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2018

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

To Win and Win Over:

Plato and Aristotle on Strategy and Persuasion in Dialectic

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Classics

by

Dale Carlos Parker

2018

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2018

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

To Win and Win Over:

Plato and Aristotle on Strategy and Persuasion in Dialectic

by

Dale Carlos Parker

Doctor of Philosophy in Classics

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor David L. Blank, Chair

This dissertation treats Socrates' argumentative strategies in Plato's *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, and *Meno*. These strategies will be compared to those found in Aristotle's logical works, especially his *Analytics*, *Topics*, and *Sophistical Refutations*. In these texts, Aristotle describes the competitive debates popular among certain Greek intellectuals. These bouts featured a questioner who offered various propositions to an answerer. The questioner tried to force the answerer into a contradiction based on affirmed propositions, and the answerer tried to evade contradiction by caution in making affirmations. Few scholars have argued that Plato's dialogues are representatives of these verbal jousts, but such a claim resolves traditional difficulties, such as (1) what Socrates' method was (if he had one), or (2) why he made 'bad' arguments, or (3) what he hoped to achieve by refuting an opponent.

By using the criteria provided in Aristotle’s logical works, we can offer new answers to these traditional questions. (1) Aristotle would identify the method of any competitive debater, Socrates included, as the crafting of premises plausible enough to be accepted by an opponent, which lead the opponent to a patent contradiction. (2) If Socrates makes bad or even fallacious arguments, it is only because he thinks that the premises are sufficiently plausible to be accepted by his opponent. (3) Socrates’ goal within the game of question-and-answer is victory, but Socrates has the broader goal of exposing the ignorance of self-proclaimed experts like Protagoras, Polus, and Meno. The refutations of these experts are an invitation for them to abandon their pretensions, which Socrates sees as roadblocks to philosophical inquiry.

The introduction of the dissertation outlines my synthesis of Aristotle’s dialectical theory, which sets the interpretative framework for the rest of the dissertation. In Chapter One, I use this hermeneutic to read the *Protagoras*. I argue that Socrates’ conversation with Hippocrates is a successful example of what Aristotle would call examinational (peirastic) dialectic, and that his conversation with Protagoras is a failed example. Chapter Two treats Socrates’ controversial refutation of Polus. Socrates fights the young eristic with eristical arguments of his own—a move countenanced in Aristotle’s *Topics*. The last chapter treats the *Meno*. I argue, against one common opinion, that *anamnesis* and the hypothetical method do not make the dialogue “transitional”, and do not make Socrates more confident in the truth of his conclusions. Rather, the dialogue shares argumentation similar to that observed in the previous two chapters.

The dissertation of Dale Carlos Parker is approved.

Kathryn Anne Morgan

Adam David Cramer

Gavin Lawrence

David. L. Blank, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2018

DEDICATION

To my parents.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have many people to thank, but first are the members of my committee: Kathryn Morgan, Gavin Lawrence, Adam Crager, and David Blank. *πρέπει δ' ἐσλοῖσιν ὑμνεῖσθαι... / καλλίσταις ἀοιδαῖς* (Pind. fr. 121), but these acknowledgments will have to do for now. On a quarter's notice, the committee helped me finish this dissertation a year early. I cannot thank them enough.

To express my gratitude, I would like to recognize their specific contributions. Kathryn Morgan's work on myth was the key for my discussion of *anamnesis* in chapter three; her recent article (2016) on the *Protagoras* helped me understand the comedic possibilities of question-and-answer exchanges. Beyond the dissertation, I am thankful for her enthusiastic support. Gavin, on sabbatical, offered detailed corrections and suggestions. These, and his many comments during the prospectus defense, have been very helpful. Adam Crager's seminar on the *Analytics* gave new life to the introduction of this dissertation. He offered me arguments plausible enough for me to accept, such that I was forced to trim down many of my original, grander claims. The introduction is now half of what it was, but vastly improved thanks to Adam.

Most of all, I'd like to thank David Blank for serving as chair. This dissertation began life as a paper I wrote for his *Gorgias* seminar three years ago. A year later it turned into a GRM paper under his direction, and then an SCS paper. At each stage David offered timely interventions when I was getting ahead of myself, with enough guidance to help me work past comfortable assumptions, and enough liberty to make the project fully my own. Finally, I have to thank him for his support for my changed career plans.

There are several others to whom thanks is due. I would like to mention James Schmidt for his help with the second geometrical passage of the *Meno*—his clear explanations saved me much toil. I also have to thank Thomas Boles for allowing me to recite the prospectus of this dissertation to him. Special recognition is due to John Tennant, whose enthusiasm for Plato helped me choose this dissertation topic. He also is the only non-committee member who has read (or likely will read) portions of this dissertation, having edited several sections of chapters one and two. I would also like to mention Fr. Steve Brock, for his Thomistic insights into the *Analytics*, especially on the subject of *nous*. Finally, I would like to thank my family and my friends, whose support I've felt every step of the way.

VITA

Dale Parker received a B.A. in Classics from the University of Notre Dame in 2013. He entered the Ph.D. program at UCLA that fall. He received his M.A. by writing on Homeric syntax, aided by a graduate certificate in Indo-European Studies. In the fall of 2018, Dale will move to Rome to study theology at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross.

Introduction: An Aristotelian Hermeneutic

0.1 Preliminaries: Aristotle's Innovation

At the end of *Sophistical Refutations*, Aristotle considers his role in the history of dialectic.¹ “We proposed to devise a certain deductive (συλλογιστικὴν) power, with regard to [dialectical] problems, from the most plausible (ἐνδοξοτάτων) premises available—for this is the task of dialectic proper and of examinational [dialectic].” (*SE* 183a37-39). This deductive ability, avers the Stagirite, had no precursors: there “was nothing at all there before.” (οὐδὲν παντελῶς ὑπῆρχεν 183b36). This claim wants no little exegesis.² Had Aristotle never read a Platonic dialogue? Was he not aware of the research in dialectic carried out in the Academy?³ He was at least aware of teachers of “eristic arguments” (τοὺς ἐριστικούς λόγους 184b36-37), from whom he is at pains to distinguish himself. This kind of education was, like Gorgianic rhetoric, “rapid”, “untechnical” and consisted only in “the products of the craft” (*SE* 184a1-4). For Aristotle, this kind of training in questions and answers “was not the true beginning of dialectic.”⁴

If we compare the development of dialectic to that of rhetoric, we will better understand Aristotle's strange claim. He mentions Tisias, Thrasymachus, and Theodorus, who had contributed parts to the art of rhetoric such that the *technē* had acquired “a certain magnitude.” (183b34). Perhaps because they “technified” rhetoric in their handbooks, these handbooks were

¹ Aristotle did not distinguish between *Topics* and *Sophistical Refutations*, and so the conclusion of the latter also concludes the former.

² “Il y a là matière à s'étonner.” (de Pater 1965: 67).

³ “Aristote semble en effet oublier toutes les allusions qu'il a lui-même faites aux diverses solutions... de ses contemporains... En s'auto-proclamant premier théoricien de la dialectique, Aristote se monterait donc quelque peu injuste à l'endroit de certains de ses contemporains, parmi lesquels il faut peut-être compter Xénocrate et Speusippe.” (Dorion 1995: 415)

⁴ Natali 1986: 114.

derivatively called *technai*.⁵ Or, perhaps because of these handbooks, Aristotle was willing to concede that rhetoric was already a *techne*. (But a *techne* nascent enough for Aristotle to come and bring it to maturity, cf. *Rhet.* 1354a11ff.). Now, just because these first-generation rhetoricians were the first to theorize about rhetoric does not mean that no one practiced rhetoric before them. The beginnings of rhetoric can be read into the earliest of Greek literature.⁶ Aristotle himself claimed that everyone practices the rudiments of rhetoric, but previous orators and the many do so ἀτέχνως (*Rhet.* 1354a1-6). Likewise, everyone engages in a rude dialectic, since everyone tries to “examine” and “uphold arguments” (*Rhet.* 1354a5).⁷ Now we can better interpret the end of *Sophistical Refutations*. No *techne* for engaging in the practice of question-and-answer had yet been developed or given rules to bring about a consistent result (viz., winning debates).⁸

This claim can help us clarify terminology. We might call these question-and-answer sessions “διάλογοι”. As for its derivative, διαλεκτική [τέχνη], this is the craft by which one skillfully engages in and is reliably victorious at question-and-answer sessions.⁹ Others may have engaged in the former.¹⁰ But, strictly speaking, they fell short of the latter for not “discovering a

⁵ See Cole (1991: 81ff.) for discussion.

⁶ See Roisman (2007) for rhetoric in Homer, Strauss (2007) for rhetoric in Hesiod.

⁷ The same goals of Aristotle’s dialectical handbook (*Top.* 100a20, 159a25, 161a25).

⁸ Cf. Dorion 1995: 416. See Nehamas (1990: 7) for the connection between winning and truth-claims in Greek dialectic.

⁹ Crane (2013: 3) makes a similar distinction. Dialogues have room for devices beyond the strictly logical: “framing narratives, myth... a sustained engagement with the poetic tradition, etc.”, and dialectic refers to the formal rules of question-and-answer.

¹⁰ Aristot. *Soph.* (ed. Gigon) fr. 39,1 (= D.L. 8.57): “Empedocles discovered rhetoric, Zeno discovered dialectic.” (Ἐμπεδοκλέα ῥητορικὴν εὐρεῖν, Ζήνωνα δὲ διαλεκτικὴν); fr. 39,3 (= S.E. *adv. log.* 1.5-7). Palmer (2017: 3) comments on this fragment, “Precisely what Aristotle meant by this remains a matter of speculation, given that Aristotle also attributes the invention of dialectic to Socrates (Arist. *Metaph.* M.4, 1078b25–30) and to Plato

method from which we will be able to make deductions concerning any problem put forward, from plausible [premises].” (*Top.* 100a18-20). The real dialectician is the one skilled in the art of deduction (τέχνη συλλογιστικῆ) (*SE* 172a35-36), of which Aristotle was “*le pionnier*”.¹¹ Therefore, in this dissertation I will avoid using the term “dialectic” with regard to Plato. What Plato depicts is part of the emerging *techne* of dialectic—but since Plato does not refer to the institution as dialectic (at least in the *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, and *Meno*), we should be cautious about doing so. I will use the word when there is some connection to Aristotle’s works.

Aristotle’s achievement was to realize that when “certain things are laid down, something other than these premises comes about through the premises by necessity” (*Top.* 100a25-27), and that being adept at discovering such premise patterns is a teachable skill. We might make bold to take Aristotle’s view that “plot is the soul of tragedy” and supply an analogue, that for Aristotle, deduction is the soul of dialectic.¹² The commentators support such a claim. Alexander begins his work on the *Topics* with a survey of the various philosophical schools (1.1-19). He reviews how each defined the term dialectic. “Aristotle”, he claims, “posits that it is a certain deductive method.” (1.19-2.1).

This deductive feature of dialectic makes it comparable to demonstration (*apodeixis*). As a result, Aristotle tries to distinguish the dialectical deduction from the demonstrative deduction.

(*Metaph.* A.6, 987b31–3); he says he himself invented the theory of it (*SE* 34, 183b34–184b8).” Whoever the inventor may have been, the important thing for us is Aristotle’s status as first theorizer of dialectical deduction.

¹¹ Thus Brunschwig (1989: 486-87). *Contra* de Pater (1965: 68-69), who thinks that the technification of dialectic results from the classification of *topoi* (he cites Grimaldi 1958: 4-5 in support). De Pater denies that the sense of *sylogismos* in the *Topics* is that of the *Analytics*, but rather “is nothing other than the Platonic sense of the term.” (71).

¹² *Pace* Owen (1961), Nussbaum (1986), Irwin (1988), Kraut (2006), that endoxic premises are the most distinguishing feature of dialectic. I follow Smith (1993), who is at pains to show that Aristotle saw the syllogistic feature of dialectic as primary, and the endoxical feature as secondary. I think that even the word order of 100a18-20 suggests as much: the phrase ἐξ ἐνδόξων is in the “Tail” position of the clause, generally analyzed as conveying secondary information (cf. Dik 1995: 12). Indeed, Smith calls the *endoxon*-requirement an “afterthought.”

(*Top.* 100a21-23, 27-29). Common to both is that “when certain things are laid down, something other than these premises comes about through the premises by necessity.” (100a25-27).¹³ In demonstrative arguments, these premises¹⁴ are “true and primary, or from such premises which have assumed (εἴληφεν), through certain primary and true premises, the first principle of knowledge about these [true and primary premises].” (100a27-29). This is an abbreviated version of the conditions laid down in *Posterior Analytics*, in which Aristotle demands that demonstrative premises be “true, primary, immediate, more knowable and prior to and an explanation for the conclusion.” (71b20-22). So, a dialectical deduction is one which falls short of this high epistemic bar. A dialectical deduction “reasons from opinions plausible [to the answerer]” (*Top.* 100a30). A questioner cannot advance unless the answerer accepts a premise, and for that to happen the premise must be plausible. Such premises are drawn from “the opinions (τὰ δοκοῦντα) of all or most people or the wise.” (*Top.* 100a29-30, 100b21-22). The questioner will want to be sure that the premise is sufficiently persuasive to be accepted by the answerer.

Now, Aristotle may have been the first to develop a *techne* of dialectic. For that accomplishment, he may have considered himself its inventor. But he was not the first to think about dialogues—Plato is his clear predecessor. Readers of the two philosophers have naturally wondered how much of his master’s dialectic the young Stagirite imbibed. It is generally held that Aristotle’s treatises, *Topics* and *Sophistical Refutations*, are handbooks for the live debates that were popular in his intellectual milieu,¹⁵ and specifically that these works have in mind the

¹³ This definition reappears in *Prior Analytics* (24b18-20).

¹⁴ As Smith (1997: 43) understands both τεθέντων and κειμένων.

¹⁵ Le Blond (1939: ch. 1), Moraux (1968), Bolton (1990), Slomkowski (1997: ch. 1), and Castelnérac and Marion (2009: 10ff.) describe these bouts.

debates practiced in the Academy.¹⁶ But these are entirely different concerns from that of this dissertation: to what extent we can apply Aristotelian dialectical theory to Plato's *written* dialogues.

Some aspects of this application will be unsavory for modern readers. For example, the question of Aristotle's recognition of "non-dialectical" features of a Platonic dialogue. Because of Aristotle's enthusiasm for the deductive method, we sometimes cannot avoid the feeling that Aristotle saw dialogues "as little more than (dispensable) vehicles" for philosophy.¹⁷ Recent scholarship has shown, on the contrary, that the dialogue form and all that comes with it is of great importance for Plato's philosophical program.¹⁸ For that reason, Fink's more tempered approach is rather attractive: surely Aristotle, who recognized the rhetorical force of "allegory and irony", "analogy", "example", and "reasoning... from what is close to the experience or immediate perception of everyone" could see the value of the drama behind the deductions.¹⁹

We might also fear that an Aristotelian hermeneutic might not account for the philosophical advantages of the dialogue form. By writing dialogues, the philosopher frees herself from the views of any character in the dialogue.²⁰ This consideration provides the reader with ample space for personal engagement with the ideas presented in the dialogues.²¹ Aristotle,

¹⁶ Huby (1962), Brunschwig (1967: lxxxiii-xcvi), and Dorion (1995) argue that the treatises date to Aristotle's Academic years. Hambruch (1904), Cherniss (1944:1-82), Düring (1968: 212ff.), Solmsen (1968), Smith (1993: 342), and Crane (2013) argue that the *Topics* is a response to Academic debate. Sainati (1968: 27-29) is critical of the idea of Platonic influence.

¹⁷ Klagge 1992: 3.

¹⁸ Nightingale (1995), Kahn (1996: ch. 2), Blondell (2002: 1-112).

¹⁹ Fink 2012b: 185, esp. n. 22.

²⁰ See Frede (1992), Wolfsdorf (1999), Blondell (2002), Peterson (2011), Cotton (2014).

²¹ See Press (ed. 2000) for a volume of essays generated by this interpretation.

on the other hand, often ascribes the arguments of the dialogues to Plato himself.²² Such concerns have made many scholars reluctant to read Plato too closely with Aristotle as a guide.²³

A Peripatetic approach must answer these criticisms. The most cogent seem to be (1) Aristotle's claim that he, not Plato, was the prime mover of dialectic, and (2) that this approach is exclusively concerned with the argumentation of dialogues.²⁴ I would point out that (1) Aristotle may have applauded himself for the invention of a technical dialectic, but he credited Plato with "a share in dialectic", a share that enabled his master philosophically to progress beyond his predecessors.²⁵ Furthermore, (2) we can accept in advance that Aristotle will be more useful for his analysis of the arguments than the drama of the dialogues. We can't expect the Philosopher to do everything, and we don't have to rely exclusively on Aristotle for our reading of the dialogues.

That said, Aristotle *does* help us understand Plato's argumentation better. This "Aristotelian reading", which has generated a rich secondary literature,²⁶ has many advantages. First, it offers a solid starting point for those interested in forming an account of Socratic questioning. In the past 70 years, there has been an explosion of studies dedicated to this question, with only deeper *aporia* as a result.²⁷ We can sympathize with Brickhouse and Smith's

²² *GC* 325b24-25, 332a29-30, *Met.* 355b32-33, *Met.* 991b3, *Pol.* 1274b9-15. See Fink 2012b: 186. Gill (2006: 136-37) cites Shorey (1904) and Cherniss (1936) as early 20th c. proponents for such an understanding of Plato, and Brisson (1998) and Pradeau (2002) as more recent ones. See Wolfsdorf (1999) for a critique.

²³ For example, Moraux (1968), Brunschwig (1986: 34-36), Kahn (1981: 310 n. 13), Dorion (2012: 259-264).

²⁴ C. Gill (2006: 137) notes that a view only to "the methods of argument and on quality of argumentation" characterized the analytic Anglo-American reception of Plato in general.

²⁵ See *Met.* 987b31-33.

²⁶ e.g., Ryle (1966, esp. 102ff., and 1968), Barnes (1970), Smith (1993: 341-2), Chiba (2010: 211-215), Fink (ed. 2012).

²⁷ We only need consider Robinson (1953: 28ff.), Gulley (1968: 43ff.), Irwin (1977: 33ff.), Vlastos (1983), and the responses to Vlastos (Kraut 1983, Brickhouse & Smith 1984, Polansky 1985, Benson 1995, Bolton 1993), and the

claim, in the face of so many contradictory claims, that “there simply is no such thing as ‘the Socratic *elenchos*.’”²⁸ The problem with such approaches, I submit, is that they offer a prescriptive account of what Plato may or may not have systematized, with little to no comparison with the dialectic of Plato’s contemporaries.

0.2 The Argument and its Place in the Scholarship

I will compare Plato’s argumentation with competitive question-and-answer bouts, an institution that preceded Plato and Socrates, and claim: (1) Plato innovated in this genre (1a) by endowing it with some ethical purpose (viz., the exposure of ignorance as intellectual therapy); (1b) by developing it with inspiration from other disciplines, e.g., by borrowing the procedure of geometrical hypotheses; and (1c) by distinguishing between constructive and destructive kinds of dialectical reasoning. (2) Aristotle’s logical works describe Plato’s argumentative strategies, and hence (3) Aristotle’s testimony augments claims (1a-c). (4) Aristotle’s logical works can illuminate, and perhaps account for, many common concerns in the scholarship: why Socrates seems to cheat,²⁹ or contradict his own opinions,³⁰ or assert the refutation of an opinion when he has only demonstrated its incompatibility with another opinion.³¹

series of essays in Scott (2002). Ironically, Vlastos, who initiated so much literature on the ‘Socratic elenchus’, cautioned against the view that Plato had ‘baptized’ the term. He traced the term of art “Socratic elenchus” to Grote (1865), Campbell (1867), and Sidgwick (1872). (Vlastos 1983: 37).

²⁸ Brickhouse and Smith 2002: 155. Cf. O’Connor’s (2002) review of the volume in which this article appears: “The answer to the title question [*Does Socrates Have a Method?*] given by the twelve essays (and two of the four commentaries) in this loosely organized volume is, ‘No.’”

²⁹ For discussion see Vlastos (1991: 132-156), Guthrie (1975: 246), and Kahn (1983: 93).

³⁰ E.g., he argues for hedonism in the *Protagoras*, against it in the *Gorgias*, and adopts a middle position in the *Philebus*. See Frede (1986) and (1996).

³¹ The “problem of the elenchus”, see Vlastos (1983), Kraut (1983), Benson (1987), and Bolton (1993).

Mine is not the first work to read Plato with Aristotle. Thionville (1855) wrote a commentary on the *Gorgias* based on the *Topics*. Crane (2013) has similarly commented on *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, and *Rival Lovers*. The third *Symposium Aristotelicum* (1968) featured six papers on the application of the *Topics* to Plato's dialogues,³² and on the same theme, Fink (2012) recently edited a volume entitled *The Development of Dialectic from Plato to Aristotle*.³³ Nevertheless, this method of interpreting Plato remains uncommon.³⁴ And, among the works I have just cited, there are few attempts to read extended sections of Plato with Aristotelian criteria. So, I would like to contribute to the field by readings three Platonic dialogues (the *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, and *Meno*) with my synthesis of Aristotle's criteria for argumentation that we find in his logical works (especially the *Topics* and *Analytics*).³⁵

0.3 ἀγῶνες λόγων and the Philosophers' Innovations

Weisser and Thaler, in a recent volume on Greek polemics, claim that the Athenians would have seen little to distinguish "philosophical" (read: Socratic/Platonic/Aristotelian) argumentation from sophistical. It would have been easier, they argue, for Plato and Aristotle to have rejected philosophizing by question-and-answer.³⁶ Had the two done so, they could have made a neat division between themselves and the sophists: "They argue, we philosophize." Indeed, they did not *have* to write dialogues: the pre-Socratics were happy to speculate without

³² The articles are by Solmsen, Ryle, Moreau, de Vogel, Owen, and Elders.

³³ Other notables include Hambruch (1904), Solmsen (esp. 1928: 156-162), Cherniss (1944: 1-80), de Pater (1965), and Bolton (1992)

³⁴ E.g., it is not mentioned in C. Gill's survey of interpretations of Plato (2006: 137ff).

³⁵ cf. Crane (2013), which reads extended passages of Plato almost exclusively with *Topics/SE*.

³⁶ Weisser and Thaler 2016: 5.

the question-and-answer structure.³⁷ But because Plato and Aristotle insisted that there was “good” argumentation, and that they practiced it, they had to “attempt to trace and define the difference” between themselves and the sophists, and “insist that *their* arguments were aimed at the truth.”³⁸

The methods of this “philosophical argumentation” share similar structures and features. De Pater notes that for both Plato and Aristotle, “la définition est la grande préoccupation de la dialectique.”³⁹ Bolton says that, “Aristotle gives us [a] descriptive account of the rules of the method which Socrates uses, but hardly himself describes.”⁴⁰ Bolton provides examples. Both Plato and Aristotle share a “say what you believe requirement”.⁴¹ Both are concerned with pretended knowledge.⁴² Both connect knowledge with providing a *logos* (or an *aitia*) of a thing’s nature.⁴³

The two philosophers share a dialectical vocabulary. We can appreciate this fact just from the beginning of *Topics* (100a18-30). Aristotle writes about μέθοδον (100a18), συλλογίζεσθαι (100a19), and ἔνδοξα (100a29-30). The term μέθοδος occurs once in Antiphon the sophist,⁴⁴ but

³⁷ Brunschwig 2003: 27-33. It is interesting that most presentations of the history of philosophy present a transition from pre-Socratic philosophy to Platonic. But if we only consider the question of literary genre, Plato rather appears to follow the tradition of question-and-answer debate, not the philosophical poetic tradition. For the latter, see Fränkl (1975) and Rowe (1983).

³⁸ Weisser and Thaler 2016: 5-6.

³⁹ de Pater 1965: 67. This fact is even more curious, given Aristotle’s pessimism about dialectic’s ability to yield episteme. For a thorough, recent treatment, see Charles’ (ed. 2010) volume on definition.

⁴⁰ 1994: 121.

⁴¹ See *SE* 165b4-5; *Pl. G.* 495a-b, 500b, *Crit.* 49d, *Prot.* 331c, *La.* 193c.

⁴² *SE* 165b5-6 and 171b; *Pl. Ap.* 23d, *Charm.* 171c, *G.* 464d, *HMa.* 298B, *Euthph* 13c.

⁴³ *EE* 1246b35-6; *G.* 465A, 501A, 500E-501B.

⁴⁴ *Fr.* 13.23. Perhaps also in Aesop (see 1.5 and 8.3). Note that the unprefixd ὁδός is sometimes an equivalent to μέθοδος in contemporary scientific literature, e.g. *Hipp. Prisca Med.* 2.1, 4.6, etc. Plato’s use of the prefix, which

otherwise, Plato and Aristotle are the first attestations of the terms. Aristotle uses the term 22 times in the *Organon*, of which 18 are in *Topics/Sophistici Elenchi*. Our evidence from the *corpora* of the two philosophers is consistent with the hypothesis that μέθοδος is a dialectical term of art inherited from Plato.⁴⁵ After Aristotle claims that the activity under discussion is “making deductions” (συλλογίζεσθαι), he defines deduction as “an argument in which after certain premises have been set down something other than the premises comes about by necessity through the premises.”⁴⁶ (*Top* 100a25-27). Plato approaches the Aristotelian sense of the term and perhaps reaches it.⁴⁷ ἔνδοξα, or opinions (τὰ δοκοῦντα) made reputable by being those of the many or the wise, are the material for dialectical inquiry, without which a discussion cannot properly be called dialectic at all (*Top.* 100a29-30). We can assume that such reputable opinions would either be taken for granted by our respondents, or be plausible enough that the respondents could not easily deny them. Based on the evidence we have, the philosophical use of

creates the meaning of “pursuit”, often indicates an aspiration to arrive at definitional knowledge, usually by *diaeresis*. See *Phd.* 79e3, *Sph.* 218d5, 227a8, 235c6, 243d7, 265a2, *Plt.* 260e8, 266d7, 286d9, *Phdr.* 270d9.

⁴⁵ “By its etymology it could mean ‘following on the road after’, pursuit’, though this sense does not seem to appear until well after Aristotle.” (Smith 1997: 41.) Pace Smith, in Plato’s *Sophist* it *does* have this sense, of “hunting after” or “pursuing” the definition of a sophist.

⁴⁶ “Ἔστι δὴ συλλογισμὸς λόγος ἐν ᾧ τεθέντων τινῶν ἕτερόν τι τῶν κειμένων ἐξ ἀνάγκης συμβαίνει διὰ τῶν κειμένων. (*Top.* 100a25-27). συλλογισμὸς is sometimes translated as “deduction” or “reasoning” (e.g., the Pickard-Cambridge translation of the *Topics* uses both). In this dissertation, I will generally translate συλλογισμὸς with “deduction”, or occasionally “syllogism”. Part of the difficulty of συλλογισμὸς is that it can mean either the more general definition of deduction offered in 100a25-27, or, specifically, the three-term categorical syllogism (see n. 11 above). As Aristotle saw himself as the inventor of the latter, I will use the more general term “deduction” when I discuss Plato. It is unclear whether Aristotle wrote *Topics/SE* before *Prior Analytics*, in which συλλογισμὸς acquired the sense of a three-term categorical syllogism. Thus it is safer to understand συλλογισμὸς in the more general sense in Aristotle’s two treatises on dialectic. I will translate συλλογισμὸς with “syllogism” when I discuss a technical point in secondary literature (e.g., hypothetical syllogisms).

⁴⁷ In *Gorg.* 479c5, Socrates asks Polus whether he can see the consequences of an argument, or whether the two need to deduce (συλλογίζεσθαι) together. Polus wants Socrates to deduce with him, so Socrates leads him through the consequences of their argument (479d): “Injustice is the greatest evil, not paying the penalty for injustice retains the evil in us, so not paying the penalty for injustice creates an even worse evil.” In *Gorg.* 498e10, Socrates uses συλλογίζεσθαι to mean “see what the consequences of one’s admissions are” (τί ἡμῖν συμβαίνει ἐκ τῶν ὁμολογημένων). Thanks to A. Crager for the tip.

the term seems to be an Aristotelian innovation,⁴⁸ but the concept is not. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates makes an assault on Protagorean relativism beginning with the opinions (τὰ δοκοῦντα) of Theodorus and himself.⁴⁹ The Eleatic Stranger begins with the opinions (τὰ δοκοῦντα) of Theaetetus and himself to refute Parmenides.⁵⁰ Socrates in the *Gorgias* identifies τὰ δοκοῦντα with τοὺς πρώτους λόγους in a debate.⁵¹

The way that the two philosophers use *elenchus* may leave us in *aporia*. *Elenchus* appears only once in *Topics*, but occurs ninety-eight times in *Sophistical Refutations*. Not a surprise, given the title of that work. On the other hand, if this component of dialectic was important enough to merit an appendix treatise, we might wonder why it is wholly absent from *Topics* I-VIII. Dorion has argued that by *Sophistical Refutations*, Aristotle could make “the logical dimension of the *elenchus* subordinate to its moral intention.”⁵² Until that point, Aristotle avoided the term to avoid association with the Academy,⁵³ and the connotations of shame which the Academy attached to *elenchus*.⁵⁴ This theory is plausible, but the term *elenchus* is problematic within the Platonic corpus as well. Plato’s prefers the term /ἐξετάζ-/ in the “early”

⁴⁸ In prior usage it is almost always in the comparative or superlative (Isoc. 1.37.4, 15.318.1, 5.14.5, 5.52.3, 5.55.3, 5.82.6, *ep.* 2.6.6; Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.56, 3.5.1, *Ag.* 1.3.5, 1.19.4, *Hip.* 8.7.2) or in reference to people (Isoc. 5.67.2, Xen. *Ana.* 6.1.23). Aristotle’s is the first usage of *endoxon* as a quasi-nominal “reputable opinion.” See the survey in Frede (2012), which reached similar conclusions.

⁴⁹ *Tht.* 171d5. Of course, there is an irony there, as Protagoras argues “How things seem to be for someone is how things actually are for that person.” (τὸ δοκοῦν ἐκάστῳ τοῦτο καὶ εἶναι [ὁ Πρωταγόρας] φησί που ᾧ δοκεῖ.) (*Tht.* 170a3-4.)

⁵⁰ *Sph.* 242b10.

⁵¹ *Gorg.* 495a7-9.

⁵² Dorion 2012: 253.

⁵³ Dorion 2012: 265.

