[25] The sixth and seventh definitions are rejected because they do not satisfy this condition.

[26] The first, second, and third definitions are rejected because they do not satisfy this condition.

[27] The third definition is rejected because it does not satisfy this condition.

[28] The first and second definitions are rejected because they do not satisfy this condition.

[29] The third definition is rejected because it does not satisfy this condition.

[30] The fourth definition is rejected because it does not satisfy this condition.

[31] These are Socrates' responses to Laches' and Meno's first definitions, Socrates' response to his first definition of φιλία, and Socrates' response to Meno's second definition.

[32] For a full discussion of the distinction between formally and materially correct answers to the WF question, cf. Benson (1990) reprinted in Benson (1992).

[33] Benson would not agree with this characterization since he believes the formal condition these responses fail to satisfy is that the WF question has only one answer. I think Benson has mischaracterized the formal problem with the answers. But an adequate explanation of Benson's error and my view on the matter is too involved for the present context (cf. my "Understanding the 'What-is-F?' Question" [forthcoming, *Apeiron*]).

definition, Socrates is unqualifiedly committed to all the propositions in the argument (save the definition).[34] In the remaining eight cases Socrates' attitude toward the propositions ranges from tentative commitment (at least of some propositions) to disbelief (at least of some propositions). To the extent that this is so, these arguments are correspondingly *ad hominem*.[35] However, although they are *ad hominem* to this extent, the arguments are not *ad hominem* insofar as the definition is suggested to fail to satisfy an *F*-condition to which Socrates is committed.

In sum, the arguments Socrates develops in response to definitions have the following forms:

In one case (Socrates' second definition of friendship):

Proposition	Discussant's attitude toward proposition	
	Socrates	Interlocutors
(1) *p* [*definiens*]	Believes true	Believes true
(2) *q*[36]	Believes false	Believe true
(3) *q* entails *not-p*	Believes true	Believe true
(4) *not-p*	Believes true	Believes true

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[34] These include the responses to the first three definitions in *Charmides*, the second and third definition in *Laches*, the third definition in *Euthyphro*, the first three and the fifth definition in *Hippias Major*, the second definition in *Meno*, and the first, second and fourth definitions in *Republic I*.

[35] These include the response to the fourth definition in *Charmides*, the second and fourth definition in *Euthyphro*, the fourth, sixth, and seventh definitions in *Hippias Major*, the third definition in *Meno*, and the second definition in *Republic I*. More precisely, in the response to the fourth definition in *Charmides*, Socrates concludes only tentatively that the knowledge of knowledge does not exist, for he claims that he is not competent to determine the issue. In response to the second definition in *Euthyphro* Socrates accepts Euthyphro's claim that the gods quarrel although he obviously disbelieves this. In response to the fourth definition in *Euthyphro*, he accepts the implications of Euthyphro's claim that ὁσιότης is the knowledge of praying and sacrificing although it is not clear that he believes this. In response to the fourth definition in *Hippias Major*, Socrates accepts Hippias' claim that the appropriate only makes things appear καλόν although it is unclear whether Socrates himself believes this. In response to the sixth and seventh definitions Socrates fails to distinguish between that which is ἀγαθόν and that which is τὸ ἀγαθόν. He clearly cannot believe that there is no distinction between the two. In response to the third definition in *Meno* Socrates accepts Meno's claim that wealth, etc. are goods although he does not think that these are unqualifiedly goods. In response to the second definition in *Republic I*, Socrates develops two egregiously bad arguments to undermine the utility of δικαιοσύνη. He surely cannot believe these arguments or their conclusions.

[36] "*q*" stands for a premise set, which may include one or multiple premises.

In three cases (Laches' and Meno's first definitions and Meno's second definition):

Proposition	Discussant's attitude toward proposition	
	Socrates	Interlocutor
(1) *p* [*definiens*]	Believes false	Believes true

The articulation of *p* is followed by Socrates' explanation of why *p* does not satisfactorily answer the WF question. The definition is not tested.

In one case (Socrates' first definition of friendship):

Proposition	Discussant's attitude toward proposition	
	Socrates	Interlocutors
(1) *p* [*definiens*]	Believes true[37]	Believe true

The definition is immediately followed by Socrates' explanation of why it isn't satisfactory.

In fourteen cases:

Proposition	Discussant's attitude toward proposition	
	Socrates	Interlocutor(s)
(1) *p* [*definiens*]	—[38]	Believes true[39]
(2) *q*	Believes true	Believes true
(3) *q* entails *not-p*	Believes true	Believes true
(4) *not-p*	Believes true	Believes true

In eight cases:

Proposition	Discussant's attitude toward proposition	
	Socrates	Interlocutor(s)
(1) *p* [*definiens*]	—[40]	Believes true
(2) *q*	?[41]	Believes true

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[37] Socrates either believes the definition is false or he is uncertain before he tests it.

[38] But immediately he realizes it is not true.

[39] This is so in those cases where the interlocutor proposes the definition.

[40] See n. 38.

[41] Socrates at least believes that one of the premises is true, namely that which expresses the *F*-condition with which the *definiens* is inconsistent. In some cases, he disbelieves some of the other premises or only tentatively believes them.

(3) q entails *not-p*   Believes true   Believes true
(4) *not-p*   Believes true[42]   —[43]

III. *Socrates' Pursuit of True Definitions*

The signal feature of my interpretation of Socrates' manner of pursuing satisfactory definitions in the early definitional dialogues, then, is the role that Socrates' *F*-conditions play in the evaluation of proposed definitions. I claim that Socrates tests proposed definitions against *F*-conditions to which he is committed.

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[42] In one case, the refutation of the fourth definition in *Charmides* for not existing, Socrates only tentatively accepts the conclusion.

[43] My interpretations of the arguments in response definitions may be compared and contrasted with those of Vlastos and Benson. Vlastos characterizes the standard form of Socrates' responses as follows:

Proposition	Discussant's attitude toward proposition	
	Socrates	Interlocutor
(1) p [*definiens*]	Believes false	Believes true
(2) q (& r)	—	Believes true
(3) q (& r) entail *not-p*	Believes true	Believes true
(4) *not-p*	Believes true	—

Vlastos does not state it, but according to his description, Socrates must believe (2) q (& r) to be true. Otherwise, it would not make sense for him to conclude that *not-p* is true (or p false). Also, since the interlocutor accepts the conclusion, the interlocutor must adjust his beliefs and believe *not-p* is true and p false. ("Socratic elenchus is a search for moral truth by question-and-answer adversary argument in which a thesis is debated only if asserted as the answerer's own belief and is regarded as refuted only if its negation is deduced from his own beliefs. [The standard form of the elenchus is this.] (1) The interlocutor asserts a thesis p [the so-called refutand], which Socrates considers false and targets for refutation. (2) Socrates secures agreement to further premises, say q and r (each of which may stand for a conjunct of propositions). [Vlastos notes that he uses two variables, q and r, "though one would suffice, with a view to a special case . . . where the interlocutor has the option of welshing on just one of the agreed upon premises" (1994) n. 33.] The agreement is *ad hoc*: Socrates argues from {q, r}, not to them. (3) Socrates then argues, and the interlocutor agrees, that q & r entail *not-p*. (4) Socrates then claims that he has shown that *not-p* is true, p false." (Vlastos (1994) 4, 11; on the non-standard or indirect elenchus, cf. 12 and nn. 34-5.))

Benson characterizes the form of Socrates' responses as follows:

Proposition	Discussant's attitude toward proposition	
	Socrates	Interlocutor
(1) p [*definiens*]	—	Believes true
(2) q (& r)	—	Believes true
(3) q (& r) entail *not-p*	Believes true	Believes true
(4) *not-p*	—	—

Ample evidence supports the view that Socrates is committed to the *F*-conditions I have attributed to him. During the investigation in *Charmides* Socrates says, "I divine that temperance is something beneficial and good".[44] And at the end of the investigation, he says, "I think temperance is a great good."[45] Outside the response in which he introduces the condition that temperance entails knowledge, Socrates does not suggest that this is so. However, Socrates' identification of excellence and some form of knowledge is generally accepted on the basis of a wide variety of evidence. Among the early definitional dialogues, for instance, in *Laches* Nicias attributes to Socrates the view (and Socrates accepts the attribution) that a man is good insofar as he is knowledgeable (σοφός).[46] Later in the dialogue he suggests that a person who possessed the knowledge of good and bad would lack nothing so far as excellence is concerned.[47] Of course, Plato need not characterize Socrates as committed to the same propositions in all of the early definitional dialogues. However, in this case, there is no good reason to assume that he is not committed to these views in *Charmides*.[48] In *Laches* Socrates says that courage is the same

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For Benson, Socrates' response to his interlocutor's definition is not an attempt to disprove that p is true; p is not a refutand. Rather, Socrates' response is an attempt to determine whether his interlocutor has knowledge. Socrates merely wants to determine whether the interlocutor has a consistent set of beliefs about F. Since he inevitably does not, this reveals that he does not have knowledge of F. The conclusion of the argument does not, then, show that p is false, but merely that p, q (& r) are inconsistent and so that at least one of them is false. (The view I am attributing to Benson is derived from (2000) 17-95, which is based on (1987) 67-85 and (1995) 45-112. Benson nowhere expresses his conception of the elenchus in the schematic form I have outlined. But this schema, based on Vlastos', is consistent with Benson's claims.)

[44] *Charm.* 169b4-5.

[45] *Charm.* 175e6-7.

[46] *Lach.* 194d1-3.

[47] *Lach.* 199d4-e1.

