

## 2 The Historical Socrates

David Conan Wolfsdorf

### I THE SOCRATIC PROBLEM

Viewed as the first philosopher to have made ethics his central concern and ethics itself the central concern of ancient philosophy, Socrates has long held a special place in the history of Western ethical philosophy.<sup>1</sup> But the enormity of Socrates' influence sharply contrasts with the complete lack of direct evidence for his philosophy. Socrates did not commit his thought to writing. Attempts to recover the content of his philosophy must use such evidence as exists in the writings of others. The main sources that have been used include Old Comedy, principally Aristophanes' *Clouds*; the literature of the Socratic writings (*Sokratikoi logoi*), principally Plato's and Xenophon's;<sup>2</sup> and testimony scattered throughout Aristotle's corpus. These sources are problematic in various ways. Hence the attempt to recover Socrates' philosophy is justly described as "the Socratic problem."<sup>3</sup>

Old comics tend to caricaturize. In *The Clouds* Aristophanes presents Socrates as a pseudo-philosophical type, a man with corrupt values, his comically exaggerated features agglomerated from various historical individuals.<sup>4</sup>

The Socratic writings are usually treated as our most important source. But there is broad consensus among leading scholars today that the norms of the genre of Socratic literature recommended creative and personal adaptation and expression rather than strict historical fidelity. Disparities in significant detail between Plato and Xenophon corroborate this point.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, as I have argued in work on Plato's early dialogues, the characters named "Socrates" in these writings are not strictly textually identical. Rather, from dialogue to dialogue Plato uses Socrates in various ways for various purposes, albeit in similar ways and for similar purposes.<sup>6</sup> Xenophon does the same.<sup>7</sup> I infer that other writers of Socratic literature either also did so or at least felt free to. In sum, various authors used a character called "Socrates" to explore and advance philosophical thought of their own, albeit philosophical thought

variously indebted to and inspired by the historical Socrates as well as variously informed by and engaged with one another.

In Anglophone scholarship, the most significant recent attempt to solve the Socratic problem is Gregory Vlastos' argument that a set of Plato's dialogues, regarded as his earliest, represents a coherent body of philosophical thought, distinct from the thought of Plato's middle dialogues, and that the philosophy of Plato's early dialogues represents the thought of the historical Socrates.<sup>8</sup>

Today most leading scholars of Socrates and the Socratic writings reject Vlastos' argument for various reasons. Here, for instance, is the gist of Louis-André Dorion's criticism: Plato uses the character Socrates in both early and middle dialogues. So Plato does not hesitate to put views, which Vlastos acknowledges are not the historical Socrates', in the mouth of his character Socrates. So why think that the views of Socrates in Plato's early dialogues are the views of the historical Socrates? Vlastos' response is that Plato's representation of Socrates in the early dialogues agrees, on several important points, with Aristotle's and Xenophon's representations of Socrates. But Vlastos "grossly" overestimates the agreement between Xenophon and Plato. For instance, in sharp contrast to Plato's Socrates, Xenophon's Socrates never professes ethical ignorance. More generally among the ten theses Vlastos cites as distinguishing Plato's early from his middle Socrates, Xenophon's Socrates and Plato's early Socrates agree only on two. Moreover, these two are negative theses: that Socrates did not develop a metaphysical theory of separate Forms and that Socrates did not maintain a tripartite theory of the *psuchê*.<sup>9</sup>

Aristotle arrived in Athens as a teenager in 367 BCE. His earliest testimony would then have been composed more than a half-century after Socrates' death. This testimony has largely been discounted on the grounds that Aristotle typically does not distinguish between the views of the historical Socrates and those of a character Socrates in a given Socratic writing.<sup>10</sup> Moreover most of the claims Aristotle attributes to Socrates can be recovered from Plato's Socratic dialogues.<sup>11</sup>

In view of the great influence that Socrates had on the history of ancient ethical philosophy and on the history of Western ethical philosophy broadly, these evidentiary problems yield a disappointing result: We can plausibly grasp a few very general features of Socrates' ethics, but not its details. Moreover, the general features are ones that we would probably grasp prior to careful examination: that ethics was central to Socrates' philosophy, that Socrates' philosophy was somehow informed by his alleged experiences of divinity, that Socratic ethics was eudaimonistic, that

Thanks to Joel Yurdin for discussing this chapter with me and suggesting a number of subtle improvements.

Socrates viewed the soul and more precisely knowledge of some kind as centrally responsible for living well, and that some form of reasoned argumentation was central to Socrates' philosophy. On the other hand, it requires some expertise to confirm and clarify these claims and to explain why others as well as more detailed proposals are unwarranted or merely speculative.

## 2 ETHICS AND THE SCOPE OF SOCRATES' PHILOSOPHY

(1a) Ethics was central to Socrates' philosophy.<sup>12</sup>

No one would doubt this, but what justifies (1a)? One reason is the prominence of related claims among ancient testimonies as early as Aristotle, claims for which there is no serious contradictory evidence. Above I said that Aristotle's testimony can largely be discounted; I did not say that it can wholly be discounted. In a few passages Aristotle clearly takes himself to be describing the historical Socrates. Some of these remarks, in conjunction with other evidence, can be used to corroborate certain claims about Socrates.

