

The double role of Socratic ignorance¹

David Ebrey

“For you see, do not you, that our discussion’s about this (and what would even a man of little intelligence take more seriously than this?), about the way we’re supposed to live.” (Gorgias, 500c)

If we find ourselves ignorant about the best way to live our lives, is it particularly important for us to remedy the situation? In Plato’s Socratic dialogues, Socrates thinks it is. But why is it so important in this situation to acquire knowledge? In particular, why does Socrates think we need answers to “what is X?” questions where “X” is some ethical term? And how could he be justified in doing what he is doing: how can he (or anyone, for that matter) profess ignorance about how we should act and then turn around and confidently tell us how we should act: that we should seek answers to ethical questions?

One reason Plato’s Socratic dialogues have such a draw on their readers is that they portray a philosopher who is not presenting a fully worked out view; rather, Socrates is in a situation that we find ourselves in – unsure of the right way to live his life. In this paper I investigate why Socrates thinks it is so urgent that we search for knowledge when we find ourselves ignorant in this way. I do not think Socrates simply assumes that knowledge is the best thing there is and hence we should go forth and acquire it. Behind at least some of Socrates’ exhortations to action there is a quite interesting and

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compelling argument that this inquiry is the most important thing that we could be doing. What makes the argument compelling is that it uses relatively weak and uncontroversial premises to argue for a strong conclusion, that we must go out and seek knowledge in ethics. The premises are trivial enough that Socrates does not think that they constitute any sort of real knowledge – hence they do not conflict with his professed ignorance. The argument helps us understand a key component of Socrates’ philosophical program and raises a fundamental and under-discussed philosophical topic: how we should react when we find ourselves ignorant in ethical matters.²

Although one frequently gets the sense that Socrates views our ignorance of ethical matters as a problem we desperately need to solve, it is not easy to find passages that clearly say this and explain why it is so. I think the best passage is found near the end of the *Laches*. Laches has suggested that neither he nor Nicias should be the teacher of two children; rather, Socrates should be their teacher in order to, as Lysimachus puts it, “take an active part with us in helping the young men to become as good as possible” (200d). Let us look at Socrates’ response to try to understand why he urges us to seek knowledge:

Well, it would be a terrible thing, Lysimachus, to be unwilling to join in assisting any man to become as good as possible. If in the conversations we have just had I had seemed to be knowing and the other two had not, then it would be right to issue a special invitation to me to perform this task; but as the matter stands, we were all in the same difficulty. Why then should anybody choose one of us in preference to another? What I think is that he ought to choose none of us. But as

² The interest and importance of this topic have been impressed upon me by many conversations with Thi Nguyen.

things are, see whether the suggestion I am about to make may not be a good one: what I say we ought to do, my friends—since this is just between ourselves—is to join in searching for the best possible teacher, first for ourselves—we really need one—and then for the young men, sparing neither money nor anything else.³

(trans.: Rosamond Kent Sprague in Copper 1997) (200e1-201a9)

Socrates says we should look for the best possible teacher to help us in our goal of becoming as good as possible. In fact, he tells us that we really need such a teacher and that we should spare neither money nor anything else in order to obtain one. Since Socrates tells us to spare nothing in order to find such a teacher, he is treating this as the thing most worthy of action, i.e., the thing most important to do, given our current situation.

In order for us to understand why Socrates thinks a teacher so important, we need to understand why we have a dire need for one. In the passage, we see that we are ignorant and that is what leads us to search for a teacher: the need for someone with knowledge. This is confirmed by what we find earlier in the dialogue, where Socrates introduces the need for such a teacher (184e-189e). We are told that we want such an expert because they have knowledge that allows them to make good decisions (184e). This teacher, Socrates tells us, would have knowledge in the care of souls and so advise us as to what we should do in order to become better. After discussing the usefulness of

³ Καὶ γὰρ ἂν δεινὸν εἶη, ὦ Λυσίμαχε, τοῦτό γε, μὴ ἐθέλῃν τῷ συμπροθυμῆσθαι ὡς βελτίστῳ γενέσθαι. εἰ μὲν οὖν ἐν τοῖς διαλόγοις τοῖς ἄρτι ἐγὼ μὲν ἐφάνην εἰδῶς, τῷδε δὲ μὴ εἰδότε, δίκαιον ἂν ἦν ἐμὲ μάλιστα ἐπὶ τοῦτο τὸ ἔργον παρακαλεῖν, νῦν δ' ὁμοίως γὰρ πάντες ἐν ἀπορίᾳ ἐγενόμεθα· τί οὖν ἂν τις ἡμῶν τίνα προαιροῖτο; ἐμοὶ μὲν οὖν δὴ αὐτῷ δοκεῖ οὐδέν· ἀλλ' ἐπειδὴ ταῦτα οὕτως ἔχει, σκέψασθε ἂν τι δόξω συμβουλεύειν ὑμῖν. ἐγὼ γὰρ φημι χρῆναι, ὦ ἄνδρες—οὐδεὶς γὰρ ἔκφορος λόγος—κοινῇ πάντας ἡμᾶς ζητεῖν μάλιστα μὲν ἡμῖν αὐτοῖς διδάσκαλον ὡς ἄριστον—δεόμεθα γὰρ—ἔπειτα καὶ τοῖς μειρακίοις, μήτε χρημάτων φειδομένους μήτε ἄλλου μηδενός·

teachers in the first half of the *Laches*, Socrates and his interlocutors try circumventing them and finding the knowledge themselves. They agree that in order to get the knowledge that they want – knowledge of how to be good – they would need to know how to add virtue to the soul. Such knowledge would make them actually able to add virtue to the soul: hence, it would be rather detailed, concrete knowledge. But, Socrates notes, in order to have this know-how, we first need to know what virtue is – if they did not know what was being added to the soul, they could hardly know how to add it (189e-190c). They decide that the virtue they want to focus on is courage (190c-d). And what happens next is just what one expects in a Socratic dialogue: Socrates and his interlocutors try to figure out what virtue is but ultimately reach the conclusion that they do not know. So now that they are empty handed, Socrates is returning to the idea of finding a teacher. What precisely does he want from this teacher? Knowledge of what virtue is? Or not just this, but also knowledge of how to become good? Or does he want the teacher to simply make him better, but not necessarily to provide him with any knowledge – much as the physical trainer can make us healthier without providing us with knowledge of health?

I will argue that Socrates is justified in thinking that we need knowledge of *what* virtue is, but not that we need someone who will teach us *how* to become good. Hence, (on the assumption that Socrates is reaching the justified conclusion) I propose that Socrates is reaching this conclusion in the passage we are discussing:

Conclusion: Given our current ignorance of how to live our lives, the most important thing for us to do is to learn (i.e., acquire knowledge of) what virtue is.

This conclusion captures the general feeling that one gets throughout the Socratic dialogues that Socrates thinks it is incredibly important for us to acquire knowledge in ethical matters.⁴

So Socrates thinks it is important to find teachers because he thinks it is important that he himself have knowledge. What are Socrates' reasons for thinking it is so important to have this ethical knowledge? In the passage we looked at earlier we get reasons – and, in fact, the outline for an argument. He says at the beginning of the passage “Well, it would be a terrible thing, Lysimachus, to be unwilling to join in assisting any man to become as good as possible.” It would be a terrible thing because becoming good is of such high importance. Socrates' comment recalls something even stronger that he said much earlier in the dialogue: “Or do you [Melesias] and Lysimachus suppose that the subject in question is some small thing and not the greatest of all our questions? The question is really, I suppose, that of whether your sons turn out to be worthwhile persons or the opposite – and the father's whole estate will be managed in accordance with the way the sons turn out.” (185a) Here we get the idea that the most important thing is to become as good as possible (see also 187d). For the argument to work, we are going to need a claim like this:

Becoming as good as possible is the most important thing to do.