[48] Consider that early on in their discussion Socrates suggests to Charmides that σωφροσύνη is a psychological entity, that is, an entity of the ψχψή. He describes his alleged Thracian charm with these words: "He said, my friend, that the ψυχή is treated by means of certain charms, and that these charms are beautiful words. From such words σωφροσύνη is engendered; and when σωφροσύνη is engendered and present, then health comes more easily to both the head and the rest of the body." (*Charm.* 157a3-b1). Shortly after, he says: "Now it is clear that if σωφροσύνη is present in you, you are able to form some opinion about it. For it is necessary, I suppose, that if it is in you, it provides a sense of its presence, from which you would be able to form an opinion both of what it is and of what sort of thing σωφροσύνη is . . . So, then, in order to guess whether or not it is in you tell me what in your opinion σωφροσύνη is." (*Charm.* 158a7-159a3)

in all cases and the common possession of courageous men.[49] In *Laches* Socrates says that courage is a power.[50] In *Laches*, outside of the argument where he introduces the condition, Socrates does not explicitly state his belief that courage is fine. However, from a wide body of evidence in and out of this dialogue, it seems beyond dispute that he does. For instance, early in the discussion, he says that he and the others are "consulting about making the souls of Lysimachus' and Melesias' sons as good as possible (ὅτι ἀρίστας)."[51] Given his belief that courage is a part of excellence, it is reasonable to infer that he believes courage is fine.[52] In *Lysis* Socrates suggests that friendship must have an ultimate object.[53] In this dialogue he also suggests that the presence of badness is not the cause of friendship.[54] In *Euthyphro* Socrates suggests that holiness is a form, the same in all instances and that because of which all holy entities are holy.[55] He also says that it is not in any way unholy;[56] and that the *definiens* must describe the being of holiness rather than that which holiness undergoes.[57] In *Hippias Major* Socrates (or his alter ego) insists that fineness is not in any way not-fine and that it makes entities fine.[58] In *Meno* Socrates says that excellence is the same in all instances and that because of which all instances of excellence are such instances.[59] In *Meno* Socrates says he does not know what excellence is and that he has never met anyone who does. Given this view, given his view, expressed in *Laches*, that a man is good insofar as he is knowledgeable and that excellence is a kind of knowledge, and given his view expressed in *Charmides* that if one possesses

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[49] Cf. *Lach.* 191c7-e7.

[50] *Lach.* 192a10-b3.

[51] Cf. *Lach.* 186a3-6.

[52] For evidence of Socrates' identification of what is καλόν with what is ἀγαθόν, cf. his claim in *Charmides*: "Well, now, I asked, did you not admit a moment ago that σωφροσύνη is καλόν? Certainly I did, he said. And σώφρονες men are also ἀγαθοί." (*Charm.* 160e6-10); and his claim in *Protagoras*: "Is going to war a καλόν thing, I asked, or an αἰσχρόν thing? Καλόν, he replied. Then, if it is καλόν, we have admitted, by our former argument, that it is also ἀγαθόν; for we agreed that all καλά actions are ἀγαθά. True and I abide by that decision. You are right to do so, I said." (*Prot.* 359e4-8)

[53] *Lys.* 218d6-220b5.

[54] *Lys.* 220b6-221b6.

[55] *Euth.* 6d9-e1; cf. *Euth.* 5c8-d5.

[56] *Euth.* 8a10-b6; cf. *Euth.* 5c8-d5.

[57] *Euth.* 11a6-b1.

[58] E.g., *Hip. Maj.* 292c9-d6. On Socrates' view that τὸ καλόν is ἀγαθόν, cf. n. 52.

[59] *Meno* 72a6 ff.

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temperance one should be able to say what it is, Socrates' expressed failure to encounter anyone who knows what excellence is suggests that he believes not many (if any) people possess excellence.[60] Finally, I take it that in *Republic I* the arguments Socrates develops for the views that it is not the function of justice to do harm and that justice is beneficial obviously reflect his own views. However, if supporting evidence is desired, one might consider his shock at Thrasymachus' suggestion that justice is not an excellence and therefore not fine or good and his expressed intent to try to persuade Thrasymachus otherwise.[61]

It is clear, then, that the propositions expressing the *F*-conditions that Socrates introduces in testing proposed definitions are propositions to which he himself is committed. However, the claim that Socrates employs these commitments in evaluating definitions in the way that I have described is controversial and demands further justification.[62] My claim is that Socrates tests proposed definitions to determine their truth-value and that he does so by considering their consistency with *F*-conditions he introduces and to which he is committed. So, for instance, if a proposed definition is inconsistent with an *F*-condition that he introduces, this gives him reason to believe that the definition is false.

The following evidence supports the view that Socrates tests definitions to determine whether they are true. In response to Euthyphro's second definition, Socrates says: "Excellent, Euthyphro, you have now answered as I asked you to answer. However, whether it is true, I am not yet sure; but, of course, you will show me that it is true."[63] In *Lysis* Socrates responds in dismay to his first definition: "a most unaccountable suspicion came over me that the conclusion to which we had agreed was not true."[64] In *Republic I*, Socrates tells Thrasymachus: "But it is clear that we must investigate to see whether or not it [that is, Thrasymachus' definition] is

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[60] Again, of course, these views from *Laches* and *Charmides* need not be applicable to the Socrates of *Meno*. But I see no good reason why they should not be.

[61] *Rep. I* 347e2 ff.

[62] For example, Benson argues that in evaluating his interlocutors' definitions, Socrates is testing to determine whether his interlocutor possesses a consistent set of beliefs about *F*. This is because such consistency implies or at least suggests knowledge and Socrates' immediate objective is to determine whether his interlocutor is knowledgeable. Cf. Benson (2000) 32-95. Benson has re-articulated this view in Scott (2002). Tarrant also defends the view that Socrates' method serves to test his interlocutor's knowledge (in Scott [2002]).

[63] *Euth.* 7a3-4.

[64] *Lys.* 218c5-7.

true."[65] In *Charmides*, Charmides introduces a definition that Socrates suspects Charmides heard from Critias. Charmides asks whether it should matter from whom he heard it; and Socrates replies, "It makes no difference at all . . . One ought not to consider who said it, but whether or not it is true."[66] Later in the same dialogue when Critias accuses Socrates of deliberately trying to refute him without paying attention to the content of the investigation Socrates says:

> If I am thoroughly refuting you, how can you think I am doing so for any other reason than that on account of which I would scrutinize what I myself say – from a fear of carelessly supposing at any moment that I knew something without knowing it. And so I assert that here and now this is what I am doing; I am examining the argument (τὸν λόγον) mostly for my own sake, but also perhaps for that of my fellows. Or do you not think it is basically a common good for all people that the nature of every entity be made clear?[67]

I take Socrates to be saying here that the fact that Critias is being refuted is incidental; that Socrates is concentrating on the argument (τὸν λόγον) – rather than on refuting Critias – and that he is concerned to determine what temperance is and whether temperance is what Critias says it is. His attention is so focused just because it is beneficial to have a true belief about this rather than a false one.[68]

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[65] *Rep. 1* 339b2-3. Cf. also Socrates' explanation that his aim is not to refute Thrasymachus (*Rep. 1* 341a5-c2) Cf. also Socrates admission that he is not concerned with whether the account under consideration is Thrasymachus', but merely with the account itself (*Rep. 1* 349a9-b1).

[66] *Charm.* 161c5-6.

[67] *Charm.* 166c7-d4. Cp. Socrates' remarks in *Gorgias*: "I think we should be contentiously eager to come to know what is true and what is false about the things we discuss, for it is a common good for all that the truth should be made evident." (*Gorg.* 505e4-6)

[68] Cp. Socrates' remarks in *Gorgias*: "And why, when I have my suspicions, do I ask you and refrain from expressing them myself? It's not you I'm after, it's our discussion, to have it proceed in such a way as to make the thing we're talking about most clear to us." (*Gorg.* 453c1-4; cp. also *Gorg.* 454c1-5.) "What's my point in saying this? It's that I think you're now saying things that aren't very consistent or compatible with what you were first saying about oratory. So I'm afraid to pursue my examination of you, for fear that you should take me to be speaking with eagerness to win against you, rather than to have our subject become clear. For my part, I'd be pleased to continue questioning you if you're the kind of man I am; otherwise, I would drop it. And what kind of man am I? One of those who would be pleased to refute anyone who says anything untrue, and who, however, wouldn't be any less pleased to

If still more evidence is needed, further support for the claim that, in his discussions in the early definitional dialogues, Socrates seeks a true definition of *F* can be gained from consideration of the explicit reasons Socrates gives in each definitional dialogue for pursuing the definition of *F*. Indeed, to cite all the available evidence would be tedious. So I will offer a representative sample from *Hippias Major* and *Meno*.

In *Hippias Major*, Socrates recounts an experience he recently had listening to speeches. He thought parts of some of these base and parts fine. But when he recognized that he was making these judgments he chastised himself for assuming to know what was fine or base, without knowing what beauty itself was. To avoid this in the future, he promised himself that if he happened to meet one of the wise, he would learn from him what fineness is. Believing that Hippias is such a person, Socrates wishes to learn from him.[69] So, clearly, in pursuing a definition of fineness with Hippias Socrates wants to gain a true definition of fineness.

In *Meno*, Meno, assuming Socrates to be knowledgeable, asks him how excellence can be acquired. Socrates professes not even to know what excellence is and not to have ever met a person who does. Meno, who had been a pupil of Gorgias and who is surprised by Socrates' claim, suggests that Gorgias knows. Socrates, confirming that Meno shares Gorgias' views, invites him, in Gorgias' absence, to tell him what excellence is and so to prove him wrong in claiming never to have met anyone who knows what excellence is. In short, then, Socrates' motivation in pursuing a satisfactory definition of excellence is that he lacks knowledge of it, has never been able to find someone who possesses that knowledge, and then encounters someone who claims to have it. Clearly, then, Socrates wants to know whether the definitions Meno proposes are true.