⁵⁴ See, e.g., Blank (1993a).

dialogues.⁵⁵ The noun ἔλεγχος only occurs in these dialogues twice (*Ap.* 39c7, *Prot.* 344b4) (if we except the *Gorgias*, where it occurs eight times). The verb ἐλέγχειν is more common, but still underwhelming in attestation. It occurs sixteen times in the “early” dialogues (if we except the *Gorgias*, where it occurs twenty-five times).⁵⁶ I think that the rhetorical context of the *Gorgias* motivates such high usage. Socrates is drawing a parallel between a professional practice of his interlocutors (i.e. cross-examination in court) and his own task of testing other people’s opinions. Only in later dialogues, such as *Sophist* (230c-d), would the term approach a dialectical term of art. We can only guess whether there is any parallel between Aristotle’s strikingly low usage in *Topics* and Plato’s in the aporetic dialogues, in which the *elenchus* is on full display. It could be that the term developed gradually, and that we can trace its slow development in the works of both Plato and Aristotle. After all, many consider *Topics* to be a very early, perhaps even Academic, work of Aristotle’s.⁵⁷ But we can only speculate.

Perhaps the most conspicuous similarity between Plato and Aristotle is their appropriation of hypothesis from mathematics for dialectic.⁵⁸ The origins of hypothetical reasoning in Greek geometry are murky.⁵⁹ We know that by the fifth century, mathematicians like Hippocrates of Chios were making indirect proofs by the assumption of an initial premise.⁶⁰ Whether he popularized the technique or not, within the 5th century “the indirect proof must have

⁵⁵ See Fink (2012a: 15) for discussion and comparison with Aristotle’s peirastic dialectic.

⁵⁶ Pace Vlastos (1983: 37): “There are dozens of uses of the noun and the verb in Plato, a majority of them in the early dialogues.” See the helpful charts in Tarrant (2002: 64-66).

⁵⁷ See the references in n. 17, as well as Chiba (2010: 215).

⁵⁸ See Menn (2002) for a full discussion.

⁵⁹ Cf. Szabó (1978: 245-50). I am indebted to this source for the references in n. 61. See also Netz (1999: ch. 3).

⁶⁰ See Rudio (1907). Hippocrates uses the example of squares placed on the diameters of circles (Becker 1958: 218ff.), just like Plato in *Meno* (See Szabó 1978: 245-50).

been the most widely used technique of proof.”⁶¹ Plato, studying mathematics, saw the clear parallel between this indirect proof and (what would become) the deduction *ex hypothesi*.⁶² But no matter how obvious a connection it may seem, we must admit that Plato was the first to make it. In the passage in which it is introduced in the *Meno* (86e1-87b2), the concept is marked for its novelty. By contrast, in Aristotle, “the repeated reference to such arguments without further explanation allows us to assume that at Aristotle’s time, members of the *Peripatos* were generally familiar with such arguments.”⁶³ Dialectical arguments from a hypothesis appear to have been part of the Academic curriculum.

If the goal of the hypothetical method is demonstrative knowledge, then one will be confronted with *ad infinitum* regression. Plato and Aristotle both were aware of this challenge. In the same dialogue, Socrates admonishes Meno not to think that they have *proved* that virtue is teachable. They still must justify the hypothetical premise “virtue is knowledge”, which was assumed only for the sake of the argument. They then have to fill in the deduction: “X is knowledge”, “All virtue is X”, therefore “All virtue is knowledge.” Socrates fills in “good” for X, but the two ultimately cannot escape from the problem of regression. Despite the claims that the *Meno* stands as a “transitional” dialogue away from the inconclusive “early” dialogues, Socrates and Meno end their discussion in *aporia*.

So, *does* Plato find a way to achieve ἐπιστήμη? Such a problem falls outside the present study, which will argue that the *Meno* offers no epistemic developments for Socrates, so I will only mention a few approaches. Some scholars try to “save” Plato’s epistemology by claiming

⁶¹ Szabó (1978: 247); see also Striker (2009: 171).

⁶² For Plato’s interest in mathematics, see Fowler (1987), Burnyeat (1987), Lloyd (1991: ch. 14), Pritchard (1995), Popper (1998: ch. 9), Horky (2013: ch. 4-5).

⁶³ Bobzien (2002: 364-5).

that he is a coherentist.⁶⁴ Let hypotheses be assumed *ad infinitum*, so long as we evade contradiction.⁶⁵ Others think that Plato introduced the notion of *anamnesis* to add epistemological foundations to hypothetical reasoning.⁶⁶ The former opinion is attractive insofar as the goal of dialectic is indeed “avoiding saying anything contradictory” (*Top.* 100a20-21). But whether Socrates appears to think that the consistent upholding of a belief is sufficient to motivate knowledge seems questionable.⁶⁷ As for the latter view, there is nothing to recommend it in the *Meno*. *Anamnesis* is introduced to keep the conversation moving after Meno becomes quarrelsome. It is a hypothesis Socrates introduces to explain the possibility of learning.

0.4.1 Classification of Arguments

Plato and Aristotle sketch out various kinds of arguments. Both are slightly vague about the divisions, and as a result, both use a variety of terms to describe each kind. Aristotle makes this classification at the beginning of *Sophistical Refutations*: there are “examinational”, “dialectical”, “eristic”, and “pedagogical” arguments. Sometimes it is difficult to tell where one begins and one ends. And some functions of dialectic are hard to locate in this division (for example, competitive and gymnastic dialectic). Perhaps it would be more helpful to classify “dialectical” arguments as *constructive*, and “examinational” arguments as *refutative*, and consider the other two special cases.

⁶⁴As Nally (2015) has most recently argued. She cites sympathetic predecessors: Burnyeat (1980, 1990: 216-217), Nehamas (1989, 1992), Fine (1990: 105-115), Sayre (1995: 177-181), Benson (1995).

⁶⁵ Aristotle envisions such an epistemology in *APo* 72b15-18. See Crager (2017: 25) for notes on these “Circular Demonstrators.”

⁶⁶ See Stenzel (1964: 15), Cherniss (1944: 47), Vlastos (1994: 29)

⁶⁷ As we will see in *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*, Socrates appears to uphold certain positions (hedonism, an interpretation of Simonides, a theory of *techne*, etc.) with no indication that he *knows* or even *believes* these ideas.

Aristotle offers such a classification in the *Rhetoric*, as he compares dialectical arguments to rhetorical ones.

ἔστιν γὰρ τῶν ἐνθυμημάτων εἶδη δύο· τὰ μὲν γὰρ δεικτικά ἐστὶν ὅτι ἔστιν ἢ οὐκ ἔστιν, τὰ δ' ἐλεγκτικά, καὶ διαφέρει ὡσπερ ἐν τοῖς διαλεκτικοῖς ἔλεγχος καὶ συλλογισμός. ἔστι δὲ τὸ μὲν δεικτικὸν ἐνθύμημα τὸ ἐξ ὁμολογουμένων συνάγειν, τὸ δὲ ἐλεγκτικὸν τὸ τὰ ἀνομολογούμενα συνάγειν. (1396b22-27).

There are two kinds of enthymemes. For there are probative enthymemes that show something is or is not the case, and refutative enthymemes. They differ in the same way that an elenchus and deduction differ in dialectic. The probative enthymeme draws together from things that agree, and the refutative draws together things inconsistent.

Aristotle notes the differences between “refutative enthymemes”/”elenchi” and “demonstrative enthymemes”/”deductions”, and they apparently conform to the constructive/refutative purposes outlined above. The orator dealing in “demonstrative enthymemes” will call different facts to an audience’s mind, such that a certain course of action or decision becomes especially recommended. The same orator in a trial will use her adversary’s arguments to point out contradictions. Similarly, the dialectician in a friendly discussion might collect opinions plausible to this interlocutor to show him the consequences of his beliefs; or persuade him as to the implausibility of certain consequences (cf. *SE* 183a37-38). That same dialectician, in an ἀγὼν λόγων, will seek to refute the position of her adversary through premises sufficiently plausible to that adversary to win consent. This too is a requirement lifted from early Socratic conversations.⁶⁸

0.4.2 Classification of Arguments: Peirastic

⁶⁸ *Ap.* 23d, *Chrm* 171c, *Gorg.* 464d, *H.Ma.* 298B, *Euthph* 13c. As noted in Bolton (1993: 135).

In *Sophistical Refutations*, Aristotle coins a term for the first kind of argument: “peirastic”. The name didn’t stick—outside of this treatise it is hardly used again.⁶⁹ But what he describes by the term receives due coverage elsewhere.⁷⁰ These arguments are a subset of “dialectical arguments” generally (a point Aristotle makes explicit in 169b25), and the reason is clear. The latter reasons from the opinions (τὰ δοκοῦντα) of all, the many or the wise, and the former reasons from the opinions (τὰ δοκοῦντα) of the answerer. This answerer is typically someone who “claims to have knowledge (τῷ προσποιουμένῳ ἔχειν τὴν ἐπιστήμην). Aristotle clarifies what he means by this later in the treatise—it is “characteristic of peirastic” to expose the ignorant. (169b23-25, 171b4-5).

The questioner can be ignorant and ask questions “from consequences which nothing stops one ignorant of the *techne* from knowing”. If the answerer fails to know these consequences, *a fortiori* he is ignorant of the art (172a21-27). So, the questioner needs no technical knowledge. This should remind us of Socrates’ manner of questioning.⁷¹ Indeed, in Aristotle’s summary at the end of *Sophistical Refutations*, he refers to Socrates by name: “On this account Socrates asked questions but did not answer them— for he used to confess that he was ignorant.” (183b7-8). In other words, nothing stopped Socrates from practicing peirastic argumentation, an argumentation in which everyone, even amateurs engages (172a34), such that people seem to practice it almost by nature (*SE* 172a31-32).

0.4.3 Classification of Arguments: “Constructive”

⁶⁹ Outside of *Sophistical Refutations*, Aristotle only uses the term once (*Met.* 1004b25). No one uses the term “peirastic” again until Galen.

⁷⁰ Although Aristotle never uses the term “peirastic” in *Topics*, this is clearly what he has in mind in *Top.* 159a25, 159a33, 161a25.

⁷¹ *Pace* Dorion (2012), who argues against applying Aristotle’s *peirastic* to Socrates.

Constructive arguments have premises plausible for an interlocutor to accept, and which have a positive outcome. For example, “Pleasure is good, the good is always choice-worthy, therefore pleasure is always choice-worthy.” These arguments characterize the dialogues that we have for the sake of intellectual exercise (*Top.* 101a26), persuading others (101a30-34), or philosophical inquiry (*Cat.* 24a28-24b3, *Top.* 101a35-37, 159a27-28). The reason one would argue for the sake of “intellectual exercise” is clear enough. There are conversations of this kind in Plato, e.g. the discussion between Aristotle and Parmenides.⁷² “Gymnastic” dialectic is a “training or practice... for philosophy,”⁷³ developing the philosopher’s “intellectual virtuosity.”⁷⁴ In their more aggressive form, they become a rule-based “dialectical joust”.⁷⁵ The benefits of such exercises extended beyond skill in jousting. The philosopher became more adept at finding middle terms (*APr.* 66a25ff.)⁷⁶ and can better see how many ways any term is used (*SE* 175a7-9). The practiced debater will be less frequently deceived by apparent homonyms (*SE* 175a10-12), and will better anticipate counter-arguments.

“Constructive dialectic” is also suitable for persuading a well-disposed interlocutor. Aristotle speaks of a special venue, “casual encounters” (τὰς ἐντεύξεις), in which we “reckon with the opinions of the many, and we attend to them not from the basis of other people’s beliefs but their own, and we shift whatever they appear to say unsoundly.” (*Top.* 101a30-34). This is the last we hear about “encounters” (ἐντεύξεις) in the *Topics*, and the word is rare enough that it

⁷² For brief treatments see Meinwald (1991: 21-22) and McCabe (2015: ch. 8).

⁷³ Allen (2007: 99).

⁷⁴ Moraux 1968: 300. Cf. Smith (1997: 129), Fink (2012a: 13).

⁷⁵ Moraux 1968.

⁷⁶ No small skill. See *APo* 89b36

is difficult to know what Aristotle has in mind.⁷⁷ Some have suggested that it refers to extramural show-downs.⁷⁸ But I am skeptical. Aristotle's use of the term in the *Rhetoric* offers another interpretation, especially because the passage in which the word occurs refers back to the *Topics*: "As we said in the *Topics*, it's necessary to make our proofs and arguments according to common principles when we are interacting with the many" (περὶ τῆς πρὸς τοὺς πολλοὺς ἐντεύξεως *Rhet.* 1355a27-29). Both in the *Topics* and *Rhetoric*, Aristotle treats the purposes for which dialectic/rhetoric is useful. In the latter case, Aristotle claims that there are situations where we might have the most exact knowledge (ἀκριβεστάτην ἐπιστήμην) of a subject, but it would still not be easy to persuade others. (1355a24-26). Therefore, he says that it is necessary to make "proofs and arguments from commonplaces" (διὰ τῶν κοινῶν ποιῆσθαι τὰς πίστεις καὶ τοὺς λόγους 1355a27-28). Indeed, it is a "great help" if an orator "meets with the opinions" of an audience (*Rhet.* 1395b1-3).

We can be reminded of a dialectician making arguments from common or plausible opinions. If we take the passage from the *Rhetoric* as an interpretive key, then we can understand that dialectic has a *persuasive* function,⁷⁹ with a like power to "change" (μεταβιβάζοντες) what other people "do not seem to state well."⁸⁰ This sort of persuasion had a long afterlife in the

⁷⁷ Before Aristotle, it occurs once in Isocrates (1.20.7) and once in Plato (*Plt.* 298d3).

⁷⁸ See Smith (1997) *ad loc.* for discussion. Wagner and Rapp (2004: 272) consider it to be philosophical debates with the unlearned. This accords with the usage of the word in Ps.-Aristot. *MM* 1.28.1.1-2 & 2.3.3.1ff. There, the author considers the virtuous man's dealings with the common run of people.

⁷⁹ Cf. Ross (1949: 484), who argues that dialectical arguments are entirely concerned with persuasion. Dialectic differs from rhetoric only by its venue.

⁸⁰ Cf. Smith "Translators have struggled to give this a plausible sense, but if Aristotle has in mind previously compiled tabulations of opinions, this most likely means just 'replacing our audience's clumsy formulations of their own views with better ones we have worked out in advance.'" (1993: 350-51)

reception of Aristotle’s dialectic,⁸¹ perhaps because it explains why Aristotle makes such a fuss about arguing from plausible opinions, or *endoxa*. The opinions that undergird dialectical arguments (*Top.* 162b1-2) cannot “be the opinion of nobody” (τὸ μηδενὶ δοκοῦν) (*Top.* 104a6) nor can they be evident to all (τὸ πᾶσι φανερόν) (*Top.* 104a6-7). One sign that something is not *endoxon*, is that the denial of it seems like a lie (*SE* 176b14-15). A sign that something is *endoxon* is that “people think differently” (ἀμφιδοξοῦσιν) about the question (*SE* 176b15-16). For example, it is plausible that the souls of animals are immortal, and it is plausible that they are not (*SE* 176b16-17). For these reasons, opinions tend to change quickly. Not only because the one with the opinion is in a changeable state (*Cat.* 8b26), but because the object of opinion tends to be changeable (*Cat.* 4a26-30).

The “endoxic aspect” of dialectic has an analogy in rhetoric. This is the “argument from judgment” (ἐκ κρίσεως) (*Rhet.* 1398b21-26) when one is arguing about the same or similar subject as, or contrary to, a decision with authoritative precedent. Like *endoxa*, these gain their authority by being the view of “everyone”; or “the majority or the wise”, and of the latter either “all or most” of them; or “the good” (πάντες καὶ ἀεὶ, εἰ δὲ μή, ἀλλ’ οἳ γε πλεῖστοι, ἢ σοφοὶ ἢ πάντες ἢ οἱ πλεῖστοι, ἢ ἀγαθοί). (*Rhet.* 1398b21-26). This is nearly the same formula we find in *Topics* for *endoxa*. (πᾶσιν ἢ τοῖς πλείστοις ἢ τοῖς σοφοῖς, καὶ τούτοις ἢ πᾶσιν ἢ τοῖς πλείστοις) (*Top.* 100b21-23). In the cases of both judgments and *endoxa*, the orator or interlocutor selects a position on the merit either of how widely accepted it is, or of its status among the wise. In the context of the *Rhetoric* this move has much to commend it: Aristotle goes on to claim that it would not be honorable to make a judgment contrary to those that are especially reputable (*Rhet.*

⁸¹ “In *The Book of Letters* al-Fārābī advocates teaching the elite philosophers with demonstrations while using only the persuasive methods of rhetoric and poetry for the people incapable of grasping proof.” (Bäck 2011; 13-14).

1391b25-26). However, there is a difference between these two *topoi*, motivated perhaps by the difference in art. The appeal to judgments in the *Rhetoric* has as its best scenario the end of a discussion.⁸² In *Topics*, *endoxa* are the bases of reasoning (*Top.* 100a29-30), and are a spur to *further* discussion and discovery (*Top.* 101a26-36).

Dealing with reputable opinions is not only useful for persuasion but also contributes to the “philosophical function” of dialectic. Aristotle maintains that what “is true and better is by nature always easier to deduce and more persuasive.” (*Rhet.* 1355a37-38). This is because “it is characteristic of one who is able to be sagacious vis-à-vis *endoxa* to be similarly so vis-à-vis the truth.” (*Rhet.* 1355a17-18). Rhetoric and dialectic develop one’s epistemic faculties, even if they are not epistemic pursuits in themselves. They do not provide knowledge to the interlocutors (*Met.* 1004b25-26, *SE* 172a15-17). The conversation only explores the consequences of beliefs that seemed initially plausible to one or both parties, such that the basis of that plausibility is either confirmed or weakened (cf. *Top.* 101a35-36). This is what Aristotle would call a common project (*Top.* 161a38), or what Plato would call a “co-search”.

This interpretation contrasts with a line of thought developed most notably by Owen, Irwin, and Nussbaum in the second half of the last century. This school, whose adherents Dorothea Frede has referred to as “friends of the *endoxa*”, see an equivalence between *phainomena* and *endoxa*, the former being a starting point in natural philosophy, the latter in less empirical branches of philosophy.⁸³ According to this school, puzzling and having a dialogue about questions that admit of different plausible opinions can lead one to *episteme*. In Irwin’s

⁸² “Persuasive arguments are employed to make a judgment. There is no need for an argument concerning those matters that we know and on which have made a judgment.” ἐπεὶ δὲ ἡ τῶν πιθανῶν λόγων χρῆσις πρὸς κρίσιν ἐστὶ (περὶ ὧν γὰρ ἴσμεν καὶ κεκρίκαμεν οὐδὲν ἔτι δεῖ λόγου). (*Rhet.* 1391b7-8).

⁸³ See Owen 1961, Irwin (1988: 29ff), Nussbaum (1986: ch. 8). For Frede’s critique of this equivalence (which I accept), see (2012: 188, 214)

formulation, perhaps the most developed, the *endoxa* one proposes are guaranteed to be correct by the intuition (*nous*) that led you to defend the one you defended in the first place.⁸⁴ Dialectic tends to justify and make intuition coherent.⁸⁵ On the other hand, intuition justifies the first principles that appear as premises in dialectic.⁸⁶ This reading has been adequately challenged elsewhere, and so I only allude to it for its importance in recent reception of Aristotle's dialectic.⁸⁷ I would stress that this "high epistemic" function of dialectic is a very recent understanding of Aristotle's dialectic, one at odds with his reception in late antiquity,⁸⁸ in the Arabic world,⁸⁹ and in the scholastic tradition.

Even if dialectical deductions cannot lead one to knowledge, they are useful in making one's own belief-set more consistent. A questioner can raise puzzles about our belief sets that we as answerers previously did not recognize; this puzzling can stimulate us to make an investigation.⁹⁰ This is why Aristotle is at such pains to highlight the aspect of *contradiction* in dialectical arguments. (*APr* 24a-b, *de Interp.* 20b22, *Top.* 162a18, *SE* 165a2-3). The questioner exposes to the answerer that two of his beliefs cannot be simultaneously held without a

⁸⁴ This theory relies heavily on the role of *nous* in *APo* II.19 to guarantee the transition from opinion to knowledge.

⁸⁵ Irwin 1988: 9.

⁸⁶ Irwin 1988: 134.

⁸⁷ See e.g., Hamlyn (1990), Smith (1993), Frede (2012).

⁸⁸ See e.g., Alex. in *Top.* 5.10-15, 95.29-30.

⁸⁹ "[Avicenna] has the premises of dialectical syllogisms come about from particular posits and assumptions made by those in the context of their discussions. More common dialectical premises come from the endoxic (*mashūr*), what is widely accepted among the experts or in the culture. Such syllogisms have no purpose for a philosopher having wisdom, although they may have some use in educating someone coming to be a philosopher (Bäck 2011: 19).

⁹⁰ Cf *Cat.* 8b21: "Perhaps it is difficult to give a strong opinion on what we have not examined many times (*πολλάκις ἐπεσκεμμένον*). Indeed, to have puzzled (*διηπορηκέναι*) on each of these things is not unprofitable."

contradiction.⁹¹ As an example, one cannot hold the opinion (1) “no one has false opinions” with the opinion that (2) “there are people who hold the opinion that there are false opinions” because then (3) it is a true opinion that there are false opinions, and therefore (1) seems false. (*Tht.* 169d–170c). The interlocutors will not have reached *episteme* about the truth or falsity of Protagorean subjectivism, but the answerer now understands that two opinions she held cannot now be held without either (1) abandoning one or (2) making a distinction within either (or both) premise(s).⁹² As Hamlyn put it, dialectic for Aristotle furnishes “inference to the best explanation.”⁹³

0.4.4 Classification of Arguments: Pedagogical

At the introduction to *Sophistical Refutations* (165a38ff.), Aristotle recognizes a pedagogical (“didascalical”) type of dialectic.⁹⁴ The didascalical *seems* to be the same thing as the apodeictic deduction, which Aristotle discusses in the introduction to the *Topics* (100a25ff.), a section quite similar to that of *Sophistical Refutations*. Some scholars accordingly treat the didascalical and the apodeictic as equivalents.⁹⁵ But Aristotle is describing two different things. In the *Topics*, Aristotle classifies the different deductions (συλλογισμοί) that one can make; in *Sophistical Refutations*, he classifies the four different types of discourse that one can have in

⁹¹ Dialectic “examines commonly held beliefs (*endoxa*), and if it is successful, it reaches a more coherent version of the beliefs we began with, solving the puzzles revealed by our examination of the initial beliefs.” (Irwin 1988: 10). See also Castelnérac and Marion (2009), who argue that the aim of Aristotelian dialectic is consistency in debate.

⁹² Cf. de Pater (1965: 82).

⁹³ Hamlyn 1990: 476.

⁹⁴ Dialectic “takes as its foundations what is relatively more intelligible than what is to be explained—relatively, that is, to the faculties of the audience of the explanation. In this way dialectic is the essential tool in the preliminary work which precedes the establishment of a complete science.” (Evans 1977: 6).

⁹⁵ Comparison with *Topics* may tempt us to identify didascalical as demonstration. (See for example Evans (1977: 32), Reeve (1998: 235), Spranzi (2011: 28), and the glossary entry “didactic argument” in the revised Oxford translation; Cotton (2014: 149) wavers on whether they are the same).

carrying on a dialogue (τῶν ἐν τῷ διαλέγεσθαι λόγων τέτταρα γένη). The former refers to specific arguments that one makes, the latter to the general character of the conversation one is having. For example, one can be locked in an eristical conversation in which the occasional demonstrative deduction is made.

Pedagogical conversations and demonstrative deductions do share an important similarity, one that is perhaps the cause of the assimilation of the two: they produce trust (πίστις) in the result. Demonstrations do this through true and primary premises that are believable (ἔχοντα τὴν πίστιν) in their own right (*Top.* 100a27-b21), such as “a whole is greater than a part.” This is knowledge to which a non-expert reasoner has access. Pedagogical conversations in dialectic reason “from the proper principles of each science and not from the opinions of the answerer, for it is necessary for the student to have trust (πιστεύειν).” (*SE* 165b1-3.) These “principles of each science” are initially unavailable to the non-expert. That is, if the teacher offered them to this non-expert, the latter could use them as premises but would not understand them as first principles. The slave’s demonstration in the *Meno* offers us an example of this. Socrates points out certain geometrical principles to the slave to help him solve a geometrical problem. The slave does not understand the principles, but he trusts Socrates’ suggestion to use them. His trust is rewarded when he finds the solution to his problem—though he remains ignorant of how the principles work.⁹⁶ Demonstration reasons from first principles already known to the respondent, and pedagogical dialectic moves us from what is subjectively more knowable to what is “objectively more knowable” (i.e. the first principles).⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Cf. “Those who first learn something string together arguments, but do not yet know what they mean. For it is necessary for knowledge to become assimilated, but this takes time.” (Aristot. *EN* 1147a20-22). Thanks to G. Lawrence for the reference.

⁹⁷ “Dialectic is not part of a search for truth itself. What is produced is indeed 'clearer and more knowable by us'; for that-its being so for us-is all that something which is very close to being persuasion can produce.” (Hamlyn 1990: 476). Cf. Aquin. in *Apo.* 8.3 (72b-73a20): “But things are said to be probable if they are better known to the wise or

Plato's *Sophist* and *Statesman* give us an idea of what a pedagogical conversation would look like.⁹⁸ Indeed, the *Sophist* includes a discussion of the διδασκαλική [τέχνη], the goal of which is to remove ignorance (ἄγνοια) (*Sph.* 229a9ff). Now, as there is a division between two kinds of ignorance, so the Stranger recognizes a division between two kinds of pedagogical conversation. For ignorance, there is error (τὸ μὴ κατειδότα τι δοκεῖν εἰδέναι) and there is simple ignorance (ἀμαθία). For the former, the removal of ignorance occurs in an *elenchus* (described in 230b-d), at the end of which the answerer realizes she has two incompatible beliefs. The Stranger dubs this process “noble sophistry” (231b). Such, as we have seen, can occur without any knowledge on the part of the questioner; moreover, the refuted answerer does not *know* which belief to discard. But a didascalical *techne* does intend to convey knowledge.⁹⁹

All this helps us understand the somewhat puzzling opening of the *Sophist*:

Σω: πότερον εἴωθας ἥδιον αὐτὸς ἐπὶ σαυτοῦ μακροῦ λόγου διεξιέναι λέγων τοῦτο ὃ ἂν ἐνδείξασθαι τῷ βουλευθῆς, ἢ δι' ἐρωτήσεων...

Ξέ: τῷ μὲν, ὃ Σώκρατες, ἀλύπως τε καὶ εὐηνίως προσδιαλεγόμενῳ ῥᾶον οὕτω, τὸ πρὸς ἄλλον: εἰ δὲ μή, τὸ καθ' αὐτόν... τῷ γὰρ ὄντι τὸ νῦν ῥηθὲν οὐχ ὅσον ὧδε ἐρωτηθὲν ἐλπίσσειεν ἂν αὐτὸ εἶναι τις, ἀλλὰ τυγχάνει λόγου παμμήκους ὄν. (*Sph.* 217c2-4, d1-3, e3-5).

So: Have you been accustomed to prefer to work through whatever you'd like to demonstrate to someone by speaking by yourself in a long speech, or through questioning?

to a great number of persons. Consequently, a dialectical syllogism proceeds from things that are better known to us (*magis nobis nota*). However, it happens that a same thing is better known to some and less known to others. Consequently, there is nothing to hinder a dialectical syllogism from being circular. But a demonstration is formed from things that are absolutely prior (*ex notioribus simpliciter*).” (Larcher translation).

⁹⁸ Blondell (2002: 338) summarizes this idea nicely: The Stranger “distinguishes three modes of discourse—genuine conversation [presumably dialectical λόγοι], continuous monologue, and exposition in the form of question and answer (πρὸς ἕτερον)—and chooses the last (217c-218a). He evidently wishes to employ a method similar to Aristotle's ‘didascalical’ dialectic, in which the questioner knows the right answer in advance, and leads the answerer to see the truth... The teacher, on the other hand, though not interested in the interlocutor's views as such, is obliged by his choice of question and answer form to accommodate the other person's limitations.” She also notes the frequency of the prefix *προσ-* in the Stranger's speech: didascalical dialectic, though it proceeds by questions and answers, is tailored to the answerer. Rowe calls its dynamics that of a “master-pupil” relationship (1996: 176). This is not the συζήτησις envisioned in, e.g., *Meno* 90b.

⁹⁹ See *G.* 454e-455a, where rhetoric is agreed to fall short of being didascalical insofar as it does not yield ἐπιστήμη. The Stranger, on the other hand, claims to be able to arrive at definitions that are τἀληθέστατα (*Pl. Sph.* 268c8-d5). This claim is far more ambitious than the “exposure of ignorance”, the goal of an *elenchus*.

St: Through questioning another is easier, if the answerer will answer without trouble and tractably. If not, by oneself is preferable. For really the present speech is not such as one might expect to be the subject of questioning, but it happens to be material for a very long conversation.

Socrates allows the Stranger to choose whether to indulge in lengthy discourse, or have a questioner-and-answer session.¹⁰⁰ The privilege, we may recall, was denied to Protagoras and Gorgias.¹⁰¹ Perhaps it is extended because the Stranger has already listened thoroughly (διακηκοέναι) to treatment of the subject and hasn't forgotten it (*Sph.* 217b7-8), or because Theodorus and company have questioned him thoroughly (διερωτῶντες) on the topic. The Stranger's grasp of the subject has already been tested.¹⁰² As a result, he is closer to the "principles appropriate to the subject" than anyone else present. To pass on the synthesis of what he has heard, the Stranger wants an interlocutor who will "answer without trouble and tractably." In other words, an interlocutor who understands that it is "necessary for the student to trust." (*SE* 165b3). The Stranger can lead such a student from what the student already knows to what is objectively more knowable, but subjectively quite obscure (e.g., being and non-being, sameness and difference, etc.).