A second reason justifying (1a) is that ethics is central in most extant Socratic writings, including Plato's, Xenophon's, and the fragments of Aeschines. In addition, evidence regarding lost Socratic writings suggests that ethics was central to their content too.<sup>13</sup>

This is one way Socratic literature can be used to make plausible claims about the historical Socrates' philosophy: If there is uniformity or if there are at least prominent trends in the content of the surviving literature or of what we know about the genre, and if this uniformity or prominent content is not contradicted, then it is reasonable to accept that such content derives from the historical Socrates.<sup>14</sup>

(1a) does not exclude other topics from prominence in Socrates' philosophy. But consider one of Aristotle's testimonies. The context is Aristotle's account of the various philosophical contributions of his predecessors. Clearly then Aristotle takes himself to be making a claim about the historical Socrates:

And when Socrates, busying himself with ethical matters (*ta êthika*) rather than nature as a whole ...<sup>15</sup>

This testimony supports (1a), but suggests further that:

(1b) The focus of Socrates' philosophy excluded natural philosophy.

Content from some of Plato's writings corroborates this aspect of Aristotle's claim.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps Aristotle's claim principally derives from these Platonic texts. But support for (1b) also derives from testimony pertaining to other Socratics' disregard of natural philosophy.<sup>17</sup>

Granting (1b), political concerns are also prominent in the Socratic writings. Generally, the distinction between ethical and political philosophy is not sharp in the Socratic writings. A central reason for this is that personal and civic identity in the Classical Greek polis were intimately related. The citizenry of Athens was relatively small, about thirty thousand men, and politics was broadly inclusive and involved direct representation.<sup>18</sup> Concerns with the relation between personal welfare and the welfare of the city-state are prominent in the Socratic writings.<sup>19</sup> In fact, Aristotle himself remarks in a passage from *Parts of Animals*, in which he is also clearly talking about the period of Socrates' historical activity:

By the time of Socrates, [the study of explanation in nature] had advanced; but in this period inquiry into nature (*to zêtein ta peri physeôs*) ceased, and those engaged in philosophy turned their attention to useful excellence and political excellence (*tên chrêsimon aretên kai tên politikên*).<sup>20</sup>

Hence:

(1c) Political philosophy was also central to Socrates' philosophy.

Additionally there is compelling evidence that in pursuing philosophy Socrates took himself to be influenced in some form by divinity. In Plato's and Xenophon's writings this influence is referred to as "*to daimonion*." As Walter Burkert has explained, the Greeks thought of a *daimôn* not substantively as a divinity, but as a mode of divine presence or influence. In other words, a *daimôn* is a way that divinity makes itself or its power present.<sup>21</sup> Given that Socrates' experiences of divinity were significant to his philosophical life, it is plausible that:

(1d) Divinity also played an important role in Socrates' philosophy.

I suppose that the role of divinity in Socrates' thought was intimately related to his ethics and political philosophy. There are numerous reasons for thinking so. Among them, religion pervaded most aspects of ancient Greek private and civic life.<sup>22</sup> A signal example of the influence of divinity on Socrates' ethics and politics is the way the *daimonion* influenced his practical decisions in private and public spheres. For

instance, Xenophon writes that "in accordance with the forewarnings of the *daimonion*, Socrates counseled many of his companions to do this or not to do that."<sup>23</sup>

More direct confirmation of (1d) comes from the fact that the topic of divinity variously features in Plato's and Xenophon's Socratic writings as well as in Aeschines', Euclides', and Antisthenes'.<sup>24</sup>

Further support for (1d) can be derived from Socrates' trial: Socrates was of course prosecuted for impiety. Granted this, I underscore that throughout my discussion I marginalize the trial of Socrates as evidence for the content of his philosophy. Even if we could establish Meletus', his associates', and the jurors' motives for prosecuting and condemning Socrates, this would only clarify hostile and popular conceptions of Socrates. Further evidence would then be needed to corroborate the accuracy of those conceptions. In the present case, however, whatever Socrates' views of divinity, the fact that he was tried for impiety, in conjunction with the other evidence I have cited, corroborates (1d).

One further consideration bears on the scope of Socrates' philosophy. There is compelling evidence that in pursuing philosophy Socrates took a special interest in method. Consider one further passage from Aristotle in which again he clearly takes himself to be describing the historical Socrates:

Socrates busied himself with the ethical excellences (*êthikas aretas*) and of these was the first to seek to define the universal (*peri toutôn horizesthai katholou*) . . . For there are two things that one may rightly attribute to Socrates: epagógic arguments (*epaktikous logous*) and definition of the universal (*to horizesthai katholou*).<sup>25</sup>

Below I will examine Aristotle's attribution of these particular methodological concerns.<sup>26</sup> Presently I introduce them to draw attention to any concern with method that Socrates might have had. Note that I use "method" here broadly to refer to epistemology as well as rational inquiry and argumentation. For convenience I will refer to such methodology by the term Plato and Aristotle use: dialectic (*dialektikê*).<sup>27</sup> I suggest, then, that:

(1e) Dialectic too was central to Socrates' philosophy.<sup>28</sup>

In proposing (1e), I presume that the role that dialectic played in Socrates' philosophy differed from the roles of ethics, politics, and divinity as follows. Ethics, politics, and divinity were topical foci. I presume that dialectic was also a topical focus.<sup>29</sup> But dialectic also played a formal and epistemological role in the practice of Socratic philosophy itself.

In addition to Aristotle's testimony, support for (1e) derives from the methodological concerns featured in Plato's and Xenophon's Socratic writings as well as testimonies suggesting that other Socratics were especially concerned with dialectic.<sup>30</sup>

In sum, I propose that the following accurately describes the general scope of Socrates' philosophy:

Ethics, political philosophy, and divinity were central to Socrates' philosophy. Dialectic was central too, both topically and instrumentally.