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be refuted than to refute." (*Gorg.* 457e1-458a5). Cp. Socrates' remarks in *Protagoras*: "It makes no difference to me, provided you give the answers, whether it is your own opinion or not. I am primarily interested in testing the argument, although it may happen both that the questioner, myself, and my respondent wind up being tested." (*Prot.* 333c5-9) "I don't want you to think that my motive in talking with you is anything else than to take a good hard look at things that continually perplex me. I think that Homer said it all in the line, 'Going in tandem, one perceives before the other'." (*Prot.* 348c5-d1) Cf. also Socrates' and Protagoras' exchange: "I think that you just want to win the argument, Socrates . . . I have no other reason for asking these things than my desire to answer these questions about virtue, especially what virtue itself is." (*Prot.* 360e3-8).

[69] *Hip. Maj.* 286c3-e4.

In sum, in the investigations in the early definitional dialogues Socrates pursues true definitions. Precisely, he evaluates proposed definitions to determine their truth-value. He does so by considering whether they are consistent with F-conditions that he introduces and to which he is committed. In short, Socrates evaluates the truth-value of definitions by considering their consistency with F-conditions to which he is committed and which, therefore, he believes are true.

IV. *The Epistemic Status of Socrates' F-Conditions*

As we will see, this account of Socrates' manner of pursuing definitions to some extent – but only to some extent – resolves the problem of the elenchus, as Vlastos first defined it.[70] According to the problem of the elenchus, the arguments Socrates develops in response to definitions can demonstrate that a set of propositions {p, q, r} constituting the argument in response to a proposed definition (and including the definition p) is inconsistent and therefore false, but not that any particular one of those propositions is false and, in particular, not that the proposed definition is. Therefore, it is questionable on what grounds Socrates can claim to refute proposed definitions as a result of the arguments he develops.

In considering the problem, it should be clarified whether in fact Socrates does claim to refute proposed definitions as a result of the arguments he develops. For instance, in arguing for a "dissolution of the problem of the elenchus", Benson suggests that Socrates does not in fact claim to refute proposed definitions. Rather, Socrates merely claims that the set of propositions (including the definition) to which his interlocutor gives his assent is inconsistent.[71] In support of his view, Benson discusses Socrates' arguments in response to the definitions in *Charmides*, *Laches*, and *Euthyphro*.[72] He suggests that Socrates' conclusions to his arguments in these dialogues are qualified as conditionals. Rather than concluding that not-p, Socrates concludes that not-p, *if q* (where p is the definition and q is what I am calling the F-condition). For instance, in response to Charmides' second definition Socrates concludes: "Then temperance would not be modesty, if it happens to be something good and modesty is no more good than bad."[73]

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[70] Vlastos (1994) 21 ff.
[71] See n. 43.
[72] Benson (2000) 57-80.
[73] *Charm.* 161a11-b2.

Many of Socrates' conclusions in the definitional dialogues are qualified in this way, or, more generally, they are qualified as relative to the particular argument developed. For instance, in concluding his response to Euthyphro's second definition, Socrates says: "Then the same things would be both holy and unholy *according to this argument*."[74] Like the previous kind of qualification, Benson interprets this form of qualification as indicating that Socrates does not intend to conclude that the definition is false, but merely that if one agrees to the premises of the argument (excluding the definition), then the definition is false. Again, however, it is undetermined whether these premises are true and so whether the definition is in fact false.[75] (I follow Adams who has recently described the difference between conclusions qualified in these ways and unqualified conclusions as hypothetical and categorical respectively.)[76]

In fact, Socrates does not always conclude his arguments with conditional qualifications or by relativizing the conclusions to the particular argument developed. Moreover, Benson's own conclusions from his interpretation of the arguments in *Charmides*, *Laches*, and *Euthyphro* are not entirely accurate. Among the early definitional dialogues, many of Socrates' conclusions are expressed categorically rather than hypothetically. As mentioned earlier in the paper, in response to Laches' and Meno's first definitions as well as Meno's second definition, Socrates more or less simply tells his interlocutor that the response is inadequate because it does not satisfy some F-condition.[77] Moreover, Socrates' conclusions to the arguments in response to the third definition in *Laches*, the first

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[74] *Euth.* 8a7-8.
[75] In fact, according to Benson's interpretation of Socrates' immediate aims in constructing elenctic arguments, Socrates is not (immediately) concerned to determine whether the proposed definition is true. Instead, Socrates uses the arguments to test whether his interlocutor has knowledge. But this interpretation of Socrates' motives in testing proposed definitions is unacceptable, in part for reasons that we have already seen. Socrates clearly seeks true definitions, and he tests proposed definitions to determine whether they are true. Furthermore, not all of Socrates' interlocutors are alleged or self-professed experts, as Benson suggests. Still further, Socrates proposes some definitions himself. The key to Benson's argument, though, is what he calls the doxastic constraint, according to which it is a necessary and sufficient condition of a premise in an elenctic argument that it be believed by the interlocutor. For a compelling refutation of this notion, cf. Brickhouse and Smith (2002) 147-9. I elaborate on some of these points below.
[76] Adams (1998) 288-91.
[77] *Lach.* 190e7-9; *Euth.* 6d6-11; *Men.* 72a6 ff., 74a7-10.

definition in *Lysis*, the first and third definitions in *Euthyphro*, the first, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth definitions in *Hippias Major*, the third definition in *Meno*, and the first, third, and fourth definitions in *Republic I* are all unqualified.[78] For instance, in concluding his response to the first definition in *Republic I* Socrates says: "Then this is not the definition of justice, telling the truth and returning what one takes." And in concluding his response to the third definition in *Laches*, he says: "So, what you are now describing, Nicias, will not be a part, but the whole of excellence ... But, you know, we agreed that courage was a part of excellence ... Then, Nicias, we have failed to discover what courage is."

On the other hand, the conclusions to the second definition in *Laches*, the first (and, as mentioned, second), and fourth definitions in *Charmides*, the second definition in *Lysis*, the fourth (and, as mentioned, the second) definition in *Euthyphro*, the second and seventh definitions in *Hippias Major*, and the second definition in *Republic I* are also expressed hypothetically.[79]

An obvious explanation for this mix of hypothetical and categorical conclusions is that Socrates has different attitudes toward the different arguments. Some he finds more compelling and others less so. Reasonable as this would seem, in fact, there isn't a compelling correlation between the character of Socrates' conclusions and the character of his commitments to the *F*-conditions he employs in the arguments. For instance, in developing his arguments in response to Hippias' first and second definitions in *Hippias Major*, Socrates uses the same *F*-condition. However, his conclusion to the former is categorical, whereas his conclusion to the latter is hypothetical. Similarly, both the sixth and seventh definitions are rejected on the same grounds, that fineness is good. But the conclusion to the latter argument is expressed hypothetically, whereas that to the former is expressed categorically. Still further, in *Charmides* the arguments using the conditions that *F* is fine or good are concluded hypothetically, but Socrates' commitment to these positions is as strong as that to any *F*-condition.[80]

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[78] *Lach.* 199e3-11; *Lys.* 218c4-7; *Euth.* 6d9-e6, 10e9-11a4; *Hip. Maj.* 289d2-5, 293b10-c7 (cf. also 293d6-8), 294e7-9, 296d2-3, 297d3-6; *Men.* 79d6-e2; *Rep. I* 331d2-3, 335e1-5, 347d8-e1 (cf. also 342e6-11).

[79] *Lach.* 193d4-10; *Charm.* 160d1-2, 174d3-7; *Lys.* 222d1-e3; *Euth.* 15c8-9; *Hip. Maj.* 291c6-8; *Rep. I* 331e1-2 and 334d5-8. Note that Critias himself concludes the argument in response to the third definition in *Charmides* by retracting certain premises to which he gave assent and by rejecting the definition (164c5-d3).

[80] See nn. 44-5.

Additionally, it is significant that, however hypothetically Socrates concludes an argument, he never then proceeds to re-consider the definition or to investigate the soundness of his commitment to the *F*-condition used in the argument. Once a definition has been concluded to be unsatisfactory – whether or not the conclusion is expressed hypothetically – Socrates suggests that his interlocutor try again to answer the WF question by posing a new definition, or he himself offers a new definition. Furthermore, the movement of the investigations is such that, once a definition has been reached that satisfies an *F*-condition that has been introduced, a new *F*-condition is introduced that the definition does not satisfy. That is to say, the investigations advance in a linear fashion by satisfying a series of *F*-conditions – although in some instances it takes more than one try (that is, more than one definition) for the interlocutor to satisfy the *F*-condition originally introduced. For example, Meno's first two definitions fail for the same reason, and Hippias' first three definitions fail for the same reason.[81] As such, the investigations exhibit a consistent developmental form: a set of properties that (Socrates believes) are constitutive of the identity of *F* is incrementally clarified.[82] In short, the investigations consistently develop in this fashion, regardless of whether Socrates concludes his arguments hypothetically or categorically.

In view of this, it is unreasonable to infer as a general principle that the way Socrates concludes an argument in response to a proposed definition – that is, either hypothetically or categorically – relates to the degree of his conviction in the soundness of the argument, and specifically to the strength of his commitment to the *F*-condition employed in the argument. This is not to say that in some cases Socrates' tentativeness in drawing a given conclusion does not correlate with the strength of his conviction in the soundness of the argument. For instance, in response to the fourth definition in *Charmides*, although his argument concludes that the knowledge of knowledge does not exist, he admits that he is not competent to judge the matter.[83] However, generally speaking there is no evidence to show that Socrates is not more or less equally committed to all

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[81] Similarly, in *Euthyphro* the third and fourth definitions fail because they describe a πάθος of τὸ ὅσιον, precisely, the same πάθος, being loved by the gods. And the sixth and seventh definitions in *Hippias* fail because they do not satisfy the condition that τὸ καλόν is ἀγαθόν.