0.4.5 Classification of Arguments: Eristic

ἐριστικὸς δ' ἐστὶ συλλογισμὸς ὁ ἐκ φαινομένων ἐνδόξων μὴ ὄντων δέ, καὶ ὁ ἐξ ἐνδόξων ἢ φαινομένων ἐνδόξων φαινόμενος· οὐ γὰρ πᾶν τὸ φαινόμενον ἐνδοξον καὶ ἔστιν ἐνδοξον. οὐθὲν γὰρ τῶν λεγομένων ἐνδόξων ἐπιπόλαιον ἔχει παντελῶς τὴν φαντασίαν, καθάπερ περὶ τὰς τῶν ἐριστικῶν λόγων ἀρχὰς συμβέβηκεν ἔχειν· παραχρῆμα γὰρ καὶ ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ τοῖς καὶ μικρὰ συνορᾶν δυναμένοις κατάδηλος ἐν αὐτοῖς ἢ τοῦ ψεύδους ἐστὶ φύσις. (100b23-101a1).

A deduction is eristic that is from opinions that are apparently plausible, but are not, or is only an apparent deduction from plausible opinions or seemingly plausible opinions. For not every apparently plausible opinion is really plausible. For none of the so-called plausible opinions show

¹⁰⁰ Note that the Stranger makes a division within the first possibility. There is "dilating and prolonging a discourse by myself or for another person" (ἐκτείναντα ἀπομηκύνειν λόγον συχρὸν κατ' ἑμαυτόν, εἴτε καὶ πρὸς ἕτερον 217e). Both are in contrast to "discourses that go back and forth" (ἔπος πρὸς ἔπος). (217d).

¹⁰¹ *Prt.* 335-336, *Grg.* 561dff.

¹⁰² The repeated suffix δι- flags the (apparent) thoroughness of the Stranger's knowledge.

this appearance at first glance, as happens to be the case concerning the beginnings of eristic arguments. For the nature of the falsehood in these is quite clear, and immediate for the most part even to those capable of little discernment.

Aristotle recognizes a counterfeit to dialectic, eristic. This type of argument occurs when the premises (1) seem to be plausible but are not, or (2) when it seems to be a deduction but is not. In *Sophistical Refutations* Aristotle would add a third kind of eristic, the one that is “merely apparent in its conformity to the subject-matter, so that it is deceptive and unfair.” (*SE* 171b19-20).

We might wonder what would qualify as an “apparently plausible premise.” Smith explains that these are “trick premises” such that “once the trick has been sprung, it is obvious how it works.”¹⁰³ For example, the proposition: “What we haven’t lost we have.” The interlocutor might be led to believe that this is the common-sense premise, “If I have something and haven’t lost it, then I have it.” But we haven’t lost horns, so, strictly speaking, we must have horns.¹⁰⁴ As the questioner makes the deduction the answerer simultaneously realizes that the premise must have been flawed. In good circumstances, she can clarify her real *doxa*. But if the chain of reasoning were long enough, it might be difficult to perceive when the eristic premise was shuffled in. These are the sophomoric tricks on display in Plato’s *Euthydemus*. For example, the sophist brothers roll out such “apparent opinions” as “Socrates wishes Cleinias to die” (283d6), because Socrates wants him to “be no longer what he now is.” (283d3). With these criteria in mind, we can appreciate that “eristic” is *not* a synonym for “false” or “fallacious.” Aristotle assures us that as long as an opinion is “plausible” it is fair game for a dialectical conversation (even if the opinion turns out to be untrue) (*APo* 81b18ff.).

¹⁰³ Smith 1997: 48.

¹⁰⁴ Smith’s example (1997: 48).

We might tease out the motives and methods behind the eristic. For the former, Aristotle says that the eristic answerer “wholly (πάντως) preferring victory undertakes everything (πάντων) [to win].” (*SE* 171b24-25).¹⁰⁵ This is an unfortunate situation for the questioner to find himself in. Aristotle advises fighting fire with fire, to “attack the speaker and not his thesis”, especially when the answerer “is lying in wait for the questioner” and the dialogue becomes “agonistic, and not dialectical.” (*Top.* 161a21-24). This situation compels us sometimes, when we are arguing for the sake of examination, to “reason not only truly, but falsely as well,” (161a26-27). However, we can only do so in moderation. A fallacious premise won’t vitiate a conversation, so long as “all or most” are not. (161b19-24).

Aristotle seems aware that it is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between a peirastic and an eristic conversation. This question has vexed some modern commentators. Some have even abandoned the idea that Socrates and the Sophists differed methodologically—rather, Socrates’ saving grace was his “overall purpose.”¹⁰⁶ This similarity explains Plato’s antipathy to the sophists. If Plato did not assert their differences—working for money, dealing in truth v. appearances, arguing to win—then people would probably assimilate them to “real philosophers”.¹⁰⁷ Now, Shields would argue that even to assert a difference between truth and appearances is to align oneself with “the philosophers”. If some things appear but are not, and others appear and are, and we can judge between them, then there is a difference between real

¹⁰⁵ There is a further distinction between eristics and sophists, not in method but motive: “Those who act for the sake of mere victory seem to be eristic and strife-loving people, but those who act for the sake of their reputation in order to make money seem to be sophists.” (171b25-27).

¹⁰⁶ Nehamas 1990: 13.

¹⁰⁷ See Shields (2016: 35-37).

deductions and eristic deductions.¹⁰⁸ This fact motivates Plato's and Aristotle's assertion that the philosopher can differentiate between appearances and what is "truly and surely the case."¹⁰⁹

0.5 Prospectus for the Dissertation

In this introduction, I have provided my hermeneutic for interpreting Platonic dialogues. In the following chapters, I will apply it to the *Protagoras* (chapter 2), the *Gorgias* (chapter 3), and the *Meno* (chapter 4). I chose to treat the *Protagoras* because it portrays a standard "dialectical joust". We will see that the strategies of Aristotle's *Topics* VIII neatly fit onto the argumentation of Socrates and the sophist. The *Gorgias* provides some variety. The first third of the dialogue also conforms to the verbal contests envisioned in *Topics*. But the middle third, the interview with Polus, exemplifies Aristotle's eristic debates. Polus evinces all the faults of an eristic, δύσκολος interlocutor. Socrates has no choice but to fight fire with fire, a scenario Aristotle envisions in *Sophistical Refutations*. Finally, I selected the *Meno* because it is often heralded as a "transitional dialogue", with a new epistemology and new argumentative features. If we read Aristotle's commentary on the hypothetical method in *Analytics* and *Sophistical Refutations*, we will see that the *Meno* is not as "transitional" as many commonly think. I will argue that Socrates remains as agnostic as he is in the aporetic dialogues, and that the "hypothetical method" described in the *Meno* is only a description of one of Socrates' usual methods of argumentation.

¹⁰⁸ Shields 2016: 44-45.

¹⁰⁹ Shields (2016: 49), citing *Rep.* 596e5; cf. *Top.* 100b24, *EN* 1113a24.

Chapter 1: The Contest of λόγοι in the *Protagoras*

1.1 Introduction

Two interviews make up the *Protagoras*, a short bout with Hippocrates and a long showdown with the dialogue's namesake. Socrates begins the dialogue by narrating the former to an unnamed friend. He casts Hippocrates as the "star-struck" youth.¹ Some commentators (who doubt his existence)² see him only as a stock character, functioning to move Socrates to Callias' house.³ His purpose fulfilled, he disappears from the dialogue. Others, like Morgan, have argued that the prologue is not so superficial. The scene challenges a sophistic genre of literature, the "advice to young men."⁴ Instead of this "conventional wisdom" couched in crackerjack rhetoric, Socrates offers "dialogue, [in which] Plato wants the young taught *thought*."⁵ As we will see, Hippocrates embodies this challenge. We meet him knocking down Socrates' door, and see that he only spouts the conventional consensus about Protagoras.⁶ We leave him at Callias' door, having a discussion with Socrates. The prologue is thus an exemplar of Socratic conversation, of teaching by testing, and it establishes Hippocrates as a foil to Protagoras.⁷ In this chapter, we will

¹ He is ready to spend all his money on lessons from Protagoras (313b5-6) but, is not sure about what the sophist teaches (312a7-e6). See Taylor 1991 and Denyer 2008 *ad loc.* for further description.

² He is mentioned nowhere else, and neither are the relations mentioned in 310b1 (Apollodorus and Phason). "Hippocrates" and "Apollodorus" were apparently common names (over 150 of the former are documented, and about 1,000 of the latter), but Phason was extremely rare (3x) (Denyer 2008: 68). On the other hand, see Morgan (2016: 165) for arguments that Hippocrates was the nephew of Pericles.

³ Thus Gagarin (1969: 135 n. 11).

⁴ Morgan 2000: 133.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Stokes 1986: 185.

⁷ Not everyone sees the prologue as a success (Beverluis 2000: 245-256). For more charitable interpretations, see Griswold (1999: 283), Treantafelles (2013), Rørstadbotten (2017).

examine why Socrates succeeds with the young lad and fails with the old sophist. The two interlocutors evince behavior typical of “good” and “bad” dialecticians, if the Aristotelian dialectical tradition is any measure.

1.2 Hippocrates

Hippocrates literally bursts onto the scene. He knocks down the door, jumps onto Socrates’ bed and announces his wish to study under Protagoras. Without much enthusiasm, Socrates humors his friend, and takes him for a walk to talk things through. (311a2-5). Now, talking things through with Socrates is rarely benign, and on this occasion it consists in “testing (ἀποπειρώμενος) Hippocrates’ resolve, examining (διεσκόπου) him by asking questions.” (311a8-b2). The move is so typical of Socrates that the finer details might escape our notice. Both /πειρ/ and /σκεπ-/ belong to the lexicon of contemporary dialectic, of the rule-based debates that became widespread in the 5th/4th c. BCE.⁸ Three motives for these conversations were practice, examination, and inquiry (γυμνασίας καὶ πείρας ἔνεκα; σκέψεως χάριν) (*Top.* 159a25, 33). In the terminology of *Sophistical Refutations*, this is *peirastic* or *examinational* dialectic. This is the sort of interview that tested an answerer’s own opinions. (Aristot. *SE* 165b4-6).⁹

⁸ A note on the term “contemporary dialectic”, here and *passim*. I treat the *Protagoras* as a literary production of *Plato*’s time, whether based on an actual debate between Socrates and Protagoras or not. For reasons made clear in the previous chapter, I treat Aristotle’s logical works as our best testimony and commentary for the dialectic typical of the time and for the Platonic dialogues. If these logical works date to Aristotle’s Academic period, an opinion of some endoxicality, then so much the better.

⁹ In contrast to what Aristotle calls “dialectical conversations” (*dialektikoi logoi*), which tested widely held opinions or the theses of notable figures, but to which the answerer was not personally committed (*Top.* 100a29-30).

Socrates' first questions regard the fees that Hippocrates wants to pay Protagoras, and the services he expects.¹⁰ The sophists, of course, were infamous for their tuition bills.¹¹ It was on the question of payment that Socrates distanced himself from the sophists (*Ap.* 19e4-20a2). What product did the young man intend to purchase? Warmed up by a few examples, Hippocrates supplies the premise that people pay money to professionals to become professionals. (311b8-c8).¹² This is a strange concession. We pay professionals for professional services, and only very few of us will pay professionals for an apprenticeship.¹³ The odd admission makes the commentators uncomfortable. Socrates is showing Hippocrates that he is *not* seeking vocational instruction, explains Taylor, and this makes the argument a *reductio*.¹⁴ But let's follow the argument. Next Socrates secures the minor premise "We will pay money to a professional [viz. a sophist]" (311e5-6), and this leads to the conclusion "to become a sophist" (312a4-5), Hippocrates can only blush (312a2). If the argument is a *reductio*, as Taylor suggests, then what have we learned? That we do *not* pay money to professionals to become professionals? Rather, Socrates wants Hippocrates to become aware of his mixed feelings about associating with a sophist. The desired conclusion is "to become a sophist". This label will embarrass Hippocrates

¹⁰ Later biographical sketches of Protagoras always refer to his fees (e.g., Sch. in *Pl. R.* 600c4-5, Philostr. *VS.* 1.494.27, DL 9.50, 52.5, 56.9-12).

¹¹ See Kerferd (1981: 27-30), Blank (1985), Corey (2002), Tell (2011: ch. 2).

¹² Socrates was famous for his *epaktikoi logoi* (Aristot. *M.* 1078b27-28). "Induction" is problematic for being so persuasive (*Rhet.* 1398a33ff.) while often invalid (from an illicit minor. See Ross 1949: 488, commenting on *APr.* 69a2ff.). On the other hand, these invalid inductions were rather benign insofar as Socrates "adduced individual examples much more often to refute a general proposition than he used them inductively, to establish such a proposition." (Ross 1949: 482-83).

¹³ Contemporary philosophical literature can distinguish between knowledge for professional attainment and knowledge for general educational purposes (*Ps.-Pl.Am.* 135c-d, Aristot. *Pol.* 1282a3-7 and *PA.* 639a1-6). That is to say, the distinction was within the Hippocrates' reach, if Plato had made him a little smarter.

¹⁴ Taylor 1991: 65.

and make him think twice about enrolling in the school of Protagoras. The quality of the premises is less important than that Hippocrates believes them. Socrates has brought Hippocrates' concessions together to a contradiction, i.e. he has subjected him to an *elenchus*.¹⁵

Hippocrates could have put up a better defense. He should revise his strange first premise, "people pay money to professionals to become professionals" to the more accurate "people pay money to professionals for their services." (e.g., people pay doctors for health and sculptors for sculptures).¹⁶ Hippocrates did not see that Socrates secured the premise with some guile: to the question of why we would pay the various professionals, Socrates adds "what would we become?" (τίς γενησόμενος; 311b4-5, c2). We don't usually pay professionals to apprentice ourselves.¹⁷ Plato was apparently wise to the trick: later, Socrates asks Protagoras about the services Hippocrates could expect from him, and Protagoras does not claim he would make him a sophist, but that he will teach him εὐβουλία, home management, and politics. (318e5-319a2).¹⁸

Now, this was a common enough fallacy in contemporary dialectic; were Hippocrates a little smarter, he could have taken a leaf from the handbook and clarified the premise.¹⁹ What-ifs aside, Hippocrates does not recognize the tricky questioning, and the fault lies with him, not

¹⁵ Aristotle calls the contradiction that happens in dialectical reasoning an *elenchus* (*SE* 165a2-3, cf. with 165b3-4). See the previous chapter for more discussion on *elenchi*, the function of dialectic, etc.

¹⁶ On the other hand, what services Protagoras claimed to offer was vague, perhaps intentionally so. See Morgan (2000: 137) for the risks of being too clever in the 5th century.

¹⁷ See Beversluis (2000: 247-248). Of course, this is standard procedure for Socrates. It's the responsibility of the respondent to examine the consequences of affirmations before making them.

¹⁸ For now, we may leave aside the question of whether the sophists even had a product to offer their students besides an apprenticeship. (The man who learns εὐβουλία, home management, and politics from a sophist does not receive a product external to himself, and arguably becomes a sophist in the process.) In any case, the point of this exchange is not to settle questions about the nature of sophistry or its products, but to reveal how little Hippocrates understands sophistry.

¹⁹ This is the standard counter in *SE* 181a31-35.

Socrates. In the rules of ancient debate, questioners were at liberty to ask for dubious admissions that were likely to be granted (*Top.* 157b38-158a2). If an answerer could not object to a premise, he had to concede it—not because it was *true* (which was irrelevant), but because there was no objection to it (*Top.* 157b31-33). The refutation stands because the goal was not truth, but conviction (πίστις).²⁰ Socrates was not interested in learning something about sophists from Hippocrates, he wanted to show how ignorant he was about them (*SE* 169b23-25).

We might wonder why Hippocrates was so enthused about Protagoras. We know that the sophist's previous visit to Athens was a legend, a *cause célèbre* of the mid-5th century.²¹ His second visit doubtlessly generated similar excitement among the impressionable.²² But the glamour had the price tag of a dubious reputation, which Hippocrates finds embarrassing.²³ So, it is not that Hippocrates just had conflicting ideas about Protagoras. Protagoras both excited and embarrassed the young man. It is only fitting that Socrates does not limit his persuasion to logical considerations. He asks if Hippocrates would be *ashamed* to present himself before the Greeks as a sophist (312a4-6). Plato won ancient admirers for the picture he creates of Hippocrates struggling to answer the question.²⁴ It is worth citing in full:

καὶ ὃς εἶπεν ἐρυθρίασας—ἤδη γὰρ ὑπέφαινέν τι ἡμέρας, ὥστε καταφανῆ αὐτὸν γενέσθαι— εἰ μὲν τι τοῖς ἔμπροσθεν ἔοικεν, δῆλον ὅτι σοφιστῆς γενησόμενος. (312a2-4).

²⁰ Cf. *APr.* 68b15. Ross (1949: 484) comments on this passage: “The object of demonstration is to reach knowledge... the object of dialectic and rhetoric alike is to produce conviction (*pistis*), and therefore their premises need not be true. It is enough that they are *endoxoi*, likely to win acceptance.”

²¹ See Philostr. *VS.*1.10.2-3, Sext. *Emp. Math.*9.55-56, Cic. *Nat. D.*1.23.63.

²² cf. The excitement that Protagoras generates in 309d3, 310b8, 310c5-d2, etc.

²³ Indeed this consequence seemed unavoidable. To be a public intellectual in Plato's Athens was to risk being labeled a sophist. e.g. Socrates (*Aeschin.* 1.173.1, *Ar.Nub.*1111), Isocrates (See Too's (2008: 13) reading of Isocrates' anxieties in *Antidosis*, esp. *Isoc.* 15.313), Gorgias (*Hip. Mai.* 282b. See discussion in Harrison 1964: 184), even Euripides (See Conacher 1998).

²⁴ *Demetr. Eloc.* 217-18.

And he said this as he blushed. For already a little bit of day shone forth, such that he became quite visible. “If it is comparable to the previous examples, it is clear that it is to become a sophist.”

Hippocrates’ diffidence and shame are markers of inexperience and youth.²⁵ Elsewhere, Plato suggests that such a disposition impedes mature philosophical conversations.²⁶ The interlocutor without ἀνδρεία cannot defend a position.

These tactics might alarm us. Socrates is a manipulator—so say some readers—happy to silence Hippocrates rather than persuade him.²⁷ Though the inducing of shame will rub us the wrong way, a more nuanced reading will understand that emotional and logical forms of persuasion do not constitute an either/or. As Blank has put it: “The intended effect of Plato’s arguments is essentially, though by no means exclusively, emotional: his logic affects us while it teaches.”²⁸ Aristotle seems to have entertained a similar notion. The philosopher puts shame in the rational faculty (ἐν τῷ λογιστικῷ), and not in the affective (ἐν τῷ ἐπιθυμητικῷ) (*Top.* 126a8-9). Aristotle may not persuade us here, but perhaps we will understand this division better in light of the emotion’s role in agonistic settings. In the Aristotelian tradition, it is a *pathos* apt for debate,²⁹ even if inducing it is dangerously close to insolence (*Rhet.* 1378b23-25). Socrates, notes Cotton, teaches by “cognitive-affect”: he makes immature interlocutors “undergo violent and unsettling experiences.”³⁰ Only thus will he safeguard Hippocrates against the σοφιστική.

²⁵ Aristotle connects confidence (θαρρεῖν) with experience (*EN* 1103b14-17), and shame with youth (*EN* 1128b15-16).

²⁶ Socrates encourages Laches to show courage in his investigation (*La.* 194a1-4): SO: “So if you’re willing, let’s also continue and be patient in our search, so that courage itself does not laugh at us, because we do not search for it courageously, if perhaps endurance itself is courage.” See Bassi (2003: 52) for discussion.

²⁷ Beversluis 2000: 245-56.

²⁸ Blank 1993a: 428.

²⁹ cf. the close connection between contest (ἀγωνία) and shame in *Prob.* 905a8.

³⁰ Cotton 2014: 146.

The interview, though, is not over. Socrates asks, with a light jingle, for a definition of a sophist (ὅτι δέ ποτε ὁ σοφιστής ἐστίν) (312c1-2). Hippocrates, who cannot define a sophist's services, cannot hope to define the practitioner. Definition of anything was a tall order, difficult to establish and easy to refute.³¹ Hippocrates first tries out an etymology: the sophist is one who knows about wise things (τὸν τῶν σοφῶν ἐπιστήμονα) (312c6).³² The definition fails because “knows about wise things” can be predicated of other professionals besides sophists. It is not a real *diaphora* (cf. *Top.* 153a15-22). Indeed this is how Socrates chooses to attack the definition. (312c6-d5).

Hippocrates tries again, defining the sophist by what he wants from Protagoras: “a master at making someone a clever speaker.” (312d6-7).³³ This definition likewise lacks a unique differentia (harpists could make non-harpists clever speakers about harp-playing). Hippocrates, outwitted, not refuted, folds (312d9-e2). He has fallen for the same trap as the “strange concession” of (311b5-c8): “*techne* of X” does not translate to “capable of speaking well about X & capable of teaching others to speak well of X.”³⁴ Indeed Socrates elsewhere ascribes silent activity to many *technai* (450c7-d2). The claim “speaking well about X requires the *techne* of X” is likewise problematic, although Hippocrates seems committed to this as well. This admission proves fatal: the sophists make a living off teaching people to speak well in the absence of *techne*. It's no wonder Hippocrates tells Socrates “οὐκέτι ἔχω σοι λέγειν” (312e6).

³¹ See *Top.* 102a11-17, VII.3; Crager 2015: 39-46.

³² It is also a folk etymology, the *-ist-* in sophist being an agent suffix, and not the root in *episteme*. Denyer (2008: 76) takes ἐπιστήτης in 312d5 to be part of the same etymologizing.

³³ Morgan (2000: 137) identifies this as the source of Hippocrates' shame: “[I]t was a peculiarity of Athenian rhetorical procedure that expertise had to be hidden by dissimulation...Hippocrates, then, is ashamed to say that he wants the skills that will enable him to manipulate the assembly.”

³⁴ Beversluis points this out *ad loc.*

Now that Hippocrates confesses his ignorance, Socrates' work is done. He rebukes Hippocrates for his willingness to entrust his soul so quickly to a teacher he knows nothing about (313a1-c3). Hippocrates has never had a conversation with Protagoras (διείλεξαι οὐδεπώποτε) (313b7-c1). How can he know if he is worth the price tag? Without that sort of testing, he cannot know whether to pay the sophists and entrust himself to them or not. (313c1-3). Money aside, Hippocrates cannot even define the sophist. Socrates brandishes the same formula from (312c1-2) to accuse him of "evidently being ignorant about what a sophist even is" (τὸν δὲ σοφιστὴν ὅτι ποτ' ἔστιν φαίνη ἀγνοῶν) (313c1-2).

Hippocrates improves from this little exchange. He does not accept Socrates' definition of the sophist *carte blanche*, but asks for clarification (313c6-7).³⁵ Perhaps this is what moves Socrates to bring Hippocrates to see Protagoras. He is prepared for one of the two prerequisites for such a venture, either to refrain from "buying" anything from them, or to be a "doctor of the soul." (i.e., to be knowledgeable concerning what is useful or harmful for the soul (313e1-5)). Neither of the two has the knowledge of such a doctor (314b5-6), so Socrates must have found cause for trusting Hippocrates' restraint. The last sign, and Hippocrates' last act in the dialogue is that he, arriving at Callias' house, "has a dialogue with Socrates" at the doorstep (314c4-5) rather than trying to knock it down, as he had done to Socrates' door (310a9-b2).³⁶ The admonished Hippocrates is now equipped to resist Protagoras' popular appeal.³⁷

³⁵ Cotton (2014: 144) interprets this as Hippocrates "tak[ing] on the role of the expert, by scrutinizing the wares he is offered before accepting them."

³⁶ In Denyer *ad loc.* Note too that Hippocrates and Socrates do not want to leave their conversation "unfinished" (ἄτελής) (314c4-5). In contrast, Protagoras will want to leave the search for virtue unfinished after suffering similar embarrassment from Socrates (360e-61a).

³⁷ Thus Guthrie (1975: 216).

1.3 Protagoras: Historical Background

Before we treat Socrates' discussion with Protagoras, it will be useful to sort through testimonies of the sophist.³⁸ Both Plato and Diogenes Laertius mention Protagoras' participation in "tournaments of words" (λόγων ἀγῶνας) (*Prot.* 335a, D.L. 9.52.6-7), eristic competitions that were apparently in vogue in the 5th century. Another source credits him with *inventing* these competitions (Sch. in Pl. *R.* 600c4). As for the substance of this dialectic, Diogenes claims that Protagoras paid more attention to the "names" of things than their meaning (9.52.8). The oddest claims of Diogenes Laertius are that Protagorean dialectic took the "Socratic form of argumentation" (τὸ Σωκρατικὸν εἶδος τῶν λόγων), and that he invented this form (9.53.1). I would interpret this claim as a confusion of a *kind* of question-and-answer format with the *general* practice of organized debates (*pars pro toto*). Perhaps we are to understand that he popularized question-and-answer before Socrates engaged in it, an assumption that would add to the stakes of his namesake Platonic dialogue: Protagoras must face Socrates in a bout of questioning in which he claimed expertise. Another source of pride for this elder statesman of the sophists was his discovery of the parts of speech (9.53.10-54.3), a discovery that emboldened him to criticize Homeric usage. His skill with language was such that he was nicknamed "Logos" (Sch. in Pl. *R.* 600c.5).

He was most famous for his tuition fees (Sch. in Pl. *R.* 600c4-5). He charged just for the privilege of his conversation (Philostratus *Vit. Soph.* 1.494.27; DL 9.50.8, 52.5, 56.9-12).

Protagoras' deepest commitment was his worthiness to exact fees, and ability in turn to "make men good citizens" (ποιεῖν ἄνδρας ἀγαθοὺς πολίτας 319a4-5). Protagoras calls it "the promise

³⁸ See Dillon and Gergel (2003: 1-42) for a useful compilation. The primary sources in this section are drawn from their discussion.

that I promise” (319a6-7), and it is the point of his Great Speech.³⁹ The extravagance of the claim and its price tag generate the glamor that moved Hippocrates to study under Protagoras.⁴⁰ From this point until the end of the dialogue, all of Socrates’ arguments aim at contradicting Protagoras’ premise, “virtue is teachable” (διδασκτόν ἐστὶν ἡ ἀρετὴ 320c1). We will see how this works on the larger scale after we review the various arguments that Socrates makes along the way.

1.4 The Unity of the Virtues: Posing the *Problema*

Socrates and Hippocrates arrive at Callias’ house. After a small mishap at the front door, the doorman brings them into the congress of sophists. They find Protagoras walking around, “enchanting [his followers] with his voice, as Orpheus [did].” (315a8-b1),⁴¹ and before long have engaged the sophist to describe his services. He does so, and is soon persuaded to flaunt the oratorical skills he promises to pass on. This is his “Great Speech,” a rhetorical showstopper that leaves Socrates speechless (328d3-8). A discussion of this speech could easily occupy its own chapter, and the present chapter concerns question-and-answer sessions of the *Protagoras*. Therefore, we will have to leave the speech’s interpretation to the vast secondary literature.⁴² We will skip ahead to the first debate of the *Protagoras*.

³⁹ The Great Speech, “beginning with the myth and ending with good empirical arguments, is calculated only to show that ordinary civic virtue is teachable.” (Kahn 1996: 217). “Only” is strong; there is much more narrative and thematic significance to the Speech (See e.g. Morgan 2000: 134-137).

⁴⁰ These also moved Aristotle to define the sophistical *techne* as “apparent but not actual wisdom, and the sophist is someone who makes money from apparent but not actual wisdom” (φαινομένη σοφία οὐσα δ’ οὐ, καὶ ὁ σοφιστὴς χρηματιστὴς ἀπὸ φαινομένης σοφίας ἀλλ’ οὐκ οὐσίας. Aristot. *Top.* 165a21-23).

⁴¹ Orpheus does not receive positive coverage in Plato. In the *Symposium* (179d), Phaedrus mythologizes that Orpheus did not win back Eurydice because of his cowardice. Hades gave him a phantom (φάσμα) of her instead of her “real self.”

⁴² For recent studies, see Morgan (2000: ch. 5), Shortridge (2007), van Riel (2012), McCoy (2017), Nathan (2017), Pettersson (2017: 181-85).

When Protagoras finishes his speech, Socrates has a question. He wonders whether the virtues that Protagoras could teach were one or many. This begins the argument on the “unity of the virtues.” This discussion lasts the rest of the dialogue, but it is not *the* problem of the *Protagoras*. The more significant problem, of course, is the teachability of virtue. But until the conclusion of the dialogue, this latter question is not mentioned again. Socrates only entertains the subordinate argument on virtues to secure premises from Protagoras, premises that will force Protagoras to admit that virtue is not teachable.

The question of the unity of the virtues is a good discussion starter. It is obscure enough to allow the reasonable assumption of either side (see *APo* 72a9-10), and so there are only *endoxa*, or plausible opinions, on which to build one’s argument (*Top.* 100b21-23). Later criticism would claim such a discussion cannot generate *episteme*, as the premises are not “true, primary, immediate, more knowable and prior to and an explanation for the conclusion.” (*APo* 71b20-22). But if we are not aiming at *episteme*, what *are* we aiming at? We recall from the previous chapter that dialectic was often competitive. This tradition of “verbal jousting” preceded Aristotle, who only codifies the rules and techniques (see *Top.* 159a32-36).⁴³ In these bouts the questioner only had “to appear (φαίνεσθαι) by all means to produce an effect upon (ποιεῖν) the other,” and the answerer “to appear unaffected (μηδὲν φαίνεσθαί πάσχειν) by him.” (*Top.* 159a.30-32). This is fencing in words. Unlike in real fencing, however, *touche* might only be apparent (φαίνεσθαι). Now, ποιεῖν/πάσχειν may seem vague, but Aristotle clarifies what this entails. The questioner must test (/πειρ/) the knowledge of an opponent (*Top.* 159a25-34,

⁴³ Diogenes Laertius (IX.52) tells us that Protagoras was the first “to institute contests in debate (λόγων ἀγῶνας).” For a discussion of the rules of these debates, see Le Blond (1939: ch. 1), Moraux (1968), Bolton (1990), Slomkowski (1997: ch. 1), and Castelnérac and Marion (2009: 10ff.).

161a25), an activity for which Aristotle coins a term *πειραστική*. This is the sort of conversation we have against knowledge-claimants, whom we try to expose as ignorant.⁴⁴

Of course, Socrates and Protagoras may have different ideas of what is supposed to happen in their dialogue.⁴⁵ Protagoras represents an intellectual culture “abounding with acclaimed sources of wisdom, from poets and divine interpreters to sophists and orators,”⁴⁶ in which insiders cited these “sources of wisdom” to signal their *paideia*.⁴⁷ Socrates offered his friends the “benefaction” of “a questioning and critical attitude, [which] cares for the soul and contributes to philosophical progress.”⁴⁸ We now see what motivates much of the dialogue’s tension. Protagoras speaks to seem like a virtuoso (317c6-d1), and Socrates is at pains to keep Protagoras from showing off.