### 3 SOCRATES' CONCEPTION OF HIS PHILOSOPHY

There is no compelling evidence that Socrates conceived of his philosophy as inquiry into *ta êthika*. The association of that phrase with ethics was principally due to the influence of Aristotle's character (*êthos*)-centric conceptualization of ethics. The term "*êthos*" and its cognates are relatively rare in Xenophon's Socratic writings. At least until his last work, *Laws*, they are also relatively rare in Plato's corpus. Moreover, the idea that *êthos* has a principal place within ethics is informed by a certain conception of the soul and its parts or faculties. But we have no compelling evidence regarding the historical Socrates' view of the structure of the *psuchê*.<sup>31</sup>

It is more plausible that one way Socrates conceived of his philosophy was as inquiry into the good (*to agathon*).<sup>32</sup> With respect to ethics specifically, Socrates was concerned with the human good.<sup>33</sup> Observe that the phrase "the human good" obscures an important distinction between "the goodness of a human" and "that which is good for a human." I presume that Socrates took an interest in both, for both topics are engaged in the surviving Socratic writings as well as in what we know of the contributions and ideas of the Socratics whose writings do not survive. For example, the topic of *aretê* (excellence)<sup>34</sup> is, at least pre-theoretically, a matter of the goodness of a human, whereas freedom, health, pleasure, wealth, and political status are popular Greek views of what is good for a human. The thesis that *aretê* itself is good for a human – which we encounter in a number of Socratics – is, in turn, a substantive and indeed contentious one.

It may be wondered whether Socrates' concern with the human good included a more abstract interest in the good per se. By "the good per se" I mean to refer, at least as a theoretical possibility, to that which various good things share in virtue of which they are good. For instance,

*Dissoi Logoi*, a philosophical text presumably composed in the late fifth century, contains a discussion of whether the good is unified.<sup>35</sup> Then again, Socrates' concern might have been more narrowly focused on the nature of good citizenship and leadership. Indeed, these topics are prominent in various Socratic writings. As such they indicate one significant way that ethics and political philosophy might have been integrated in the historical Socrates' thought.

Presumably Socrates was interested in all three: the good per se, the human good, and good citizenship and leadership. On the other hand, it is doubtful that he regarded a description such as "to agathon" or "to andros agathon"<sup>36</sup> as definitively identifying the unifying concern of his philosophy. For instance, assuming Socrates conceived of his philosophy as unified in some way, reasonable alternatives might include: care for the soul, political science, the art of leadership, civic education, or service to the divine.<sup>37</sup>

In *Memorabilia*, Xenophon characterizes Socrates' philosophy this way:

His own conversations always concerned human affairs (*ta anthrôpina*). He inquired into the nature of piety and impiety, excellence and badness, justice and injustice, sound-mindedness and madness, courage and cowardice, state and statesman, government and governors, and everything else that he thought someone truly noble (*kalon*) should know, or that anyone ignorant of would deserve to be called servile.<sup>38</sup>

Xenophon hereby suggests that Socrates pursued knowledge that a *kalon* person should have. Perhaps Socrates conceived of such knowledge as *sophia*. If so, he might have conceived of his activity simply as a pursuit of *sophia*, perhaps even as *philosophia*. In fact, Livio Rossetti has argued that Socrates and the Socratics were the first to define their intellectual activity as *philosophia*.<sup>39</sup> Whether or not we accept this thesis, it is likely that Socrates and in turn the Socratics took themselves to be involved in inquiry into a form of *sophia* that they regarded as distinctive and especially important, and that they thereby appropriated the term "*philosophia*" and were subsequently responsible for an influential conception of it.

In short, there are various plausible ways that Socrates could have conceived the ethical facet of his philosophy or his philosophy as a whole. We cannot determine whether he privileged one over others.

#### 4 EUDAIMONISM

From the fourth century, Greek ethical philosophy is, without exception or perhaps with one exception, eudaimonistic.<sup>40</sup> Since Socrates was executed at the beginning of the fourth century, it is questionable whether his ethical thought was eudaimonistic.<sup>41</sup> Eudaimonism is the view that the supreme value and hence orienting point of ethics is living a good life. Observe that under this description eudaimonism may include aspects of both construals of the human good.

I have suggested that insofar as he was concerned with ethics, Socrates took himself to be concerned with the human good. It may therefore be questioned whether Socrates' ethical thought was eudaimonistic. If so, a distinct question is whether Socrates actually spoke prominently of *eudaimonia*. And if so, another question is whether Socrates thought of this condition in its etymological sense, namely as being under a good divine influence. The following considerations lend some support to positive answers to these three questions.

First, the term "*eudaimonia*" and its cognates are common in Plato's Socratic writings and in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*. "*Eudaimonia*" also in occurs in a fragment of Aeschines.<sup>42</sup> Testimony also suggests its use by Antisthenes.<sup>43</sup> Second, in its common usage in fifth-century Athens, "*eudaimonia*" is understood in its etymological sense.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, whether or not Socrates viewed his own life as an example of *eudaimonia*, the fact that he took his philosophy to be informed by his experience of the *daimonion* and the prominence of divinity within his ethical thought suggests that Socrates would have conceived of a good human life as *eudaimôn* in an etymological sense.

The following, somewhat speculative consideration lends further support to the preceding conclusions. Elsewhere I have argued that both Socrates and the Socratics took a special interest in Hesiod's *Works and Days*. In particular, the Encomium to Work (vv. 287–319) and Prodicus' adaptation of it in *The Choice of Heracles* influenced how they framed and conceptualized some of their fundamental ethical concerns.<sup>45</sup> When I advanced this argument, I did not draw a connection with eudaimonism under that description. However, the ethical concerns in question are eudaimonistic: What is the place of pleasure in a good human life? And to what sort of work should one devote oneself? In fact, in Xenophon's paraphrase of Prodicus' *Choice*, each of the two paths of life offered to Heracles is characterized as "*eudaimonia*."<sup>46</sup> Finally, it is noteworthy

that Hesiod's poem concludes with the first attested use of the word "eudaimôn."<sup>47</sup>

In sum, I suggest that Socrates' ethics was eudaimonistic and, probably, that it was self-consciously so.