But this is not quite right on its own, since supposedly *becoming* good is not more important than *being* completely good. Rather, in this passage they are assuming that they are not already completely good. So, in fact, the premises we want are:

⁴ We will see a contrary view below offered by Forster (2006, 2007). For a view similar to mine, see, for example, Scott 2006, p. 89: “One thing of which we can be sure is that the historical Socrates believed in our duty to inquire...”

- 1) If we are not already as good as possible, becoming as good as possible is of greatest importance for us. [implicit]
- 2) We are not as good as possible.⁵ [implicit]
- 3) Sub-conclusion: becoming as good as possible is of greatest importance to us.

This brings up a very important point: in talking about what is “most important” here, Socrates and his interlocutors (and I) mean what is most important *given the situation they find themselves in*. They are describing an activity’s value relative to the situation, not its absolute value. If we already are as good as possible, becoming good is not at all important to us.

It is hard to untangle whether the first premise is a trivial or substantive claim. In the *Laches*, like the *Euthyphro*, *Charmides*, and most other Socratic dialogues, the importance of becoming good is presupposed. In the *Euthydemus* and *Gorgias* we see Socrates try to convince people that they should care for virtue and wisdom – and in the *Apology* we see Socrates describe such attempts to convince people (we will discuss this passage below). I will not try to analyze these arguments here. However, I think that Socrates is here deploying a quite weak conception of good and so the first premise is relatively trivial. Socrates does not know what it is to be good, but he is nonetheless confident that becoming good is the most important thing there is. We have something here like a conceptual or analytic truth. The good, whatever it is, is what we should all

⁵ Alternatively, one might want to make 1) “If, as far as we know, we are not already as good as possible, becoming as good as possible is of greatest importance” and make 2) “As far as we know, we are not as good as possible.” This creates its own complication, since it is not clear that 1) is true if written in this way, since it cannot be of greatest importance if (unbeknownst to us) we are already as good as possible. I take this complication to be unimportant since it is supposed to be obvious that we are not already as good as possible.

aim at; thus, becoming good is the most important thing for us to do.⁶ So it requires no substantive knowledge to know premise 1.

To appreciate the power of the argument, it is important for us to be comfortable with this idea of a weak conception of the good. In the next section of the paper, I will defend the claim that Socrates deploys such a weak conception; for now, let me simply explain what I mean by saying that Socrates deploys a weak conception of good. My claim is that when Socrates talks about “good” here, he is leaving underdetermined what this actually is – he is keeping his options open. Elsewhere, Socrates certainly makes quite strong, even radical claims about the good, but these claims are not constitutive of the basic notion of the good. Thus, Socrates’ claims at the end of the *Laches* are compatible with the good being practically anything – playing backgammon, experiencing pleasure, being able to do whatever you feel like, contemplating... We should not confuse the conclusion with another idea one finds in Plato and Aristotle, and which Socrates may independently holds as well, that the highest good involves thinking.⁷ It is true that this conclusion tells us to use our intellect – it tells us to go out and learn something. But, as far as *this* argument is concerned, the use of our intellect might be purely instrumental.⁸ If we were to learn, for example, that base pleasures are

⁶ There is an important assumption being made here: that the good we are aiming at is not something that we acquire, like a pair of gloves, but rather something that we can *be*, like courageous, experiencing pleasure, playing chess, etc.

⁷ In fact, I do not think that Socrates has this belief about the good – I think it is a Platonic development. But that would require an separate argument, which this paper is merely a part of.

⁸ Compare Vlastos 1958 p. 6: “[the claim that virtue requires knowledge] is what gives such intensity to Socrates’ arguments, such urgency to his quest for definition. He makes you feel that the failure to sustain a thesis or find a definition is not just an intellectual defeat, but a moral disaster.” The argument I am investigating generates this intensity without relying on the claim that “Virtue requires knowledge” – although, as we will see, it is important that we do not know that it is impossible to learn how to be good. At the end of his article Vlastos says that he, unlike Socrates, does not think that knowledge is the only thing that can save a man’s soul. Even if Vlastos is right that Socrates believes this, Vlastos could have been convinced by more of Socrates’ arguments than he allowed.

the highest good, then (as far as this argument goes) we could then cease using our intellects and start living the best life, the life of pigs.⁹ If the good, in fact, could not turn out to be something like this, it is for reasons that have nothing to do with this argument.

The other major claim we find in the *Laches* passage is that none of them have the relevant knowledge, which clearly alludes to the fact that they have been unable to say what courage is. They made clear that they wanted knowledge of courage because, ultimately, they wanted knowledge of virtue in general (190c-d). So we have this premise (which I will number “7” since this will eventually make the structure of the argument more perspicuous):

7) We currently do not know what virtue is.

Socrates and the interlocutors think that these virtues play an essential role in our being good (in fact, I think this is another sort of conceptual or analytic truth). So, since we lack knowledge of virtues, we thereby lack knowledge of the good.

These two premises (3 & 7) and conclusion are found in the text and form the core of the argument. The most important thing is for us to become as good as possible, yet we do not even have the basic knowledge needed to do this. So we must search for this knowledge. This conclusion is very much based on our present epistemic position: given how ignorant we are, this is what we should be doing. The exhortation only binds us in this position of ignorance. But it is still unclear how the conclusion is supposed to follow. Why does becoming better require that we remove our ignorance? Is Socrates assuming that knowledge itself is the good? If so, he is presupposing quite a strong

⁹ In fact, I think Socrates has another other main argument for the value of knowledge, which tells us that all virtue is wisdom, found in *Euthydemus*, *Meno*, *Protagoras*. This tells us that even if the good turns out to be something like pleasure, we will still need to use our intellects to acquire the good, because they are the best guide to the good, even they do not generate the good themselves.

conception of the good. I think something quite different is going on; in order to investigate this, let us try to spell out the remaining implicit premises that Socrates needs for the argument to be valid. This is not meant as a logical exercise; rather, doing so will help us unearth some of the fundamental ideas underpinning the argument.

The first thing we need to do is to connect virtue and the good, so that there is some connection between the premises we have laid out so far: the importance of becoming good and our ignorance about virtue. I take there to be a very tight connection between virtue and the good, something like a conceptual or analytic connection, which is best brought out by translating “arête” as “excellence”¹⁰ instead of “virtue.” We have already seen this implied in the passage we looked at earlier: in response to a request that he help the children become as good as possible, he says that he has been shown to not be knowing – a clear reference to his not knowing what courage is. So not knowing what courage is implies that he does not know how to help someone become good. In fact, Socrates is here drawing a similar assumption to the one made in his argument from 189e-190c. There he treats it as obvious that virtue is the thing that, when added to the soul, makes it better. To my knowledge, there is no place where Socrates suggests that someone might deny such a connection between good and virtue. Thus, it is safe to make this a premise:

- 4) In order to become as good as possible, we need to become virtuous.

¹⁰ Adkins (1960) seems to think that this is very basic to how the Greeks thought about goodness and arête. In particular, he thinks in Homer we determine who is good by judging whether they have arête. At the end *Republic* I we have a different picture: arête is what leads to what’s good. In either case there is a tight link between goodness and arête; the question, then, just becomes what precisely this connection is.

Note that this does not tell us that Socrates has a substantial notion of the good, because this notion of virtue itself might be a fairly thin – perhaps something like “whatever is conducive to the good.”