Now for the argument, which Socrates frames for Protagoras. I break down the premises here and in following quotations for ease of following the argument.⁴⁹ In any case, Socrates offers the following *problema*, or choice between affirmation or negation.⁵⁰

πότερον ἐν μὲν τί ἐστὶν ἡ ἀρετή, μόρια δὲ αὐτῆς ἐστὶν ἡ δικαιοσύνη καὶ σωφροσύνη καὶ ὁσιότης, ἢ ταῦτ’ ἐστὶν ἅ νυνδὴ ἐγὼ ἔλεγον πάντα ὀνόματα τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἐνὸς ὄντος. (329c6-d1).

⁴⁴ See *SE* 165b5-6, 169b23-25, 171b4-5. The knowledge-claim requirement has many parallels in the Socratic dialogues (as noted in Bolton (1993: 135)): See *Ap.* 23d, *Chrm* 171c, *Gorg.* 464d, *H.Ma.* 298B, *Euthph* 13c. Knowledge claims appear to invite refutation (*SE* 172a31-32).

⁴⁵ Even if Protagoras claimed to be a regular in these kinds of discussions. (335a9-b2).

⁴⁶ Cotton 2014: 144.

⁴⁷ See Halliwell (2000: 96-98) and Morgan (2016: 152)

⁴⁸ Cotton 2014: 145.

⁴⁹ At the risk of appearing like those who “extract arguments from Plato’s texts and recast them in numbered form” in the hopes of revealing Platonic doctrines (Cotton 2014: 157, and n. 27). *Pace* Cotton, such analysis can also appreciate, or even better appreciate, “the eristic techniques... [that] obscure the underlying form of the argument (which may or may not be valid) so as unfairly to gain his respondent’s assent to it.” (2014: 157).

⁵⁰ By Aristotle’s time, this is usually framed in the form *πότερον... ἢ οὐ* (See discussion in *Top.* 101b28-33). This discussion follows that pattern: “I ask whether the virtues a single thing or not?”

Whether

(1a) virtue is a single thing, and justice and temperance and piety are parts of it, or

(1b) whether these things which I have just mentioned are all names of the same single entity.

Protagoras claims, “what you are asking about are parts of a single entity, virtue”, and this answer was “easy.” (329d3-4). So much for the “reasonable assumption of either side” (see above); his overconfidence will make the refutation all the more humiliating. In the meantime, Protagoras affirmed the *problema* (i.e. he asserted 1a), so Socrates must deny it and argue *for* the unity of the virtues.⁵¹ He will reason from acceptable opinions to produce a contradiction (*SE* 165b3-4), and Protagoras will try to “uphold the argument and avoid saying anything contradictory.” (*Top.* 100a20-21).

We should not treat “the virtues are one” as Socrates’ real belief, a mistake to which the secondary literature is often prone.⁵² To explain the odd argument, scholars have done all sorts of gymnastics. The simplest solution understands that “this topic in the Protagoras [does not] amount to an advocacy.”⁵³ Had Protagoras claimed the virtues were one, what do they expect Socrates to do? It is certain that he would argue for their plurality. The point of this discussion is not to establish a position either way, but to test the prior claim that “Protagoras is wise and can make others wise” (*Prot.* 310d7–8). Should Socrates defeat Protagoras in question-and-answer,

⁵¹ The argument that Socrates must make is vague (often a bonus in dialectical combat). “The virtues are one” could mean anything from “The person who has one has them all” to the literal identity of all the individual virtues. My reading is that it does not really matter what *Socrates* is arguing, so long as Protagoras appears refuted. But for an influential attempt to make Socrates’ position coherent and phenomenologically plausible, see Penner (1973: 35-68). Penner argues that there is one psychic disposition that makes people brave, just, temperate, etc.

⁵² See Irwin (1995), Brickhouse and Smith (1997), Devereux (2006), Kremm (2009), Rayan (2014), Clark (2015), etc. Kahn is candid enough to admit, “The position defended by Socrates in [the] final section of the *Protagoras* presents a serious challenge to my interpretation... It is widely believed that Socrates’ identification of the virtues with wisdom and his apparent denial of *akrasia* are flatly incompatible with the tripartite psychology of the *Republic* and with the large allowance made there for non-rational motivation.” (1996: 211-212).

⁵³ Blank (1993a: 439). He offers another motive for Socrates’ argument: “Socrates picks up on Protagoras’ own notion that the Virtues are somehow one thing because he knows he can show that it is the ill-formed thesis of a sophist ignorant not only about Virtue but even about how one must conduct a philosophical examination of Virtue.”

an arena in which Protagoras took pride (*Prot.* 329b3-5), Socrates would fulfill his ulterior purpose, to expose Protagoras and arrest Hippocrates' enthusiasm.⁵⁴

1.5 The Unity of the Virtues: Initial Debate

Now that we are clear about Socrates' goals, we can understand the motives behind Socrates' follow-up question.

Πότερον, ἔφην, ὥσπερ προσώπου τὰ μέρη μέρη ἐστίν, στόμα τε καὶ ῥίς καὶ ὀφθαλμοὶ καὶ ὄτα, ἢ ὥσπερ τὰ τοῦ χρυσοῦ μέρη οὐδὲν διαφέρει τὰ ἕτερα τῶν ἑτέρων, ἀλλήλων καὶ τοῦ ὅλου, ἀλλ' ἢ μεγέθει καὶ σμικρότητι; (329b4-8).

Do you mean

(2a) the parts are just as the parts of a face, as mouth, nose, eyes, and ears;

(2b) or just as the parts of gold, the different parts do not differ from the others, with respect to each other and the whole, except in greatness and smallness?

Protagoras chooses (2a). (329d8-e2). He is at least clever enough to evade an early refutation.

Had he chosen (2b), Socrates might have made Protagoras concede “piece-of-gold A and piece-of-gold B are both called (and are) gold.” If the virtues are similar to gold (as in (2b)), then piece-of-virtue A (σωφροσύνη) and piece-of-virtue B (ἀνδρεία) are both called (and are) “virtue”. Socrates might then point out that Protagoras had denied this when he denied (1b).⁵⁵

This would have ended the argument unless Protagoras could have made a further distinction.

Socrates pursues another line of attack: whether some people partake of one part of these virtues or another, or if one who has one part will necessarily have them all (329e2-4)?

Protagoras answers that it is possible to have some virtues but not others (329e5), and then

accepts the vague premise “each virtue is different.” This is where Socrates begins to out-argue

⁵⁴ My reading is thus nearly the opposite of Irwin's conclusion (1995: 94): “Plato wants to show that the conclusions rest on a fair examination of the merits of the case, as they appear to someone who is not initially disposed to agree with Socrates. These claims about Socratic method should encourage us to treat the premises and conclusions of the ethical arguments in the dialogues as expressions of Plato's actual views.”

⁵⁵ This would describe virtue as the “unity of a mass concept like water, where the plurality of parts is so to speak accidental with no internal principle of diversity other than spatial location and magnitude.” (Kahn 1996: 220).

Protagoras. Socrates wants Protagoras to concede that each virtue has “a proper function” (δύναμιν ἰδίαν), which, as we will see, proves key to the latter’s refutation. He guides Protagoras to this admission by asking, “(3a) the eye is not like (οὐκ οἶον) the ears, (3b) [so] neither is its function the same?” (330a4-7). He has made (3b) appear to be a necessary consequence of (3a). Socrates, though, has smuggled in an extra premise. It is possible for X to have a different function than Y but be “like” (οἶον) Y. οἶον can mean everything from “sort of” (LSJ II.7) to “just as” (LSJ V.2), and here Socrates allows οἶον to mean everything from “qualitatively identical” to “having at least one characteristic in common.”⁵⁶ This ambiguity does not reflect “a failure (on the part of Socrates or of Plato) to distinguish the different implications of ‘like’.”⁵⁷ It’s part of the game.

Socrates repeats himself, shuffling in desired premise (3b) with the undeniable premise (3a) to make them seem equivalent:

Ἦ καὶ δύναμιν αὐτῶν ἕκαστον ἰδίαν ἔχει, ὥσπερ τὰ τοῦ προσώπου, οὐκ ἔστιν ὀφθαλμὸς οἶον τὰ ὠτα, οὐδ’ ἡ δύναμις αὐτοῦ ἢ αὐτῆ· οὐδὲ τῶν ἄλλων οὐδὲν ἔστιν οἶον τὸ ἕτερον οὔτε κατὰ τὴν δύναμιν οὔτε κατὰ τὰ ἄλλα· ἄρ’ οὖν οὕτω καὶ τὰ τῆς ἀρετῆς μέρη οὐκ ἔστιν τὸ ἕτερον οἶον τὸ ἕτερον, οὔτε αὐτὸ οὔτε ἡ δύναμις αὐτοῦ; ἢ δῆλα δὴ ὅτι οὕτως ἔχει, εἴπερ τῷ παραδείγματι γε ἔοικε; (330a4-b2)

Does each have its own function? Just as in the parts of a face, (3a) the eye is not like the ears, (3b) nor is its function the same; (3a) each one is like none of the others, (3b) neither in function (3a) nor in any other way. And so, (3a) are the parts of virtue unlike each other, either intrinsically (3b) or in function? Or is it clear that they do they exist in this way, if it is comparable to the example?

Protagoras grants it (330b2-3). Next Socrates asks Protagoras whether each virtue is “something” (πρᾶγμα τι) or “nothing” (οὐδὲν πρᾶγμα) (330c1). Protagoras is in a bind. In *Sophist*, the Stranger and Theaetetus consider it “impossible to apply some existent thing to something that

⁵⁶ Taylor 1991: 110-111. Taylor thoroughly treats the ambiguity of οἶον in the argument.

⁵⁷ Taylor 1991: 111.

does not exist.” (238a7-9).⁵⁸ In other words, “Whatever has any attributes must be something.”⁵⁹ Protagoras has already ascribed some attributes to the virtues in 330a-b, and so he now seems committed to calling virtue “πράγμα τι. This admission may jeopardize Protagoras' real-life commitment to *homo mensura*: the predications “just”/“pious”/“wise” ought not to flow from πράγματα, but be conventional. Furthermore, should the virtues be πράγματα, they will have to have *some* commonality between them. They all would exist, at any rate. This admission furnishes many opportunities for Socrates to *appear* to refute Protagoras, who granted that the virtues are “not like” each other.

Now that the virtues are agreed to be things, and so receptive of predication, Socrates asks whether justice “is itself just or unjust? (αὐτὸ τοῦτο δίκαιόν ἐστιν ἢ ἄδικον)” (330c4-5), to which Protagoras answers “just.” Commentators have wondered whether Socrates is asking for Protagoras’ assent to a tautology or a self-predication.⁶⁰ The puzzle need not detain us—rather, we should note the question’s strategic function. Once Protagoras makes this vague affirmation, Socrates is in position to ask for one even vaguer: “Is justice the same sort of thing as being just is?” (ἔστιν ἄρα τοιοῦτον ἢ δικαιοσύνη οἷον δίκαιον εἶναι;) (330c7-8). Socrates *seems* just to have secured this admission. But the ever elastic οἷον is a necessary introduction for the subsequent argument.⁶¹

⁵⁸ ΞΕ. Μὴ ὄντι δέ τι τῶν ὄντων ἄρά ποτε προσγίγνεσθαι φήσομεν δυνατόν εἶναι; ΘΕΑΙ. Καὶ πῶς;

⁵⁹ Taylor’s paraphrase (1991: 111). He makes the connection to the *Sophist* with discussion.

⁶⁰ Self-predication in Plato has generated its own discussion. see Vlastos (1981), Malcolm (1991: ch. 2), Nehamas (1999).

⁶¹ It may well be that Plato did not mean this as a tricky argument. The ambiguous status of self-predication seems to motivate Aristotle’s later attempts to distinguish synonymy from paronymy vis-à-vis nouns and adjectives. See *Cat.* 6b8ff., 10a27-32 (where he distinguishes “the just from justice” on this ground), etc.

Socrates secures his next premise by pretending to extend the previous point about justice

to piety:

πότερον δὲ τοῦτο αὐτὸ τὸ πράγμα φατε τοιοῦτον πεφυκέναι οἷον ἀνόσιον εἶναι ἢ οἷον ὄσιον; ἀγανακτήσαιμ' ἂν ἔγωγ', ἔφην, τῷ ἐρωτήματι, καὶ εἶποιμ' ἄν: εὐφήμει, ὦ ἄνθρωπε: σχολῆ μεντᾶν τι ἄλλο ὄσιον εἶη, εἰ μὴ αὐτὴ γε ἡ ὀσιότης ὄσιον ἔσται. τί δὲ σύ; οὐχ οὕτως ἂν ἀποκρίναιο; (330d5-e2).

Do you claim that this thing itself is such by nature as to be impious or pious? I myself would be annoyed at this question, and I would say: “Be quiet man! Scarcely anything could be pious if piety itself was not pious. What about you? Could you not answer similarly?”

We find the same τοιοῦτον/οἷον business describing holiness (330d5-6). Socrates makes the argument as he ventriloquizes a third interlocutor. This ventriloquism distances Socrates from his premise “X^{virtue} is such as to be like Y^{quality}” and allows him to comment on it. Socrates is “annoyed” at the impiety of such a premise, and tells his fictional friend to “be quiet”.⁶² In his indignation, Socrates rehearses the argument, but he eliminates the words τοιοῦτον/οἷον: (ἡ ὀσιότης ὄσιον ἔσται). *Now* they are dealing in self-predication. We see the trick behind the ventriloquism. In this dialogue with himself, Socrates has moved description to self-predication, a move that will prove fatal to Protagoras.

This imaginary interlocutor has Socrates clarify his aims in the discussion. “You [two] seemed to say that the parts of virtue are such towards each other that one of them is not like another.” (330e4-6). Socrates responds “You misheard if you think I said this—for Protagoras himself gave these answers, and I was the questioner.” (330e8-31a1). Aristotle, we recall, assigns some conversations “to teachers and learners” and “investigation”, others to “competitors” (τοῖς ἀγωνιζομένοις) (*Top.* 159a25-28). Cooperation and mutual learning distinguish the former from the latter. Socrates has made clear the quality of the present discussion. He distances himself

⁶² Denyer (*ad loc.*) notes that this is a “brusque” address, with some other examples.

from Protagoras' alleged opinion, which signals the more competitive discussion. Socrates is not arguing σκέψεως χάριν, but “to develop the argument as to make the answerer utter the most implausible of the necessary consequences of his thesis.” (*Top.* 159a18-20). (Even if he is the architect of the implausibility.) All this motivates the fatal exchange from τοιοῦτον/οἷον to plain ἔστι, a rapid way to seem to affect (φαίνεσθαι ποιεῖν) Protagoras. It's Protagoras' job to maneuver through the premises and expose the flimsy ones.

Socrates is now ready to trap Protagoras. “Isn't piety such as (οἷον) to be a just thing, justice such as (οἷον) to be pious”, etc. (331a7ff.). If Protagoras agrees, then the refutation is simple. Protagoras had granted that justice is not like (οἷον) holiness (330a4-b3). This concession might only mean that they are not “qualitatively identical.” But now Socrates seems to ask whether the different virtues have “at least one significant characteristic in common.”⁶³ Protagoras is wise to the trick (331c2-3) but tells Socrates to assume his consent and proceed.⁶⁴

1.6 The Unity of the Virtues: Digression

This answer gives Socrates the chance to discuss method (331c5-d1). Socrates does not want a *statement* (such as “if you want” or “if it seems fine to you”) to be refuted (ἐλέγχεσθαι), but a *person*, whether questioner or answerer (ἐμέ τε καὶ σέ). Proponents of the “say-what-you-believe requirement” make much of texts like this.⁶⁵ That Socratic interlocutors *always* had to

⁶³ See Taylor (1991: 109-111).

⁶⁴ It would have been entirely within the rules of dialectic to call foul play here. It violates a procedure we find in (Aristot. *de Int.* 20b19-25): “If someone makes one certain affirmation of these things, it is not one affirmation but, although a single sound, there is more than one affirmation. If these affirmations are made of one thing, similarly it is more than one affirmation. So, if dialectical questioning is a search for an answer, either for a proposition or for one side of a contradiction—this proposition is a side of a single contradiction—there would not be a single answer for these things.”

⁶⁵ For the requirement, see e.g. Vlastos (1994: 7), Irwin (1993: 11), Beversluis (2000: 38 n. 3), Blondell (2002: 116), Benson (2011: 186).

speak from personal beliefs, an idea prominent in the latter half of the last century, we would do well to question. The more nuanced reading of both the Platonic dialogues and Aristotle's dialectical works suggest occasions for "say-what-you-believe" debates, but also dialogues that test notable opinions.⁶⁶

Aristotle gives evidence of both kinds of conversations, as we have seen.⁶⁷ The "say-what-you-believe" requirement seems to apply to his "examinational" arguments. (*SE* 165b4-6). But even here Aristotle admits an exception. He excuses the questioner from saying what she believes. She doesn't have to believe anything about the subject, since it is not the *questioner's* knowledge that is under inspection. (See *SE* 172a21-27). In fact, Aristotle allows the questioner to deduce a falsehood, as long as the answerer grants the premises. (*SE* 169b25-27). So, had Aristotle entertained any idea of the requirement, it seemed only to apply (1) to a certain kind of dialogue, and (2) to one party within that dialogue.

That said, we should not read a general statement about method into 331c5-d1. In the *Protagoras* itself, Socrates will make the same distinction as Aristotle. Often Socrates "tests an argument" (τὸν γὰρ λόγον), and sometimes he "tests the questioner and answerer" (τὸν ἐρωτῶντα καὶ τὸν ἀποκρινόμενον) (333c7-9). Both he and Protagoras know that the argument began as a test of Protagoras' own opinions, and Socrates is holding Protagoras to this original commitment. He does not want the sophist to evade refutation by making the problem theoretical.

⁶⁶ I agree with Brown's (1998: 182) summary: "A feature common in Plato's later works... [is] the examination of views not of those participating in the conversation, as in the more familiar dialectic of the early and middle dialogues, but of named and unnamed persons whose views are discussed and criticized in their absence." We can think of the discussion of Protagorean ideas in *Tht.* 166a-168c.

⁶⁷ See the previous chapter for complete discussion.

Protagoras agrees to Socrates' stipulation. He then identifies the ambiguity causing him so much trouble: "anything resembles anything else in some way," (331d2-3); and "it is unfair to call things similar which have some similarity, or dissimilar that have some dissimilarity." (331e2-4). Protagoras is calling out Socrates' fast-and-loose use of *hoion*.⁶⁸ Protagoras only stands to gain by a clarification: he does not have to argue against the thesis "the virtues have *some* point of commonality", but that "the virtues are not identical." This does credit to his skill as an answerer. Just in time, he has foreseen that his earlier admission "the virtues are unlike to each other" would now be paired with the proposition "justice is like holiness", so he and Socrates have to agree with what "like" means. But he fails to halt the contradiction, as Socrates has another trick up his sleeve.⁶⁹ He treats Protagoras with astonishment (θαυμάσας), scandalized that Protagoras could suggest that "the just and the pious are such to each other that they have little similarity to each other" (331e5-6).

This reaction knocks the wind out of Protagoras. He mutters a flustered string of participles (οὐ πάνυ, ἔφη, οὕτως, οὐ μέντοι οὐδὲ αὖ) and thinks aloud, "that's how I think *you* believe them to be." (ὥς σύ μοι δοκεῖς οἶεσθαι.) (331e6-a1) By this Protagoras means, "I thought *you* were the one who understood *hoion* to encompass even having only *one* similarity?" Protagoras only needs to retort "I'm not the one who believes they only have a small similarity. Unlike you, I think *hoion* means being *really* similar, or identical, just as you made the term out to be earlier." But Socrates preempts this realization. He claims that Protagoras is in a disturbed

⁶⁸ Calling out ambiguity was a move allowed to the answerer in these sorts of contest-debates. See Moraux (1968: 277-279) for discussion.

⁶⁹ Taylor (1991: *ad loc.*) attributes this to his "imprecision."

psychological state (δυσχερῶς ἔχειν) (though he himself induced it) and charitably concedes to change the argument (τοῦτο μὲν ἔασωμεν) (332a2-3).

1.7 The Unity of the Virtues: End of First Round

Socrates moves on to another argument for the unity of the virtues (332a-333e), which runs as follows:

- i. Someone who is acting unjustly seems to σωφρονεῖν in committing acts of injustice (333b8-c1, d4)
- ii. Τὸ σωφρονεῖν = εἶ φρονεῖν (d5)
- iii. Τὸ εἶ φρονεῖν = εἶ βουλευέσθαι in committing acts of injustice (d5-6)
- iv. εἶ βουλευέσθαι in committing acts of injustice = εἶ πράττουσιν in committing acts of injustice (d7)⁷⁰
- v. [doing] good things is useful (d9-e1)
- vi. [doing] some good things is not useful (e1-e2)

Socrates needs to have Protagoras admit the identity of σωφροσύνη and justice. He almost has his syllogism if we exclude (vi), which was a parting shot from Protagoras. If we grant Socrates missing premises such as

- vii. faring well (εἶ πράττειν) = doing good things (ἀγαθὰ πράττειν)
- viii. doing good things = to act justly

then he can argue the following:

- σωφρονεῖν = doing good things (i-v, vii)
- Doing good things = to act justly (viii)
- ∴ σωφρονεῖν = to act justly

The argument is problematic, even if it would have sounded plausible in a live debate. That plausibility is somewhat lost in English, which translates εἶ πράττειν with two expressions: “fare

⁷⁰ Note that this is a conditional in the text: Τὸ δ' εἶ φρονεῖν εἶ βουλευέσθαι, ὅτι ἀδικοῦσιν; — Ἔστω, ἔφη. — Πότερον, ἢν δ' ἐγώ, εἰ εἶ πράττουσιν ἀδικοῦντες ἢ εἰ κακῶς;— Εἰ εἶ. Socrates treats (d7) as an equivalence in the refutation, as we will see.

well” and “do well”. The ambiguity in the Greek phrase is critical for the refutation. “Faring/doing well” in “εὖ πράττειν in committing injustice” (iv) is not the same as that in “εὖ πράττειν and doing good is the same” (vii), unless one wishes to take an immoralist position. From what we have seen of the Platonic Protagoras, this is an unlikely strategy for the sophist. Instead, Protagoras restricts (v.), apparently a universal, by means of (vi.), and thus evades refutation. Now, the argument’s most noteworthy feature is its tricky reasoning. There’s little opportunity for truth-seeking when the premises are so equivocal.⁷¹ Socrates is not arguing for the unity of the virtues in any seriousness, so we do not have to be ashamed of his “bad logic”. Socrates is only playing the role of the gadfly, stinging Protagoras in the hope of waking him up to his ignorance.⁷²

The argument may be incomplete, but we might take a closer look at various segments. It begins with the following exchange:

ἄρα τίς σοι δοκεῖ ἀδικῶν ἄνθρωπος σωφρονεῖν, ὅτι ἀδικεῖ; — Αἰσχυνοίμην ἂν ἔγωγ’, ἔφη, ὃ Σώκρατες, τοῦτο ὁμολογεῖν, ἐπεὶ πολλοὶ γέ φασιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων. (333b8-c3)
 Does a person acting unjustly seem to you to be temperate as he acts unjustly? — Socrates, I would be ashamed to admit that, although many people say it.

Why should Protagoras be ashamed to concede this? After all, his original position was that the virtues are not one. This implies that one could possess one virtue and not others. Perhaps there is something obscene about a person who is unjust and σώφρων at the same time. Or, there is something more at play. Protagoras makes a strong divide between himself and the many (ἔγωγ’ ... πολλοὶ γέ). This is typical of the Protagoras we have seen thus far. At the beginning of

⁷¹ Pace Crombie 1962: 233-235, Vlastos 1972, Gerson 1984, etc., who see this argument as a sincere investigation. As the questioner, Socrates is free to introduce a few equivocal premises. See *Top.* 157a34-157b1.

⁷² cf. Blank (1993a: 428): “I want to argue that there is no conflict between the gadfly Socrates, whose primary effect on his associates is emotional and protreptic, and the philosophical arguer of the Platonic dialogues.”

the dialogue, he contrasted his art with its contemptuous treatment by the many (317a-b). The irony is that he often maintains the same views as the many, though he may express these views with more rhetorical flourish.⁷³ This conventionalism weakens Protagoras' first commitment: that he is in a special position to teach others virtue.

We should mark Protagoras' agitation during this whole exchange. He "played coy" (ἐκαλλωπίζετο 333d1), and he found the argument "annoying" (δυσχερῆ 333d2). After he derails the argument on σωφροσύνη and justice (333b8-e2), he is agitated (τετραχύνθαι) and "agonized" (ἀγωνιᾶν), and "drawn up against answering" (παρατετάχθαι πρὸς τὸ ἀποκρίνεσθαι). He is starting to fall into that state of character in which discussion becomes impossible, cantankerousness (δυσκολία). Protagoras has already exhibited some classic characteristics of the δύσκολος: (1) he has refused to grant a universal ("Doing good things is useful"), (2) he has brought the argument to a standstill, and (3) he has brought no counter-examples forward. Aristotle describes all of these in (160b1-5).

Socrates recognizes Protagoras' δυσκολία and decides to address him gently (333e5). But he still wants Protagoras to concede that "all useful things are good" so he can finish off the refutation. (334a1-2). Protagoras has decided that he has had enough of question-and-answer, and violates one of its fundamental rules. He no longer answers with "yes or no" but makes a speech about the relative goodness and usefulness of things (334a-c). More than Protagoras' bad mood motivates the speech. As a subjectivist, he's committed to the idea that the things we call good or advantageous are relative. Making only affirmations or negations on the good and the

⁷³ cf. Irwin (1995: 94): "However proud Protagoras may be of having improved on common beliefs, he often relies on unexamined common sense."

useful would not accord with his own view.⁷⁴ Question-and-answer is an inadequate medium to express his opinion; long speeches offers him a space to give it the appropriate nuances.

1.8 Arguing about Arguing

The scene testifies to the contemporary competition between different discourses. On the one hand we have Socratic questioning, and on the other “old school sophistic.”⁷⁵ As we have seen, the former does not necessarily excel the latter in “superior fidelity to valid argument”.⁷⁶ Assuming Plato is aware of Socrates’ maneuvers, we might wonder what he considered *brachylogia*’s peculiar virtues to be; and why he considered sophistic *macrologia* and its attendant disciplines second class. For one thing, these latter, for Plato, are “unable to generate knowledge of the nature of things. Indeed, all are oriented to words rather than things.”⁷⁷ For another, not only can we respond to an opponents’ claims in question-and-answer sessions,⁷⁸ we can respond to each point.⁷⁹ With this in mind, we can understand why Socrates cites his forgetfulness as the reason he cannot appreciate the speech (334c8, d1). It is another way of saying that there’s no opportunity to critique each point.

Protagoras could have “agreed to disagree” with Socrates, and let him go off and ask people short questions while he would go off and give long speeches. There’s a snag that holds

⁷⁴ Thus Denyer (2008: 134ff.)

⁷⁵ The phrase is from Fossheim (2017: 10).

⁷⁶ The phrase is from Allen 2010: 354. As Allen also points out, the similarities between rhetoric and dialectic became sufficiently obvious that Aristotle would concede the similarity between the two. Other scholars have argued that dialogues in the third stylometric group seem more open to rhetoric, as long as it is undergirded by the thought patterns of dialectic (i.e. *diaeresis*) (see Murray 1988).

⁷⁷ Barney 1998: 83.

⁷⁸ Allen 2010: 354.

⁷⁹ See Denyer’s (2008: 134) comments on 334a1.

Protagoras back from this friendly solution. Protagoras claimed that he could teach people how to speak *and* question-and-answer debate. (334e4-335a3).⁸⁰ Teaching was an assertion of expertise, and expertise was an invitation to examination.⁸¹ This ignorance gives Socrates the leverage to demand that Protagoras argue in *brachylogia*. (334a1-3). Protagoras is at an impasse. He is embarrassed by his arguments against the unity of the virtues and does not want to participate in question-and-answer anymore (335a9-b2). However, he still wants to pose as a master at debate.

Protagoras makes a show of authority to negotiate his delicate position.

ἽΩ Σώκρατες, ἔφη, ἐγὼ πολλοῖς ἤδη εἰς ἀγῶνα λόγων ἀφικόμην ἀνθρώποις, καὶ εἰ τοῦτο ἐποίουν ὁ σὺ κελεύεις, ὡς ὁ ἀντιλέγων ἐκέλευέν με διαλέγεσθαι, οὕτω διελεγόμεν, οὐδενὸς ἂν βελτίων ἐφαινόμην οὐδ' ἂν ἐγένετο Πρωταγόρου ὄνομα ἐν τοῖς Ἑλλησιν. (335a4-8).

Socrates, he said, I have come into verbal jousts with many men, and if I did what you ask, argue in the same way that my opponent demanded that I argue, I would not have appeared better than anyone, nor would the name of Protagoras exist among the Greeks.

Protagoras brags about the “many men” he has brought down in these “verbal jousts” (ἀγῶνα λόγων). This athletic metaphor had traction among sophists and rhetoricians. Diogenes Laertius also used it to characterize Protagoras’ discussions (9.52.6), and Gorgias applied it to his own speechifying (*Hel.* 11.83-85). The joust did not enjoy the same cachet among the philosophers. Plato contrasts “agonistic” with “more dialectical” discussions (*Meno* 75c9-d4) to the disadvantage of the former. Dialectical discussions took place among friends and had truth as

⁸⁰ When Diogenes Laertius’ makes the strange claim that Protagoras was the first to practice the “Socratic type of arguments” (τὸ Σωκρατικὸν εἶδος τῶν λόγων) (9.53.1), he is likely referring to Protagoras’ accomplishments in short question-and-answer.