[82] No indication is given that by the end of the investigation all properties necessary for a satisfactory definition have been determined.

[83] *Charm.* 169a7-b1.

the F-conditions he introduces; which is to say, Socrates believes with more or less the same degree of conviction that all of the F-conditions that he introduces are true.

This fact to some degree resolves the problem of the elenchus, for it shows that Socrates' manner of evaluating definitions does give him some reason to believe the truth or falsity of a definition. Precisely, since Socrates believes that the premise expressing the F-condition is true, its inconsistency with the definition gives him reason to believe that the definition is false. In other words, the definition p and the premise expressing the F-condition q do not have the same doxastic status. Either q is more firmly entrenched in Socrates' as well as his interlocutor's belief set, or the interlocutor follows Socrates in accepting that the definition must satisfy the F-condition introduced, whether or not the interlocutor had previously believed that. For instance, according to this view, in *Charmides* Charmides and Socrates more firmly believe that temperance is fine and good than that it is quietness or modesty; and in *Euthyphro*, Euthyphro follows Socrates in accepting that the *definiens* must be purely holy. Therefore, while Socrates or his interlocutor logically could propose to reject the F-condition rather than the definition, they never do, again, because their attitudes toward the definition and the F-condition differ.[84]

The preceding account does not explain why Socrates occasionally expresses the conclusions to his arguments in response to proposed definitions hypothetically. It also leaves untouched a deeper and more complex issue related to the so-called problem of the elenchus. Vlastos' conception of the problem of the elenchus was in part motivated by the following epistemological question: What gives Socrates any more confidence in his belief in one proposition than another? For our purposes, the question may be put more precisely in this way. Consistency or inconsistency with one

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[84] There are only two instances in the early definitional dialogues where, in the process of testing a proposition, an interlocutor rejects an F-condition that Socrates introduces. One occurs in *Charmides*, where Critias rejects Socrates' suggestion that, *qua* ἐπιστήμη, self-knowledge has a product and, given that it doesn't, that it has an object distinct from itself. Socrates concedes that some ἐπιστήμαι are not productive, and he accepts Critias' suggestion that self-knowledge does not have a distinctive object. Of course, in the ensuing conversation Critias is unable to defend the claim that such an ἐπιστήμη exists (*Charm.* 165c4-166c3, esp. 165e3-166a2 and 166b7-c3). In *Republic 1* – although not in the process of testing a definition of δικαιοσύνη – Thrasymachus claims that δικαιοσύνη is not an ἀρετή and therefore not καλόν or ἀγαθόν. Socrates is shocked, but develops an argument to justify this claim and persuade Thrasymachus to retract his position (*Rep. 1* 347e2 ff.).

of his F-conditions gives Socrates reason to believe or disbelieve a given proposition, but why should Socrates have any confidence that his F-conditions are true? The answer to this question and to the question why Socrates occasionally expresses the conclusions to his arguments hypothetically are related.

If we inquire into the grounds of Socrates' commitments to his F-conditions, we find that in most cases no argument is given. In *Charmides,* that temperance is (necessarily or in all instances) fine is assumed. That temperance is (necessarily or in all cases) good is based on the claims that temperate men are good, that temperance makes them good, and that that which makes men good must itself be good. But that temperate men are good and that temperance makes men good is assumed. That temperance entails knowledge because a temperate man knows what he is doing is confirmed by appeal to intuition, but not argument. That temperance exists is assumed. That temperance is beneficial is assumed.[85] In *Laches,* that courage is the same in all cases and the common possession of courageous men is assumed. That courage is a power is assumed. That courage is in all cases fine is assumed. That courage is a part of excellence is assumed. In *Euthyphro,* that holiness is the same in all instances and that because of which all holy entities are holy is assumed. That holiness is purely holy is assumed. That the *definiens* of holiness must describe the being of holiness and not something that holiness undergoes is assumed. In *Hippias Major,* that fineness is not in any way not-fine is assumed. That fineness makes entities fine is assumed. That fineness is good is assumed. In *Meno,* that excellence is the same in all instances of excellence and that because of which instances of excellence are such instances is assumed. That excellence is a property most people do not possess is assumed. In *Republic 1,* that all instances of justice must be just is assumed.

Only in four cases does Socrates defend an F-condition with an argument. In *Lysis,* that the presence of badness is not the cause of friendship is based on an imaginative inductive argument. That friendship must have an ultimate object of love seems based on the suggestion that otherwise

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[85] Socrates expresses his commitment to this view in two places. On one occasion he says, "τὴν οὖν δὴ σωφροσύνην ὠφέλιμόν τι καὶ ἀγαθὸν μαντευόμαι εἶναι." (*Charm.* 169b4-5) This may be compared with Socrates' "strange suspicion" that his first definition of φιλία is untrue ("κἄπειτ' οὐκ οἶδ' ὁπόθεν μοι ἀτοπωτάτη τις ὑποθία εἰσῆλθεν ..." (*Lys.* 218c5-6))

a vicious regress would ensue.[86] In *Republic I*, that it is not a function of justice to do harm is based on a partly inductive analogical argument. That justice is beneficial to others is based on a partly inductive analogical argument.

But that most of Socrates' *F*-conditions are assumed to be true, but not defended does not imply that Socrates does not have some resources to defend them. Twice among the early definitional dialogues, Socrates' interlocutor challenges an *F*-condition that Socrates introduces.[87] In one case, Socrates concedes his interlocutor's objection,[88] but in the other he defends his position. Given the way that Socrates develops arguments throughout the early dialogues, it is reasonable to assume that were he compelled to defend his *F*-conditions, the epistemological grounds of his defense would be as varied as the explicit arguments he does develop. That is to say, the premises of his arguments would rest variously on self-evidence,[89] common opinion,[90] experience, and deduction. Granting this, it

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[86] "Now are we not bound to weary ourselves with going on in this way, unless we can arrive at some first principle which will not keep leading us on from one friend to another, but will reach the one original friend for whose sake all the other things can be said to be friends?" (*Lys.* 219c50d2).

[87] See n. 84.

[88] This need not be interpreted as indicating that Socrates admits he is wrong. Rather, he admits the possibility that he may be wrong. He does seem to believe that all the ἀρεταί have ἔργα as well as content that is distinct from themselves. One might compare his concession to Critias with his concession to Hippias that there is no distinction between the questions, "What is καλόν?" and "What is τὸ καλόν?" (*Hip. Maj.* 287d3-e3). Although he believes that there is a distinction, he is willing to concede that there may not be. Similarly, Socrates concedes to Euthyphro that the gods quarrel, even though he believes they do not (*Euth.* 6a6-c7).

[89] Others who have suggested that Socrates' premises are, at least in part, justified by self-evidence include Gulley (1968) 43-4 and Polansky (1985).

[90] Only one *F*-condition seems to be a candidate for this explanation, that ἀνδρεία is a part of ἀρετή. Consider how Socrates introduces it. "Then which of the parts of ἀρετή shall we choose? Clearly, I think, that which the art of hoplomachy is supposed to promote. And that, of course, is generally supposed (δοκεῖ τοῖς πολλοῖς) to be ἀνδρεία." (*Lach.* 190d4-5) Others who have suggested that Socrates' premises are, at least in part, justified by common opinion include Bolton (1993) and Polansky (1985). Cp. Xenophon's claim: "Whenever Socrates himself argued something out he proceeded from the most strongly held opinions, believing that security in argument lies therein. Accordingly, whenever he argued he got much greater assent from his hearers than anyone I have ever known" (*Mem.* 4.6.15, cited from Vlastos (1994, 14)). Vlastos also claims that most of the premises Socrates uses in his arguments are reputable opinions (1991, 112); but, of course, that he does not subscribe to these opinions *because* they are endoxic.

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may reasonably be asked where else they could rest. In other words, we must agree with Kraut and Vlastos that when he develops his arguments Socrates "picks premises . . . he considers . . . eminently reasonable."[91]

The problem that this conclusion does not address and which I regard as the deeper problem motivating Vlastos' conception of the problem of the elenchus is this. If Socrates develops arguments using premises he considers eminently reasonable, then why then does he so frequently disavow ethical knowledge? In other words, why is Socrates so infrequently willing to claim that he knows a given ethical proposition? I suggest the following answer. Nowhere in the early dialogues does Socrates broach epistemological questions about the grounds for believing or determining the truth-value of ethical propositions. In this respect, his pursuit of true definitions is theoretically and methodologically naïve. Yet Socrates is in some sense aware of his epistemological and methodological limitations of his investigations.[92] It is this sensitivity to these limitations that compels Socrates to disavow knowledge. It is precisely such an understanding of ethical matters that he believes an expert (or the possessor of a craft of excellence) would have and which he does not. Consequently, although he sometimes categorically concludes that a given proposition is the case, he never claims as a result of an argument or several arguments to know a given conclusion.[93] Furthermore, Socrates' occasional hypothetical conclusions to arguments in response to proposed definitions are

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[91] Vlastos concedes this to Kraut in (1983) 73 with regard to Socrates' arguments in pre-*Gorgias* dialogues.

[92] In each of the definitional dialogues except *Laches* Socrates disavows knowledge of the identity of *F* (*Charm.* 165b5-c1, 166c7-d3; *Hip. Maj.* 286d1-3, 304d5-8; *Lys.* 212a4-6; *Meno* 71a5-7, 80d1; *Rep. I* 337e4-5; *Euth.* 5a7-c5, 15c12, 15e5-16a4). Moreover, nowhere in the early definitional dialogues does Socrates claim to know that *F* has a given property. Still further, in *Laches* Socrates disavows ethical expertise at *Lach.* 186b8-c5 (on which cf. also *Lach.* 186d8-e3); and in *Charmides* (175e6) he claims that he is a poor investigator.