## 5 PSUCHÊ, EXCELLENCE, AND WISDOM

From the Archaic period into the fifth century, the word "*psuchê*" was principally used to mean "life" or "vital spirit." But in the second half of the fifth century some philosophers appropriated the word to mean something like "soul."<sup>48</sup> According to this usage the *psuchê* was regarded as in some sense a substantial unity, contrasted with the body, and responsible for a range of what we now call "psychological" capacities and functions. This conceptual development was momentous for the history of ethics, for the *psuchê* thereby came to be viewed as a personal power governing or shaping one's life.

Among fifth-century philosophers, it is widely believed that:

(3a) Socrates used "*psuchê*" to mean "soul."

Indeed, it is widely believed that:

(3b) *Psuchê*, conceived as soul, was central to Socrates' ethics.

Decisive evidence for (3a–b) is actually difficult to find. Weak evidence for (3a) derives from two instances of "*psuchê*" in Aristophanes' *Clouds*.<sup>49</sup> David Claus notes that "remarkably, [these uses] attribute *sophia* to the *psuchê*, an association that, with the exception of Heraclitus B 118 and the Gorgianic *Helen*, is original to this play."<sup>50</sup>

An alternative approach to (3a–b) proceeds by way of Socrates' interest in the *aretai* (excellences). Recall Aristotle's testimonies:

Socrates busied himself with the ethical excellences . . .

[In Socrates' time,] those engaged in philosophy turned their attention to useful excellence and political excellence.

Among the things Aristotle has in mind when he speaks of "ethical excellences" and "useful excellence and political excellence" are traits such as courage, justice, and self-control. Given earlier remarks, it should be clear that Socrates would not have conceived of these *aretai* as "*êthikai*"; however, he might well have viewed them as "*politikai*." For convenience, I will refer to them as "practical excellences." That

Socrates examined some practical excellences and considered their importance for *eudaimonia* is corroborated by the fact that they are so treated in Plato's and Xenophon's Socratic writings and by testimony that they were so treated in the works of other Socratics, in particular Aeschines and Antisthenes, but also Aristippus.<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, there is compelling evidence that Socrates held one of the following theses:

- (4a) The practical excellences are a single thing, namely, a form of practical knowledge.
- (4b) The practical excellences are forms of practical knowledge.
- (4c) Practical knowledge of some kind is only partly constitutive of practical excellence.

For convenience, I will hereafter refer to the practical knowledge constitutive of practical excellence as "wisdom."

The evidence for Antisthenes suggests a commitment to (4a).<sup>52</sup> Testimony attributes (4a) to Euclides.<sup>53</sup> (4a) and (4b) are developed, albeit ultimately aporetically, in several of Plato's Socratic dialogues.<sup>54</sup> Relatedly, in a fragment from Phaedo's *Zopyrus*, the character Socrates claims to have cured his psychological defects by means of reason (*ratione*).<sup>55</sup> (4a) or (4b) seems to be expressed in a passage of Xenophon's *Memorabilia*.<sup>56</sup> However, Dorion has compellingly argued that (4c) is Xenophon's position.<sup>57</sup>

(4a–c) are, in turn, to be distinguished from the following thesis:

- (4d) Wisdom is not necessary for some aspects of human excellence.

For example, by the value they place on bodily strength and wellness, both Xenophon and Antisthenes commit to (4d).<sup>58</sup>

Given Socrates' interest in the nature of certain practical excellences, given his view that wisdom is at least central to human excellence, and assuming that Socrates conceived of wisdom as a condition of the *psuchê*, understood as soul, it can be inferred that concern with the soul as such was central to Socrates' ethics.

However, it must be emphasized that the assumption that Socrates conceived of wisdom as being a condition of the soul is the weakest premise in this argument. It would certainly have been possible for Socrates to take the pursuit of practical excellence to be central to his ethics and to identify practical excellence with wisdom, without conceiving of practical excellence or wisdom as conditions of the *psuchê* as such.

Perhaps the strongest evidence that Socrates used "*psuchê*" to mean "soul" comes from consideration of the prominence of "*psuchê*" as so used in Plato's early dialogues. Some of these dialogues were almost certainly composed in the decade immediately after Socrates' death. If Socrates did not use "*psuchê*" to mean "soul," then the fact that Plato does so without fanfare or special explanation itself requires explanation.

## 6 WISDOM, SKEPTICISM, AND EUDAIMONIA

Given these conclusions, I want to raise several questions for Socrates' ethics, some of which I believe we cannot answer for lack of evidence.

What did Socrates take wisdom to consist in? This question may be analyzed as conjoining two others: What was Socrates' conception of the dispositional epistemic attitude constitutive of wisdom? And what was his conception of the content of wisdom? Regarding the former, in Plato's and Xenophon's Socratic writings, wisdom is often examined in relation to forms of technical or craft knowledge (*technê*).<sup>59</sup> A familiar question in Platonic scholarship in particular is whether wisdom is a *technê* or rather whether *technê* analogies are merely used to explore ethical epistemology. *Technê* analogies are also employed in fragments of Aeschines' *Miltiades* and *Alcibiades*.<sup>60</sup> Aristotle also mentions that Aristippus favorably contrasted *technai* with mathematics, insofar as the former concern themselves with things that are good and bad.<sup>61</sup> Hence I infer that in examining the nature of wisdom, Socrates himself employed *technê* analogies. The fact that he did is itself a remarkable and ingenious contribution to ethical epistemology. Taken in conjunction with the way I have argued that Hesiod's *Works and Days* informed his ethical thought, Socrates' employment of the *technê* analogy suggests that he at least entertained the idea that one's life is a work or product (*ergon*) of which one is the craftsman.<sup>62</sup> That said, we do not know just what Socrates concluded from such considerations.