⁸¹ Aristotle would later claim that the teacher must be expert in “the principles appropriate to each branch of learning.” (*SE* 165b1-2). This claim of expertise opens the claimant to an examination based on “that which it is necessary to know for someone claiming to have knowledge.” (165b5-6). It is for these reasons that Socratic ignorance has as its corollary a disavowal of teaching (*Ap.* 33a5-6).

their goal.⁸² Not that Socrates was above a good ἀγών. When he ran into one of the “eristic and agonistic wise guys” he played a different game, “examine and refute.”⁸³

This distinction sheds light on Protagoras’ boast that he never debated “as my opponent (ὁ ἀντιλέγων) demanded me to debate (διαλέγεσθαι)” A properly dialectical conversation does not take place among ἀντιλέγοντες. Elsewhere in Plato, ἀντιλέγοντες are counterfeit dialecticians (cf. *Rep.* 539c5-d1).⁸⁴ Aristotle never refers to an interlocutor as an ἀντιλέγων either in the *Topics* or *Sophistical Refutations*, though he does pick up on his master’s distinction between agonistic and dialectical conversations (*Top.* 161a23-24).⁸⁵ Finally, we should note Protagoras’ concern to *appear* (ἐφαινόμην) to be better than everyone else. For the sophist, says Aristotle, “it is better to seem to be wise, than to be wise and not seem to be” (*SE* 165a19-21).

Socrates sees through Protagoras’ self-assertion. He’s boasting because he did poorly in the debate on the virtues (335a9-b2). He is displaying the classic characteristics of a bad interlocutor. Like Critias, Protagoras rejects his *aporia* and its potential for further inquiry (*Charm.* 169c6-d2); like Euthyphro, he wants to seem wiser than ordinary people without being tested (*Euphr.* 3d4-5, 4e-5a). Such an interlocutor cannot progress, Plato suggests: if we take the *Sophist*’s commentary on education as Plato’s own, we know that good students “get mad at themselves and become gentler to others” (230b8-9) after a refutation. Ideally they will “hate

⁸² “SO: But if friends like you and me wanted to discuss with one another, it is necessary to answer more gently and in a manner more suitable for discussions (διαλεκτικώτερον). More suitable for discussions perhaps is not only answering truthfully, but also to answer through those things which the answerer concedes that he knows.” (*Meno* 75d2-7) See chapter 3 for a full discussion.

⁸³ “SO: If one of the wise and eristic and competitive types (τῶν σοφῶν τις εἴη καὶ ἐριστικῶν τε καὶ ἀγωνιστικῶν) were the one questioning, I would tell him, “If I don’t speak correctly, it’s your job to exact an account and refute me (λαμβάνειν λόγον καὶ ἐλέγχειν).” (*Meno* 75c8-d2).

⁸⁴ The dialogue in which ἀντιλέγειν occurs most is *Euthydemus*, where it (naturally) describes the activity of the two brothers.

⁸⁵ He does so twice in *Rhetoric* 1354a17 (but not in a specialized sense) and 1415b36 (about a political opponent).

themselves and flee from themselves towards philosophy, so that becoming different they might escape from the persons they were before.” (see *Tht.* 167e-68a). This reaction should especially be the case when the interlocutor had asserted knowledge but is shown not to know about the matter at hand (*Soph.* 229c5-6). But Protagoras is not that kind of philosopher.⁸⁶

Cotton, reflecting on Platonic pedagogy, makes a similar observation. When an interlocutor is at an early stage of philosophical development, Socrates “radically challenges” their beliefs and self-image, a trial that “produces violent feelings.”⁸⁷ This reading makes Protagoras a novice as far as philosophy is concerned, on par with the teenage Hippocrates, who undergoes the same treatment. But unlike Hippocrates, Protagoras will not benefit from this trial. Protagoras may have his beliefs and self-image challenged, but he does the opposite of *Sophist’s* advice: he grows angry towards the group and consoles himself with the thought of his fame (335a7-8). Ironically, this fame is the *reason* Protagoras cannot improve. His reputation as a debater supplies his income, and this personal interest blocks him from making progress. Well did Aristotle note that “one’s own benefit [makes us] no longer able to have sufficient vision of the truth (θεωρεῖν ἰκανῶς τὸ ἀληθές), and it obscures our judgment” (*Rhet.* 1354b8-11).

Since Protagoras refuses to play the answerer (335b1-2), Socrates decides to leave. The assembled sophists devote much hand-wringing and commotion on the question of convincing Socrates otherwise. Most of their suggestions consist in compromises and appointing a referee, neither of which interests Socrates. We might wonder why they or Socrates do not consider a

⁸⁶ Blank (1993a: 431) reminds us that sometimes “the victims become angry not with themselves, but with Socrates (*Ap.* 23c7). These reactions are in line with Socrates’ statement in the *Republic* (440d) that when a man thinks he is wrong, the nobler he is the less angry he will become at one he thinks justly makes him suffer, but when a man thinks he is being wronged, he is angered and his spirit allies itself with the just cause.” Socratic questioning can be a test of an interlocutor’s “nobility.”

⁸⁷ Cotton 2014: 165.

role-reversal, and having Protagoras ask the questions. After all, this is how Socrates resolves the impasse (338d1-3). Aristotle offers some clue. Socrates never played the answerer, he only asked questions. (*SE* 183b7-8). The witness of the Platonic dialogues bears this out.⁸⁸

We can certainly wish that Aristotle had given more commentary to this claim at the end of *Sophistical Refutations*. Nevertheless, a look at the context provides some clues. Just before these comments, Aristotle says that he “proposed to discover a certain ability that could reason (συλλογιστικὴν) through [dialectical] questions from the most plausible (ἐνδοξοτάτων) premises possible.” (183a37-38). This is a description not of question-and-answer generally, but only the questioner’s task. It is the *questioner* who must reason through possible outcomes from yes-or-no questions, and think about possible contradictions that could occur in either direction. In some forms of discussion (i.e. pedagogical or purely dialectical), the answerer need not reason ahead at all, since she does not have to be on the lookout for traps.⁸⁹

However, other forms of question-and-answer are closer to a verbal joust (gymnastic, eristic, etc). In these the answerer does need to develop the skill of seeing through fallacies, distinguishing equivocations, etc., to avoid entrapment. The well-intentioned dialectician can fall into these arguments because of dialectic’s “proximity to sophistic” (*SE* 183b2). The answerer in these situations, while *defending* her thesis, must “as it were uphold the argument” (ὅπως λόγον ὑπέχοντες) by similarly employing the most plausible premises possible (δι’ ἐνδοξοτάτων)

⁸⁸ Castelnérac and Marion (2009: 11) agree, and comment on those rare occasions when Socrates *does* play the answerer: “[this] occurs for other reasons that must be clearly distinguished... in such cases, the role reversal is temporary, in order to open and close a sub-game in which Socrates answers to objections to his move, so that the main game can resume.”

⁸⁹ “[T]hese exercises are a means for exploring the consequences of different opinions as a part of philosophical inquiry... it is important to *this* variety of argument that the refutations produced are logically valid.” (Smith 1997: 129). (emphasis mine).

(183b4-6).⁹⁰ This kind of defense requires the pretense of knowledge (ὡς εἰδώς) (183b3).

Socrates (or at least Aristotle's Socrates) apparently considered this too high a price and refused to answer questions in these bouts (183b7-8). Assuming Aristotle has captured something well-known about the historical Socrates, we now understand his reluctance to switch roles with Protagoras. Now, that's not to say this refusal did not have its benefits. It seems to have been more humiliating to play the answerer. The best an answerer could do was not seem responsible for the paradoxes in their position. Theirs was the unenviable task of explaining how hard the thesis was to defend.⁹¹ Protagoras has reason to be indignant for having to play the answerer again.

To return to the scene, we find Socrates excusing himself, and making a speech to escape the company of the sophists. He argues from an example: just as fast runners must slow down for slow runners, so must those who give long speeches slow down for those who deal in short answers (335e2-336b1).⁹² There can be no middle ground: Socrates will engage in dialogue, and Protagoras will play the mob orator (δημηγορεῖν) and not address the actual questions raised (αὐτὰ τὰ ἐρωτώμενα) (336b3). It should be too obvious to point out the scene's irony, and yet none of the sophists call out Socrates for discrediting speeches through a speech. Hypocrite or not, Socrates pulls off a rhetorical *tour-de-force*. His disavowal of long speeches "releases Socrates from any commitment to the practice displayed", even as his speech lends him "the

⁹⁰ This type of dialectic "would tend to presuppose participants who are more or less on equal footing and understand the rules of the dialectical game." (Smith 1997: 129).

⁹¹ "For perhaps it is a different mistake to set down an initial point which it is not necessary to set down and not to defend it suitably." (*Top.* 159a22-24). Sometimes an interlocutor is forced to defend difficult positions, and when this happens the answerer does well to blame the thesis itself (159a20-22).

⁹² For discussion of argument by example, see Aristot. *APr* 69a13-19. Ross comments that example by its nature "commits the fallacy of illicit minor." (Ross 1949: 488).

credit and authority earned by his skill” to make the very disavowal.⁹³ Socrates has himself played the *demegoros*. He hasn’t argued from τὰ κοινὰ of dialectic and universals, but the more persuasive “close examples” (τὰ ἐγγύς) (*Rhet.* 1395b30-31), from analogies like fast and slow runners. This is especially strategic when the speaker does not have a good argument to prove the point (*Rhet.* 1394a9-10). Such may be the case here. Socrates wants to discredit *macrologia* as a medium for philosophy, but he has already assumed that philosophy without dialectic is τὸ δημηγορεῖν. (336b3).⁹⁴

Callias feebly tries to introduce some parity between long speeches and question-and-answer (336b4-6) and suggests that Socrates speak as he likes and Protagoras speak as he likes. His suggestion is attractive but naïve. The more obvious problem: dialectic must have two people engaged in question-and-answer. Otherwise, it is not dialectic. Giving a speech does not require a respondent. If Protagoras is unwilling to engage in question-and-answer, then Socrates is right to recognize that his presence is not necessary for Protagoras “to stretch out long speeches.” (335c5). The second problem is more subtle. The apparent topic of the *Protagoras* is the virtues. But an unannounced theme has been the contest of speech forms, question-and-answer and long speeches. We cannot forget the reason *why* Socrates and Protagoras are locked in verbal combat: Protagoras claims that he can teach virtue, and from that claim, we must infer that he can answer questions about virtue. When Alcibiades weighs in on the company’s impasse, perhaps he is referring to this forgotten second problem: he worries that Protagoras will “keep stretching out the speech until most of the audience has forgotten what the question was

⁹³ Barney 1998: 83.

⁹⁴ See Aristot. *SE* 27 for discussion of *petitio principii*. Denyer suggests that the adverb χωρὶς (336b1) is rhetorically charged, and that it often implies tricky speech (cf. Eur. *Alc.* 528, Ar. *Th.* 11, Soph. *OC* 808).

about.” (336d1-2). In their long discussion, Socrates and Protagoras have accomplished little, and the very reason for beginning the discussion is obscure.⁹⁵

Alcibiades goes on to reinforce Socrates’ argument. He reminds Callias that Protagoras’ skill at long speeches is irrelevant (336b8-4). Protagoras’ claim to be a teacher hangs on his skill both in long *and* short answers (334e4-5, 335b8-c1). So, if Socrates, who does not claim to have anything to teach, excels Protagoras in question-and-answer, who claims that this skill as part of his pedagogy, then Protagoras is shown not to be a worthy teacher. But Alcibiades goes further. He grants Protagoras *macrologia* as a sphere of excellence (336b8-9). Then he describes the practitioners of *macrologia*: they evade (ἐκκρούων) arguments and are unwilling to give an account (διδόναι λόγον) of what they are talking about. (336c6-d1). Alcibiades seems to amplify Callias’ kindly suggestion that each party excelled in their preferred form of *logos*. But he has only reinforced the unproven premise that *macrologia* is inferior to short answers when it comes to philosophical discussion.⁹⁶

Critias offers his opinion next (336d6-e4). He recognizes what lies behind Alcibiades’ apparent liberality. (He calls him “contentious” φιλόνομος in 336e1).⁹⁷ He reprimands him for taking Socrates’ side, and Callias for taking Protagoras’: the company should not “take sides with” (συμφιλονικεῖν) either of the two. Like Callias, his desires are well-intentioned but

⁹⁵ For that matter, have the company forgotten Hippocrates, the cause of the whole dialogue? He has not been mentioned since 328d8 and is not mentioned again in the *Protagoras*.

⁹⁶ It’s no wonder that Socrates describes Alcibiades here as ὑπολαβών (336b7) (note the semantics of suspicion in the LSJ entry A.III.1-2).

⁹⁷ Cf. *Gorg.* 515b5-6: “CAL: You are contentious (φιλόνομος), Socrates. SO: But I do not ask questions because of contentiousness (φιλονικία) but because I truly want to know.”

impossible: “allowing Protagoras to make long speeches” and “not allowing Protagoras to make long speeches” are contradictories.⁹⁸ Compromise will have to support Socrates *or* Protagoras.

Socrates then responds.⁹⁹ He does not acknowledge the requests to compromise—he and Alcibiades have already argued that compromise is impossible—but he does respond to the suggestion of an umpire. Umpiring seems to have been a feature of contemporary question-and-answer sessions,¹⁰⁰ especially in the gymnastic sort.¹⁰¹ We have evidence of enforced time-limits in debates (Aristot. *Top.* 161a10-12 and *SE* 183a24-26), which was perhaps the umpire’s main task. We can understand why Socrates would not take well to such an umpire, no matter how frequent this practice may have been. We know from elsewhere that Socrates disapproves of time limits (*Tht.* 172d-e). Sometimes investigation should take “a day or a year, if only [the interlocutors] may hit upon that which is.”

Socrates evades having an umpire appointed, as he argues that umpires are only of value when they moderate the debates of inferiors. In the present case, either (1) the umpire would be worse than Socrates and Protagoras, in which case it would not be right for him to referee his superiors (338b5-6); or (2) he’ll be an equal, in which case he would act as the two interlocutors would act (338b6-c1). So Socrates tells them (3) to choose a superior (βελτίονα ἡμῶν αἰρήσεσθε) (338c1). But Protagoras is only in the discussion at all because he asserts a superior

⁹⁸ Hippias makes the same error when he requests [φαίνονται] μέσοντι ἀμφοτέρους τεμείν) in (338a6-7).

⁹⁹ I omit treatment of Prodicus’ and Hippias’ suggestions, which are less relevant. Taylor provides ample treatment (1991: *ad loc.*)

¹⁰⁰ See Ryle (1966: 115).

¹⁰¹ “Aristotle clearly thinks of these disputations as having a certain time limit, but whether they are limited by an official rule, by custom, or by the stamina and patience of the participants is not clear.” (Stump 1989: 15). Castelnérac and Marion (2009: 25) read Aristot. *Topics* VIII.158a25 as implying an umpire to enforce a “*cedat tempus*”.

wisdom. In the eyes of his fans, “he is the only wise man.” (310d5-6) As for Socrates, it doesn’t make a difference if the umpire is better than he is. Socrates is not the one who claims to be wise (338c2-6).

It’s not all bad news for Protagoras. Socrates allows him to play the questioner (338d1), an unusual privilege for a Socratic interlocutor. Not that Protagoras has a free rein: Socrates only concedes him the right so as to teach the sophist how an answerer ought to answer (338d3). This concession was a strategic move, rather safe for Socrates. He’s not the one asserting his knowledge, and so he has nothing to lose by being questioned (*SE* 169b23-25, 171b4-6), while Protagoras has much to lose. Furthermore, by answering Protagoras’ questions, Socrates can humiliate Protagoras should he evade contradiction.¹⁰² He also gets Protagoras to agree to answer his own questions after Protagoras is finished questioning (338d3-5). We can understand why Protagoras would be “extremely unwilling” to consent to all this. (338e3).

1.9 The Interpretation of Simonides

Nevertheless, Protagoras realizes that the show must go on, and with great reluctance begins to question Socrates. He leaves behind the debate about the unity of the virtues and opts for a discussion of a poem of Simonides. This interlude, the subject of much secondary literature, is described by one scholar as “an embarrassment to admirers of Socrates, since he seems here to be playing the part of the sophist.”¹⁰³ We know by now that it is only an “embarrassment” for those who think Socrates could never pull someone’s leg. The whole passage is one long

¹⁰² Evading contradiction in these verbal jousts required a special expertise. Aristotle devotes a discussion to answerers’ strategies in *Topics* VIII.5-10.

¹⁰³ Kahn 1996: 210.

dialectical joust. Socrates is not out to divine truths, but crush Protagoras in his claimed domain of excellence.

Indeed, here if anywhere Protagoras could expect to excel. Exchanging poetic wisdom and telling stories is the special domain of elders, and unfitting for youth like Socrates (Aristot. *Rhet.* 1395a2-6).¹⁰⁴ Protagoras might rest easy, were it not for a certain table-turning. Protagoras has more to lose than a typical questioner. Protagoras claimed to be an educator and now has claimed that the interpretation of poetry is the greatest part of education (338e7-339a3). Furthermore, he was famous for his interest in correctness of speech (*Phdr.* 267c6), a topic that undergirds the whole episode. Protagoras has a reputation to maintain. If he loses this joust, his expertise will suffer much discredit. So, even though he is formally the questioner, in an unusual twist Protagoras is the one put to the test.

Protagoras begins: “Whether (πότερον) [the poem] seems to have been composed well and correctly or not (ἢ οὐ)?” (339b6-7). Socrates answers in the affirmative, so Protagoras must make it seem as implausible or paradoxical as possible to assert the poem’s good qualities and correctness. (*Top.* 159a18-20). He has Socrates grant the following (339b7ff):

- 1) This poem is well composed.
- 2) A poem is not well composed if it contradicts itself.
- 3) Therefore this poem does not contradict itself.

No sooner does Socrates make the third claim, than, as he tells his unnamed friend, he “was afraid that [Protagoras] might be on to something.” (339c7-8). Socrates fears that he has admitted something that would lead to a refutation. We may well wonder if this Socrates is compatible with the one who would be as happy to be refuted as to refute (*Gorg.* 458a). Surely Socrates has

¹⁰⁴ Plato does not indicate Socrates’ age. The acknowledgment of Socrates’ infatuation with Alcibiades may lead us to guess that he is well into adulthood; on the other hand, he describes himself as a νέος in 314b5.

nothing to fear from having Protagoras point out a false opinion to him? (*Gorg.* 458a8-b1). There are a few possibilities. First, in the *Gorgias* passage Socrates is describing an ideal conversation, with interlocutors of good will. In such a conversation the interlocutors, detached from personal interest (*Rhet.* 1354b8-11), put themselves in a better position to seek the truth.¹⁰⁵ (Of course, these were *not* the kind of conversations Socrates had in the *Gorgias*). Socrates describes these conversations in the *Meno* (75c8-d7, see discussion above). These situations are different games with different rules. Second, the *Protagoras* is a contest of *logoi*, Socratic questioning pitted against the sophistic.¹⁰⁶ Protagoras and Socrates are not just having a discussion, but wrangling over what form of discussion we ought to have. Should Hippocrates study sophistry, a “system of values” in which words can beat facts?¹⁰⁷ These are the stakes.¹⁰⁸

Now for the theme of the conversation, an apparent contradiction in a poem of Simonides. Perhaps Protagoras thought that *this* was an arena in which he stood a chance against Socrates. More importantly, if he beats Socrates, then he’ll at least be able to claim an expertise, namely in interpreting poetry or applying poetry to moral cultivation. Better than that, it is an

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Aristotle: “Being able to puzzle each way (*πρὸς ἀμφοτέρω διαπορῆσαι*) we will more easily see truth and falsehood.” (*Top.* 101a35-36).

¹⁰⁶ “Where there is no consensus as to method, to win definitively can only mean winning by all the methods there are, or perhaps by the methods of one’s opponent. The agonistic genre is Plato’s vehicle for engagement with the language-bound, authority bound contemporary rivals of dialectic: his purpose is to establish the authority of the philosopher both to practice and dismiss them.” (Barney 1998: 84).

¹⁰⁷ For the phrase see Morgan (2000: 147). “It’s not as necessary, says Protagoras, for everyone to be just, but to say they are just” (323a-b).

¹⁰⁸ Part of Plato’s concern might have been the difficulty in distinguishing the virtues of “answering briefly” from the vice of “long speeches.” As the former crystallized into dialectic and the latter became identifiable as the art of rhetoric, Aristotle would acknowledge this similarity. As Ross diagnoses the problem, “The distinction between dialectical and rhetorical arguments is logically unimportant. They are of the same logical type; but when used in ordinary conversation or the debates of the schools Aristotle calls them dialectical, when used in set speeches he calls them rhetorical.” (Ross 1949: 484).

expertise that would seem to demand pedagogy, one associated with the elite status he craved.¹⁰⁹ He could let Socrates excel in the little tricks of question-and-answer, but he would be secure in his position as an expert exegete. This is why Socrates must beat Protagoras in poetic interpretation. If he wins, he has the authority to “reject [the method] in scathing terms” because of his demonstrated skill in it.¹¹⁰

Socrates’ fears come true when Protagoras draws out the contradiction between two verses from the poem. The sophists applaud.¹¹¹ Socrates compares the force of the *elenchus* to being “hit by a good boxer”, and says that he “was blinded and dizzied after he said these things and after the others cheered.” (339e1-e3).¹¹² Socrates needs to stall for time.¹¹³ There is another occasion in the dialogues where Socrates needs more time to respond, and in fact uses this same formula χρόνου ἐγγενομένου. This is in the *Phaedo* (86e1). However, the situations are quite different. In the *Phaedo*, the conversation is not agonistic, and taking more time will only improve the quality of the responses. But in the competitive setting of the *Protagoras*, time is a factor that plays against the respondents.¹¹⁴ So Socrates solicits the expert opinion of Prodicus, grandiloquently asking for the sophist’s “music” (τῆς μουσικῆς) (340a7).¹¹⁵ This consultation

¹⁰⁹ Cf. pg. 44 n. 47.

¹¹⁰ Barney 1998: 83.

¹¹¹ On the informal judging that the audience does, see Moraux (1968: 285).

¹¹² Similar boxing analogies occur at *Euthd.* 303a, *Symp.* 218a, and *Philb.* 22e.

¹¹³ This stalling may signal Socrates’ young age. Aristotle connects slowness in crafting arguments with inexperience (*SE* 175a20-26).

¹¹⁴ See Stump (1989: 15), Castelnérac and Marion (2009: 25).

¹¹⁵ With the sort of flattery that would later make it to the textbooks: see Ps.-Aristot. *Rhetoric to Alexander* 1436b32ff.

buys him some time to cook up an explanation for the contradiction. Prodicus, won over by Socrates' flattery, agrees to participate in the quibbling.¹¹⁶

The best defense for an answerer is to accuse the questioner of fallacy.¹¹⁷ To that end, Socrates says that Protagoras has not made a distinction between the two copular verbs τὸ γενέσθαι and τὸ εἶναι.¹¹⁸ This is standard procedure—exegetes made a *topos* of discerning a poetic usage in quotidian words (Aristot. *Poet.* 1461a9ff.).¹¹⁹ Socrates then appeals to the reputable opinions of Prodicus (339e5ff) and Hesiod (340d1-5), who both seem to agree that Simonides and Pittacus are indeed opposed to each other, and so the poem as a whole is not contradictory.¹²⁰ The latter authority is especially apt if we recall the Aristotelian advice to finish off our speeches with a good maxim.¹²¹ Indeed, the Stagirite jokes that some audiences won't believe a speaker unless he cites some poetry. (*Metaph.* 995a7-8). All this aside, the interpretation is strained, the details of which need not detain us long. Socrates is later trapped into making a perfect infinitive (ἐκτεῖσθαι) mean the same thing as Simonides' τὸ ἔμμεναι, and to

¹¹⁶ Denyer (2008: 153) is convinced that Prodicus was in on the joke.

¹¹⁷ Cf. *Top.* 160b10-13, 161a17-19, 161b11-17. See Stump (1989: 17). See also *Poet.* 1461b15-18: "The contradictions found in the poet's language one should first test as one does an opponent's confutation in a dialectical argument, so as to see whether he means the same thing, in the same relation, and in the same sense, before admitting that he has contradicted either something he has said himself or what a man of sound sense assumes as true."

¹¹⁸ Taylor (1991: 143) finds the interpretation strained, but the most probable solution to the contradiction. Campbell (1982: *ad loc.*) is open to the solution.

¹¹⁹ It was also a dialectical *topos*. See *Top.* 112a32-36.

¹²⁰ Morgan (2016: 152) rightly observes that Socrates' reading of tension between the two poets mirrors his (literal) antagonism towards Protagoras.

¹²¹ Aristot. *Rhet.* 1394b27-30. We might add, though, that rhetorically this move was a bit of a risk: "The use of maxims is appropriate only to elderly men, and in handling subjects in which the speaker is experienced. For a young man to use them is—like telling stories—unbecoming." (*Rhet.* 1395a2-5).

make χαλεπήν περ ἑοῦσαν mean the same thing as Simonides' becoming (γενέσθαι).¹²²

Protagoras is not impressed by these gymnastics and sticks to the *lectio facillior*. (340e).

Socrates is not finished though. He sets Prodicus on some more verbal quibbling, trying to get his desired meaning out of χαλεπὸν (341b-c). The content of this quibbling is less important than its function, a (jocular) attempt to distract Protagoras from finishing his refutation and to pull Protagoras' leg.¹²³ Protagoras rejects the quibbling quite strongly (341d2-5), but he makes two mistakes in so doing. One is intentional, that he has agreed to the change in topic; and one unintentional, that Socrates can claim to have pulled his leg over the whole χαλεπὸν business. Protagoras looks silly for taking the two's incredible philologizing seriously, and does not have it in him to laugh at himself.¹²⁴ Socrates condescendingly argues for the point that Protagoras had just asserted, albeit now with some textual references (341e).¹²⁵

Now follows Socrates' own "Great Speech" (342a-347a). Since this is not dialectic *per se*, we will not treat it here in any detail. It has already received many recent treatments.¹²⁶ We should, however, pay attention to how the conversation moves from question-and-answer to long speeches. Right after Socrates feels like he has been struck by a boxer, he withdraws from playing the answerer with Protagoras. Instead he initiates a question-and-answer session with Prodicus, in which he resumes the role of the questioner (339e6). In this subconversation,

¹²² See Denyer 2008: 152 for a fuller treatment.

¹²³ Cf. "[There is a] weak-minded tendency of the hearer to listen to what is beside the point." (*Rhet.* 1415b5-6).

¹²⁴ Protagoras has some traits of the "boor", who cannot "make or take a joke." (*Rhet.* 1381a33-35). Cf. also comments on the "boor" from the peripatetic *Magna Moralia*: "the boor is he who neither thinks fit to make jests nor to have them made at him, but gets angry." (1.30.1.4-5) (Stock transl.).

¹²⁵ Part of dialectical strategy was appearing to argue against oneself on unimportant points. (*Top.* 156b18-20). It makes one "appear to be playing fair in the attack."

¹²⁶ See Frede (1986), Pappas (1989), Griswold (1999), McCoy (1999), Trivigno (2013).

Socrates secures premises from Prodicus, and this results in the “proof” that Simonides did not contradict himself (340b-d). So, most unusually, Socrates has countered Protagoras’s *elenchus* by having a dialogue with a third interlocutor. Protagoras tries to reenter the conversation (340e5-7), but Socrates insists on continuing to speak at length with Prodicus (340e8-341c9). Along the way, Socrates has changed the *problema* from “Whether Simonides contradicts himself or not” to the farcical “Whether *χαλεπὸν* means *κακόν* in Simonides’ poem?” Socrates then turns to Protagoras and asks him whether he agrees with Prodicus or not (341d1), an action that transitions him back to the role of questioner. Protagoras should have made Socrates answer more questions about being and becoming, business which has not yet been settled. But Protagoras recognizes neither the farce nor the change in subject. He wastes his time trying to demolish the equivalence of *χαλεπὸν* and *κακόν*¹²⁷ until Socrates tells him that he and Prodicus were only joking around (*παίζειν* 341d7). This comment terminates the discussion. Before the sophists can respond, Socrates proposes another change in the genre of discussion. Instead of sophistic quibbling over poetry, perhaps Socrates might be allowed to make a speech of his own. He allows Protagoras the chance to “make a trial” (*λαβεῖν μου πείραν*) of the speech afterward (342a1).

1.10 Back to Dialectic

Socrates makes his “Great Speech”, the content of which need not detain us.¹²⁸ We will skip to the end of the speech. The company has another debate about which *logos* should guide

¹²⁷ This is a fool’s errand. As Trivigno notes (2013: 519), Socrates “plucks passages out of context and suggests ways of understanding the text that he himself is not committed to. Indeed, Socrates makes claims about the text that very quickly he rescinds. He merely uses the text to his own advantage in the eristic game.”

¹²⁸ I only note that the speech treats the very themes at issue, namely the tension between long speeches and question-and-answer, and that Socrates ironically praises question-and-answer within a (very) long speech.

the discussion. Hippias wants another display speech (347a6-b2). Alcibiades reminds the gathering that Socrates had conceded to Protagoras the right to be the questioner after he told his tale. Socrates intervenes. Socrates makes a show of entrusting (ἐπιτρέπω μὲν ἔγωγε) the choice to Protagoras (347b8).¹²⁹ That said, Protagoras should grow up and move on from this business of interpreting poetry, an activity more suitable for the symposia of the low and vulgar (347c3-e1). The masses cannot entertain themselves, and so hire flute girls. Similarly, the company should act like philosophical grown-ups and test their own ideas, rather than “hire out” ideas from the poets (347e7-348a6). Protagoras is speechless (348b1-2). But Socrates may well think Protagoras is getting his just deserts. Socrates had earlier complained that Protagoras’ long speech left no occasion for examination, and now Protagoras gets a taste of his own medicine. This dismissal ends a ring-composition, which began with Protagoras’ claim, that the interpretation of poetry was the highest intellectual cultivation (338e6-339a3).

Socrates’ rejection of poetic exegesis is worth a closer examination. His argument is relevant to the broader “war of words” we find in the *Protagoras*:

οὐς οὔτε ἀνερέσθαι οἷόν τ’ ἐστὶν περὶ ὧν λέγουσιν, ἐπαγόμενοι τε αὐτοὺς οἱ πολλοὶ ἐν τοῖς λόγοις οἱ μὲν ταῦτά φασιν τὸν ποιητὴν νοεῖν, οἱ δ’ ἕτερα, περὶ πράγματος διαλεγόμενοι ὁ ἀδυνατοῦσι ἐξελέγξαι: (347e3-7)

It is impossible to ask them what they spoke about, yet the many bring them up in their conversations. Some say that the poet thought these things, others say the poet thought something else, and discoursing about this matter they are unable to make any examination.