Next, we need some sort of basic linking principle so that the importance of becoming good is transferred to becoming virtuous. So we have this as an implicit premise:

- 5) If we are not X (in particular, as good as possible) and the only way to become X requires Y (in particular, becoming virtuous), then however important X is to us, Y is at least as important to us.
- 6) Sub-conclusion (from 3, 4, 5): becoming virtuous is of greatest importance for us.

I take 5) to be an uncontroversial principle that Socrates displays frequently: if it is important for us to do A, and B is the only way we know of for achieving A, then it is equally important for us to do B. Again, by talking about “importance,” I mean to only be discussing value relative to the situation one finds oneself in, not absolute value (5 is false for absolute value). This principle tells us what is important for us to do as we are right now, given our current knowledge.

Okay, so now we bring back in the second claim from the main *Laches* passage:

- 7) We currently do not know what virtue is.

The question is how to make this relevant; it looks like Socrates needs something along these lines: acquiring knowledge of what virtue is would help us become virtuous. Since

we are not simply looking for knowledge for the sake of knowledge, it is important that acquiring and exercising this knowledge would help us (and our children) become better.¹¹ Unfortunately, for the argument to work, Socrates needs more than this. He appears to need the claim that knowing what-virtue-is is the *only* or the *best* means to being as good as possible or some sort of necessary condition for being good. Otherwise, he will not be able to say that learning is the best thing to do – after all, another means to achieving the good might be just as effective or in fact more effective. But how can he be confident that knowledge is either required or the best means?

Why think that acquiring knowledge the best method for success? Why think it is necessary? I do not think that Socrates needs it to be either the best method or a necessary condition. Perhaps a better method would be to do whatever your parents tell you to do, whatever your priest suggests, or whatever you feel like. The problem is that we do not know whether these things in fact help us become better or not – precisely, because we do not know what virtue is. So while the most effective way to become better might not be through learning, we have no way of knowing this. Learning what-virtue-is is the only way to know what to aim for and to know whether we are improving.¹² So this knowledge is a prerequisite to our having reasonable confidence in any means to becoming good. In a new way, the argument rests on our current epistemic position: given our ignorance of

¹¹ It could be that this knowledge would do more than help us become good: perhaps it would automatically make us good. But for purposes of the argument, we do not need such a strong claim. Socrates, in the *Protagoras*, argues that no one knowingly does wrong, so if one knew what is good, one would *always* live properly (as long as he or she had basic control over his or her actions). However, for purposes of this argument, it does not matter how we think about *akrasia* (which is important since Socrates has not argued for his position here in the *Laches*). All that is important is that knowing how to become good would at least *help* us to become good.

¹² Note that knowledge, here, allows us to identify our target. This goes against an interpretation of Socratic knowledge according to which knowledge merely involves grasping on account. I am suggesting that a major reason Socrates wants knowledge is so that he can identify instances of what is known (which, at least in theory, someone who merely had a correct account might not be able to do).

what virtue is, the only way we know of to approach the question of how to become as good as possible is by trying to learn what virtue is. Thus, the premises we want are:

- 8) The only way we can recognize whether we are becoming virtuous is to learn (i.e., come to know) what virtue is.
- 9) If Y (in particular, becoming virtuous) is of greatest importance for us, and Z (in particular, learning what virtue is) is the only way to recognize whether we are Y, then Z is also of greatest importance.

8 says that we need to know what virtue is to tell whether we are becoming virtuous and 9 says that it is vitally important for us to recognize whether we are becoming virtuous. The idea of 9 is that if you are trying to accomplish something important then you want to tell whether you are accomplishing it or not – without this, from your own perspective, you will not be able to tell whether you are making progress. The principle is importantly different from 6, because 6 has to do with necessary preconditions. 9 does not have to do with a precondition to being virtuous; rather, with a precondition to *recognizing* whether we are becoming virtuous. 8 and 9 are crucial to explaining *why* we want to acquire knowledge, rather than simply trying to bypass this knowledge and turn to something that would make us good.

Our ignorance rears its head in two ways in the argument: we do not know what we should be doing and, because this is so, we do not know how to proceed other than try to figure out what we should be doing. Or, to put it slightly differently, our ignorance creates a question we need to answer – how should we be living our lives? – and constrains how we try to find an answer – only by acquiring knowledge can we have any reasonable confidence in our answer.

Why think that Socrates is relying on our ignorance in this second way? One reason is that it helps explain why Socrates would frequently search for knowledge himself, rather than simply looking for someone who could produce the desired results. Moreover, we see instances of Socrates treating this as a reason we need knowledge, for example, in the *Protagoras* and the *Laches*. Consider how Socrates responds when Protagoras claims to be able to teach virtue. Socrates does not simply accept Protagoras' claim. He wants to himself have the knowledge needed to verify Protagoras' claim; he wants to be convinced that virtue is teachable.¹³ This suggests that the knowledge is not simply supposed to be beneficial: it is also needed in order to verify when we have in fact come across what we are looking for. Closer to home, in the *Laches* (at 186e) Socrates says that one reason they need to question Laches and Nicias is that Socrates himself does not have the knowledge needed to decide who has the right advice. Here we see that knowledge allows us to be independent judges of whether we are getting sound advice or not.¹⁴

So let us set out the full argument, so we can see how the conclusion follows:

- 1) If we are not as good as possible, becoming as good as possible is of greatest importance for us.
- 2) We are not as good as possible.
- 3) Sub-conclusion: becoming as good as possible is of greatest importance to us.
- 4) In order to become as good as possible, we need to become virtuous.

¹³ See also Socrates' chastising of Hippocrates for his eagerness to learn from Protagoras without knowing what he is (313a-c), which leads into the need to be knowledgeable consumers who know what teachings they are buying (313c-314c).

¹⁴ Joseph Barnes has pointed out to me that Socrates must be assuming that acquiring knowledge could not *hurt* (or eliminate) our chances at becoming virtuous. I take it that Socrates does assume this without even considering that this knowledge might hurt us. In fact, I suspect that Socrates would think that knowledge itself can never be bad for us, although of course we could misuse knowledge.

- 5) If we are not X (in particular, as good as possible) and the only way to become X requires Y (in particular, becoming virtuous), then however important X is to us, Y is at least as important to us.
- 6) Sub-conclusion: becoming virtuous is of greatest importance for us.
- 7) We currently do not know what virtue is.
- 8) The only way we can recognize whether we are becoming virtuous is to learn (i.e., come to know) what virtue is.
- 9) If Y (in particular, becoming virtuous) is of greatest importance for us, and Z (in particular, learning what virtue is) is the only way to recognize whether we are Y, then Z is also of greatest importance.

Conclusion: Given our current ignorance, the most important thing for us to do is to learn (i.e., acquire knowledge of) what virtue is.

So, from two premises (3 & 7) found in the primary passage and others to which Socrates is committed, the conclusion follows. I think that this argument captures what Socrates thinks is crucial for us to do – search for a certain type of knowledge – and why he thinks we need to do it – because it would allow us determine how to become better.

Notice that the argument says that there are three things of greatest importance: becoming as good as possible, becoming virtuous, and learning what virtue is. None of these are what is actually our highest good; rather, they are each things that will allow us to reach the highest good. We need to know what virtue is in order to tell if we are becoming virtuous and we need to become virtuous so we can become good, which we need to do so that we are good.