However he conceived of wisdom, did Socrates take himself to have achieved it? Here the Socratics' presentations markedly diverge. Plato portrays Socrates as a subtle ethical-epistemological skeptic.<sup>63</sup> In his one remark on this subject, Aristotle claims that Socrates viewed himself as a skeptic.<sup>64</sup> In a fragment from Aeschines' *Alcibiades*, the character Socrates also appears to express skepticism:

And so although I knew no instruction (*mathêma*) that I could teach to anyone to benefit him, nevertheless I thought that in keeping company with Alcibiades I could, through loving him, make him better.<sup>65</sup>

In striking contrast, Xenophon consistently attributes wisdom to Socrates and repeatedly portrays Socrates as beneficently applying it to his friends. Likewise, Antisthenes appears to present a doctrinal rather than aporetic conception of Socratic philosophy.<sup>66</sup> I suggest, then, that it is unclear whether Socrates took himself to possess wisdom.

Precisely how did Socrates understand the relation between wisdom and *eudaimonia*? For instance, did he take there to be a logical relation between the two, such that the former is necessary or sufficient for the latter? Alternatively, did he conceive of the relation as causal? Relatedly, assume that, among conditions of the soul, wisdom alone is required for *eudaimonia*. Are other factors also required, in particular bodily or environmental conditions? In considering this question, observe that from its earliest usage in the Archaic period through the fifth century, *eudaimonia* was associated with a life or at least an extended period of life of ample pleasure.<sup>67</sup> Above I mentioned that central to the influence of Hesiod's *Works and Days* and Prodicus' *Choice of Heracles* on Socrates and the Socratics' ethical thought was a concern with the place of pleasure in the good life. The Socratics' views on this topic are various and contradictory. I infer, then, that Socrates himself took a serious interest in the place of pleasure in the good life. But what place he accorded to pleasure, we don't know.<sup>68</sup>

Finally, since *eudaimonia* is understood to involve divine favor, the idea that *eudaimonia* also centrally depends on wisdom appears paradoxical. To what extent do humans determine their lives, and to what extent does the divine? One solution may lie in the idea that wisdom is the very thing that may be favorable to the divine. If Socrates engaged this question, how did he respond to it? Moreover, how would his conception of the *daimonion* feature in his response?

## 7 METHOD

Above I referred to Socrates' philosophical method as "dialectic." I now consider some alleged features of it: *elenchus*, definition, and *epagôgê*.

Something called "*elenchus*" has traditionally been viewed as characteristic of Socrates' philosophical method. Basically, *elenchus*

involves the exposure of inconsistency in an interlocutor's set of beliefs pertaining to some (typically) ethical topic. Inconsistency in turns indicates lack of pertinent wisdom. *Elenchus* may be humiliating for the interlocutor, but it may also serve to engender a philosophical motivation.<sup>69</sup> In numerous passages in Plato's and Xenophon's Socratic writings, Socrates' interlocutor is exposed as ignorant and such exposure is shameful and painful. In some cases the exposure also inspires philosophy.<sup>70</sup> Aeschines' *Alcibiades* and *Aspasia* include examples.<sup>71</sup>

Granted this, I resist identifying Socrates' method with *elenchus* and thereby limiting his method to it. Given his intellectual or dialectical facility, surely Socrates often exposed ignorance in his interlocutors. Moreover, such episodes surely struck his associates as memorable and philosophically significant.<sup>72</sup> But presumably Socrates also spent time with his associates cooperatively inquiring into ethical topics and problems.<sup>73</sup>

Note further that however prominently *elenchus* featured in Socrates' philosophical practice, the significance of doxastic consistency and more precisely coherence that *elenchus* entails suggests precisely this as a key feature of dialectic: Doxastic coherence must have been a governing norm of Socrates' dialectic.<sup>74</sup>

Recall now that Aristotle attributes definition of the universal (*katholou*) and epagogic arguments to Socrates. The term "*katholou*" is Aristotelian. But we may simply consider whether it was a prominent feature of Socrates' inquiries to pursue questions of the form "What is *F*?" where "*F*" stands for some ethical kind. The character Socrates pursues definition as such in a number of Plato's Socratic dialogues and occasionally uses the term "*horos*" (definition) and its cognates. Xenophon also attributes such pursuits to Socrates.<sup>75</sup> There is no evidence of definitional inquiry in Aeschines' fragments. On the other hand, Antisthenes took serious interest in definitions as well as in theory pertinent to definitions.<sup>76</sup> The weight of evidence therefore suggests that Socrates himself pursued questions of the form "What is *F*?" This is another major contribution Socrates made to the history of philosophy and to ethical philosophy in particular.

In considering Aristotle's attribution of *epagôgê* to Socrates, let's first clarify what Aristotle takes "*epagôgê*" to mean. The term is standardly translated as "induction" and therefore understood to refer to a form of inferential reasoning where information not contained in the premise set is derived from it. Precisely how Aristotle views such

reasoning is controversial. Scholars have mainly focused on *Prior Analytics* 2.23, Aristotle's most sustained discussion. Recently, however, John McCaskey has argued that the very interpretation of Aristotelian *epagôgê* as induction is misguided and that this error is precisely the result of too narrow a focus on the *Prior Analytics* passage. Drawing on uses of "*epagôgê*" throughout Aristotle's corpus, McCaskey concludes that Aristotle and his philosophical contemporaries understood *epagôgê* as a form of argumentation in which a concept or the meaning of a general term is elucidated through comparison (*parabolê*).<sup>77</sup> For example:

In medicine (*technê* 1), the doctor (*technikos* 1) is one who knows how to solve medical (*technê* 1-specific) problems.