[93] One of the problems with Vlastos' conception of the problem of the elenchus is its commitment to the view that in developing arguments to evaluate definitions, Socrates aims to *demonstrate* the truth-value of the definition. However, Socrates nowhere expresses an intent to demonstrate or an expectation that he will demonstrate the truth-value of any definition. In his paper on the elenchus, Vlastos claims that in one "crucial" passage Socrates claims to have proven the truth of an atomic proposition. The passage occurs in *Gorgias*, where Socrates elicits Polus' assent to the claim that it has been shown to be true that suffering injustice is preferable to doing injustice ("ΣΩ. Οὐκοῦν ἀποδέδεικται ὅτι ἀληθῆ ἐλέγετο; ΠΩΛ. Φαίνεται." [*Gorg.* 479e7-8]) Vlastos draws special attention to the verb "ἀποδέδεικται", claiming that this means

reflections of this recognition of his deeper epistemological and methodological limitations. That is to say, although Socrates only occasionally concludes his arguments hypothetically, these occasions reflect his deeper epistemological commitments. His categorically expressed conclusions, then, should only be interpreted as reflecting his strong belief in the conclusion, not his belief that he knows the conclusion.[94]

Considerable debate persists over the interpretation of Socrates' avowals and disavowals of ethical knowledge. Although Socrates often disavows ethical knowledge, on a few occasions he claims to know an atomic ethical proposition. For instance, in *Apology* Socrates claims to know that it is wrong to do injustice by disobeying a superior, whether god or mortal.[95] It is unclear whether these can be explained as consistent in view of the fact that the scope of their content does not overlap. That is, Socrates knows some ethical propositions but not others.[96] Or, whether Socrates claims to know some ethical propositions, but disavows having ethical expertise.[97] Or, whether he uses the words for knowing in two different senses – meaning it in one sense when he claims to know, and in another sense when he disavows knowledge.[98] Or, whether his knowledge claims are so infrequent as to be hermeneutically insignificant.[99] Or, whether he does not have a consistent view on the topic, but his ethical epistemology to some extent shifts over the course of the early period.[100,101]

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it has been proved, where "proved" implies demonstration by valid deduction (1994, 19 ff.). This is an egregiously anachronistic interpretation of the verb. Indeed, the argument upon which Socrates' conclusion is based could be deductive and the conclusion could be validly inferred from the premises. But there are no grounds for believing Socrates recognizes the logical distinction between inductive and deductive argumentation or the epistemological ramifications of this distinction. Socrates is not using "ἀποδέδεικται" in a technical sense. Rather, the verb here means what it normally means in conventional discourse, *it has been shown*; which is to say, both Socrates and his interlocutor have perceived from the propositions they have introduced and to which they have given assent that it is better to suffer than to do injustice.

[94] Further explanation of why Plato makes Socrates express his conclusions hypothetically in some instances and categorically in others would have to be gained from a consideration of the immediate context of those passages in conjunction with consideration of Plato's dramaturgical objectives in the passage.

[95] *Apol.* 29b6-9 and 37b7-8.

[96] E.g., Lesher (1987); Nozick (1994).

[97] E.g., Brickhouse and Smith (1994) 30-72.

[98] E.g., Vlastos (1994) 39-69, reprinted from (1985).

[99] E.g., Benson (2000) 222-37.

[100] E.g., Kraut (1984) 275.

[101] One further possibility is that Socrates' frequent disavowals of knowledge are

The topic is too complex to be entirely resolved here. But I do wish to emphasize one fundamental point in support of the claims I have made. In the early dialogues Socrates does not offer an explanation for why he believes he lacks ethical knowledge. I suggest the reason for his silence on this matter reflects the very reason why he so frequently disavows ethical knowledge: he does not understand how ethical reasoning operates, and, specifically, he does not understand what makes ethical propositions true.

In the early dialogues Socrates does not disavow all knowledge.[102] At the same time, ethical knowledge is not the only kind he does disavow. Among other things, he also disavows certain eschatological knowledge.[103] He does not know what will happen when he dies. In this case, the reason for his disavowals is also not made explicit. However, it is evidently related to his commonsensical conception of the limitations of the human condition and human experience. Precisely, most human beings have not experienced death and then returned to life to report on it. I cite this instance of Socrates disavowing knowledge because I believe his disavowal of ethical knowledge is similar in its simplicity and non-theoreticality.

Consider Socrates' remarks in *Euthyphro*:

> 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 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 noble and disgraceful and good and bad? Are not these the questions about which

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disingenuous. Hence, his notorious εἰρωνεία. But, although among previous generations of scholars this view was common, it is widely accepted today that Socrates' disavowals are genuine. On this, cf. Vlastos (1985) 1-31, reprinted in (1994) 39-66.

[102] Lesher (1987) instructively emphasizes this point. Brickhouse and Smith ([1994] 34-5) emphasize the fact that Socrates principally disavows ethical knowledge, not all knowledge – although they do not make much of the fact that he disavows other kinds of knowledge as well.

[103] *Apol.* 29a40b6, 37b5-7. In addition Socrates disavows knowledge of rhetoric, the heavens, and Hades at *Apol.* 19c2-8 as well as of run-of-the-mill craft-knowledge at *Apol.* 22d2-3. He also disavows knowledge about the activities of the gods at *Euth.* 6b1-2.

you and I and other people become enemies, when we do become enemies, because we differ about them and cannot reach any agreement?"[104]

Note that Socrates does not distinguish between rationally and empirically derived evidence (that is, arithmetical and metrical evidence) *per se*. Therefore, it seems unreasonable to assume that he regards the truth of ethical propositions as difficult to determine because the method of determination is either deductive or inductive. When he examines ethical propositions Socrates reasons both deductively and inductively,[105] and he makes no theoretical distinction between the two. Rather, in the *Euthyphro* passage Socrates simply expresses a belief that people can resolve certain kinds of questions satisfactorily or with ease and others not; and he regards ethical or axiological questions as among the types of questions that are difficult to resolve.

But, while Socrates believes that it is difficult to determine the truth-value of ethical propositions, notably, neither here nor elsewhere in the early dialogues does he indicate or consider why this is so. Socrates is silent on this matter. Questions concerning the epistemological grounds of ethical propositions do not preoccupy him. The process of reasoning in which he engages is not meta-ethical or epistemological in a way that could present such questions to him, much less facilitate answers to them. Therefore, although he recognizes that disagreement in ethical debate is common and perhaps also that ethical concepts appear shrouded in a particular obscurity, he gives no indication of understanding why it is difficult to determine the truth-value of ethical propositions.

In considering these points, we might even grant that Socrates' approach to ethical reasoning tends to be foundationalist in style insofar he tends to pursue definitional knowledge of *F* prior to pertinent non-definitional knowledge and that he suggests the importance of pursuing definitional knowledge prior to pertinent non-definitional knowledge.[106] But Socrates does not approach his investigations by trying to determine the truth-value of foundational ethical propositions that he can then use to determine the truth-value of definitional propositions. So, even granting the epistemological priority of definitional knowledge for pertinent non-definitional knowledge, the question remains how one can acquire definitional knowledge.

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[104] *Euth.* 7b7-d5.

[105] This point is also emphasized by Kraut (1983) 60 and Adams (1989).

[106] On the question of whether Socrates is committed to the epistemological prior-

In this regard, Socrates' pursuit of true definitions is limited. Yet, as noted, in some sense he is not ignorant of his limitations. On the contrary, at least pre-theoretically, he is keenly aware that his understanding of ethics is limited. I suggest that ultimately it is for this reason that Socrates so often disavows knowledge of ethical propositions, even on the basis of his arguments for them.

In general, then, in some cases Socrates has reasons that persuade him to believe certain ethical propositions, but he doesn't understand what makes those reasons persuasive. And in other cases he merely believes certain ethical propositions, but, again, without understanding reasons for doing so. It is precisely such an understanding that Socrates believes an expert in the field would possess. As he says elsewhere in *Gorgias*, a craft (τέχνη) would encompass the nature (φύσις) of entities within a specific domain, the cause (αἰτία) of their operation, and it would enable its possessor to give an explanation (λόγος) of these things.[107] Socrates always denies being an expert in ethical matters or having a craft of excellence.[108] His pursuit of definitions is relatively unsystematic and *ad hoc*. Despite his years of discussing ethical topics and pursuing definitions, he does not have a theory of definition[109] or even building blocks for a theory of practical reasoning.

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ity of definitional knowledge for pertinent non-definitional knowledge, see subsection V.v.

[107] On these conditions as necessary for a τέχνη, cf. *Gorg.* 500e4-501a7: "I was saying, I think, that cooking does not seem to me to be a τέχνη; whereas medicine, I said, has investigated the φύσις of the object of its care as well as the αἰτίαι of the things that it does. Moreover, medicine can give a λόγος of these things. In contrast, cooking, whose whole concern is with pleasure, pursues this in an altogether ἀτεχνῶς manner. It has not at all investigated the φύσις of pleasure or the αἰτία, and in a completely ἀλόγως manner, so to speak, has made no distinctions whatsoever..." For a fuller account of Socrates' conception of expertise and τέχνη as well as the controversy over the extent to which Socrates thinks ethical expertise is analogous to carft-expertise, cf. Irwin (1977) 71-101; Roochnik (1986), reprinted in Benson (1992); Woodruff (in Everson 1990), reprinted in Benson (1992); Brickhouse and Smith (1994) 5-7; Roochnik (1996); Smith (1998). I agree with Smith when she says that "[f]or Socrates ... [a] definition is ... a particularly clear manifestation of the kind of knowledge possessed by an expert." (148) But I strongly disagree with her claim that a definition "does not even constitute the content of that knowledge." (*ibid.*)

[108] *Apol.* 20c1-3 (cf. *Apol.* 21d2-6); *Lach.* 186b8-c5 (cf. also *Lach.* 186d8-e3).