For starters, we should mark the amount of dialectical vocabulary that Socrates injects into his criticism. ἀνερέσθαι, an exclusively poetic word before Plato, is one of the many synonyms for

¹²⁹ The term ἐπιτρέπειν is perhaps ironic. It often means “referring something to a professional”, whether a judge, ruler, etc. cf. *Hdt.*3.81, 130; *Ar.Ach.*1115, *V.*521, *Ra.*811; *Th.*1.28, 4.83; *Pl.Ap.*35d; etc.

ἔρωτάω in the dialogues.¹³⁰ Socrates uses more familiar terms when he asserts that poetic interpreters trying “to have a dialogue” (διαλεγόμενοι) are unable “to refute” (ἐξελέγξαι). We might ask why Socrates criticizes poetic interpretation in the language of dialectic. Barney, who articulates the tensions central to the Simonides episode, suggests that Socrates cannot offer his “scathing rejection of literary interpretation” until he “has the authority to reject it as worthless.”¹³¹ He won this authority from his Great Speech. Like Protagoras, Socrates can speechify on command and make criticisms on the correctness of speech.¹³² As a result, when the interlocutors are left to decide how to proceed, he has won the high ground to make “Protagoras answer Socrates’ questions, on Socrates’ terms, and on the topic of Socrates’ choice.”¹³³

Socrates calls for another round of question-and-answer on the unity of the virtues. Protagoras, perhaps too frustrated to answer, makes no indication of his consent or dissent. Alcibiades forces the issue (348b1-3): either Protagoras should keep up the debate, or step out of the way for someone else to discuss with Socrates. This embarrasses Protagoras, and as everyone presses him to debate his embarrassment only grows keener (348c1-4). We see again the split between the freedom Protagoras apparently enjoys to direct the conversation and the emotional compulsion in which he is enmeshed. Protagoras was party to an agreement (ὡμολογησάτην) (347b4), Protagoras can ask questions if he is still willing (εἰ βούλεται/ ἐὰν βούλη) (437b5, 347b9, 348a6, 348a7), the conversation is set to go according to what is more pleasant for Protagoras (ὁπότερον αὐτῷ ἥδιον) (347b8-9), and all he need do is say he is unwilling (οὐκ

¹³⁰ See *Euphro.* 13c12, *Ap.* 20a6, *Phdo* 78b4, *Crat.* 421e1, *Pol.* 285c8, *Phlb.* 38c9, *Symp.* 173b5, *Phdr.* 275d6, *Charm.* 153d1, *Lys.* 211b2, *Prot.* 354e3, *G.* 451c5, 454b10, 455c8, *M.* 74b4, 74c5, 85c10, *Leg.* 629b8, 799d1.

¹³¹ Barney 1998: 84.

¹³² See the discussion above for Protagoras’ famous regard for *orthoepieia*.

¹³³ Barney 1998: 84.

ἐθέλων/οὐκ ἐθέλει) (348a4, 348a6) to be excused from the discussion. Despite all this volitional vocabulary and Protagoras' obvious displeasure at continuing, he allows himself to be dragged back in. Socrates has forced him into it, a further sign of the eristic quality of the conversation. Force is incompatible with persuasion (ἀμετάπειστον) because it does not engage our reason (*Met.* 1015a26-33). A dialectician that relies on ἡ βία can win victory, but he comes off as eristic (ἐριστικῶς) and a competitor (ἀγωνιζομένων); he cannot make investigations or persuade (*Top.* 161a33-b1).¹³⁴

We would do well to recall the climax of Socrates' interview with Hippocrates. He, after being examined by Socrates, realized his ignorance and grew ashamed (312a3-4). He resists refutation and offers some feeble attempts to defend his position. Eventually, though, Hippocrates confesses his ignorance to end the examination (312e6). Protagoras is now in a comparable situation. He too has been made to feel ashamed. But shame, a *pathos* appropriate to youth, is a disgrace to behold in old men (*EN* 1128b10-20). Protagoras cannot plead ignorance as safely as Socrates' young friend. Hippocrates had the further advantage of being alone with Socrates. Protagoras, surrounded by colleagues and friends, would have to suffer a public humiliation to end the spectacle.

There is also a difference in genre between the interviews with Hippocrates and Protagoras. The former was a specimen of examinational dialectic, and the latter is a verbal joust, an ἀγὼν λόγων. The whole point of the joust is victory or loss, while examinations need not have a loser. It can well be a learning experience for both parties. This joust in particular carries a particular motive for victory. Protagoras has staked his professional reputation, and thus his

¹³⁴ Despite Socrates' ironic claims to the contrary: "Protagoras, don't think that I am conversing (διαλέγεσθαι) with you for any other reason than my own desire to examine one-by-one these things about which I am puzzled." (348c5-7)

income, on the outcome. (Socrates is happy to remind Protagoras of these stakes in 348e-349a). All this motivates the force that Alcibiades and Socrates apply to Protagoras. At this point, for Protagoras to step down is for him to lose.

Some commentators raise questions about the lessons we readers are supposed to learn from scenes like this. Are we supposed to feel the humiliation of Protagoras?¹³⁵ This reading can perhaps be reconciled with Aristotelian criticism. If we think of the dialogue as drama, we can identify characters “not pre-eminent in virtue and justice, who fall into adversity not through evil and depravity, but through some kind of error.” These are usually such people who “enjoy great renown and prosperity.” (Aristot. *Poet.* 1453a10).¹³⁶ We fear such a fate for ourselves (1453a1ff.); we do not want our professional ineptitude to be exposed to our colleagues.¹³⁷ On the other hand, the desire to improve also tugs at us, and gives us the *andreia* to follow the argument and apply its lesson to ourselves, even if we are painfully reminded of our own inadequacies.¹³⁸

After we feel the fear, we wonder how we can avoid this scenario. Cotton describes an influential hermeneutic, the “intellectualist interpretation”, that would have “the failings of respondents... spur us on to more adequate responses.”¹³⁹ There is much to commend this

¹³⁵ For the “reader mirroring the interlocutor” interpretation, Cotton cites Belfiore (1984: 137), Nussbaum (1986: 129), Annas (1981: 16), Blank (1993a: 434), Gifford (2001: 100-101). She criticizes this interpretation in (2014: 44ff).

¹³⁶ Halliwell translation (1995).

¹³⁷ For this “tragic” reading of Platonic dialogues, see Blank (1993a: 434-36).

¹³⁸ On the complex intersection of fear and desire that Socrates inspires, both in interlocutors and those who hear anecdotes about him, see *Symp.* 215d, *Phd.* 58d & 88c8-e3, *Plut. de Curios.* 516c11, *Ael. Arist.* 286.2. See discussion in Blank (1993a: 428, 436-37).

¹³⁹ Cotton 2014: 45. For the “intellectualist interpretation, Cotton cites (and discusses in 2014: 45) MacKenzie (1982: 69), Gifford (2001: 87-89), Blondell (2002: 105). Closely related is the “modeling” interpretation, where we

viewpoint. Perhaps the reader will be more cautious about making knowledge assertions, now that she has seen how interlocutors like Protagoras fare. Cotton would add that the reader should not only observe the dialogue but be drawn into it. In her “dialogic interpretation” the dramatized debate “enables us to engage in a kind of dialogue with ourselves, in which we monitor and mediate our own responses.”¹⁴⁰ So, not only will we avoid behaving like Protagoras, but our critical observation will teach us how. On the emotional level, we see interlocutors’ “desire to show off, their pride, their shame, their shyness, loves and lusts”; these heighten our emotions, until we are led “to the cathartic experience of *aporia*.”¹⁴¹ At the same time, our reason judges the traps that Protagoras fell for, and we mentally rehearse how we would have defended his position.

1.11 The Unity of the Virtues Again

Socrates reminds Protagoras that he is committed to the virtues being different with different functions. Socrates has already won admissions that temperance and wisdom are one, and that holiness and justice are one (332a-333b). The argument had broken off before Socrates could prove the unity of temperance and justice (333b-334a), which would have made justice, temperance, holiness, and wisdom one. Curiously, Protagoras now seems to grant that these four virtues are one (349d2-4).¹⁴² This makes Socrates’ task to refute the claim that courage is

initially are inclined to identify with Socrates, but further reflection suggests that we might have more in common with the refuted interlocutors. See Nehamas (1998: 11-12, 27-32, 43-44), whom Cotton (2014: 46) also cites.

¹⁴⁰ Cotton 2014: 48-49. She seems indebted to the reading advocated in Frede (1992).

¹⁴¹ Blank 1993a: 436.

¹⁴² Taylor 1991: *ad loc.*

different from the other virtues (349d2-8) all the easier. This accomplished, the unity of the virtues will be shown.

Now, we cannot forget the argument behind all the arguments of the *Protagoras*: the teachability of virtue.¹⁴³ We are close enough to the conclusion of the dialogue to see how this will work. Let's take stock of the positions:

- Protagoras Premise 1 (PP1): Virtue is teachable
- Protagoras Premise 2 (PP2): The virtues are distinct

Socrates argues for the opposites:

- Socrates Premise 1 (SP1): Virtue is not teachable
- Socrates Premise 2 (SP2): The virtues are one (wisdom)

PP2/SP2 has occupied most of the rounds of question-and-answer. The former premise has not been mentioned since Socrates and Protagoras began to argue after the Great Speech, but it is the only question that really matters.

So, if premise 1 is so important, why is Socrates at such pains to argue for SP2, especially when it is so counterintuitive? Socrates has done something quite crafty. He realizes if virtue is wisdom, and wisdom is teachable, then PP1 is correct. This would be odious; even if Protagoras loses the debate on the unity of the virtues, he could still go on teaching what wisdom he does have. But this course can be circumvented. Socrates and Protagoras are necessarily arguing for opposite positions. So if Socrates keeps arguing for SP2, eventually he will be forced to switch to PP1. If Protagoras keeps arguing for PP2, then he will find himself arguing against PP1. This is precisely what happens, as we will see. Plato's genius is not that he forces Protagoras into a contradiction about his most critical claim, but that he makes Protagoras himself argue against it.

¹⁴³ cf. Blank (1993a: 433): "The apparent subject at the beginning of a Socratic conversation never turns out to be its real subject: the ultimate subject will always be the respondent himself, and the correctness of his present and former life." Protagoras is under scrutiny *only* for the practice of teaching people virtue for money.

Not only is Protagoras incompetent to win in question-and-answer, but he can be duped into self-sabotage.

This opens the last third of the *Protagoras*, in which there are three parts. The first third (348c5-351b2) continues the discussion on the unity of the virtues. Protagoras tries to save at least one virtue, courage, from being the same as the others. It does not take Socrates long to win the premises necessary to refute Protagoras: Protagoras grants that (1) “knowledge belongs to all the bold” (350a1-b1) and (2) “bold belongs to all the brave” (349e2), so we have the conclusion (3) “Knowledge belongs to all the brave.” (350c2-5). Then Protagoras loses consistency. He claims that (4) “knowledge does not belong to some bold” (350b1-4), (5) “brave does not belong to some bold” (350b4-5), and (6) “bold belongs to all brave.” (350b6-7). But (1) contradicts (4), and Protagoras denies the reasoning of (1-3) on the basis of (5) (350c6-d1). Protagoras tries to clarify with an analogy (350d-e): If “powerful belongs to all the strong” and “powerful belongs to all those who know-how-to-wrestle”, then “powerful belongs to all knowledge.” But this is fallacious (undistributed middle). Ironically, he claims “Neither there nor elsewhere do I admit that the powerful are strong, only that the strong are powerful.” But if he *did* assert the former, the logic would improve. (The reasoning would become valid, but the term “knowledge” is still equivocal in the different propositions). Protagoras still does not acknowledge his deep confusion, as obvious as it has become.¹⁴⁴

Puzzlingly, Socrates decides to change the subject. Perhaps Protagoras’ logical breakdown, and refusal to stick to clear propositions, motivate Socrates to try something different. At any rate, there follows a strange and paradoxical discussion of hedonism. The

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Cotton’s diagnosis of Polemarchus, who “is not at any point made to voice in an extended way the feelings of confusion or uncertainty which the text indicates he is experiencing.” (2014: 167). Admission of *aporia* is necessary for progress (cf. Hippocrates’ admission of *aporia*, and Meno’s admission in ch. 4 of this dissertation).

discussion on hedonism (351b3-359b) “poses many major problems of interpretation.”¹⁴⁵ It has spawned a vast secondary literature,¹⁴⁶ and the commentaries treat it at great length (Taylor 1991: 161-200, Denyer 2008: 176-194). Its doctrine is “unlike what we find in any other dialogue,” at odds with “obvious facts about human nature.”¹⁴⁷ Again, we should remember the agonistic context of the *Protagoras*. Socrates is not committed to his positions. He’s out to win, from premises that may or may not even be true, may or may not be well argued, but that are sufficiently persuasive to win Protagoras’ assent.¹⁴⁸

To expose Socrates’ fallacy in any detail would be tedious, and has been done elsewhere. Its main error lies in the final claim, “Pleasure = good” and “Pain = bad.” This depends upon an equivocation between “later pleasure/pain” and “present pain/pleasure” (this occurs in 353c-54d). From this equivocation, Socrates has Protagoras admit that “the state of being-overcome-by-pleasure makes no sense.” Pleasure is the good, and something bad can hardly overcome someone (354e-55c). So, when an individual is overcome, it must be by something else, viz. ignorance (357d7-e4). This leads to the premise that no one chooses evil willingly, but only through ignorance (358d). Socrates secures this premise with flattery: if people are overcome because of their ignorance, then they do well to spend their money on sophists who can cure

¹⁴⁵ Taylor 1991: 161.

¹⁴⁶ For recent coverage, see Taylor (2008: ch 15), Dimas (2008), Shaw (2015), Callard (2016), Wilburn (2016). Zeyl (1980) remains prominent in these discussions.

¹⁴⁷ Kahn 1996: 210.

¹⁴⁸ See Zeyl (1980) for the view that Socrates argues for hedonism to trick Protagoras, a hedonist, into arguing against it; and Kahn (1996: 238) for the view that the hedonism and denial of *akrasia* are asserted for the final refutation.

them of their ignorance. We can understand Prodicus', Hippias', and Protagoras' enthusiasm for such an argument.¹⁴⁹

All this serves the broader argument of proving the equivalence of wisdom and courage. If everyone chooses things on the basis of pleasure, everyone rejects things on the basis of dread, or fear of pain.¹⁵⁰ (358d-e). That being the case, the courageous and the cowardly both go after that which is not a cause of dread for them, and knowledge is that which enlightens the individual about what is to be truly feared (359a-d, 360b). Therefore, "courage is the wisdom that knows what is and what is not to be feared" (360d). Therefore, all the virtues are wisdom.

1.12 Conclusion

We have now reached the conclusion of the dialogue. Socrates has twisted Protagoras into an agreement that all the virtues are wisdom. Protagoras does not realize his defeat until the last minute.¹⁵¹ The ending has a comical "tricolon of reluctance" as it dawns on Protagoras that he has lost the joust (360c7-e4): Protagoras "nodded assent", "still nodded assent", and then "scarcely nodded assent at all." Then he can no longer finish the argument at all, but tells Socrates to do so.

Before the curtains are drawn, Socrates has one more trick up his sleeve. Another ventriloquized interlocutor tallies up that SP2 has been established, and PP2 refuted. Now, if all the virtues are wisdom, which is a matter of knowledge, then all the virtues are teachable.¹⁵² So,

¹⁴⁹ See O'Brien (1967: 138), Zeyl (1980: 268 n. 37), Kahn (1996: 240-41).

¹⁵⁰ See Santas (1971: 284-86) for the move from "overcome by pleasure" to "overcome by fear."

¹⁵¹ Just as Aristotle would later advise, Socrates has hidden the direction to which the argument was leading. See *Top.* 156b10-14.

¹⁵² Cf. *Prot.* 361b, *Meno* 87c1-7.

the imaginary interlocutor reasons that in upholding SP2, Socrates becomes committed to PP1. On the other hand, Protagoras must be committed to SP1 and should look for another source of income.¹⁵³ Of course, this argument doesn't necessarily hold. One can "teach someone how to be a good man, in a broad sense of 'teach' which includes conditioning in social mores."¹⁵⁴ This is at least defensible, but Protagoras is finished debating.

As we said at the beginning of this chapter, that the virtues are teachable (or unteachable) is the argument behind all the arguments of the *Protagoras*. The tangential discussions are subordinate to Hippocrates' inquiry of whether he should study under Protagoras. In hindsight, we can see that with enough cleverness (of which Socrates had no lack), Socrates could have argued against studying under Protagoras no matter which way the direction the conversation went. Protagoras could have argued *for* the unity of the virtues. In that case, Socrates would have refuted the thesis "all the virtues are one", and then argued, "Only knowledge is teachable, the virtues are distinct and none are knowledge, and so virtue is not teachable." This would have been more direct. But Protagoras took the more difficult route, but we have seen how Socrates negotiated this refutation. It's fair to say that Socrates had the foresight always to keep in mind the real question under discussion.¹⁵⁵

Is this eristic baiting? By no means. Now that Protagoras has been humbled, he receives an invitation to a more substantive discussion: "I would like us to go through these things, both

¹⁵³ A position that Protagoras has too many personal commitments to entertain seriously. Aristotle envisions this possibility: "love or hate or one's own benefit [makes us] no longer able to have sufficient vision of the truth, and it obscures our judgement." (*Rhet.* 1354b8-11)

¹⁵⁴ Taylor 1991: 214.

¹⁵⁵ On foresight/hindsight in the *Protagoras*, see Morgan (2000: ch. 5).

to reach the nature of virtue, and to examine again whether it is teachable or not.”¹⁵⁶ Protagoras’ *aporia* is an invitation for more in-depth investigation.¹⁵⁷ It provides him an opportunity for a “joint search” (συνδιασκοπέω) with Socrates to make things more clear (361e6).¹⁵⁸ Aristotle offers a similar reflection in the *Categories*, a passage with verbal parallels to the ending of the Protagoras.¹⁵⁹

It is perhaps hard to make firm statements (ἀποφαίνεσθαι) on such questions without having examined (ἐπεσκεμμένον) them many times. Still, to have gone through the various difficulties (διηπορηκέναι) is not unprofitable. (8b21ff. Ackrill trans.)

But Protagoras politely declines the opportunity for further investigation. He suggests that the present company “turn to something else”, presumably back to poetic exegesis or listening to long speeches. As we will see, the question of virtue’s teachability remains for a later conversation with a more amenable interlocutor. Indeed, both in subject matter and in the question of how to proceed after being “numbed” into *aporia*, the ending of the Protagoras is a fine foreshadow to the issues raised in the *Meno*.

¹⁵⁶ We can easily apply the situation of the slave in the *Meno* to Protagoras’. Both are put into a state of *aporia*, but what they do with their confusion makes all the difference: “Instead of simply bringing the slave to the truth, Socrates first reduces him to *aporia*... The episode with the slave is designed to show that, once various misconceptions are cleared away, the answer can be recollected from a previous existence of the soul. Under these circumstances, Socrates can claim that the numbing of the respondent is itself good for him: now that he’s perplexed he’ll be glad to look for an answer (84b).” (Blank 1993a: 432).

¹⁵⁷ Without *aporia*, there is no dialogue (cf. *Top.* 105a3-9).

¹⁵⁸ For the place of co-searching in Plato’s dialectic, see chapter 3.

¹⁵⁹ Now, by showing verbal parallels, I am not arguing that Aristotle had the end of the *Protagoras* in mind as he wrote this passage. The “dialectical vocabulary” present in both passages occur throughout both philosophers’ *corpora*. I only intend to show the similarities Plato and Aristotle have vis-à-vis the “searching function” of dialectic.

Chapter 2: Arguing to Win and the Refutation of Polus

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, we saw an example of a “gymnastic” question-and-answer session, the verbal jousting that became fashionable in the Athenian intellectual circles of Plato’s time. We know from Aristotle’s *Topics* VIII that these jousts were subject to rules of fair play, sometimes enforced by a referee, sometimes by the audience. Foul play characterized the eristic, an argumentative mode considered by Plato and Aristotle to be a counterfeit variety of discussion. The line separating competitive, gymnastic discussions from the eristic was uncomfortably thin. In neither was it necessary to argue from true premises, in both the questioner had to strategize to corral an unwilling answerer into a contradiction. In fact the line was so thin that Socrates could not always escape the eristic brush: Socrates’ interlocutors are happy to call him “insolent” (ὕβριστής *Symp.* 175e7, *Ps-Pl.Alc* I. 114d7), “just a mob orator” (ἀτεχνῶς δημηγόρος *G.* 494d1), “violent” (βίαιος *G.* 505d4), contentious (Φιλόνικος *G.* 515b5), a “malefactor in argument” (κακουργήσαις μάλιστα τὸν λόγον *Resp.* I.338d2), and a “swindler” (συκοφάντης *Resp.* I.340d2).

The line is admittedly thin, sometimes vanishingly so. Aristotle tries to distinguish the eristic on the following grounds. The eristic (1) uses deductions that reason from *apparently* (but not actually) reputable opinions, or it (2) appears to reason (but does not) from either actual or apparent *endoxa* (*Top.* 100b23-25). How this looks in arguments, and how (or whether) it differs from tricky dialectical reasoning, will be a point of dispute. But at least for Aristotle, the key was that eristic arguments rely on what is *apparent* but not *actual*. Eristic questioning hoodwinks the answerer into accepting premises and reasoning that she did not intend. For example, the proposition: “What we haven’t lost we have.” The interlocutor might be led to believe that this is

the common-sense premise “If I have something and haven’t lost it, then I have it.” But we haven’t lost horns, so, strictly speaking, we must have horns.¹ As the questioner makes the deduction the answerer simultaneously realizes that the premise must have been flawed. In good circumstances, she can clarify her real *doxa*. But if the chain of reasoning is long enough, it may be difficult to perceive when the eristic premise got shuffled in.

For example, suppose the answerer realized that the proposition “I have no athletic ability” was plausible. A friend then offers us the following premises: (1) “If I have something and haven’t lost it, I have it” (eristic) and (2) “athletic ability is innate” (plausible but ambiguous—innate to whom? everyone?) and (3) “innate athletic ability must be activated by practice” (plausible). We would conclude that we must have innate athletic ability that simply needs to be activated by practice. We would be refuted, but perhaps not persuaded. The conclusion may not harmonize with our perception. This is not to say, though, that eristic arguments have no value. The revelation of hitherto unperceived athleticism could prompt us to examine our premises more closely. This inquiry could lead us to discover that premise 1 is less reputable than it appears, and premise 2 may be reputable but fallacious by an unclear referent. We’ve at least learned something, even if we remain unathletic.

On the other hand, the questioner could convince the answerer to assent to a premise that is not true, but plausible. This is unlike the admission of an eristic premise, such as “If I have something and haven’t lost it, I have it”, because the answerer understands the premise as she agrees to it. After being led through an argument with such premises, there is a much better chance that the answerer would be persuaded at the conclusion. For example, suppose that an answerer admitted the premises “pleasure is the good” and “the good must always be chosen”,

¹ Smith’s example (1997: 48).

both of which are plausible. The answerer would be led to grant that “pleasure must always be chosen.” The questioner might object, “But what if your pleasure causes someone else pain? Surely criminal acts are pleasurable for criminals, but are censured?” This objection might lead the answerer to reexamine the premise “pleasure is the good.” Perhaps she would concede that, although initially persuasive, the premise must be qualified to “pleasure with no admixture of pain is the good” or “everyone’s pleasure is the good”, against which the questioner can raise fresh objections. In this case, the answerer was not fooled. She knew what “pleasure is the good” meant, but did not consider all the implications. The value of this sort of discussion is obvious: it gives the interlocutors the chance to clarify and sharpen their own *doxai*.

In this chapter, I will argue that (1) Socrates argues eristically in the Polus section of the *Gorgias*; that (2) Socrates plays unfair as a pedagogical strategy; and that (3) Socrates is not a “contentious arguer” in the strictest sense, because of this educative intention and his lack of φιλονικία. Some of the arguments may seem close to those deployed in his joust with Protagoras. In fact, the *Protagoras* is not without its eristic moments. However, the Polus section is notable for its refutation of Polus by seeming *endoxa*. Socrates twists Polus’ admissions to mean something different, and Socrates’ spin makes them less than endoxical. Consequently, Polus is left unpersuaded. Protagoras, however, understood the premises offered to him, and his refutations were not due to a failure in the premises, but in his ineptitude in verbal jousting and imprudence in his choice of premises.

Except for *Laws* and *Republic*, the *Gorgias* is Plato’s longest dialogue. Socrates debates with three interlocutors: Gorgias, and his two admirers Polus and Callicles. The debate with Callicles lasts roughly half the dialogue and attracts the most scholarly attention.² Because of

² See Stauffer (2006: 3-4).

that section's great length, and extensive coverage in the secondary literature, I will not treat it in this chapter. As Socrates' strategy against Callicles resembles that brandished against Gorgias, and the arguments in *Protagoras*, to treat that section would be repetitive. My chief interest is Socrates' refutation of Polus, where Socrates no longer plays by rules of good debate and deals in ἐριστικοὶ λόγοι. He does this, I will argue, to meet Polus at his own level. Polus consistently shows himself to be a poor interlocutor, more interested in how things appear than how they are, aiming at victory and self-promotion rather than investigation and learning. His refutation is a "taste of his own medicine." To illustrate how marked the episode is, I will also comment on the sections leading up to the refutation. We will see a more standard procedure in Socrates' conversation with Gorgias, and the early antics of Polus that will suggest he is not interested in a mature philosophical discussion.

2.2 Chaerephon's Questions

The first three words of the *Gorgias* are πολέμου καὶ μάχης, war and battle. The opening is apt for the *Gorgias*, certainly one of Plato's "aggressive and polemical" dialogues.³

Aggressive action follows aggressive words. Chaerephon wants to listen to Gorgias' show-speech, but Socrates has no interest in it and insists that Gorgias not recite it again. (447b4-c4).

Instead, Socrates wants Gorgias to engage in *his* verbal medium, question-and-answer

(διαλεχθῆναι 447c4), and talk about *his* questions: what's the function of Gorgias' *technē*, what claims does he make about it, and what does he teach. If Gorgias and Socrates are to joust, the

³ Ballacci 2018: 23. The opening has been subject to much discussion. I follow Doyle's (2006: 600) treatment: The proverb is "along the lines of 'first at a feast, last at a fight'... Socrates over-interprets [the criticism of his lateness] to mean that Callicles is accusing him of traducing the entire proverb... yet Callicles is equal to Socrates' wit, identifying the 'feast' in question with the very rhetorical display of Gorgias' that Socrates has just missed... Notice that, if Socrates has traduced the entire proverb, then he is not only late for a feast, but early for a fight." Note that the festival is metonymous for Gorgias' activity, which then becomes matter more akin to an "amusement" or "pastime" (LSJ s.v. ἑορτή A.2). It lacks σπουδή (cf. *Phdr.* 276b).

opening volleys are informal. We do not have Aristotle's recommended "Whether X is Y or not?"⁴ Socrates' round of questions leaves Chaerephon confused as to what he should ask Gorgias (447d2), so Socrates clarifies that he wants Gorgias to define his craft. But he appears to have a deeper purpose in mind. He asks Chaerephon "Don't you understand what I mean?" (ἢ οὐ μανθάνεις ὡς λέγω; 447d4-5), a strange clarification if Socrates is only asking Chaerephon to parrot a question.

Chaerephon, as one of Socrates' closer friends, catches on to Socrates' deeper wish. Socrates wants Gorgias to promote himself so that he can test the rhetorician's assertions about his own practice.⁵ Chaerephon angles for this situation. He does not immediately pose the question that Socrates suggested (ὅστις ἐστίν; 447d1), but asks "Tell me, Gorgias, does Callicles say truly that you promise to answer (ἐπαγγέλλῃ ἀποκρίνεσθαι) whatever anyone asks you?" (447d6-8). Contemporary *sophoi* made much of these "promises" or "professions". Protagoras had his "profession that I profess" of "making men good." (*Prot.* 319a4-7), and Isocrates rails against the sophists for their promises (*Isocr.* 13.1).⁶ Chaerephon's use of ἀποκρίνομαι signals more than meets the eye. In the context of contemporary debate-culture, asking someone to "answer" was an invitation to a formal debate, whether "gymnastic" or "agonistic" or "dialectical" (*Top.* 101a27-28, *SE* 165b10-11), in which "the questioner undertakes to attack and the answerer to defend."⁷ So, Chaerephon has secured what Socrates intended. He wanted to hear

⁴ Of course, what Socrates asks "amounts to asking for a definition of the craft" (Irwin 1979: 111).

⁵ For praise of Chaerephon's intellectual abilities see Olymp. *in Grg.* 0.3.15-21 and 25.1.20-24; 0.8.3-5, 16-22. See Moore (2013) for the various receptions of this most faithful member of the Socratic circle.

⁶ This illuminates Aristotle's claim that everyone tries to refute those who make professions of knowledge (τοὺς ἐπαγγελλομένους) (*SE* 172a31-32).

⁷ Smith 1997: 56.

a commitment from Gorgias as to his argumentative prowess, to make the subsequent question-and-answer session more a test of Gorgias' reputation than of his ideas.⁸

Gorgias brags that no one has asked him a new question in ages (448a1-3).⁹ Chaerephon shows appropriate deference and praises the ease with which the *rhetor* will answer his questions (ἀποκρινῆ) (448a4). Beneath the flattery, there is still the dialectical challenge to play the answerer, and Gorgias understands it. He permits Chaerephon to “make a trial” (πεῖραν λαμβάνειν 448a5) of him. These are not idle words, but a formula within the vocabulary of verbal jousts, whether rhetorical,¹⁰ or dialectical.¹¹ It is a technical description of the role of the cross-examiner.

Before Chaerephon gets rolling, Polus interrupts and asks to answer on behalf of Gorgias. This interruption characterizes him as a stock character, the “overeager interlocutor.”¹² This is the sort of person, claims Aristotle, that everyone else is eager to refute. (*Top.* 156b23-25). In the conversation to follow, Polus comes off so poorly as to win Dodds' choicest descriptions: “impatien[t]”, “prickly”, “resentful”, “unteachab[ly] stupid”, “derisi[ve]”, “ill-bred”, and “intellectually and morally vulgar.”¹³ The young buck claims that he can play the answerer just

⁸ This is a function of dialectic that Aristotle dubs “examinational”. It tests the answerer's own opinions, and it is the answerer's goal to defend a claim to ἐπιστήμη, and the questioner's goal to refute the claim (*SE* 165b4-6, 169b24-25).

⁹ Dodds (1959: 191) calls him “the bored expert.”