In architecture (*technê* 2), the architect (*technikos* 2) is one who knows how to solve architectural (*technê* 2-specific) problems.

etc . . .

Therefore, a *technikos* is one who knows how to solve *technê*-specific problems, hence has *technê*-specific knowledge.<sup>78</sup>

I doubt that in every instance Aristotle understands and employs "*epagôgê*" in this way. But my point here does not require such a strong thesis. Rather, as McCaskey emphasizes, *epagôgê* so understood is a signal feature of Socratic dialectic in Plato's early dialogues,<sup>79</sup> and so it is reasonable to conclude that when he attributes the introduction of *epagôgê* to Socrates, this is what Aristotle means.

Examples of epagogic argumentation also occur in Xenophon. There is also an instance in Aeschines' *Aspasia*, which Cicero, our source, explicitly identifies as a case of *inductio*, and which employs a *technê* analogy.<sup>80</sup> Based on the employment of epagogic arguments in these various Socratic writings, in conjunction with Aristotle's testimony, I infer that epagogic argumentation was a feature of Socrates' dialectic. Furthermore, the use of the *technê* analogy in the epagogic argument in Aeschines' *Aspasia*, as commonly features in instances of epagogic argumentation in Plato's and Xenophon's Socratic writings, suggests that Socrates deployed the *technê* analogy particularly in conjunction with *epagôgê*. Finally, confirmation of Aristotle's attribution of epagogic argumentation to Socrates further confirms the correctness of his attribution of definitional inquiry to Socrates.

## 8 SPECULATIVE CONCLUSION

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, the primary reason the Socratic problem exists is that Socrates never committed his philosophy to writing. But why didn't he? It is doubtful that Socrates was illiterate. In any case – and although his intense devotion to philosophy seems to have ultimately reduced him to poverty – if Socrates had wanted to create philosophical compositions, he had wealthy friends who would have gladly paid for scribes. Since many of Socrates' philosophical contemporaries composed works, I assume that Socrates himself chose not to. This fact itself deserves consideration. Moreover, I suggest that such consideration should go hand-in-hand with consideration of the following question: Why did ethics become central to Socrates' philosophy at all? The answers I offer here are speculative, but certainly plausible.

Socrates' adult life coincided with the apex and subsequent defeat of the Athenian Empire. I conjecture that in the course of his life, perhaps especially in the last decades of the fifth century, Socrates became deeply concerned with Athens' imperial culture and with the ethical and political values of his fellow citizens. I suggest, then, that Socrates' practice of philosophy principally had a political goal. Socrates wanted to motivate his fellow Athenians and their sons to become good citizens and good political leaders. In pursuing philosophy himself, then, Socrates was driven by a sense of patriotism as well as the belief that his objective was divinely sanctioned.

Furthermore, Socrates believed that pursuit of his goal could be effective only through personal dialectical engagement. The reason for this relates to Socrates' epistemic or centrally epistemic conception of human excellence. Socrates appreciated that the ethical and political opinions and discursive habits of his contemporaries were complex and diverse, varied in subtle as well as unsubtle ways. Moreover, such opinions tend to be deeply held, anchored in forms of life as a whole. Consequently identification, exposure, and adjustment or extirpation of such opinions is a challenging task.<sup>81</sup> Different interlocutors require different strategies of dialectical engagement, and the same interlocutor may require different strategies at different stages in his intellectual development. Contrast a written work, which literally says the same thing to every reader, yet inevitably impacts diverse readers in diverse ways; and at the same time is unable to respond to, let alone dialectically engage with, these diverse responses.

Socrates believed he possessed a level of dialectical skill effective to motivate at least some of his contemporaries to cultivate excellence by pursuing wisdom.

## NOTES

1. Socrates was not the only philosopher of his day to examine ethical questions. All of the sophists did, as did other philosophers such as Democritus. But Socrates pursued ethical philosophy in a powerful and unique way.
2. For an overview of the Socratics, cf. Döring (2010) 24–47.
3. Cf. Dorion (2010) 1–23; Waterfield (2013) 1–19. For a collection of responses to the problem, cf. Patzer (1985).
4. Cf. Patzer (1993) 72–93; Patzer (1994) 50–81; Konstan (2010) 75–90.
5. Cf. Dorion (2010).
6. Cf. Wolfsdorf (2004a) 15–41.
7. Cf. Gera (2007) 33–50.
8. Vlastos (1991) esp. 45–106.
9. Cf. Dorion (2010), esp. 14–16, and n.38 with references to Bandini and Dorion (2000).
10. Cf. Chroust (1952) – although I believe its conclusions are too extreme; Deman (1942); Gigon (1959). For a recent, more charitable treatment of Aristotle's testimony, cf. Smith (forthcoming).
11. While Aristotle surely read many *Sokratikoi logoi* other than Plato's, in his surviving writings he has nothing to say about any particular others. Among other Socratics, he mentions Aristippus twice (*Meta.* 996a32, 1078a33) and Antisthenes several times (*Top.* 104b21, *Meta.* 1024b32, 1043b24, *Pol.* 1284a15, *Rhet.* 1407a9). For a recent discussion of Aristotle's conception of the *Sokratikoi logoi*, cf. Ford (2010) and Ford in Goldhill (2008) 29–44.
12. By "Socrates' philosophy" I mean Socrates' mature philosophy. Plausibly, when he began to engage in philosophy the problems that preoccupied Socrates were those central to Pre-Socratic philosophy. The autobiographical section of Plato's *Phaedo* (96a–102a) is consistent with this point. I see no way of identifying when ethics became a central focus of Socrates' philosophy.
13. This evidence is assembled in SSR. Some of this material is translated in Boys-Stone and Rowe (2013). In particular, cf. SSR IV A 166, 167. On Antisthenes, most likely the oldest of the Socratics, cf. Brancacci (2015); Prince (2015). On Aeschines, cf. Lampe (2015b).
14. Consider the following problem. In some Platonic dialogues Socrates is the central philosophical protagonist; but the central content of those dialogues is not ethical,