[109] For more on this claim, cf. subsection V.iv.

V. *Problems and Consequences*

As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, the topic of how Socrates pursues definitions in Plato's early definitional dialogues intersects the broader topic of Socrates' method of philosophizing in the early dialogues. Since one of main preoccupations in the early dialogues is pursuing definitions, my views on Socrates' pursuit of definitions bear directly on the interpretation of Socrates' manner of philosophizing more broadly. In the following subsections I address some of these consequences as well as touch upon some problems more narrowly related to Socrates' pursuit of definitions. These include whether Socrates has a method of pursuing definitions and whether Socrates' manner of pursuing definitions is "elenctic"; whether Socrates' manner of pursuing definitions changes over the course of the early period; whether Socrates has a theory of definition; whether Socrates evaluates definitions or people; and whether Socrates is committed to the epistemological priority of definitional knowledge. In brief, I advance the following claims:

- Although Socrates has a distinctive manner or style of pursuing definitions, it is inappropriate to ascribe to him a method of doing so in just the following sense. The concept of method implies a certain theoretical conception of procedure that Socrates lacks. Moreover, according to Socrates' own conceptual framework, only one who possessed the relevant craft would have a method. Furthermore, Socrates' manner of pursuing definitions is not elenctic, just insofar as the word "elenchus" is interpreted to have adversarial connotations that are inconsistent with the motives and interests we have ascribed to Socrates.
- Socrates' manner of pursuing definitions does not change among the early definitional dialogues. More specifically, there is no "demise of the elenchus," as Vlastos describes it. First, Socrates' manner of pursuing definitions is not "elenctic" (in the sense described). And, second, the fact that he himself proposes definitions in allegedly post-elenctic dialogues (that is, *Lysis* and *Hippias Major*) is consistent with the manner of pursuing definitions I ascribe to him.
- In the early definitional dialogues, Socrates does not have a theory of definition. In particular, he lacks a general theoretical ontology. Moreover, while his comments and implicit commitments entail beliefs about some conditions for a satisfactory definition (for example, that the *definiens* must be a uniquely identifying true verbal description), such conditions are too rudimentary to count as constitutive of a theory.

- Although in other early dialogues and in other parts of the definitional dialogues Socrates may express concern over the psychological states and well-being of his interlocutors, in the process of pursuing definitions, Socrates' principal concern is the evaluation of definitions, not the psychologies or lives of his interlocutors.
- Socrates is committed to the epistemological priority of definitional knowledge over pertinent non-definitional knowledge. This does present a methodological problem of the kind to which Geach first drew attention. Specifically, according to the manner in which Socrates pursues definitions, it is unclear how he can get from belief that p to knowledge that p. Although this problem is genuine, Socrates himself is not unaware of such limits of his approach.

V.i *On Whether Socrates Pursues Definitions by an Elenctic Method*

Following Vlastos, the current, standard characterization of Socrates' manner of investigating definitions in the early dialogues is elenctic.[110] But throughout the paper I have hesitated to describe as elenctic the manner in which I view Socrates as pursuing definitions. The word "ἔλεγχος" often has adversarial connotations and typically means *cross-examination, testing to disprove*, or *refutation*.[111] But in investigating the WF question Socrates does not conceive of himself as antagonistically or adversarially engaged with his interlocutor. We have seen some evidence for this in the course of the discussion. But it is worthwhile to cite further support here.

It is precisely Socrates' sensitivity to his epistemic and methodological limitations that to a large extent explains why he engages in genuinely dialogic exchanges, why he wants his interlocutor to say what he believes,[112] and, more specifically, why in pursuing true definitions he usually asks for his interlocutors' assent to the premises he introduces that

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[110] Vlastos (1994, 2, n. 8) writes that George Grote first used the word "elenchos" to describe Socrates' method (1865). Robinson (1941) revived it. Although, to quote Scott, it seems that the meaning of "elenchus" has broadened so much that it often includes almost any question-and-answer style of conversation ([2002] 2-3). Obviously, Socrates' method is elenctic according to this broad conception of elenchus. But I here retain a narrow conception of elenchus so that the question of whether Socrates' method is elenctic retains its substance.

[111] At least, in conventional discourse (cf. Ausland in Scott (2002) 37 ff.). On pre-Socratic philosophical usage of the term, cf. Lesher in Scott (2002).

[112] This view was originally emphasized by Vlastos (1994) 7-9. It is the cornerstone of Benson's view, which he calls the doxastic constraint; cf. his (2000) 37 ff. Benson

express the F-conditions to which he is committed.[113] When his interlocutor proposes a definition and Socrates perceives that the definition is inconsistent with an F-condition to which he is committed, this suggests to him that the definition is unsatisfactory. But, because he does not believe he knows that his F-condition is true, he elicits his interlocutor's assent to the F-condition in order to confirm his view. Moreover, while the interlocutor's assent to the F-condition does not persuade Socrates to believe that he knows the F-condition is true, it satisfies him that the argument may at least reasonably develop upon this assumption.

Socrates' conception of himself as engaged in a joint investigation is well brought out by the way in several texts he concludes the investigation. Rather than claim that his interlocutor has failed to offer a satisfactory definition of F, he says his interlocutor(s) *and he* have failed to discover one. "[W]e have not yet been able to discover what a friend is";[114] "we have failed to discover what courage is";[115] and "we are unable to discover to which entity the lawgiver gave the name 'temperance'."[116]

Similarly, in the course of the discussions, Socrates tends to describe himself and his interlocutor as engaged in a joint investigation. For instance, in *Meno* he says: "Now, with regard to excellence, I myself do not know what it is, and whereas you perhaps thought you knew before you came into contact with me, now you are in a similar state to me. But, I am willing to investigate with you (μετὰ σοῦ σκέθασθαι) and engage in a joint investigation (συζητῆσαι) of what it is."[117] And in *Charmides* he says: "But, Critias ... you treat me as though I were speaking as one who knew about the things into which I am inquiring ... But the situation is not so. I am always inquiring with you (ζητῶ μετὰ σοῦ) into the proposition proposed because I do not know."[118]

Perhaps the most revealing passage in this regard occurs in *Republic I*. Just as he turns from consideration of what justice is to examine Thrasymachus' claim that the life of the unjust man is superior to that of the just

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has tried to answer criticisms of his view in Scott (2002), but I think Brickhouse and Smith's points in Scott (2002), esp. 147-9, settle the issue.

[113] I say usually because Socrates sometimes does not request his interlocutor's assent to the F-conditions that he introduces. As we have seen, in some cases, he simply explains that the proposed definition is inadequate.

[114] *Lys.* 223b7-8.

[115] *Lach.* 199e11.

[116] *Charm.* 175b3-4.

[117] *Meno* 80d1-4.

[118] *Charm.* 165b5-c1.

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man, Socrates asks Polemarchus if they should try to persuade Thrasymachus that what he says is not true (Βουλεῖ οὖν αὐτὸν πείθωμεν ... ὡς οὐκ ἀληθῆ λέγει;).[119] When Polemarchus assents, Socrates explains:

> If then we oppose him setting out a lengthy speech against his speech (ἀντικατατείναντες λέγωμεν ... λόγον παρὰ λόγον). in which we each enumerate all the goods of being just or, in his case, unjust, it will then be necessary to add up and compare the number of goods, and so we will need judges to decide the case between us. But if, as we did before, we investigate and try to come to a mutual understanding with one another (ἀνομολογούμενοι πρὸς ἀλλήλους σκοπῶμεν), we will be both the pleaders and the judges ... Which way do you prefer?[120]

The evidence indicates that in the course of investigating the WF question Socrates' disposition toward his interlocutors is neither antagonistic nor adversarial, but cooperative and supportive.[121] Furthermore, as we have also seen, Socrates is primarily focused on the definitions and arguments that his interlocutors and he develop. That is to say, he primarily examines definitions, not people.[122] Given this, it hardly even makes sense to conceive of Socrates as having an adversarial relationship to a definition or as cross-examining definitions. Of course, he can test to disprove or refute definitions. But, for the most part, his attitude toward definitions is not negative in this way. Socrates does not in principle approach definitions with the assumption that they are false and must therefore be shown to be false. Rather, given his sensitivity to his own epistemic limitations, he typically approaches definitions with an open-mind, and he tests them to determine whether it is reasonable to believe them.

While I have hesitated to characterize Socrates' manner of pursuing definitions as elenctic insofar as elenchus is understood as adversarial, I have also hesitated to characterize Socrates' manner of pursuing definitions as methodical. Socrates does not conceive of himself as having a method of investigating definitions, insofar as the concept of method implies a relatively systematic and theoretically based procedure.[123] The

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[119] *Rep. I* 348a4-5.

[120] *Rep. I* 348a7-b6.

[121] The only occasion where Socrates uses a deliberately fallacious argument against his interlocutor in the course of pursuing a definition of F is in *Republic I* in considering Polemarchus' definition.

[122] Cf. subsection V.iv.

[123] Cp. Brickhouse and Smith's comments at (1994) 3 f. and more recently in Scott (2002).

possessor of a craft would have a method, but Socrates denies such expertise. On the other hand, in view of the role that Socrates' F-conditions play in the evaluation of the truth-value of proposed definitions, Socrates' investigations do have a distinctive character. As such, I suggest that, while he lacks a method, Socrates does have a manner of pursuing definitions in the early definitional dialogues.

V.ii On the Demise of the Elenchus

In the appendix to his paper, "The Socratic Elenchus", entitled, "The Demise of the Elenchus in the *Euthydemus, Lysis,* and *Hippias Major*", Vlastos briefly touches upon what he regards as a new feature of these supposedly transitional dialogues: "abandonment of adversary argument as Socrates' method of investigation". That is to say, "[t]he theses that are seriously debated in these dialogues are uncontested by the interlocutor, Socrates himself is both their author and their critic."[124] In other words, Vlastos suggests that, for among other reasons, *Lysis* and *Hippias Major* were composed after the other early definitional dialogues because Socrates' method in these two texts is not elenctic.