¹⁰ *Isoc.* 11.27.2, 6.4.7, 12.236.4, *L.* 4.3.4; *Isaeus* 7.34.2; *Lys.* 26.17.5; *Dem.* 25.42.4, 26.21.5, 28.21.5, 28.22.3, 30.2.3, 59.101.2, 60.20.4; *Aeschin* 3.213.3; *Hyp. Frag.* 199.3.

¹¹ *Xen. Mem.* 1.4.18.5, *Ec.* 8.21.2, 17.1.5, 20.13.4; *Ps-Pl. Theag.* 129d3, *Charm.* 171a4, *Euthyd.* 275b5, *Prot.* 348a2, 348a6, *Laws* 649d8, 649e4, *Aristot. SE.* 172a23, 172a39, 183b2.

¹² He has a similar stock-profile to Hippocrates (see the previous chapter). But he lacks Hippocrates' humility and willingness to concede ignorance, and this will make all the difference.

¹³ Dodds 1959: 11.

as well as Gorgias, so Chaerephon should just question him and give the old expert a break. If Chaerephon was hunting for self-assertion, he's found his prey.¹⁴ Chaerephon begins to play the questioner.

Chaerephon uses a typically Socratic induction to have Polus agree that we label people by the craft of which they have knowledge (ἐπιστήμων ὧν τῆς τέχνης) (448b4-c1)—e.g. “physicians are those that know medicine”, “sculptors are those that know sculpting”, etc. Chaerephon then asks which *techne* is the one Gorgias knows, and so what we should call him. (448c2-3). We should note that while appellations can come from *technai*, *technai* are not the *only* source of appellations. Chaerephon assumes this in his question, and Polus does not challenge it. One could be called an ἔμπορος, for example, a trade that Socrates would likely shrink from calling a *techne*. (*Prot.* 313c-14a). The desire to assert the technical status of rhetoric, we shall see, proves to be a fatal commitment for both Gorgias and Polus.

Polus avoids committing himself to any specific claims. Instead, he offers a speech (448c4-9), grand but vague, Gorgianic to the point of the “grotesque”.¹⁵ It is full of cheap jingles (ἐμπειριῶν ἐμπείρωσ, ἄλλοι ἄλλων ἄλλως, τῶν δὲ ἀρίστων οἱ ἄριστοι) and bland parallels (ἐμπειρία μὲν... ἀπειρία δέ; κατὰ τέχνην... κατὰ τύχην). But beneath the pomp, we find themes that will be key for the rest of the dialogue. First, that *technai* come from *empeiriai* (448c4-5),¹⁶ or perhaps that *empeiria* and *techne* are the same thing.¹⁷ Second, to the question “What is

¹⁴ Polus claims that his skill at answering questions could rival Gorgias' (448a9-b1).

¹⁵ Dodds' description *ad loc.*

¹⁶ Incidentally, Aristotle also seems to buy this relationship between *empeiriai* and *technai*: “It is characteristic of experience (ἐμπειρία) to pass on the principles (τὰς ἀρχάς) of each subject. I cite, for example, experience in astronomy as the basis for the science of astronomy (τὴν ἀστρολογικὴν μὲν ἐμπειρίαν τῆς ἀστρολογικῆς ἐπιστήμης).” (*APr.* 46a17-19). See also *APo.* II.2.

¹⁷ This is a common reading of 448c5-6: “Experience makes our age progress according to *techne*” (ἐμπειρία μὲν γὰρ ποιεῖ τὸν αἰῶνα ἡμῶν πορεύεσθαι κατὰ τέχνην). Cf. Blank (1998: xxii-xxiii): “Polus had written rhetoric was a

Gorgias’ *techne*?”, Polus answers “the noblest (καλλίστης) of the *technai*” (448c8-9). Calling a *techne* “καλλίστη” is not definitional. τὸ κάλλος is not even intrinsic to the object, since an agent is required to dub something καλόν.¹⁸ Polus betrays his preoccupation for how things *appear* over how things *are*.

2.3 Socrates First Refutes Polus

Socrates rebukes Polus for “not playing the answerer at all” (οὐ πάνυ μοι φαίνεται ἀποκρίνεσθαι) by ignoring the “question under discussion” (τὸ ἐρωτώμενον) (448d5). Gorgias does not recognize the problem with Polus’ answer (448d4), betraying his own ineptitude in question-and-answer. Socrates clarifies that Polus’ answer was inappropriate for the genre, a symptom of the fact that “Polus... has had more experience in so-called rhetoric (καλουμένην ῥητορικὴν) than in dialogue (διαλέγεσθαι)” (448d8-10).¹⁹ Perhaps for the first time in Greek, a philosopher has separated “rhetoric” from “dialogue”.²⁰

By creating the disjunction, Socrates has defined the differences. Polus’ answer was (1) verbally florid and (2) devoid of thought. If Polus’ speech reliably exemplifies the trade, Socrates can make vacuous grandiloquence a property of rhetoric rather than a peculiar failing of Polus’.

kind of knowledge acquired by experience, an *empeiria*, but by that he meant to indicate that *technê* and *empeiria* are the same thing or that all there is to *technê* is *empeiria*.”

¹⁸ cf. *Crat.* 416b6ff., which tries to etymologize κάλλος from καλεῖν (an erroneous etymology, cf. Beekes 2016 s.v. καλέω & καλός). The *Cratylus* passage corroborates the need of external agency for an object to become καλόν (note especially 416c7-8).

¹⁹ By καλουμένην, we must understand that Plato is neologizing the abstract noun ῥητορικὴν. See Schiappa (1990), Cole (1991: ch. 8), and Nightingale (1995 ch: 1), who claim that the two verbal arts in question were once comprehended by the term λόγος. As for the art of “dialectic”, McCabe (2008: 108-109) finds that the term *dialektike* only appears in “later” dialogues (*Republic*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Phaedrus*, *Philebus*), and was likely “christened” in *Republic*. Therefore, we should exercise caution in considering διαλέγεσθαι a realized term of art for “dialectic”. That said, it clearly encompasses the established tradition of question-and-answer.

²⁰ Of course, this was anticipated in 447b9-c4, where ἐπιδείξασθαι and διαλεχθῆναι are contrasted. The initial contrast establishes a key theme for the interview with Polus: that rhetoric is almost exclusively concerned with appearances (see LSJ s.v. ἐπιδείκνυμι 2.a), or showing off to others.

Polus does not understand the division Socrates is making, and so he asks him to elaborate. This gives Socrates the chance to define each genre. Socrates accuses Polus of not answering the question, “Of what craft is Gorgias knowledgeable”, but only praising it. In other words, we know we are in a dialogue if we are seeking what things are (τὸ τί ἐστὶ); when we are not so seeking, we are practicing rhetoric. Of course, the irony is that Socrates is defining rhetoric even as he asks the rhetoricians to do so.

Polus still does not understand. We’re not seeking what Gorgias’ *techne* is like (ποίη), says Socrates, but what it is (τίς) (448e6-7). This is the mistake of many “early” interlocutors, such as Protagoras and Meno. Polus’ confusion gives Socrates the space to reinforce the dialogue/rhetoric divide: in dialogue, the interlocutors “put things briefly” (διὰ βραχέων) and answer “*what* is the *techne*” (τίς ἢ τέχνη) (449a1), and so rhetoricians must neither put things briefly nor explain what things are.

2.4 The Testing of Gorgias

Gorgias allows Socrates’ division between *logoi*, and accepts that he practices what Socrates is calling rhetoric:

SO: So we’re to call you a *rhetor*?

GO: And a good one at that (ἀγαθὸν γε), Socrates! if you want to call me “what I boast to be”, as Homer says.

SO: But I want to!

GO: Call me it then! (449a6-10).

He defensively marks the adjective “good” with γε. Perhaps this is a nod to the poor reputation that innovating educators like Gorgias enjoyed (cf. Isocr. 13.1), and he cites a Homeric tag to

evoke some prestige.²¹ “Good” might also be marked to signal the ambiguity of the phrase “good orator”: is he good insofar as he persuades, or is he good insofar as he is a good man?²²

The formula [εὐχομαι εἶναι] merits attention. It is not infrequent as a line-ender. But as Gorgias has called attention to the word ἀγαθός, perhaps he is referring us to *Il.* 14.113 (πατρὸς δ’ ἐξ ἀγαθοῦ καὶ ἐγὼ γένος εὐχομαι εἶναι). The reference is apt, a speech of Diomedes in which the son of Tydeus defends himself against those who would “disdain his words” (μῦθον ἀτιμήσατε) because of his “bad kin” (γένος γε κακὸν) (13.126-7). Gorgias likewise defends his μῦθος against those who would associate him with the γένος κακὸν of rhetors. But there is more to this Homeric citation: it is a performative act. Citing poetry is similar in effect to citing *gnomai*, which Aristotle claimed “give our *logoi* character (ἠθικὸς)” (*Rhet.* 1395b12-13), and are useful when making assertions about oneself (1418b22-34). What sort of assertion is Gorgias making? The quotation of canonical poetry was a form of *paideia*-signaling, a way of showing that one was party to an elite milieu “abounding [in] acclaimed sources of wisdom, from poets and divine interpreters to sophists and orators.”²³ So, by making a clever Homeric reference, Gorgias has defended his intellectual *bona fides* in the belief that this would somehow impress Socrates.

²¹ On the practice of citing poetry for prestige-signaling, see Arisot. *Metaph.* 995a7-8, *Rhet.* 1394b27-29. Such citations were persuasive, but, like the citation of *gnomai*, are perhaps only useful as vehicles of persuasion: they “are not arguments and do not explain themselves.” (Morgan 2009: 563, referring to *gnomai*).

²² D. Blank brought to my attention a similar ambiguity, and discussion, regarding the phrase ἀγαθὸς χρηματιστής in *Phild. de oec.* XX.1-32. See Tsouna (2007: 70-73, 192-94).

²³ Cotton 2014: 144. See pg. 44 n. 47.

Socrates asks whether Gorgias can make other *rhetoires* (449b1) (a feature commonly required of *technai*),²⁴ and Gorgias affirms that he can. Socrates uses this question to draw Gorgias into giving short answers. It is a dialectical *problema*, or controvertible issue around which the questioner bases his question, to trap the answerer in contradiction (*Top.* 101b28-33, *SE* 165b3-4). Once Gorgias makes an affirmation, Socrates can say, “Gorgias, would you like to finish our round of questions, just as we’ve now been discussing (διαλεγόμεθα)? But as for these long speeches, such as Polus began to make, would you be willing to put it aside for later (εἰς αὐθις)?” (449b4-7). Socrates wants Gorgias to move from the *logos*-arena in which he is known to excel (rhetoric), to the one in which Socrates is known to excel (question-and-answer).²⁵ Indeed, Plato commonly uses the idiom (εἰς αὐθις) to dismiss *logoi* that are in competition to question-and-answer or to switch a conversation from one of these *logoi* to question-and-answer.²⁶ Gorgias ought to be cautious about accepting this challenge. Accepting reinforces the notion, if only implicitly, that this field of “rhetoric”, the nature of which is being defined in this very text, is inadequate for philosophical investigation. But Gorgias is proud of his skills both in *macrologia* and *brachylogia* (449c2-3, 7-9), so he acquiesces.²⁷

²⁴ Cf. *Ap.* 19a8-20c3, *Soph.* 232c7-10, *Phaedr.* 266c1-5, *Euthyd.* 292d1-6, *Prot.* 248e2-5, *Meno* 99b7-9, *Menex.* 235e3-7.

²⁵ On the other hand, how are we to interpret Gorgias’ claim that he also excels in answering questions (447c5-8)? We are reminded that, when Plato composed the *Gorgias*, all forms of speechcraft were comprehended by λόγος. The character Gorgias, who would be unaware of a division between ῥητορικὴ (=long speeches) and διαλεκτικὴ (=short answers), might reasonably assume that mastery in one form of λόγος entailed a general mastery of λόγος. The tension of the interview with Gorgias is to demonstrate that there’s a branch of λόγος in which Gorgias is incompetent, and that this branch is superior to the one in which Gorgias has expertise. That said, even before the *Gorgias*, ῥήτορες were associated with long forms of speech, and with using their speech for personal advantage. See Thuc. 3.40, 6.29, 8.1; Isoc. 8.129-30, 12.12; and Jebb (1896: 336).

²⁶ Cf. 447c3, where the phrase is used for the same point. See also *Euthph.* 6c8, *Crat.* 440e3, *Pol.* 286c2, *Euthyd.* 275a4, *Prot.* 347b3. See Denyer (2008: 168) for discussion.

²⁷ See Vogt 2012 on epistemic over-optimism in Platonic interlocutors. We can read this passage with a comment that Irwin (1995: 20) makes about Laches: “Do Laches’ concessions show that he is simply not a very astute

What follows is a refutation typical of the aporetic or “early” dialogues. Socrates and the answerer take opposite sides of a dialectical *problema*. Socrates, as questioner, has to “give the appearance (φαίνεσθαι) by all means of producing an effect upon (ποιεῖν) the [answerer],” and the answerer has “to appear to be unaffected (μηδὲν φαίνεσθαί πάσχειν) by him.” (*Top.* 159a30-32). To do this, the questioner “leads forward the argument so that he makes the answerer say the most implausible of the necessary consequences because of his thesis.” (*Top.* 159a18-20). We can see this in synopses of the argument:

- 1) Those who have knowledge of rhetoric can teach rhetoric. (449a5)
Gorgias has knowledge of rhetoric. (449b1).
∴ Gorgias can teach rhetoric (449b1).

Like Protagoras and Meno, Gorgias’ chief commitment is that he has something to teach other people. Changing his mind on this would mean losing both income and prestige. Personal commitments of this kind are roadblocks to a real investigation because some assumptions become unassailable.²⁸

- 2) All *technai* concerning *logoi* (TCL) have a defining feature (DF) (451a3-c9).²⁹
Rhetoric is a TCL (450b6-c2).
∴ Rhetoric has a DF (451c10).

This is not a difficult claim to extract. From *Topics* VII.5, we see that Aristotle would advise the questioner to establish the genus and differentia, because the essence of a thing is signified by

interlocutor? This criticism overlooks the fact that Socrates is not trying to test the interlocutor’s logical skills.” Indeed, Socrates will not be testing Gorgias’ virtuosity, but his mistaken beliefs about the *level* of his virtuosity.

²⁸ Cf. Aristotle on predetermined opinions in investigation: Συμβαίνει δὲ περὶ τῶν φαινομένων λέγουσι μὴ ὁμολογούμενα λέγειν τοῖς φαινομένοις. Τούτου δ’ αἴτιον τὸ μὴ καλῶς λαβεῖν τὰς πρώτας ἀρχάς, ἀλλὰ πάντα βούλεσθαι πρὸς τινὰς δόξας ὀρισμένας ἀνάγειν. (*DC* 306a5-9)

²⁹ Cf. *Charm.* 170a-171c.

the genus and differentiae. Without these, Aristotle warns, it will be impossible to reason out a definition. So, by this syllogism, Socrates wants to make the discussion about defining rhetoric. This is dangerous for Gorgias. Within dialectic, it is highly strategic to force an answerer to grant a definition, “the easiest thing to destroy.” (155a3). The corollary is that a subtle answerer will avoid, as far as possible, giving a definition.

3) No DF is shared by another TCL (453d1-5).³⁰

Rhetoric’s DF is shared by another TCL (452e1-8) and (453d7-11).

∴ Rhetoric’s DF is not a DF (454a4-5).

Every definition needs a differentia (103b15, 139a30), and indeed a good deal of dialectic is devoted to problems related to differentiae. (101b20ff). Despite that, Gorgias did not have to grant these concessions so readily, or he could at least offer resistance. For example, Socrates had claimed that the art of music is the “composition of melodies” (449d4). Gorgias could object that this definition does not separate a defining feature of music from its specific instantiations (e.g., cithara or aulos playing).³¹ Then Gorgias could argue that rhetoric does not have a defining feature apart from its specific instantiations (there are speeches about shipbuilding, about foreign policy, about medicine, etc.)

Now, it will turn out that these premises are not vital to the refutation at the end. On the other hand, the multiplication of concessions, even unnecessary ones, confuses the answerer (cf. *Top.* 157a1-5). Even if it does not refute Gorgias, the round shakes our confidence in him, and so is still worthwhile for Socrates.

³⁰ Cf. *Ion* 538a2-4.

³¹ Cf. Beversluis (2000: 296).

- 4) All TCL involve either belief or knowledge (454d1-455a2).³²
 Rhetoric involves belief (*pistis*) (454e8-9).
 ∴ Rhetoric does not involve knowledge (455a1-2).

This argument fallaciously mistakes effect for cause. Socrates gets Gorgias to concede that rhetoric *causes* certain beliefs in a listener, but this is not incompatible with having knowledge of rhetoric and teaching that knowledge to others.

- 5) Rhetors have knowledge of justice (454b5-7 and 460a3-4).
 Those who have knowledge of justice always act justly (460b8).
 ∴ Rhetors always act justly.

The argument is problematic. Socrates argues that just as a man who learns to build is a builder, a man who learns music is a musician, and a man who learns medicine is a doctor, so the man who learns justice is just. But Gorgias could have objected with examples that knowledge can coexist with a lack of application. (For example, the builder could be persuaded to make a shoddy building, or the doctor could have poor coordination but expert knowledge of medicine). Nevertheless, this is not an eristic deduction. Gorgias understood the premises as Socrates understood them, and found them plausible (*endoxa*), even if we do not.

Argument (5) motivates the middle term in the final refutation (8). Aristotle recommends winning a concession for the middle term early in an argument (*APr* 66a25-32), as here. This is a good strategy because the middle term explains *why* the refutation is the case. If the questioner asks about the middle term early enough, the answerer may not understand how it fits into the final refutation. Similarly, when the argument does reach the final refutation, the answerer may not be able to reconstruct how the middle term was granted, and so will be powerless to argue against it.

³² Cf. *Ion* 537d5-e1.

6) Those who have learned (μεμαθηκῶς) a *techne* unfailingly receive knowledge of their *techne* (460b3-5).

Those who have learned rhetoric have learned a *techne*.

∴ Those who have learned rhetoric unfailingly receive knowledge of their *techne*.

7) Those who know a *techne* unfailingly act according to their *techne* (460c1-4).

Those who have learned rhetoric are those who know a *techne*.

∴ Those who have learned rhetoric unfailingly act according to their *techne* (460c5-6).

These last two arguments are perhaps unnecessary, although they (a) reinforce the final conclusion (Aristotle advises securing as many deductions as possible for persuasive effect (*Top.* 156a7-9); and (b) they conceal the connection between (5) and (8), which are the more important arguments. Indeed, Aristotle discourages going through deductions in their most logical order, as this conceals the conclusion for as long as possible (*Top.* 156a23-26).

8) All beneficial rhetoric is unjust (452d5-8, e1-8; 456b-c).

Rhetoric cannot be unjust (5, 6, 7).

∴ No rhetoric is beneficial rhetoric (461a4-b2).

Gorgias, it seems, must give up either the technical status of rhetoric (an odious choice, for then Gorgias is out of a job) or concede that rhetoric can procure none of the goods that make people want to study rhetoric (also odious, for now rhetoric is useless). Irwin argues that Gorgias need only deny that knowledge is virtue to escape the dilemma.³³ But *rhetoires* need to have knowledge of *something* (454b5-7 and 460a3-4) according to the current concessions.

2.5 Analysis of Gorgias' Refutation

It does not require much imagination to think of ways that Gorgias could have evaded refutation *and* clung to his commitments. He could have withdrawn his claim that rhetoric is knowledge, and given examples of non-epistemic disciplines that still require pedagogy. In fact,

³³ Irwin 1979: 126-129.

Socrates later recognizes knacks of this kind, such as cosmetics and cooking (463b). Gorgias could have also claimed that rhetoric was a matter of *pistis* about justice, and that *pistis* about justice does not force an agent to act justly (5).³⁴ That way the *rhetor* is not shamefully ignorant of justice, but can still act unjustly to secure the desired benefits. Finally—and this is perhaps the easiest solution—Gorgias made the same error that Hippocrates made in the *Protagoras*, the belief that ability to speak about X belongs to the knowledge of X. (*Prot.* 312d9-e2). If Gorgias had shown that knowledge about X has no connection to an ability to speak about X, then he could carve out a niche for rhetoric. Indeed, from some of Gorgias’ comments, it seems that Gorgias accepts this distinction anyway. Gorgias’ brother Herodicus knows medicine, but Gorgias can speak more convincingly about medicine than he can (456b). In any event, this distinction is plausible. (Everyone has had a wise but inept pedagogue).

Gorgias shows that he is a poor performer in competitive argument. He would rather just end the debate prematurely than try to examine his previous concessions. He does not learn from Polus’ definition of rhetoric but defines it (τὰ μέγιστα τῶν ἀνθρωπέων πραγμάτων, ὃ Σώκρατες, καὶ ἄριστα 451d7) in the same mistaken manner that he had. Finally, he fails to use Socrates’ admissions for his counterattacks. For example, Socrates describes his own procedure as “wanting to know this very thing, namely, whatever the argument is about” (453a8-b3). Socrates could hardly criticize rhetoric for lacking a defining feature (451a3-c10). Other *logoi*, such as long speeches, could seek knowledge of the thing under discussion. For example, the second of Antiphon’s tetralogies features a series of speeches, in which an accidental homicide becomes a starting point for a discussion about guilt, voluntariness, justice, etc. This tetralogy has the added

³⁴ Cf. Kahn (1983: 79): “Polus tells us that Gorgias came to grief because he was ashamed to admit that the orator might not know ‘what is just and honorable and good’ (461b). This diagnosis of Gorgias’ downfall is echoed by Callicles (482c-d), and confirmed by Socrates (508c1-3).”

advantage of allowing for response and criticism of an opponent's claims, which Socrates claimed as the special domain for question-and-answer (for example, in *Prot.* 334c8-d1).

What motivates Gorgias' contradictions? He has *a priori* commitments to whatever will further his claim to teach a *techne* for money. This leads him to assert propositions which he does not believe, such as “*rhetoires* have knowledge of justice” (454b5-7 and 460a3-4) and “No *rhetoires* are unjust” (8), which are meant to establish the “technicity” of rhetoric (2-3).³⁵ Without knowledge there is no *techne*, and without a *techne* Gorgias has nothing to teach. We can now understand why Gorgias is so ashamed to admit that the rhetorician lacks knowledge of the good, and why this shame is what led to Gorgias' defeat.³⁶ These insincerities are a roadblock to further discussion.³⁷ Critics might pin the blame for this roadblock on Socrates, or claim that Socrates has done nothing for Gorgias as a result of this conversation.³⁸ But this is to misunderstand the dialectical joust. Sometimes all we can expect is the exposure of false expertise (*SE* 169b23-25). In this case, Gorgias claimed that he was an expert in question-and-answer, and by his very refutation, his claim has been challenged.

2.6 The “Socratic Elenchus” and Historical Understandings of the Argumentation in the *Gorgias*

³⁵ But see Kahn (1983: 82-83), who argues that Gorgias had to overcome the suspicion attached to foreign rhetoricians by claiming to benefit the city, by making politicians just.

³⁶ This accords somewhat with Kahn's (1983: 79) justly famous treatment. However, I would nuance this aspect of his commentary: he dismisses attempts by other commentators to show how Gorgias could have worked his way out of a refutation, on the grounds that such maneuvers are not relevant to the case at hand. The only relevant matter is Socrates refuting Gorgias with an *ad hominem* argument, one that shames Gorgias such that he cannot respond. Rather, Gorgias' failure to argue well is part of his refutation: he claimed to be an expert in question-and-answer, and his ability to maintain the argument thus must be part of his refutation.

³⁷ As McCabe (2015: 122) notes that dialectic in Plato usually breaks down when the interlocutor loses the “right discursive and synoptic state for the truth which is presented.” That is, Gorgias is no longer asserting premises based on his real *doxa*, nor does he have a regard for truth, but for financial gain.

³⁸ Socrates has not “purged Gorgias of any false beliefs”, and these beliefs have not been shown to be inconsistent, only too hastily conceived. (Beverluis 2000: 310).

Now, not everyone has been convinced that Socrates argues here, or anywhere else, according to a dialectical tradition that Aristotle would later inherit. Since “puzzling each way we will more easily see truth and falsehood” (*Top.* 101a35-36), I would now like to rehearse some of the arguments of those who do not see Plato and Aristotle as participants in the same culture of competitive debate. The most influential school for this claim, perhaps now interesting more for its dominance in the late 20th century, is that spearheaded by Gregory Vlastos. Vlastos reified some phenomena in the Platonic corpus, and particularly the *Gorgias*, into what he called the “Socratic *elenchus*”, which is:

A search for *moral* truth by question-and-answer adversary argument in which a thesis is debated only if asserted as the answerer’s own belief and is regarded as refuted only if its negation is deduced from his own beliefs.³⁹

Vlastos denied that the “Socratic *elenchus*” shared features with the Aristotelian dialectical program, on the grounds that “in elenctic argument there is no appeal... to what [Aristotle] calls τὰ ἐνδοξα... which constitute for Aristotle the foundation of ‘dialectical argument’—the form of argument proper to moral inquiry.”⁴⁰ There are two responses I would make to this claim. First, a more basic point: we have already seen that opinions (τὰ δοκοῦντα), reputable or otherwise, *do* play a role in Plato’s dialectical practice.⁴¹ The second is the following: does Vlastos’ definition of *elenchus* move beyond Aristotle’s “making a deduction with a contradiction of the conclusion” (*SE* 165a2-3)? If we turn back to Vlastos’ definition, we might reflect that dialogues must be “question-and-answer”, “adversary”, and an “argument”, and so these descriptions give

³⁹ Vlastos 1983: 30.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ See sections 0.3 and 0.6 of the introduction to this dissertation. We might add that Aristotle never claims that dialectical argument is “the form of argument proper to *moral* inquiry”. The terms are also being used in a slippery way: *elenchi* are a feature of a dialectical program, not another name for dialectic.

us no new information. Furthermore, Aristotle's "examination" dialectic is likewise "deduced from [the answerer's] own beliefs" (τὰ δοκοῦντα τῷ ἀποκρινομένῳ), and must include a contradiction from the admission of these beliefs. So, it appears that Vlastos does not move far beyond Aristotle.

I am also unsure whether the debate between Gorgias and Socrates, or other Platonic discussions, can be called a "search for *moral* truth". The phrase itself is ambiguous. Perhaps Vlastos means that the *elenchus* can *reach* truths, a hunch confirmed by his claim that the *elenchus* aims to "discover how every human being ought to live,"⁴² and by his list of ten positive "theses" that Socrates establishes by the *elenchus*.⁴³ Let us now examine whether Socrates uses *elenchi* to reach truths in his interview with Gorgias. If an effect is not greater than its cause than presumably such discoveries will be undergirded by true premises. Indeed, for this reason, Aristotle distinguishes arguing in a "plausible" manner from arguing by the truth (cf. *Top.* 175a31-33). This is the distinction between dialectical and demonstrative arguments. (cf. *APo* 71b21-22, *Top.* 101a27-30, 100a30-100b18, 100b22-24). The latter can reveal new truths, the former can only expose contradictions. Now, the argument between Socrates and Gorgias is clearly closer to a "dialectical" argument. Some propositions seem reputable enough, e.g. (1-4). Others sound plausible, but on reflection strain our credulity, e.g. the minor premise of (5), the major premises of (6) and (7). Socrates and Gorgias cannot expect a true conclusion from debatable premises. Rather, we should understand that Gorgias has simply failed to "uphold an argument and not say anything contradictory" (*Top.* 100a18-21). We still do not *know* that

⁴² Vlastos 1994: 10.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 11-12. Some examples include: "That the poet versifies and the rhapsode recites not by craft, but by a kind of madness", "That we should never return wrong for wrong or evil for evil", "That the just ruler rules not for his own benefit but for that of his subjects."

knowledge does not belong to rhetoric, or whether rhetoric has a defining feature or not.⁴⁴ We have only learned that we cannot simultaneously hold the premises of arguments (1-8), in the way that Gorgias understood them, and claim that we have a consistent belief-set.⁴⁵

2.7.1 The Refutation of Polus: Introduction

We now find Polus intruding once more into the dialogue, “sputtering with indignation and anacolutha.”⁴⁶ Such an interlocutor requires special argumentation,⁴⁷ and Socrates does not fail to deliver.⁴⁸ Dodds, who takes the whole section too seriously, claims that Socrates stops acting the gadfly, and puts forward “positive doctrine with a certitude about its truth that appears new.”⁴⁹ As we will see, nothing should be taken at face-value in Socrates’ refutation of Polus. The argument is fallacious and meant to feel fallacious, strong medicine for a wayward rhetorician. But before we treat the actual argument, we must examine the lead-up carefully, and see what provokes Socrates’ venom.

We have already intuited that Polus is not a smart interlocutor. This intuition is confirmed in his leap back into the discussion. Obsessed with how things appear, Polus can only point to “shame” as the source of Gorgias’ refutation.⁵⁰ He fails to recognize that this shame is the

⁴⁴ Some scholars have argued that Plato is not as pessimistic about rhetoric as is assumed. See Fussi (2001) and Murray (1988: 286).

⁴⁵ See Benson (2011: 198ff), and his arguments for “doxastic coherency” as a goal of Platonic argument.

⁴⁶ Irwin 1979 *ad loc.*

⁴⁷ Gill (1996: 289) comments on the correlation between the quality of the interlocutor and that of the discussion. Blondell (2002: 100) shows that Socrates tailors his refutations according to the dispositions of the interlocutor.

⁴⁸ The argument has generated a generous secondary literature. For a survey of views, see: Guthrie (1975: ch. V.4), Vlastos (1991: ch. 5), Berman (1991), Beversluis (2000: ch. 15), Sermamoglou-Soulmaidi (2017).

⁴⁹ Dodds 1959: 16ff.

⁵⁰ 461b4-5, see Irwin (1979: *ad loc.*). Not that such affects are ever lacking in a Socratic interview (Blank 1993a: 428ff.).

emotion *subsequent* to his poor performance and a reflection of his ill-thought out positions.⁵¹ He blames Socrates for leading Gorgias into inconsistency (461c), betraying his ignorance about dialectical practice. No one can doubt that Gorgias experienced shame, or that Socrates persuaded him to accept plausible but dubious premises; but he was refuted by his own commitments. Socrates politely corrects Polus' misunderstanding about what he and Gorgias were doing, offering to revise whatever has been agreed upon if Polus can argue his way out of it (461c-d).