for example, *Cratylus* and *Theaetetus*. If the centrality of ethical content is a necessary condition of membership in the genre of Socratic literature, then appeal to this literature to justify (1a) is circular. Assuming a familiar view of Plato's literary chronology, one way around this problem is to restrict Plato's Socratic writings to Plato's early dialogues. The idea, familiar enough, would then be that later in his career, Plato's thought developed in directions beyond the scope of Socrates' philosophy.

15. *Meta.* 987b1–2 (I cite the continuation below); cf. 1078b17; *Xen. Mem.* 1.1.2, 1.4.1, 4.7.2–8.
16. *Ap.* 19AD; *Phd.* 96A–102A.
17. *SSR* IV A 166, 167, 169. Cf. *Xen. Mem.* 1.1.11–16, 4.6.2–8. Cf. PBerol inv. 21213 r (CPF I.1\*\*\*, 1999, 771–3). Antisthenes' *On Nature* needn't be an exception. Arguably, its content concerned distinctions between natural and conventional views pertaining to ethical and political topics. Cf. *SSR*, vol. 4, nota 25.
18. Cf. Hansen (1991) 86–124.
19. Cf. Brickhouse and Smith (1994) 137–75; Ober (2010) 138–78; Pangle (1994) 127–50; McNamara (2009). The names of political figures in the titles of other Socratic writings include: Aeschines' *Miltiades*, *Aspasia*, *Alcibiades* (*SSR* VI A 22); Aristippus' *Artabazus*, *Advice to Dionysios* (*SSR* IV A 144); Euclides' *Alcibiades* (*SSR* II A 10); Antisthenes' *Cyrus*, *Aspasia*, *Alcibiades*, and *Archelaus* (*SSR* V A 41). On Antisthenes' political philosophy, cf. Prince (2015).
20. 642a29–31.
21. Burkert (1985) 179–81.
22. Cf. Parker (1996) esp. 152–217; Mikalson (1983). (In fact, from the Pre-Socratics to Late Antiquity, there is scarcely a philosopher who does not engage the topic of divinity in some form.)
23. *Mem.* 1.4.
24. For Aeschines, cf. Mallet (2013) 225–32. For Euclides, cf. Brancacci (2005b) 143–54. For Antisthenes, cf. *SSR* V A 179–182 and Brancacci (1985/6). For Xenophon and Plato, cf. Destrée and Smith (2005) and McPherran (2010) 111–37.
25. *Meta.* 1078b18–29. Cf. "[And Socrates] . . . was inquiring, among these [ethical matters], into the universal and was the first to focus his mind on definitions" (987b1–4).
26. This will require consideration of what Aristotle means by "*epagôgê*."
27. Aristotle uses the word in the *Metaphysics* passage in question. The earliest surviving occurrences of the word are in Plato. However, the titles *Peri tou dialegesthai* and *peri dialektou* are listed among Antisthenes' writings (*SSR* V A 41). Cf. *Xen. Mem.* 4.5.12. On Aristotle's own conception of dialectic, cf. Evans (1977); Beriger (1989).

28. To be clear, Plato and Aristotle understand dialectic differently from one another, and Plato's own conception of dialectic develops through his corpus. So from Socrates to Plato to Aristotle, there is a development of the idea and of the theory of dialectic. The word "*dialektikê*" itself derives from the verb "*dialegesthai*" meaning "to engage in discussion." "*Dialektikê*" is short for "*dialektikê technê*" (the art of discussion) and thus already marks a significant development. Cf. the phrase "*technê logôn*" [art of words or speech] at *Xen. Mem.* 1.2.31–34; *Dissoi Logoi* 8.3–9; *Plato Phdr.* 266C3ff.
29. Support for this claim derives from the importance of epistemological and argumentational topics in the works of various Socratics. I return to this point below.
30. On Aristippus, cf. Lampe (2015a) 57–63; Dorandi (2015). On Antisthenes, cf. Brancacci (1990); Prince (2015). For Euclides, cf. *SSR* II A 3, 34. For a recent discussion of Socratic dialect in Xenophon, cf. Patzer in Gray (2010) 228–56; Natali in Judson and Karasmanis (2006) 3–19. For a review of recent interpretations of Socratic method in Plato's Socratic dialogues, with particular focus on the *elenchus*, cf. Wolfsdorf in Bussanich and Smith (2013) 35–65.
31. In saying this I do not at all mean to deny that Socrates was interested in kinds and characters of individuals.
32. Cf. Patzer (2012). Cf. *Plato Ap.* 29B8–9.
33. Cf. *Plato Ap.* 38A1–6.
34. The word "*aretê*" is a nominalization of the superlative adjective "*aristos*" (best). Just as there are many kinds of goodness, there are many kinds of excellence. Common translations of "*aretê*" as "virtue" mislead insofar as they identify *aretê* with ethical excellence specifically.
35. 90 DK, 1.1–17. Cf. *Plato Prot.* 333D8–334D6; *Xen. Mem.* 3.8.1–4. Note that one of Antisthenes' works has the title *On Good* (*SSR* V A 41).
36. Cf. *Plato Prot.* 325A2.
37. Cf. A. Brancacci's claim that Antisthenes conceived of his ethical program as *epistêmê tôn praxeôn* ([2005b] 9). Cf. the phrases "*paideia anthrôpôn*" and "*epimeleia heautou*" in Aeschines' *Miltiades* (*SSR* IV A 79) and *Alcibiades* (*SSR* VI A 50).
38. 1.1.16; cf. Bandini and Dorion (2000) n.44.
39. Rossetti (2010) 59–70.
40. Cf. Tsouna (2002) 464–89; Lampe (2015a) 92–100.
41. For eudaimonism in Plato's Socratic dialogues, cf. Bobonich (2010b) 293–332. Cf. O'Connor (2010) 48–74.
42. Fr. 35.47 Dittmar. Cf. Them. *De Virt.* 34.10–35.9.
43. Cf. *SSR* V A 134.11; Prince (2015).
44. Cf. De Heer (1969) esp. 59–67.