Recall that earlier I claimed that Socrates is only justified in concluding that we need to learn *what virtue is*, not *how* to acquire virtue. We are now in a position to appreciate why this is. The premises 8 & 9 are fairly non-controversial premises whereas parallel premises do not seem like they could be justified – premises that claimed that if becoming virtuous is important to us then we should acquire knowledge of *how* to become virtuous. First, this simply does not seem true. If I had knowledge of what virtue is, I would not also need to personally have knowledge of *how* to acquire virtue. As long as I can identify whether a supposed expert can produce virtue in us, I should have enough. Consider the following analogy. If I do not know what a table is, I have no way of knowing how to get a table. There may be self-proclaimed table craftsmen, but without knowledge of what a table is, I have no idea whether they will actually provide me with a table or not. Before entrusting myself to the first self-described table craftsman I find, I would do well to learn something about tables. But once I learn what a table is, I do not need to know how to build one myself. I will now be in a position to judge whether I am being provided with a table or not. Similarly, we do not need to have the knowledge to actually acquire virtue, but we had better know what virtue is. We can rely on others to help us actually acquire it. In the *Laches*, Socrates says that if we do not know that an expert has had a good teacher, “you would not want to trust them when they said that they were good craftsmen unless they should have some well-executed product of their art to show you—and not just one but more than one” (185e). The implications, certainly, is that if they have a well-executed product, we could trust the expert. So what we need to be able to do, then, is identify such a well-executed product, not produce one. To be more concrete: if we know what courage is, and so we could identify someone who

consistently instilled courage in the souls of young men, it would be reasonable for us to trust this person's advice on the matter – whether we understood and could duplicate his (perhaps quite complex) method or not. We are going to the teachers in order to become better and to acquire some knowledge from them, but not in order to learn their trade.

You might think that one cannot become good without personally learning *how* to become good. But this is a quite substantial claim about the good that Socrates has not argued for. So even if it did turn out to be true, Socrates would not be justified in claiming that we needed such know-how. Moreover, in the *Laches* Socrates seems implicitly to deny that we personally need know-how. He and the interlocutors want to know whether fighting in armor will or will not help their sons become more courageous. Someone needs to have the knowledge required to guide their sons, but there is no suggestion that the sons themselves need to know *how* to become good. I have suggested that the adults need to know what virtue is in order for them to know whether their sons are actually becoming good or not. We need knowledge of what virtue is even though we need not be the ones giving the advice as to how to become virtuous. Hopefully, this sheds some light on one reason Socrates gives these “what is it?” questions a central role.

Let us now reflect on the argument as a whole.

Socrates' own disavowal of knowledge shows that he thinks that he is as ignorant as anyone else: he does not know what virtue is. In fact, Socrates takes the whole argument to apply to himself.¹⁵ Nonetheless, for Socrates' argument to compel you to

¹⁵ Contra Vlastos and others (see list in Forster 2006, footnote 3) who think that Socrates is simply holding back his knowledge. I disagree with them, for reasons often given. But even if I am wrong about this, as I say two paragraphs down, the argument works on whoever is ignorant. Whether that includes Socrates or not does not directly affect the argument.

learn how to become good, it simply needs to be the case that *you* do not know how to do this. The argument requires that the person it is directed at is ignorant, not anyone else.

Notice that Socrates' argument is a practical one in more than one sense. It is not merely practical in the Aristotelian sense that it tells us how to act rather than simply imparting knowledge. A practical argument, in this sense, can have universal scope, applying to everyone no matter what circumstance they find themselves in. Nehemas in *The Art of Living* says that Socrates' goal is universalist (p. 9) and, as a general description, I do not disagree. But the Socratic argument I want to focus on here does not apply regardless of what circumstances people find themselves in; it applies to a very specific situation Socrates and his interlocutors find themselves in: ignorance. The question is how to proceed when you do not know what you should be doing. Socrates' answer is that you must search.

Even if everyone is in these circumstances, i.e., ignorant, (as Socrates actually believes) it is still the case that the argument is conditional upon these circumstances. This is important for two reasons. First, if we were to remove ourselves from the circumstances, i.e., gain the knowledge, the argument would no longer apply to us. Second, this means that although the argument tells us what it is most important for us to do *right now*, it does not tell us what our highest good actually is.

We can now answer a question I asked at the beginning of the paper: how can Socrates claim there is something we absolutely should do despite denying that he knows what we should do? He does not rely on any real knowledge of the good. Rather, he relies on the much weaker premises that I have set out which rely on quite little, if any, knowledge. Moreover, in saying that the most important thing for us to do is to seek this

knowledge, he is not committed to this being our highest good; rather, it is the most important thing for us given our current circumstances. So he lacks knowledge of the absolute highest good but can show, without relying on any robust knowledge, what we must do given our ignorance.

Objection: Socrates does not deploy a thin notion of the good

As I mentioned earlier, in order for Socrates' argument to work from weak premises to a strong conclusion, he must not be relying on or deploying a substantive conception of the good. The way he talks about "good" here must be underdetermined, in the sense that it could turn out that the good is practically anything. Again, this is not to deny that Socrates has substantive beliefs about the good, just to say that these beliefs are not constitutive of the meaning of the word "good" when he deploys it. We have already seen (expressed in premise 4) the idea that the good is tightly connected to virtue, so I also need to defend the position that Socrates is not working with a substantive notion of virtue.

Why take Socrates, here, not to be using a substantial notion of the good? There are, to be sure, some things that Socrates believes about virtue and about the good. For example, he believes that virtue is a type of knowledge and that it is unified. But Socrates does not bring these beliefs to bear on every conversation he takes part in; rather, he recognizes these as substantive claims. For example, he struggles throughout the *Protagoras* to show that the virtues are unified. Socrates and his interlocutors have not agreed to any such substantial claims about the good in the *Laches*.

The best evidence that he deploys a weak conception of the good is in the *Gorgias* and *Protagoras*. In the *Protagoras* he acknowledges that some people think of things as good insofar as they are pleasurable and bad insofar as they are painful and deprive us of pleasure. But he understands that not everyone needs to hold this view of the good – if nothing else, Protagoras is clearly resistant (351c-d). In the *Protagoras*, Socrates is able to consider a basic notion of the good that abstracts away from the particulars of different peoples' beliefs about the good. Different people have different ways of thinking about the same thing: the good. And in the *Gorgias*, he defends the claim that everyone desires the good, clearly aware that they do not all think of good in the same way – Socrates' interlocutors, e.g., clearly think of the good quite differently than he does.

There is also a quite general reason for us to expect Socrates to be deploying an underdetermined notion of good: it fits well with his profession of ignorance. If Socrates claims not to have any knowledge about matters pertaining to how to live his life and to act on the basis of this, he should not silently presuppose substantive claims about this; any substantive claims he makes should be flagged so they can be questioned. If I am right, Socrates is not making a substantive claim in saying that the most important thing for us to do is to become as good as possible. He is staying true to his claims to ignorance. This is important to our overall picture of Socrates. I think that we really do see Socrates struggle, as a philosopher, from a position of ignorance. This is part of what makes the dialogues so powerful, since this is where we all find ourselves when doing philosophy (at least at first and perhaps continually).

One might worry that Socrates has beliefs about the good that are built into his basic conception of virtue and so of the good. The prime candidate would be his belief

that the virtues are justice, courage, moderation, etc. It might seem that this is a substantive claim and that Socrates builds it right into his basic concept of virtue. But whether there is a substantive connection between virtue and the individual virtues depends on how one conceives of these virtues. One reason this seems like a substantive assumption is that we could imagine someone saying something like, “Courage is highly overrated – sometimes the right thing to do is to run away,” or, “Forget moderation – sometimes you’ve got to just sit down and eat as much chocolate cake as you can.” There is a subtle question here of whether these people are really attacking courage and moderation or merely attacking popular conceptions of these virtues. After all, if courage involves being afraid of the right things and not of the wrong ones, it could be that most people are mistaken about when and where we should be fearless. If being courageous simply involves being fearful and bold at the appropriate times, it could be trivially true that courage is a virtue. Perhaps most people are wrong and the ones they call cowards really are the courageous ones – because they are the ones that are afraid of the right things and everyone else is merely foolish. If the virtues are what allow you to be good, and if one’s fear and boldness has some relevance to one’s overall goodness, it would be trivially true that courage is a virtue.