In the postscript to his paper,[125] Vlastos explains Socrates' abandonment of the elenctic method as due to Plato's growing preoccupation with specific epistemological questions, evidence of which is first apparent in *Gorgias*. Accordingly, *Lysis* and *Hippias Major* were composed after *Gorgias*. Moreover, since *Meno* is generally viewed (with Vlastos among those in agreement) as a transitional dialogue, *Meno* too must be included among post-*Gorgias* definitional dialogues.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Vlastos' conception of Socrates' manner of pursuing satisfactory definitions and my own, then, is that Vlastos regards Socrates' manner as changing among the early definitional dialogues. And the central reason for Vlastos' claim is the fact that Socrates, as opposed to his interlocutors, offers definitions in *Lysis* and *Hippias Major*. This is decisive, precisely because Vlastos views Socrates' manner as adversarial, specifically as geared to refuting his interlocutors' definitions.

Vlastos claims that "these three dialogues [*Euthydemus, Lysis,* and *Hippias Major*] ... [have] been frequently thought (on the strength of miscella-

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[124] (1994) 30.
[125] "Postscript to 'The Socratic Elenchus'" (1994) 33-7.

neous criteria) to fall late within the early dialogues".[126] In this case, I will only be concerned with *Lysis* and *Hippias Major*. In particular, I want to suggest that *Lysis* is not generally thought to be a transitional dialogue. The one secondary source Vlastos cites in favor of this view is a monograph published by V. Schoplick in 1969 that has exerted little influence on scholarship on *Lysis*. Beyond this, he offers no specific reason why *Lysis* should be regarded as transitional.

Vlastos' position is also internally inconsistent because he regards *Meno* as transitional, yet Socrates' treatment of Meno's three definitions is, by Vlastos' criteria, "elenctic" – as is the treatment of the first three definitions in *Hippias Major*. Vlastos writes of the first three definitions in *Hippias Major* that they are not meant to be taken seriously.[127] It is true that Socrates' alter ego thinks that Hippias' definitions are simple-minded and easy to refute. But *Hippias Major* is the most adversarial of the early definitional dialogues; and if the adversarial style had been abandoned by its date of composition, it is odd that Plato would have composed the search for a satisfactory definition of fineness in such a way at all. Moreover, what is one to do with the treatment of Meno's first three definitions? Meno certainly has difficulties grasping what is common to all instances of excellence, but his third definition hardly seems ridiculous relative to some of those proposed by Socrates' other interlocutors in *Charmides, Laches, Euthyphro,* or *Republic I*.[128]

I suggest that, although the investigations in *Lysis* and *Hippias Major* are distinct insofar as Socrates offers definitions, Socrates' method of pursuing definitions does not change in these texts. As I have suggested, elenchus (understood as an adversarial style) is not fundamental to Socrates' manner. Socrates' introduction of definitions in *Lysis* and *Hippias Major* can be explained on other grounds.

In *Lysis* the definition is rather complex and the boys, being the youngest and most naïve of Socrates' interlocutors, couldn't be expected to develop the sort of view that Socrates ends up developing and which, in virtue of that, it is clear Plato intended to advance for consideration. In *Hippias Major*, Socrates' introduction of definitions conforms to the especially sardonic and comic style of the text. The necessity of Socrates introducing definitions just so that the investigation can progress beyond

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[126] (1994) 29-30.
[127] "Definitions meant to be taken seriously ... are all put forward by Socrates" (31)
[128] For a similar criticism, see Benson (1990) 25 ff.

a certain rudimentary point is supposed to highlight Hippias' incompetence – as is Socrates' alter ego's comment that Hippias' definitions are too simple-minded and easy to refute.

Moreover, the fact, according to my position, that Socrates' F-conditions influence the course of the investigation and make a substantial constructive contribution to the progress of the investigation diminishes the distinctiveness between the fact that Socrates introduces definitions himself in *Lysis* and *Hippias Major* and the fact that he doesn't in the other definitional dialogues. To this may be added the fact that in *Euthyphro* Socrates is also compelled to help Euthyphro advance the investigation, when Euthyphro becomes stuck. He does so with the suggestion that holiness be conceived as a part of justice.[129] And in *Laches*, Nicias' definition of courage as a kind of epistemic state is based on a view that he attributes to Socrates: a person is good only insofar as he is knowledgeable.

In sum, among the definitional dialogues there is no demise of the elenchus because Socrates' manner of pursuing definitions in these texts is not "elenctic". Moreover, Socrates' examination of his own definitions in *Lysis* and *Hippias Major* is consistent with the non-elenctic manner of pursuing definitions that I attribute to Socrates throughout the early definitional dialogues.

V.iii   On Whether Socrates Has a Theory of Definition

It is often stated, and, I take it, uncontroversial that Socrates seeks real as opposed to nominal definitions.[130] Socrates does not just want to know what the popular conception of *F* is; he wants to know what *F* really is. But real definition broaches the most fundamental problems in philosophy, problems such as whether and how language can (accurately) represent the world. A theory of real definition in natural language must engage this question and in doing so engage problems of semantics and with these epistemology and metaphysics. Plato's early writings touch upon these philosophical matters to a very limited extent.

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[129] Cp. Brickhouse and Smith's comment: "Euthyphro has been fully reduced to *aporia* by *Euthyphro* 11b6, yet Socrates continues his search for the definition of [τὸ ὅσιον] by contributing one of what... appears to be his own views. He proposes that [τὸ ὅσιον] is part of [τὸ δίκαιον]." (1994) 22.

[130] For instance, Ross (1951) 16; Bluck in Allen (1965) 34 ff.; Allen (1970) 79-105; Penner (1973); Irwin (1977) chapter 3; Fine (1995) 46-9, n. 10. Dissenters include Cross in Allen (1965) 27-9; Vlastos (1972), (1981) 410-7.

A real definition of *x* is a description of some entity *x*. This description should be true and should uniquely identify *x* (that is, distinguish *x* from all other entities). Since this may be done in a number of ways, it is a question how one identifying description is to be preferred to another; for instance, in terms of simplicity, richness, clarity, accessibility, fundamentality, intrinsic versus extrinsic properties. Fundamentality, in particular, has a special significance in its relation to essentialism within the tradition of real definition. But it, like all the other concepts enumerated, is theory-relative.

So the question of preference of identifying descriptions raises the more basic question: What form must a real definition have? The early definitional dialogues do not offer a great deal with which to answer this question. Socrates specifies F-conditions that the *definiens* must satisfy, but these conditions pertain to the specific excellences under investigation. They are not general conditions for defining entities. What Socrates lacks is a theoretical ontology to provide a general framework for real definitions.

In this respect, the early definitional dialogues are remarkable works. Historically, the WF question arises prior to the conceptualization of metaphysics. But methodologically the pursuit of the WF question requires such conceptualization. So, in the absence of a general theoretical ontology, a theory of definition must be basically limited to the principle mentioned: a real definition uniquely identifies, by means of a linguistic description, some entity *x*. But this principle alone does not constitute a theory of real definition. Moreover, while this principle is certainly extricable from the content of the early definitional dialogues, nowhere in these texts does Socrates make any explicit general statements about the condition of definitions. Rather, Socrates' engagement with the WF question, the first such engagement of which we have record, puts Plato in a position to develop a theory of (real) definition – indeed, to create philosophy as we know it.

V.iv   On Whether Socrates Tests Definitions or Lives

My emphasis on Socrates' concern with the truth-value of definitions as opposed to the psychological states of his interlocutors will seem at least lopsided to those who emphasize that Socrates examines "lives and not merely propositions."[131] In particular, Brickhouse and Smith draw atten-

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[131] Brickhouse and Smith (1994) 12-14; cp. Vlastos (1994) 9: "But those who know

tion to Socrates' claims in *Apology* that a significant aspect of his divine mission involves liberating his compatriots from the false conceit of knowledge and encouraging them to attend to their souls.[132] I find the use of *Apology* as a hermeneutic guide for interpreting the early definitional dialogues questionable since Plato's motivations in composing *Apology* might have been quite different from those in composing the definitional dialogues. Although, of course, the contents of *Apology* could be illuminating in this regard, insofar as one is concerned to determine Socrates' motives for engaging his interlocutors in the search for satisfactory definitions, evidence must primarily be gleaned from the definitional dialogues themselves.[133]

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him best understand that the elenchus does have this existential dimension – that what it examines is not just propositions but lives."

[132] "Socrates even claims that he has a 'mission' undertaken on behalf of the god of Delphi to show people who think they are wise that they are not" (4).