45. Wolfsdorf (2008). On Antisthenes in relation to Prodicus' *Choice of Heracles*, cf. Prince (2015).
46. *Mem.* 2.1.26, 29, 33.
47. 826–28.
48. Cf. Claus (1981); Huffman (2009) 21–43.
49. *Nub.* 94, 414–15.
50. Claus (1981) 157; cf. Moore in de Luise and Stavru (2013) 41–55.
51. For Aeschines, cf. *SSR* VI A 16; fr. 8.24 Dittmar. For Antisthenes, cf. the titles *On Justice*, *On Courage*, *On Law or Republic* (*SSR* V A 41); cf. *SRR* V A 77, 92, 103, 132, 134, and Prince (forthcoming). For Aristippus, cf. Lampe (2015a) 57–63, and note the work entitled *Aretê* among Aristippus' writings (*SSR* IV A 144).
52. *SSR* V A 134; cf. Prince (2015).
53. *SSR* II A 30, 32.
54. Namely, *Protagoras*, *Charmides*, *Laches*, and *Republic I*. (Aristotle repeatedly attributes (4b) to Socrates: *EN* 1116b4, 1144b14, *EE* 1216b3, 1229a12, 1230a4; cf. *MM* 1182a15, 1183b9, 1190b21, 1198a10. However, in these cases Aristotle appears to be thinking of Plato's Socrates.)
55. Cic. *TD* 4.80 (= fr. 7 Rossetti); cf. Boys-Stone (2004) 1–23.
56. 3.9.5–7.
57. Dorion (2012) 455–75; cf. Morrison (2010) 227–39.
58. For Antisthenes, cf. "Those who intend to become good must exercise their body with physical exercises and their soul with *logoi*." (*PKöln* 66 II 2, *CPF* I 1\*, 1989, 237) Cf. *SSR* V A 163.
59. For Plato, cf. Balansard (2001); Roochnik (2007). For Xenophon, cf. Parry in *SEP*.
60. *SSR* VI A 80, 48; cf. Kahn in Vander Waerdt (1994) 87–106, at 90–91.
61. *Meta.* 996a32-b1 (= *SSR* IV a 170).
62. Cf. Plato *Charm.* 165C4–166A2, 171D1–172A8, 173C7–174B10.
63. Cf. Wolfsdorf (2004b) and (2004c). It is worth noting here that Antisthenes composed an epistemological work on the distinction between belief and knowledge in four books (*SSR* V A 41.40).
64. *SE* 183b7.
65. *SSR* VI A 53.
66. Cf. Brancacci (2015); Prince (2015).
67. Cf. De Heer (1969) *passim*.
68. Cf. Lampe (2015a) 31–35.
69. For Socratic *elenchus* in Plato's Socratic dialogues, cf. the reference in n.26.
70. For *elenchus* in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, cf. Bandini and Dorion (2000) CXVIII–CLXXXII. Cf. also Morrison in Gray (2010) 195–227.
71. Cf. Kahn (1994).
72. Cf. Plato *Ap.* 23C2–5.

73. In Wolfsdorf (2003), I argue that in Plato's Socratic dialogues this is actually Socrates' prevailing attitude.
74. Cf. the topic of *homonoia heautōi* in Antisthenes in Brancacci (2011); Prince (2015).
75. Cf. *Mem.* 1.2.41–46, 50; 3.9.4–10; 3.14.2; 4.2.13–22, 25–29; 4.4.11–25; 4.5.1–11; cf. Patzer (2010) 234–45.
76. *SSR* V A 147–59 and vol. 4, nota 34, 327–9; cf. the competing interpretations of Brancacci (1990) and Prince (2015). And cf. Gili (2013) 321–28.
77. McCaskey (2007) 345–74; cf. Cajolle-Zaslowsky (1990) 365–87.
78. The example is adapted from McCaskey (2007) 364–5, he in turn appropriating it from Vlastos' (1991, 267–8) discussion of Plato *Ion* 540b–d. At *Rhet.* 1393b4–8 Aristotle cites a related argument and claims that it represents the sort of comparisons (*parabolai*) Socrates used.
79. Cf. McPherran (2007).
80. *SSR* VI A 70.
81. Pertinent to these facts is the topic of *polytropia* (versatility and adaptability), arguably central to Socratic dialectic, which I have not had space to consider here. Cf. LévyStone (2005).