We can make the same move for moderation. If moderation involves having the appropriate amount of pleasurable things at appropriate times, it could be that most people are just mistaken about what the appropriate times and amounts are. Perhaps eating a whole chocolate cake is moderate – unbeknownst to us. If so, again it might be

trivially true that moderation is a virtue. The same move can be made for piety, justice, and any other virtue.¹⁶

The point is that even if Socrates builds courage and moderation right into his conception of virtue, that does not mean that he has a substantial conception of virtue. In order to have that, he would have to build a substantial conception of the individual virtues into his conception of virtue. But he is famously uncommitted to the right way to understand the individual virtues; he does not seem to presuppose very substantive conceptions of any of them.

The proceeding line of reasoning will not convince some. So let me change my tack: instead of arguing that Socrates has a weak conception of the individual virtues, let me try to sever the connection between virtue and Socrates' preferred list of virtues. In *Republic I* we see Socrates deploy an underdetermined notion of virtue that does not automatically include his preferred set of virtues. I doubt *Republic I* is an authentically early Socratic work; however, I think it is worthwhile to see that here, at least, Socrates clearly can understand a notion of virtue where "justice" plays no role (even if he strongly disagrees with such a view):

"Do you [Thrasymachus] really include injustice with virtue and wisdom, and justice with their opposites?

I certainly do.

That's harder, and it isn't easy now to know what to say. If you had declared that injustice is more profitable, but agreed that it is a vice or shameful, as some others do, we could have discussed the matter on the basis of conventional beliefs. But

¹⁶ While too complex a topic to properly discuss here, natural justice in the *Gorgias* is relevant. Callicles is critical of what most people think of as justice, but is not skeptical of justice in general; he thinks there is a type of justice that is revealed by nature.

now, obviously, you'll say that injustice is fine and strong and apply to it all the attributes we used to apply to justice, since you dare to include it with virtue and wisdom." (348e2-349a2, Grube trans.)

Socrates here clearly understands Thrasymachus' view that injustice, not justice, is a virtue. Socrates states that this is not a conventional belief, but he certainly grasps what Thrasymachus is saying and does not suggest that this is incompatible with the very notion of virtue. Here in the *Republic*, Socrates can talk about and understand virtue without presupposing that it has justice, piety, etc. built right in. He also provides an explanation for why this may not have come up in the earlier, Socratic dialogues: those dialogues, for the most part, are done on the basis of conventional beliefs. Hence there may have been no need to talk about people who think that virtue does not include justice, piety, etc.

But, if I am right and Socrates deploys this weak notion of good and of virtue, is his notion of the good simply empty, then? Well, at least one feature, one that is made quite clear in the *Gorgias*, is that everyone desires the good and everything we do we do for the sake of the good. Socrates and Polus agree that the tyrant, like anyone else, wants the good. This is carried on in his conversation with Callicles (499e-500a). Similarly, in the *Laches*, like other Socratic dialogues, the background assumption is that we should all pursue the good.

So my claim is simply this: Socrates deploys a basic notion of the good as what should be pursued. He, no doubt, has further things that he believes about the good, but these are not built into every claim that he makes about it. Thus, premise (3), the claim that the most important thing for us to do is to become as good as possible, is a rather

trivial claim, instead of a substantial one. He is not saying that the most important thing is for us to become good as Socrates conceives of good, just for us to become good, whatever that happens to be. This is crucial for Socrates to be engaged in the activity that I think he is engaged in: investigating how to live our lives from a position where he does not know the answers.

Objection: Merely Human Wisdom

Does Socrates believe it is possible for us to acquire knowledge of what virtue is? If not, no matter how great it might be if we were (*per impossible*) to acquire this knowledge, it can hardly be the most important thing for us to do.

Recently, in a pair of extremely well thought out articles (Forster 2006 and 2007), Michael Forster has argued that Socrates does not think we can acquire such knowledge. Forster claims that the historical Socrates' ultimate goal is to provide us with a sort of humility: an understanding that we cannot have ethical knowledge. He thinks that Socrates' purpose in refuting people was not to prepare them for learning (in the manner of the Noble Sophist in the *Sophist* and Socrates' treatment of the slave-boy in the *Meno*). Rather, Socrates' purpose is to help them understand their position in the world: completely ignorant of ethical matters, in contrast to the gods. Although he draws on a number of texts, both by Plato and others, the heart of his evidence is from the part of the Plato's *Apology* where Socrates explains how he interpreted the Oracle at Delphi. Socrates saw it as his mission from Apollo to show that we are all quite ignorant and that human knowledge is worth quite little or nothing. Forster says that this is meant as a timeless statement about humans, not as a statement about humans as they are right now.

In some sense this is surely right, but I do not think it makes inquiry impossible in the way that Forster suggests.

There are two questions for us in evaluating Forster's claim. First, does Socrates think in the *Apology* that it is absolutely impossible for us to acquire knowledge, so that searching is completely futile? And second, does Socrates' evaluation of the possibility of knowledge in the *Apology* carry over to the other early Socratic dialogues?

Here is how Socrates first describes the Oracle's true message:

What is probable, gentlemen, is that in fact the god is wise and that his oracular response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing, and that when he says this man, Socrates, he is using my name as an example, as if he said: "This man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless." (trans. Grube in Cooper 1997) (23a-b)¹⁷

I agree with Forster that this is supposed to be a general statement about human wisdom, not a statement about the current state of humans. Nonetheless, I think it is seriously over-reading this passage to say that it means that we should give up any attempt at ethical inquiry since it is absolutely impossible. The fact that my knowledge is worthless from the standpoint of a god does not mean that there is no room for substantially improving it. In fact, even if human wisdom did not allow us to acquire any ethical knowledge, this would not necessarily mean that we could not acquire such knowledge. There is a strong Greek tradition that thinks that humans can and should acquire divine

¹⁷ τὸ δὲ κινδυνεύει, ὦ ἄνδρες, τῷ ὄντι ὁ θεὸς σοφὸς εἶναι, καὶ ἐν τῷ χρησμῷ τούτῳ τοῦτο λέγειν, ὅτι ἡ ἀνθρωπίνη σοφία ὀλίγου τινὸς ἀξία ἐστὶν καὶ οὐδενός. καὶ φαίνεται τοῦτον λέγειν τὸν Σωκράτη, προσκεχρησθαι δὲ τῷ ἐμῷ ὀνόματι, ἐμὲ παράδειγμα ποιούμενος, ὥσπερ ἂν <εἰ> εἴποι ὅτι "Οὗτος ὑμῶν, ὦ ἄνθρωποι, σοφώτατός ἐστιν, ὅστις ὥσπερ Σωκράτης ἔγνωκεν ὅτι οὐδενὸς ἀξιώσ ἐστι τῆ ἀληθείᾳ πρὸς σοφίαν."

wisdom.¹⁸ So Foster would need to argue both that human wisdom does not allow for any ethical knowledge and that humans cannot acquire divine wisdom.