[133] My position here may be broadened to a general hermeneutic rule of thumb. Most scholarship on Plato's early dialogues focuses on the philosophical beliefs of the main and favorite character in these texts, Socrates – a tendency I have followed here. The procedure of determining Socrates' philosophical beliefs tends to operate by gleaning all relevant utterances pertaining to a particular topic and then attempting to construct from these a coherent conception to be presented as Socrates' view on that topic. This approach is susceptible to neglecting a possibility that, if actual, could significantly affect the interpretation of Socrates' utterances. The possibility is that Plato composes or uses the character Socrates in different ways for different ends in different dialogues. As such, whatever Socrates believes, does, or says in a given dialogue or at a given stage of a given dialogue would be influenced by Plato's aims in composing these. One difficulty with this is that it involves us in a hermeneutical circle. But this is by no means a vicious circle. It merely requires of the interpreter an oscillation of focus from the particular facts of the content to the author's intentions in composing those facts and the reinterpretation of each according to the other, ideally, gradually and asymptotically leading to the truth. The other difficulty – with which I am more concerned – is that, regardless of his own intellectual development – if any – Plato need not have felt bound to compose Socrates in the various dialogues with consistent acts, beliefs, or utterances. Although in all the early dialogues the character Socrates is obviously derivative of the historical Socrates or Plato, this derivation need not be one of the strictest correspondence; and Plato could have felt free to shade or color his main character slightly differently in different texts, again, to suit particular ends. This possibility suggests caution when drawing inferences among Socrateses in the dialogues. For example, why should we assume that Socrates' description of his philosophical activity in *Apology* *should* be reflected in other dialogues? It could be the case that, say, memorializing motives compelled Plato to cast Socrates in *Apology* in one way that makes him slightly different from the way that, on account of other kinds of motives, he is cast in another text. As a matter of fact,

Accordingly, in these texts we do *not* "always discover that, in fact, Socrates is seeking somehow or other to refute the one he is questioning."[134] As we have seen, he is typically cooperative and supportive. For instance, he most explicitly explains to Critias that he is not trying to refute him. Rather, he stubbornly seeks the truth (about *F*). Consequently, he is unwilling to concede opinions just because it would be polite or socially graceful to do so.[135] That his interlocutors' positions are always revealed as inadequate is not, even partially, to be explained on the grounds of Socrates' intent to refute them. Rather, this is simply because the interlocutors have not adequately reflected on the questions as he has.

Furthermore, since the topics in which Socrates is interested are of fundamental importance for the conduct of human life, the discussions naturally can have significant ramifications for the conduct of the discussants' lives. This may explain Nicias' statement in *Laches* that ". . . whoever is closest to Socrates and draws near into a discussion with him, if he would begin a discussion about something else, will necessarily not stop being led around by him in the discussion until he falls into giving an account of himself – of the way he is living now and of the way he has lived in the past."[136] However, in fact, in the early definitional dialogues no one is made to give an account of the way he is living or of the way he has lived in the past.

In sum, in trying to define basic ethical virtues, the interlocutors inevitably expose some of their basic values. The refutation of these can lead them to believe they do not know what they thought they did and can make them feel that they need to attend to their beliefs and the conduct of their lives more closely. But Socrates' explicit intentions in pursuing definitions in these dialogues are not to refute his interlocutors or to compel them to question the conduct of their lives.[137] As he says to Protagoras: "I am

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Socrates may be cast in precisely the same way in all the texts. But I caution that we should not assume this. It should be something we discover. And, in particular, whatever we discover should result from examining Socrates' acts, utterances, and beliefs one by one within the context of individual dialogues and, to the extent that it is possible, with a sensitivity to the compositional aims of individual dialogues and the possibility that these may not be identical in all texts.

[134] Brickhouse and Smith (1994) 4.

[135] Cf. *Charm.* 165b5-c2. Although, on at least one occasion, out of politeness, Socrates does hesitate from compelling his interlocutor to admit that his definition has failed (cf. *Charm.* 169c3-d8).

[136] *Lach.* 187e6-188a2.

[137] It is, of course, the case that, as Socrates himself says, knowledge of things

primarily interested in testing the argument, although it may happen both that the questioner, myself, and my respondent wind up being tested."[138]

V.v On the Epistemological Priority of Definitional Knowledge

Elsewhere I have argued that Socrates is committed to the epistemological priority of definitional knowledge for pertinent non-definitional knowledge (PD).[139] Precisely, (PD) is a conjunction of the following 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;[140] and

(D) If one does not know what F is, then one cannot know, for any property P, whether F has P.

Here I merely wish to note the significance of my position in light of the preceding discussion. Geach first raised the question whether Socrates's commitment to a proposition resembling (PD) was methodologically acceptable. Specifically, he suggests that Socrates is committed to (P) and yet, illogically, employs examples of F in pursuing definitions of F.[141] This problem, subsumed under the more general problem of how Socrates can reasonably pursue definitional knowledge of F, if he is committed to (P) or (D) or (PD), has since been called "the Socratic fallacy". In response

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(especially ἀρετή) will be of great value for human life. Socrates strongly believes that F is beneficial. Moreover, although Socrates never says it in the definitional dialogues, it is hardly controversial that he believes his pursuit of definitions of F is consonant with his pursuit of εὐδαιμονία. (It is generally accepted that Socrates believes that definitional knowledge is necessary for expertise. Cf., for example, Woodruff (1990); although, recently Smith (1998) has – unsuccessfully, I believe – argued for a contradictory position. However, Socrates' exact view of the relation between ethical expertise and εὐδαιμονία is more controversial. Cf., for instance, Zeyl (1980), (1982); Vlastos (1984), reprinted in (1985), reprinted with revisions in (1991); Brickhouse and Smith (1994) 103-36; Irwin (1995) 65-77; Rudebusch (1999). Accordingly, insofar as he can engage in the same pursuit with others, who, like himself, do not know what F is, he makes a constructive contribution to their pursuit of εὐδαιμονία. Still, in the definitional dialogues, Socrates' motives for pursuing definitions are as I have described them – not merely to test his interlocutor's claims for consistency, but to determine true definitions.

[138] Prot. 333c7-9.

[139] "The Epistemological Priority of Definitional Knowledge" (under review).

[140] Note that instances of F are not restricted to particulars, they include kinds.

[141] Geach (1966).

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to Geach, a number of scholars have defended Socrates against the charge of committing the Socratic fallacy.[142] Their responses are of three kinds:

(1) In some early dialogues Socrates is committed to (PD); however, these are transitional dialogues. In the transitional dialogues Socrates does not employ the elenctic method of pursuing definitions. Consequently, in these dialogues Socrates' commitment to (PD) is consistent with his method of pursuing definitions.[143]

(2) Socrates is not committed to (P)[144] or (D)[145] or (PD).[146]

(3) Although Socrates employs propositions about F's putative properties and putative examples of F in pursuit of definitional knowledge of F, he does not, in the process, assume he knows F's properties or that any given entity x is an example of F.[147]

I reject (1) and (2) and defend a version of (3). At least two other scholars have defended versions of (3), Irwin and Burnyeat, both in 1977. In the past quarter century, defenses of (1) or (2) have prevailed – although, in 1990 (subsequently reaffirmed in 2000),[148] Benson presented a powerful argument for accepting Socrates' commitment to (PD), and I follow Benson to this extent. However, Benson maintains that Socrates does not pursue definitional knowledge of F so much as test his interlocutors' alleged expertise by considering whether their beliefs about F are consistent. In section IV, we have seen that this is mistaken.[149] Therefore, Benson's conclusion is only partially satisfactory – and, as such, the question whether Socrates commits the Socratic fallacy remains alive. I maintain that although in the early definitional dialogues Socrates is committed to (PD) and pursues definitional knowledge of F, he does not commit the Socratic fallacy in the egregious sense supposed. This is because he employs putatively true beliefs (not knowledge) about examples and properties of F to achieve definitional knowledge of F. In fact, there is

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[142] Santas (1972); Burnyeat (1977); Irwin (1977) 40-1; Woodruff (1982) 138-49; Vlastos (1985); Nehamas (1985), (1986); Beversluis (1987); Lesher (1987); Benson (1990); Vlastos (1994); Brickhouse and Smith (1994) 45-60.

[143] Vlastos (1985), (1994); Beversluis (1987).

[144] Woodruff (1982); Santas (1979) suggests that this is possible, though the evidence is inconclusive.

[145] Lesher (1987).

[146] Brickhouse and Smith (1994); Nehamas (1985), (1986); Kraut (1984).

[147] Irwin (1977); Burnyeat (1977).

[148] Benson (2000) 112-63.

[149] Wolfsdorf (2003).

no passage in the early definitional dialogues where Socrates claims to know any of the *definiendum*'s properties or that any *x* is an instance of the *definiendum*.

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Sextus Empiricus and the Tripartition of Time

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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the arguments against the existence of time based upon its tripartition into past, present, and future found in SE *M* 10.197-202. It uncovers Sextus' major premises and assumptions for these arguments and, in particular, criticises his argument that the past and future do not exist because the former is no longer and the latter is not yet. It also places these arguments within the larger structure of Sextus' arguments on time in SE *M* 10 and considers these arguments as an example of his general strategy for producing *ataraxia* by assembling opposing sets of argument on a given question.

Philosophical discussions of time are a fertile breeding ground for paradoxes.[1] Aristotle, who provides one of the earliest extended discussions of the nature of time, begins that discussion in *Physics* 4.10 with a series of *aporiai*. In one way or another these and similar puzzles dominated thinking about time for much of antiquity. In particular, the apparently innocuous division of time into three parts – past, present, and future – which Aristotle mentions at *Phys.* 217b33-4, has been the source of many long-lived puzzles.[2] I focus here on Sextus Empiricus' use of such arguments in his *Against the Mathematicians* 10 (sometimes referred to as *Against the Physicists* 2).[3] Sextus uses for his own Pyrrhonist cause the difficulties involved in giving a coherent account of the nature of time while retaining the intuitions both that there is something special about the ontological status of the present and what happens in the present and also that there is a sense in which the past and future exist although they are not

[1] Augustine famously confesses: *quid est ergo tempus? si nemo ex me quaerat, scio; si quaerenti explicare velim, nescio* (*Conf.* 11.13).

[2] At DL 9.52 Protagoras is credited with being the first who 'distinguished the parts of time' (καὶ πρῶτος μέρη χρόνου διώρισε). For the argument that this refers primarily to a distinction in humans' epistemological access to the past, present, and future, see Dunn (2001).

[3] I shall deal mainly with the full expression of these arguments in *M* 10, but there is a brief summary in *PH* 3.144, and another at *M* 6.62-7 where the non-existence of time is used to show that there can be no science of poetic rhythm.