Socrates nowhere says in the *Apology* that we cannot acquire knowledge. On its own, that might leave interpretative matters open. In fact, I take it that later in the *Apology* Socrates urges us to improve our knowledge, not simply to acknowledge our ignorance. Socrates takes the Oracle to be asking him to go out and act on the Oracle's insight. Socrates describes this in a couple of different ways. At first he says (immediately after the previous quotation):

So even now I continue this investigation as the god bade me – and I go around seeking out anyone, citizen or stranger, whom I think wise. Then if I do not think he is, I come to the assistance of the god and show him that he is not wise. (23b)¹⁹

This makes it sound like Socrates takes his whole job to be simply pointing out people's lack of knowledge – in line with Forster's account. But later he makes it clear that there is room for his job to be broader:

I shall not cease to practice philosophy, to exhort you and in my usual way to point out to any one of you whom I happen to meet: Good sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not shamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?" Then, if one of you disputes this and says he does care, I shall not let him go at once or leave

¹⁸ This was pointed out to me by Rachana Kamtekar. Consider, for example, Empedocles' wisdom beyond "mortal wisdom" (B2 and B111) and Socrates' hopes of becoming divine through philosophy in the *Phaedo*.

¹⁹ ταῦτ' οὖν ἐγὼ μὲν ἔτι καὶ νῦν περιῶν ζητῶ καὶ ἐρευνῶ κατὰ τὸν θεὸν καὶ τῶν ἀστῶν καὶ ξένων ἄν τινα οἴωμαι σοφὸν εἶναι· καὶ ἐπειδὴν μοι μὴ δοκῆ, τῷ θεῷ βοηθῶν ἐνδείκνυμαι ὅτι οὐκ ἔστι σοφός.

him, but I shall question him, examine him and test him, and if I do not think he has attained the goodness that he says he has, I shall reproach him because he attaches little importance to the most important things and greater importance to inferior things. I shall treat in this way anyone I happen to meet, young and old, citizen and stranger, and more so the citizens because you are more kindred to me.

Be sure that this is what the god orders me to do, and I think there is no greater blessing for the city than my service to the god. For I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul.

(29d-30a, emphasis mine)²⁰

The god orders Socrates to persuade people of the importance of improving themselves and he does nothing but persuade people of this. Clearly Socrates sees this as part of his divine oracular mission. So he simultaneously sees his mission as that of showing people that they are ignorant and getting people to improve themselves by caring for (or perhaps better: taking care of) the right things. How are these two tasks intertwined? There is no hint here that we care for the right things simply by realizing our ignorance. It is more

²⁰ “[Εγὼ ὑμᾶς, ὦ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, ἀσπάζομαι μὲν καὶ φιλῶ, πείσομαι δὲ μᾶλλον τῷ θεῷ ἢ ὑμῖν, καὶ ἔωσπερ ἂν ἐμπνέω καὶ οἶός τε ὦ,] οὐ μὴ παύσωμαι φιλοσοφῶν καὶ ὑμῖν παρακελευόμενός τε καὶ ἐνδεικνύμενος ὅτῳ ἂν αἰεὶ ἐντυγχάνω ὑμῶν, λέγων οἷάπερ εἴωθα, ὅτι ‘ὦ ἀριστε ἀνδρῶν, Ἀθηναῖος ὢν, πόλεως τῆς μεγίστης καὶ εὐδοκιμωτάτης εἰς σοφίαν καὶ ἰσχύν, χρημάτων μὲν οὐκ αἰσχύνῃ ἐπιμελούμενος ὅπως σοὶ ἔσται ὡς πλείστα, καὶ δόξης καὶ τιμῆς, φρονήσεως δὲ καὶ ἀληθείας καὶ τῆς ψυχῆς ὅπως ὡς βελτίστη ἔσται οὐκ ἐπιμελῆ οὐδὲ φροντίζεις;’ καὶ ἐάν τις ὑμῶν ἀμφισβητήσῃ καὶ φῆ ἐπιμελείσθαι, οὐκ εὐθὺς ἀφήσω αὐτὸν οὐδ’ ἀπειμι, ἀλλ’ ἐρήσομαι αὐτὸν καὶ ἐξετάσω καὶ ἐλέγξω, καὶ ἐάν μοι μὴ δοκῇ κεκτῆσθαι ἀρετήν, φάναι δέ, ὄνειδιῶ ὅτι τὰ πλείστου ἄξια περὶ ἐλαχίστου ποιεῖται, τὰ δὲ φαυλότερα περὶ πλείονος. ταῦτα καὶ νεωτέρῳ καὶ πρεσβυτέρῳ ὅτῳ ἂν ἐντυγχάνω ποιήσω, καὶ ξένῳ καὶ ἀσπῷ, μᾶλλον δὲ τοῖς ἀστοῖς, ὅσῳ μου ἐγγυτέρῳ ἔσται γένει. ταῦτα γὰρ κελεύει ὁ θεός, εὐ ἴσπε, καὶ ἐγὼ οἶομαι οὐδὲν πῶ ὑμῖν μείζον ἀγαθὸν γενέσθαι ἐν τῇ πόλει ἢ τὴν ἐμὴν τῷ θεῷ ὑπηρεσίαν. οὐδὲν γὰρ ἄλλο πράττων ἐγὼ περιέρχομαι ἢ πείθων ὑμῶν καὶ νεωτέρους καὶ πρεσβυτέρους μήτε σωματῶν ἐπιμελείσθαι μήτε χρημάτων πρότερον μηδὲ οὕτω σφόδρα ὡς τῆς ψυχῆς ὅπως ὡς ἀρίστη ἔσται, [λέγων ὅτι ‘Οὐκ ἐκ χρημάτων ἀρετὴ γίγνεται, ἀλλ’ ἐξ ἀρετῆς χρήματα καὶ τὰ ἄλλα ἀγαθὰ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἅπαντα καὶ ἰδία καὶ δημοσία.’]”

plausible to suppose that realizing our ignorance is part of a larger project of getting us to care for the right things.

Later in the *Apology* Socrates again suggests that realizing our ignorance is part of a larger project of improving ourselves. This is seen most vividly when Socrates gives two explanations for why he will not live quietly:

Perhaps someone might say: But Socrates, if you leave us will you not be able to live quietly, without talking? Now this is the most difficult point on which to convince some of you. If I say that it is impossible for me to keep quiet because that means disobeying the god, you will not believe me and will think I am being ironical. On the other hand, if I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for me, you will believe me even less. (37e-38a)²¹

The god's mission and the importance of discussing virtue are two different ways to explain the same thing: why discussions are so important to Socrates. Surely Socrates is not saying we should simply discuss virtue so that we realize that we do not understand what it is. Socrates already knows that he is ignorant. And there is nothing to suggest here that the greatest good for a man must involve finding those with a pretense to knowledge – that is Socrates' mission, not everyone's. So sitting around discussing virtue, quite possibly with those who realize they do not know what it is, is the greatest good for man.

²¹ Ἴσως οὖν ἂν τις εἴποι· “Σιγῶν δὲ καὶ ἡσυχίαν ἄγων, ὦ Σώκρᾳτες, οὐχ οἷός τ' ἔση ἡμῖν ἐξεληθὼν ζῆν;” τοῦτ' ἐστὶν δὴ ἐστὶ πάντων χαλεπώτατον πείσαι τινας ὑμῶν. ἐάντε γὰρ λέγω ὅτι τῷ θεῷ ἀπειθεῖν τοῦτ' ἐστὶν καὶ διὰ τοῦτ' ἀδύνατον ἡσυχίαν ἄγειν, οὐ πείσεσθέ μοι ὡς εἰρωνευομένῳ· ἐάντ' αὖ λέγω ὅτι καὶ τυγχάνει μέγιστον ἀγαθὸν ὃν ἀνθρώπῳ τοῦτο, ἐκάστης ἡμέρας περὶ ἀρετῆς τοὺς λόγους ποιεῖσθαι καὶ τῶν ἄλλων περὶ ὧν ὑμεῖς ἐμοῦ ἀκούετε διαλεγόμενου καὶ ἐμαντὸν καὶ ἄλλους ἐξετάζοντος, ὁ δὲ ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ, ταῦτα δ' ἔτι ἤττον πείσεσθέ μοι λέγοντι.

The most plausible explanation for why Socrates thinks this is that there is some possibility – no matter how scant – that we could acquire some ethical knowledge and doing so would be incomparably good.²²

Nonetheless, this passage (and the *Apology* in general) helps us appreciate an important feature of Socrates project that I have so far neglected. In this passage Socrates claims that “the greatest good for a man is to discuss virtue every day.” How can this be the greatest good for man? Isn’t the greatest good for man being virtuous? One might think that this is where some sort of Socratic intellectualism is coming in: perhaps discussing the good *is* being good. Let me suggest an alternate interpretation. Socrates’ point is that humans will never have all ethical knowledge – even if they acquired some.²³ After all, human wisdom is worth very little. Thus, they will always need to search for ethical knowledge. This is not because the search itself is what is valuable, but because what it finds is so valuable and, owing to our own limitations, the search will never be over. Thus, describing this as the greatest good *for man* is like describing Socrates’ state as a sort of *human* wisdom. It does not mean that the discussion itself is what is valuable – being virtuous is what is truly valuable. It means that we will always need to be engaged in discussion because doing so allows us to find what truly is valuable.²⁴

²² Of course, one could still try to resist this reading. Perhaps one has to constantly be on guard against failing to realize one’s ignorance and so one must constantly question oneself to keep this fact in mind. The translation of “*exsatazo*” as “test” perhaps suggests this, but the meaning of this verb is much broader than simply “test”; it can mean to examine, scrutinize, inspect.

²³ This does presuppose that one can acquire some knowledge about a subject matter without having all the knowledge in the subject matter. So one could acquire some knowledge relevant to living our lives without having all the knowledge. If this assumption is false, then you could not have any knowledge without having it all, and then perhaps knowledge really would be impossible for humans (or perhaps we would have to understand the worthlessness of human wisdom in a different way).

²⁴ Contrast this with the sort of optimism that you find in later Plato and Aristotle (and most of the rest of philosophers): we can at least theoretically obtain the highest good.

But even if I am wrong in my main claim of this section – even if Socrates eliminates all possibility of ethical inquiry in the *Apology* – he certainly allows for the possibility in the *Laches*. As we have seen, in the *Laches* Socrates tells us that we should spare nothing to go out and find a teacher. Forster thinks that this teacher is supposed to be Apollo, since no human has such knowledge (Forster 2006, 21). I am not convinced, but even if this were true, it would definitely be Apollo being a *teacher* and providing *knowledge* to Socrates, Laches, Lysimachus and the others. Hence, Socrates thinks this is possible. In the *Laches* the result of finding oneself ignorant is *not* that you come to accept your place in the universe. Rather, it is that you go out and search for knowledge.

Moreover, Forster's view has a result that he finds appealing, but which seems to me to be a major flaw for him. On his reading: "Socrates of the early dialogues is *realizing* his highest philosophical ambitions: demonstrating people's ethical ignorance in order to fulfill what he takes to be his divinely imposed duties to verify and disseminate the oracular message of universal human ignorance in ethics" (Forster 2006, 41, emphasis his).²⁵ Yet this seems to me simply against the tenor of almost all of the Socratic dialogues: they almost all end with Socrates frustrated at not having made further progress or at least hoping go beyond the current conversation (see the ends of *Euthyphro*, *Charmides*, *Laches*, *Lysis* and *Lesser Hippias*). Forster claims that when Socrates says or implies, near the beginning of a dialogue, that he is looking for knowledge, this is in fact a form of sly irony on Socrates' part: he does not really want knowledge, rather he wants to "draw an interlocutor into a refutation or keep him there

²⁵ The passage continues "and to prepare people for ethical improvement by discrediting their false conceits that they already have ethical knowledge." This has to do with another one of Forster's main theses which has not been discussed here: that Socrates' positive ethical beliefs have an entirely religious source. It is important for Forster that we are discrediting these false conceits in order to replace them with ethical *beliefs* not ethical knowledge and that these beliefs are not derived from philosophy but divine inspiration.

once drawn” (Forster 2006, 19). Forster can make sense of why Socrates would be ironic (or somehow deceitful) here because it would further what Forster sees as Socrates’ motives. But why would Socrates be deceitful at the end of the dialogue when he says how awful it is that they do not have knowledge? Surely this would not be to Socrates’ advantage if, as Forster claims, Socrates’ ultimate goal is to get us to appreciate our own ignorance. Socrates never seems like he has accomplished his primary goal upon showing that someone is ignorant. And, on Forster’s account, there is no obvious reason for Socrates to hide such an accomplishment. If he took the God’s mission to be to get people to realize that they are ignorant, you would think that Socrates would emphasize, not hide, this fact.

Objection: No Teachers of Virtue

In the *Protagoras* Socrates tells Protagoras that he does not believe that virtue can be taught and so he is skeptical that Protagoras could be a teacher of virtue. If Socrates does not believe that virtue can be taught, how seriously should we take his claim at the end of the *Laches* that we should all go out and try to find someone to teach us how to become good?

One response available is that Socrates is serious that we should seek knowledge, even if he is skeptical as to whether there are teachers. We find a solution like this at the end of the *Euthydemus*. (Gregory Vlastos has also defended a view like this in a number of his works, for example Vlastos 1991, 32.) The *Euthydemus*, like the *Laches*, is built around the question of who would be a good teacher for our children and ourselves. At the end of the dialogue Crito is not convinced that Euthydemus and Dionysodorus would

be good teachers for him or his son, although Socrates strongly wants to enroll in their class. Socrates' advice is an interesting development and, I think, illuminating:

Socrates: And just because this is so, do you intend to run away from all these pursuits and entrust your son to none of them?

Crito: No, this would not be reasonable, Socrates.

Socrates: Then do not do what you ought not to, Crito, but pay no attention to the practitioners of philosophy, whether good or bad. Rather give serious consideration to the thing itself: if it seems to you negligible, then turn everyone from it, not just your sons. But if it seems to you to be what I think it is, then take heart, pursue it, practice it, both you and yours, as the proverb says. (307b-c)²⁶

Earlier in the *Euthydemus*, as in the *Laches*, Socrates' advice was to find a teacher. But here Socrates advice is not to find a teacher, but to pursue and practice it if it seems worthwhile, paying no attention to the practitioners. And this, I think, is the wiser advice for Socrates to be giving; it is not at all clear why the only route to knowledge would need to be through teaching. In fact, Socrates has yet to find someone who has the knowledge he is looking for.

Still, one might want to take Socrates' worry about virtue not being teachable more seriously. At the end of the *Protagoras* he famously finds that he and Protagoras have switched positions: he has argued that virtue is a type of knowledge and hence teachable, whereas Protagoras has argued it is not a type of knowledge and hence not

²⁶ {ΣΩ.} Ἡ οὖν τούτου ἔνεκα αὐτός τε φεύξει πάντα τὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα καὶ τῷ υἱεὶ οὐκ ἐπιτρέψει;

{ΚΡ.} Οὐκ οὐκ δίκαιόν γε, ὦ Σώκρατες.

{ΣΩ.} Μὴ τοίνυν ὅ γε οὐ χρή ποιεῖ, ὦ Κρίτων, ἀλλ' ἔασαο χαίρειν τοὺς ἐπιτηδεύοντας φιλοσοφίαν, εἴτε χρηστοὶ εἰσιν εἴτε πονηροί, αὐτὸ τὸ πρᾶγμα βασανίσας καλῶς τε καὶ εὖ, ἐὰν μὲν σοι φαίνεται φαῦλον ὄν, πάντ' ἄνδρα ἀπότρεπε, μὴ μόνον τοὺς υἱεῖς· ἐὰν δὲ φαίνεται οἶον οἶμαι αὐτὸ ἐγὼ εἶναι, θαρρῶν δίωκε καὶ ἄσκει, τὸ λεγόμενον δὴ τοῦτο, αὐτός τε καὶ τὰ παιδιά.

teachable. This connection between being teachable and being a type of knowledge points towards a serious problem if Socrates did not think that virtue is teachable. To the extent that he believes that virtue is in fact not teachable, he is committed to it not being a form of knowledge.

What would the threat be if virtue were not a form of knowledge? This is not as straightforward a question as it might seem since it would not stop us from inquiring into what virtue is, as is revealed at the very end of the *Protagoras* (362d).²⁷ Here Socrates suggests that they first try to determine what virtue is and then use this to inquire into whether it is teachable. This suggests that they could figure out what it is and yet it not be teachable. How is this possible? If they know what it is, you might think they could teach that to people. The *Meno* makes it clearer how it might not be teachable. What if we learn what virtue is and it turns out to be something that simply comes to people by nature (or as an unprompted gift from the gods)? We would know what it is without thereby being able to pass it on to another. I could then tell you what virtue is, but, in learning this, you would not be able to use this knowledge to become virtuous – just as I could tell you what an albino is, but you cannot use this knowledge to become an albino. If virtue turned out to be such a thing, it would not be within our powers to make ourselves become as good as possible and hence it could not be the most important thing for us to do, contra premise 1.

A tempting response is to simply deny that Socrates really doubts that virtue can be taught and hence that he does not doubt that it is a type of knowledge. Perhaps this is

²⁷ The same is revealed in the *Meno*, but since that does not seem to be a Socratic dialogue – or is in some sort of halfway house between Socratic and Platonic – I draw on the *Protagoras* here.

correct and, if so, there is no threat to my account of why Socrates seeks ethical knowledge.

But, even if Socrates really does doubt that virtues can be taught, I do not think my reading needs to be threatened; it could simply mean that Socrates himself is deeply conflicted about whether we can learn to be virtuous. On the one hand, Socrates has no proof that it cannot be taught and the possibility that it can be taught offers a pathway to figuring out how to be truly good. On the other hand, Socrates has never met anyone who has seemed to be a real teacher of virtue, social institutions are set up on the assumption that it is not teachable, virtuous parents do not succeed in teaching it to their children, etc.

A strength of this Socrates-is-conflicted reading is that it explains Socrates' strong interest in whether virtue is teachable. The possibility that it is not teachable threatens to undermine his own hopes of becoming virtuous by acquiring the appropriate knowledge. An attempt to deny that Socrates really doubts that virtue is teachable ends up throwing out the possibility that Socrates is himself deeply torn. In fact, if Socrates really is driven by the nine-premise argument that I have presented, it would be quite reasonable to expect him to worry about whether it is really correct – at least, I think a reasonable reaction to any argument that one finds convincing is that one begin to seriously probe and question the premises. And that is precisely what Socrates seems to be doing in worrying about whether virtue is teachable.

Of course, the mere possibility that virtue is not a type of knowledge should not deter us from searching for it. Perhaps we cannot learn what the fundamental particles are that make up the universe, but unless we have extremely good reasons to doubt that we can learn this, physicists should not stop searching. So while Socrates may have serious

doubts about whether virtue is teachable, he does not know that it is not teachable.

Socrates tells us at the end of the *Protagoras* (361d, as well as in the *Meno*, 100b) to hold off final judgment about teachability until we know what virtue is.

It is important to note that even if virtue is teachable and hence a type of knowledge, this does not mean that the good is itself a type of knowledge. In the *Protagoras*, for example, Socrates relies on the opinion of the majority that the good is pleasure (not knowledge, *per se*) and yet virtue turns out to be a type of knowledge: one that lets us measure pleasure and pain. In general, the sort of argument that makes virtue knowledge of good and bad does not rely on the good itself being a type of knowledge. What is important to this type of argument is that virtue produce only good results. What goodness and badness turn out to be – base pleasure, noble activity, contemplation, etc. – is irrelevant to these arguments.

Further Objections

So far we have considered three objections to my attribution of this argument to Socrates. The first asked whether Socrates really deploys as thin a conception of the good I attribute to him. The second questioned whether Socrates really believes that we can acquire knowledge of what virtue is. This is, of course, a question that Plato takes up in the *Meno* in responding to what is called Meno's paradox. It is important to remember the context of Meno's Paradox: not just any inquiry, but an attempt to determine what virtue is. The paradox is so important for Socrates to solve because his ethical project relies on the possibility that we can provide answers to these "what is it?" questions. We here see Plato trying to defend an epistemological presupposition of Socrates' ethical project.

Similarly, we saw in the third objection Socrates struggling with a potential problem facing his own argument: the possibility that virtue is not teachable.

There are, of course, many other ways we might want to challenge the argument. The other major places to push are on the seventh and eighth premises, which say that we lack knowledge and that, only if we acquired this can we tell if we are becoming better. One might dispute that we really lack ethical knowledge. Or one might doubt whether we really need to acquire knowledge of what virtue is in order to recognize that we are becoming good. One could dispute each of these claims by pressing on what it means to have knowledge of what virtue is – and what, precisely, knowledge allows us to do. And these are topics that Socrates takes up in the *Meno*, where he distinguishes between knowledge and true opinion for the first time. How that works and what we learn from the *Meno* is another story. What I want to point out here is that if one pushes on the argument, we find Plato attempting to shore it up in other works. This, I think, is a good sign that it is central to Socrates' project.

Conclusion

I have tried to explain why Socrates thinks that it so important for us to acquire ethical knowledge. The major constraint I have worked within is that we attribute claims to him that he would not have had to argue for – hence, it should not rely on substantial claims about virtue or the good. The major suggestion I have made is that ignorance plays two roles in Socrates' motivation. Not only does our ignorance mean that we do not know how become better, it also means that we have no way to evaluate whether we are becoming better. It is this evaluative role that I think is crucial; without it, there is no

reason for Socrates to expect everyone to agree that we should acquire ethical knowledge. Plato's Socratic dialogues help us think through what to do when we do not know what to do. They do not simply discuss ethical topics; they provide a philosophical motivation for being drawn into ethics.

I hope to have helped make some headway in separating out one of the topics that falls under the heading of "Socratic intellectualism." I fear this phrase causes more harm than good. Socrates has a number of claims that fall under this heading, some of them argued for in multiple ways, including: we should seek answers to "what is it?" questions for ethical terms, we should seek knowledge of virtue, all virtue is a type of knowledge, all desires are desires for the good, no one errs willingly, there is no weakness of will, and reason rules over us. We need to clearly distinguish these and think about what motivates each of them before we seeing if there is a single tie that binds them together.

Let me end with what seems to me a tension in Socrates' thinking in the early dialogues. We have seen that we need answers to these "what is it?" questions in order to tell whether or not we are becoming virtuous. But if a primary function of these "what is it?" questions is to help us identify in this way, why does Socrates place such demanding requirements on definitions? Why ask them to tell us on account of what all Xs are Xs? I suspect that this tension is what leads Plato to provide new reasons for valuing knowledge in his middle and late dialogues.

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