Polus wants to speak in *macrologia*, but Socrates flatters him into continuing in question-and-answer (462a5-6), and he allows Polus to play the questioner.⁵² The proceedings have much in common with the Simonides scene in the *Protagoras*. The interlocutor has been denied a chance to give a rhetorical exposition, and instead must proceed according to question-and-answer, but as the questioner. This provides a hermeneutical hint. Just like the Simonides episode, this scene is a dialectical farce, a sort of comedic intermission.⁵³

2.7.2 The Refutation of Polus: Polus Plays the Questioner

Polus first asks, “Since Gorgias seems to you to be in *aporia* (*ἀπορεῖν*) about rhetoric, what do you claim that it is?” (462b5). Socrates objects to the neologism *ῥητορικὴ*. He perceives that the feminine adjective is modifying the missing noun *τέχνη*. To offer any definition would

⁵¹ And also of his unwillingness to change his position after being refuted. This is perhaps why Blank (1993: 438) suggests that Socrates “trains or habituates [interlocutors] to display the proper emotions in the proper measure in response to dialectic.” The good interlocutor experiences a healthy shame that leads to a more philosophical outlook. (Tht. 167e-68a).

⁵² Pace Rowe (1996: 173-174), it seems that even in the “early” dialogues Socrates is sometimes willing to trade roles and play answerer (as we also saw in the *Protagoras*, in the Simonides scene). The difference is that in “middle” to “late” dialogues, the other interlocutor has the dialectical virtues necessary to sustain the role-reversal. As we will see here, and as we saw in the *Protagoras*, Socrates quickly retakes the reins.

⁵³ For the intersection of comedy and philosophical dialogues, see Nightingale (1995: ch. 5), Morgan (2016).

be to accept the unargued premise, “rhetoric is a *techne*.” Socrates bases his objection on a point culled from Polus’ own rhetorical handbook: rhetoric is that which Polus “claimed to have made a *techne*” (462b11). We might recall 448c4-9, where Polus waxed grandiloquent on the relationship between *empeiriai* into *technai*. Socrates uses Polus’ *empeiria/techne* distinction and assigns rhetoric to the former. Socrates has done something clever: not only has he avoided giving a definition, he also has prevented the conversation from becoming a detached investigation of ideas. Polus was the one who claimed that a technified rhetoric came from or consisted in *empeiriai*, so Socrates’ claim that rhetoric remains an *empeiria* and not a *techne* marks an examination of Polus’ own ideas. The tables have turned: Polus’ phrasing of the original question, viz. “Gorgias seems to you (σοι δοκεῖ)... you claim (σὺ φησὶ)”, had signaled that Polus wanted to submit Socrates’ views to an examination. Socrates throws down the challenge: Rhetoric is not a *techne*, but that which Polus claimed he made into a *techne*, i.e. an *empeiria* (462b11).

Polus does not understand what Socrates means (462c2). This is rather dim of him, as Socrates has cited Polus’ own book to contextualize the claim. Polus had also expounded on this idea in 448c4-9. This is the first hint of one of Polus’ poor memory, a serious dialectical fault as we shall see. It is a foil to Socrates’ own infamous memory, with an important difference. Socrates claims not to have a memory for long speeches,⁵⁴ but can remember the propositions of question-and-answer over any space of time, even an entire dialogue (as we saw in *Protagoras*). Polus’ memory permits him to gather together inane commonplaces for rhetorical display but prevents him from following the most basic moves of a question-and-answer debate.

⁵⁴ Or rather, pretends not to have such a memory. See *Prot.* 336d.

So Socrates becomes explicit: “rhetoric is an *empeiria*.” “An *empeiria* of what?” asks Polus. “Of manufacturing a certain gratification and pleasure.” (462c3-7). Now Polus makes a misstep: “Doesn’t rhetoric seem to be a fine thing (*καλόν*), to be able to charm people?” (462c8-9). Until this question, the conversation had sought *what* rhetoric is, or a definition of it. Now Polus would rather investigate an accidental feature of rhetoric.⁵⁵ He wants to know whether we should call it *καλόν* or *αἰσχρόν*. As we have seen, Polus cares too much about how things appear and whether he is esteemed *καλός*. Prestige marks the limit of his curiosity: “Haven’t I learned that you say rhetoric is a certain *empeiria*?” (462d3-4). It is unclear how Polus conceptualizes the difference between *empeiria* and *techne*, or if he does sees a difference between the two. Unlike Socrates, he does not care that much whether rhetoric is called one or the other, so long as people hold it in esteem.⁵⁶

Ultimately, Socrates will show that we should *not* hold rhetoric in esteem, and Polus will be powerless to argue against it. But if Polus had paid less attention to fishing for Socrates’ affirmation, and more attention to the discussion at hand, he would have found that he had the admissions to make Socrates call rhetoric *καλόν*. Socrates is happy to concede that things that are *καλόν* excel in pleasure or usefulness (474d2-e1). He has conceded here that rhetoric produces pleasure (462c7). So, there’s a argument to be made that rhetoric is *καλόν*. But that’s not the point of the discussion. He and Gorgias are supposed to show that rhetoric is a *techne* (449a-b). Socrates, realizing that Polus will not stay focused, will offer him the only wake-up call he can: he demolishes the *κάλλος* of rhetoric, the premise to which Polus is most committed.

⁵⁵ Dialectic can certainly investigate accidental features just as well as definitions. However, they are two different kinds of discussion, each with their own *topoi*. Aristotle devotes different books of the *Topics* to the two kinds of conversations (book II for arguments about accident, book VI for definitions). Polus does wrong here for not sticking to the problem under discussion.

⁵⁶ We saw a foreshadow of this mentality in 448e.

If Polus were a little clever, could he have twisted Socrates into defining rhetoric? If Gorgias is at an impasse (ἀπορεῖν 462b5), can we expect any better from Socrates? We have good reason to doubt. Socrates not only induces ἀπορία in others but exists in it as a perpetual state. (*Meno* 80a1-2). But Socrates is not thereby excluded from fruitful searches for definitions—there is more than one kind of *aporia* in Plato. The one more familiar to readers of the “early” dialogues, *kathartic* *aporia*, ends conversations, exposes ignorance,⁵⁷ and induces an emotional shock.⁵⁸ The other kind is “zetetic”, an *aporia* that fosters curiosity and co-searching for truth.⁵⁹ It is pedagogical, “raising awareness of the shaky foundations of our accepted notions and our trust in experts, and... engaging us with questions and puzzles that could serve as starting points for further enquiry.”⁶⁰ The latter is characteristic of Socrates, obviously, and here we see it in action.

2.7.3 The Refutation of Polus: A Lesson in Good Dialectic

Socrates tries to help Polus ask better questions. He walks him through a tutorial. First, Polus should be mindful of the perennial Socratic lesson, that we cannot ask ποῖον-questions unless we’ve exhausted ὅτι εἶναι-questions (462c10-d2). As he typically does, he recommends that Polus start with analogies:⁶¹ “Ask me what art cooking seems to me to be” (462d8). By

⁵⁷ The ignorance is exposed to other parties, and to us readers. As Szaif (2017: 31 n. 4) notes, “Socrates’ interlocutors [do not] realise their ignorance when they find themselves ‘to be at a loss’ ...[they] only admit, at best, to a temporary breakdown between their understanding and their ability to articulate.” When interlocutors *do* realize their ignorance, progress can be made. See the discussion on Hippocrates in the previous chapter.

⁵⁸ For “the cathartic experience of *aporia*”, see Blank (1993a: 436). In a recent volume on *aporia*, Politis defines this kind of *aporia* as “that which is articulated by a whether-or-not question, or in general a two-sided question, such that it appears to one and the same person that there are good reasons on both sides and this person does not in the least know, and recognises that she does not in the least know, how to resolve this conflict of reasons.” (2017: 14).

⁵⁹ See Politis (2006: 105-107), Nightingale (1995: 17).

⁶⁰ Szaif 2018: 43.

⁶¹ Socrates was well known for proceeding by “inductive arguments” (ἐπακτικοὶ λόγοι) (Aristot. *M.* 1078b27-28).

leading Polus through arguments in which he has no vested interests (viz. cooking), Socrates hopes to teach him the correct way to investigate when nothing personal is at stake. They work through this parallel case:

ΣΩ. Ἐροῦ νῦν με, ὀψοποιία ἤτις μοι δοκεῖ τέχνη εἶναι. ΠΩΛ. Ἐρωτῶ δὴ, τίς τέχνη ὀψοποιία; — ΣΩ. Οὐδεμία, ὧ Πῶλε. —ΠΩΛ. Ἀλλὰ τί; φάθι. —ΣΩ. Φημί δὴ, ἐμπειρία τις. —ΠΩΛ. Τίς; φάθι. —ΣΩ. Φημί δὴ, χάριτος καὶ ἡδονῆς ἀπεργασίας, ὧ Πῶλε. (462d8-e1).

SO: Ask me now what art I take cookery to be. PO: Then I ask you, what art is cookery? SO: None at all, Polus. PO: Well, what is it? Tell me. SO: Then I reply, a certain habitude. PO: Of what? Tell me. SO: Then I reply, of production of gratification and pleasure, Polus.

Socrates and Polus are now at the same point in the conversation, as when their previous one on rhetoric broke down. Unfortunately, Polus cannot get past this level. He asks the inane question, “So cooking and rhetoric are the same thing?” (462e2).⁶² The conversation has derailed again, whether from stupidity or jeering we cannot tell. Socrates decides to take advantage of the outcome for a further lesson on good manners in dialectic.

Socrates confesses that their conversation leaves him with no clear idea of what Gorgias thinks rhetoric is (463a1-2). In the absence of such clarity, he assumes that it has no share in the fine (τῶν καλῶν 463d3-4). This answer is baiting, a challenge for Polus to improve his argumentation. Socrates wants to grab Polus’ attention, but instead he gets Gorgias’. The older rhetorician is not happy to hear that rhetoric might be αἰσχρόν, and so he steps back into the ring (463a5). Now that everyone is more invested in the conversation, Socrates starts making fun (διακωμῳδεῖν 462e7)⁶³ of everyone present with his four flatteries (463a6-c7).

⁶² We know from Aristotle that questions of sameness and difference were commonplaces of dialectic (see *Top.* bk. VII). This question of Polus’ signals a failure in the most basic principles of question-and-answer.

⁶³ The term διακωμῳδεῖν is unusual; its sense might be gathered from a passage from Aristotle’s *Poetics* (1458b7ff.). Aristotle describes the poet Eucleides, who satirized (διακωμῳδεῖν) epic poetry’s license to lengthen syllables to fit the meter by making up verses that did this to an extreme extent. À la Eucleides, Socrates will satirize his interlocutors by making some exaggerated claims about rhetoric.

There are strong signs that we should not take Socrates seriously here. He reprimands Polus for not noticing which share of flattery rhetoric is (463b7-c2). But the reprimand occurs in the very speech in which Socrates introduces the four flatteries. But even if Polus could have divined the existence of the four flatteries *a priori*, we would still be unsure whether Polus deserved a rebuke. All four are rather arcane, at least when Plato composed the *Gorgias*. Plato seems to have coined ὄψοποιική or “cook-craft”, and the word is only used by Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle. After these three, the term only reappears during the Second Sophistic. The term κομμωτική (“cosmeticraft”) is a neologism, and with the feminine ending is a *hapax* in Greek literature. If we believe Schiappa, Plato also coined ῥητορική,⁶⁴ and he seems to have coined σοφιστική.⁶⁵ What lies behind all this neologizing? We know that the wise men of the time, sophists and rhetoricians both, enjoyed making up new words.⁶⁶ This scene, a clear parody, is likely at the expense of Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles, all participants in this broader wisdom tradition. This parody has a special bite for Polus. He, with his excessive concern for appearances, will be especially mortified by being satirized. It’s the perfect therapy.

Polus may not have caught on to the joke, but it is enough that we readers have. We may be skeptical whether Socrates entertains hopes that Polus will improve, or that Socrates is interested in such a goal. Yet Socrates continues to exhort Polus to practice good manners—perhaps to give good example to Chaerephon or to us readers. After a further admonition to seek quiddity before qualities, Socrates frames questions for Polus to ask (463c6-d2):

⁶⁴ Schiappa 1990.

⁶⁵ The closest competitor is Xenophon, who uses σοφιστικοῦς (*Cyn.* 13.7.2).

⁶⁶ See Schiappa (2013: 79).

ΣΩ ἀλλ' εἴπερ βούλει πυθέσθαι, ἐρώτα ὅποιον μῦθον τῆς κολακείας φημί εἶναι τὴν ῥητορικὴν.
ΠΩΛ. Ἐρωτῶ δὴ, καὶ ἀποκρίναι ὅποιον μῦθον. ΣΩ. Ἄρ' οὖν ἂν μάθοις ἀποκρινάμενον; ἔστιν γὰρ
ἡ ῥητορικὴ κατὰ τὸν ἐμὸν λόγον πολιτικῆς μύθου εἶδωλον.

SO: But if you want to learn about it, ask me what sort of part of flattery I claim rhetoric to be. PO:
I'm asking, so answer what part it is. SO: Now, would you understand me when I answer? Rhetoric,
by my argument, is a mirage of a part of statecraft.

We should recall that Socrates had claimed that rhetoric was an *empeiria* (462c2). Rhetoric is on better footing as an *empeiria* than as a flattery, at least for Polus' priorities. Polus could use the claim "rhetoric is an *empeiria*" to try to argue his way to the conclusion that "rhetoric is/could become a *techne*", or even that "rhetoric as an *empeiria* is καλόν." Only when Socrates began to pull Polus' leg did he switch from calling rhetoric an *empeiria* to calling it a flattery. Socrates *wants* Polus to call him out on this substitution, and this is why he asks Polus if he "would understand" anything from Socrates' answer. Socrates does not want Polus to learn a *fact*, he wants Polus to learn how to handle himself in question-and-answer situations. That would be something better for Polus to understand than some definition of rhetoric.

Socrates was right to worry whether Polus would follow. Polus apparently thinks the two have done justice to the question "What is rhetoric", so he once more asks, "Do you consider rhetoric fine or shameful?" (463d3). "Shameful", Socrates answers; but we should not take Socrates too seriously. He says that his answer is not at all clear, perhaps because Polus has no idea what they are talking about (463d4-e1). Gorgias wants Polus to leave the conversation, so that he can hear Socrates expound on his ideas about the flatteries. But the point is not for Socrates to expound, but to examine others and teach others how to conduct an examination. That's why Socrates insists that Polus needs to stay and examine (ἐλέγξει) his claims (463e6-464a1).

2.7.4 The Refutation of Polus: Polus Plays the Questioner Again

Socrates then, by his own admission, gives a long speech, and an *epideixis* (464b2) at that. It is hard not to see it as another parody at the expense of his interlocutors. For one thing, he had criticized *epideixeis* earlier in the dialogue (447c3-6) and he admits that he is “acting strangely” (465e2) by giving such a long speech. Furthermore, this scene occurs at the same point in the narrative as Socrates’ long discourse about Simonides in the *Protagoras*, a mockery of the eponymous interlocutor’s own “Great Speech”. In Gorgianic fashion, Socrates makes his *epideixis* jingly (λέγω δυοῖν ὄντων τοῖν πραγμάτων δύο λέγω 464b2, μίαν μὲν οὕτως... μιᾶς δὲ οὕσης 464b4-5), full of rhyming neologisms (πολιτικῆς, γυμναστικῆς, νομοθετικῆν, δικαστικῆν⁶⁷ 464b68) and neat classifications.⁶⁸ Polus could not keep up in question-and-answer, so Socrates had no choice but to try his hand at rhetoric (465e3-466a3). But now the floor is Polus’ to give question-and-answer another whirl.⁶⁹

Polus tries to resume the dialogue format. “Does rhetoric seem to be flattery?” (466a4-5). Socrates derails him with the quibble, “I said it is a *portion* of flattery.” (466a6), and makes fun of Polus’ bad memory (466a6-7). Polus ignores this comment, asks the question ever on his mind: whether Socrates thinks that good orators are considered worthless flatterers. (466a9-10). Socrates wonders whether he is beginning a speech or asking a real question (466b1). Polus has not asked a good question, so he will not receive a real answer. His question shows that he is still

⁶⁷ In some manuscripts. It is the *lectio difficilior*, and better fits the passage (*pace* Kahn 1983: 78).

⁶⁸ For the love of classification in the sophistic/rhetorical wisdom tradition, see Aristot. *Rhet.* 1407b6–7, Guthrie (1971: 219ff.), Kerferd (1981: 68).

⁶⁹ “SO: If I am unable to make use of your answer, stretch out your speech as well. But if I am able, let me make use of it, for that is just. And now, if you are able to make some use of this answer, do so.” (466a2-3). Because Socrates has proven his stripes in rhetoric, Polus must do the same in question-and-answer. See Barney (1998: 83).

too preoccupied with how *rhetores* appear (δοκοῦσι) to learn what they are.⁷⁰ When Socrates asks, “Are you beginning a long speech or asking a question”, what he means is “Are you going to search for what rhetoric is with me *via* question-and-answer, or give in to appearances and engage in rhetoric?”

The commentators have puzzled over Socrates’ claim that orators do not seem to be considered at all (466b3). Irwin advises us to read it as an ought statement (i.e. “There is no reason to think well of *rhetores*.”) That may be true, but I would not discount the possibility that Socrates is arguing facetiously, and that these and the following admissions are a parody of the paradoxical claims for which this milieu of Athenian intellectuals became famous (e.g. Gorgias’ “Nothing exists”).⁷¹ That said, Socrates’ paradox here, and the one that follows (“*Rhetores* seem to be the least powerful of those in the city” 466b9-10) do have a purpose beyond farce. In a shocking, and therefore memorable way, they move us to reflect on a major theme of the *Gorgias*, the difference between external power and the freedom to do what one really wants.

By this point in the dialogue, we can identify a pattern. (1) Polus habitually derails the search for “what rhetoric is” in favor of “what does rhetoric seem like.” (462c8-9, 464a4-5, 464d3, 466a9-10). When Polus does this, (2) Socrates no longer feels bound to play by the rules. He invents the four flatteries, lampoons Gorgias, and asserts paradoxes. These paradoxes are what Aristotle would call “seeming *endoxa*.” (*Top.* 100b24-25). For Aristotle, these become the

⁷⁰ Though the interlocutors of the *Gorgias* are nowhere called “sophists”, Polus’ attitude leaves him open to the Stagirite’s diagnosis, that the art of the sophist is to seem to be wise but not really be. (*SE* 165a21-23).

⁷¹ For a discussion of other sophistic parodies in the *Gorgias*, see Bensen Cain (2008: 225ff.). Blank (1993a: 430) notes that dialectic breaks down when the answers “are too outrageous, a transparent attempt to thwart the questioner’s purpose.” Polus has already derailed the conversation—Socrates is fighting fire with fire.

premises of eristic dialogues.⁷² If Socrates is steering the conversation in an eristic direction, is this blameworthy? According to Aristotle, he may be within his rights. Ideally dialectic is a common task with a common goal, but competition and a peevish interlocutor could turn the argument into a contentious discussion (*Top.* 161a23-24). In other words, it's not Socrates that has shipwrecked the dialogue, but Polus has shown himself incapable of having a real philosophical conversation.

But Socrates has not totally given up on Polus. He wants Polus to work past his focus on appearances. He tries to teach him about distinctions: tyrants and Polus do not do what they want, but whatever seems (δόξη) best to them (466d5-e2). He tries to sharpen his logical skills: for example, he warns Polus against asking compound questions (466c7).⁷³ Socrates even offers Polus a path to solving the puzzle, refuting Socrates, and establishing the technicity of rhetoric: if *rhetores* make speeches “with intelligence” (νοῦν ἔχοντας), then their practice will be eligible as a *techne* (466e13).

Socrates tries to teach Polus how to make a refutation. Whenever Polus balks at an answer that Socrates gives (οὗτος ἀνὴρ 467b1, σχέτλιά γε λέγεις καὶ ὑπερφυῖ 467b10), Socrates reminds him that if he disagrees, he needs to refute him (ἐὰν μὴ Σωκράτης ἐξελεγχθῆ ὑπὸ Πώλου 467a9-10, ἀλλά μ' ἔλεγγε 467b2, ἐπίδειξον ὅτι ψεύδομαι 467c1-2). Polus doesn't understand what Socrates means. He asks Socrates to play the questioner to show him how it's done (467c3-4), a switch that dramatically improves the quality of the conversation. Socrates gets to work: under questioning, Polus grants that there are good, bad, and neutral things (467e1-

⁷² See Aristot. *Top.* 100b23-26. See Irwin (1995: 20), for whom the “say what you believe” requirement distinguishes eristic from peirastic. This is compatible with Aristotle—in peirastic, a seeming *endoxon* would *not* be the answerer's own opinion.

⁷³ cf. Aristot. *SE* 167b38ff. See Beversluis (2000: 323 n. 18) for discussion.

3), and that we do the neutral for the sake of the good (468a5-6). Then Socrates lists all the things about rhetoric that attract Polus (putting people to death, expelling them, seizing their property), and has Polus agree that we do not do these acts absolutely, but for the sake of the good. (468b4-7). What is Socrates' goal in this discussion? He wants Polus to make a good argument for rhetoric. Polus can now claim that the attractions of rhetoric (killing, expelling, seizing property) are neutral things that can accomplish good. As such, rhetoric should not be deemed a "flattery." In fact, if a practiced rhetorician learns how to move others to kill, expel, and seize property at the right place at the right time for the sake of the good, then perhaps it can become technical knowledge.

2.7.5 The Refutation of Polus: Polus as the Stock *Dyskolos*

Unfortunately, Polus' bad memory strikes again. Socrates leads him to the conclusion "So it is possible for someone in the city who does whatever seems good to him to be neither very powerful nor do what he wants." (468e3-5). This will lead Polus to admit that rhetoric, and its attendant attractions, need to be practiced in the right way to be worthwhile. But Polus cannot keep the whole argument in his head and goes back to claiming that anyone, even Socrates, would want to seize property, throw people in prison and kill them (468e6). Socrates, with great patience, tries to rescue the discussion, and reminds Polus of his earlier concession: "would you want these things justly or unjustly?" (468e10). Polus claims both are enviable, so Socrates tells him to shut up (469a1-2). This is the only answer suitable for Polus, who has evinced that worst of dialectical faults, *δυσκολία*. The *δύσκολος* "does not grant the universal even if it appears to have many examples"; he "brings no objection"; he "is unable to counter-attack, nor object, nor set down an argument." (*Top.* 160b3-6, 10-12). Polus incarnates this stock character; he is a true "wrecker of reasoning" (*συλλογισμοῦ φθαρτική Top.* 160b12-13). He also cheats, "not

conceding that from which there could be a well-made argument against his thesis.” (*Top.* 161a17-19).

So, the argument breaks down. Socrates has had Polus grant that there is a difference between “what seems fit” and “wanting”, and that no one wants anything unless it is for the sake of the good (468e3-5). Therefore, no one would *want* to use rhetoric for an unjust purpose. But Polus does not allow the argument to proceed any further because it jeopardizes his dream of tyrannizing the city with rhetoric. Now, one might object that this is a moral, not a dialectical problem. We could respond that *δυσκολία* can well be symptomatic of deeper moral issues, rather than the principal failing of an interlocutor. For this study, it is enough to note that *δυσκολία*, whatever its origins, ends up becoming a worse dialectical fault than the eristic. The grouchy interlocutor does not allow the conversation to proceed, while the eristic interlocutor at least provides *aporiai* which a clever interlocutor can sort through.⁷⁴ These puzzles, though often silly,⁷⁵ sharpen our argumentative skills and make us more perceptive of ambiguities in language. Aristotle himself provides an example of this: though Zeno’s argument is implausible, we “must not on this account not set down the opposite of his opinions” (*Top.* 160b8-10). Indeed, his paradoxes provide Aristotle with a rich discussion in *Physics* (4.2, 6.2-9). But the refusal of the *δύσκολος* to continue the discussion is of benefit to no one.

2.7.6 The Refutation of Polus: Arguing from *Exempla*

After some more back-and-forth, Socrates introduces the most famous part of his conversation with Polus. Socrates argues that to do injustice is worse than to suffer it, and Polus

⁷⁴ “[Plato makes] set pieces of eristic argumentation... morph into major philosophical challenges.” (Szaif 2017: 41).

⁷⁵ E.g. “Socrates wants Cleinias not to be as he is, Cleinias is alive, so Socrates wants him dead.” Or “We’ve lost what we don’t have, we don’t have horns, so we have lost horns.”

argues for the contrary. Socrates does not begin the argument with deductions or ἐπακτικοὶ λόγοι, but with an example, the hidden dagger (469c8-e8).⁷⁶ Would Polus be happy to have the power to kill or rob whomever he likes, like a man in a marketplace with a dagger hidden under his cloak? Polus would reject this power (469e8) because he wouldn't want to be caught (470a5-6). We might wonder, even if Polus didn't, whether Socrates wanted him to acknowledge that it is not the unjust deeds that attract him, but the desire to *appear* great. In any case, he asks Polus whether being punished is good. Polus denies this. (470a7-8). But Socrates reminds Polus that the attractions of rhetoric included punishing people, so Polus concedes that sometimes acts of punishment can be good (470b). Consistency is not his strong suit.⁷⁷ Socrates asks Polus what the difference is between good and bad punishment, which Polus would rather have Socrates answer. So he says, punishment is good when it is just and bad when it is unjust. (470c2-3). Polus claims even a child could refute the idea, and Socrates reminds him that whatever the difficulty of the refutation, Polus still hasn't gotten around to any refuting yet (470c6-8).

Polus copies Socrates and argues with his own *exemplum*, that of Perdiccas, the unjust king of Macedon. (471a4-d2). The story leaves Socrates unimpressed. He does not even respond to the story but claims that the only thing clear to him now is Polus' rhetorical training and neglect of question-and-answer (471d3-5). As it is, Socrates is unrefuted, because Polus has not won Socrates' ὁμολογία on a single point (471d7-9). Polus says that deep down, Socrates does want to be like Perdiccas (471e1). Polus seems to have a penchant for *tu quoque* accusations when argument fails him (cf. 468e6).

⁷⁶ Aristotle has some illuminating remarks on such *exempla*. We should deploy them on audiences with a short attention span, for which reason the example is normally part of the rhetorician's arsenal, not the dialectician's (*Rhet.* 1357b26ff.).

⁷⁷ cf. Brickhouse and Smith (1992: 66-67), who diagnose inconsistency as Polus' fatal flaw.

This gives Socrates the chance to digress on method (471e-472d). There are two understandings of what an *elenchus* is, he claims, a rhetorical understanding (ῥητορικῶς) and a dialectical one. The former *elenchi* only seem to refute (δοκοῦσιν ἐλέγχειν), and were the refutations of the Athenian law-courts. Perhaps they represented the more usual meaning of *elenchus* in Plato's time.⁷⁸ As for the latter kind, it seems that Socrates takes the term and uses it as an analogy for his own method. Because of this analogy, the scholarship has canonized the word *elenchus* as *the* term of art for Socrates' own (early) method, especially scholarship in the latter half of the last century.⁷⁹ The data, though, might leave us skeptical. As I mentioned in the introduction, the noun ἔλεγχος only occurs in the "early" dialogues twice (*Ap.* 39c7, *Prot.* 344b4), if we except the *Gorgias*, where it occurs eight times. The verb ἐλέγχειν is more common, but still underwhelming in attestation. It occurs sixteen times in the "early" dialogues, if we except the *Gorgias*, where it occurs twenty-five times.⁸⁰ I argue that the rhetorical context of the *Gorgias* motivates such high usage. Socrates is drawing a parallel between a professional practice of his interlocutors and his own task of testing other people's opinions. Only in later dialogues, such as the *Sophist* (see 230c-d), would the term approach a term of art. Incidentally, a similar phenomenon occurs in Aristotle's dialectical treatises. The term, which would earn an eponymous volume (*Sophistici Elenchi*), is absent from book I of the *Topics*, and appears only

⁷⁸ Including both the noun and verb: Antiphon (39x), Isocrates (14x), Isaeus (21x), Andocides (16x), Lysias (23x), Demosthenes (80x), Aeschines (5x), Lycurgus (8x).

⁷⁹ Thanks to such works as e.g. Robinson (1953: 28ff.), Gulley (1968: 43ff.), Irwin (1977: 33ff.), Vlastos (1983), and the responses to Vlastos (Kraut 1983, Brickhouse & Smith 1984, Polansky 1985, Benson 1990 & 1995, Bolton 1993). Ironically, Vlastos, who initiated so much literature on the 'Socratic elenchus', cautioned against the view that Plato was the one who had 'baptized' the term. He traced the term of art "Socratic elenchus" to Grote (1865), Campbell (1867), and Sigwick (1872). (Vlastos 1983: 37).

⁸⁰ *Pace* Vlastos (1983: 37): "There are dozens of uses of the noun and the verb in Plato, a majority of them in the early dialogues." See the helpful charts in Tarrant (2002: 64-66).

once in the middle books (130a6), and twice in book VIII (158a10, 163b6). Perhaps Aristotle, a rebel youth, rejected Plato's dialectical terminology and made up his own; or perhaps he and his master mirrored each other in their development of dialectical vocabulary. We cannot know, and here we only aim to διαπορεῖσθαι.

The scholion understands intention to be the difference between the two *elenchi*: dialectical *elenchi* aim for truth, rhetorical for “the mistaken opinions (ἡμαρτημένας δόξας) of the many” (*Schol. in Plat. Grg.* 472e2). This is a common distinction in Greek philosophical literature,⁸¹ and can be read into Socrates' earlier interview with Gorgias. Socrates had claimed that in arguments, making definitions is difficult, just as learning and teaching are (457c). If one party tries to help the other make a definition, by pointing out error or lack of clarity, the rebuked dialectician may “take it hard (γαλεπαίνουσι) and think that the other spoke out of ill-will (κατὰ φθόνον), wanting to win rather than investigate (φιλονικούντας ἀλλ' οὐ ζητοῦντας).” (457d4). The line between dialectical search and agonistic display is thin. This is the tension that has been just under the surface of the Polus interview. Polus routinely interprets Socrates' interventions as motivated by ill-will, and repays them in kind. He only wants to look good, to win, even if it comes at the expense of real investigation.⁸²

2.7.7 The Refutation of Polus: Arguing from Appearances

After Socrates runs through the premises again (472d4ff.), Polus accuses him of crazy talk (ἄτοπία) (473a1). Socrates tells him to stay focused and “examine them for yourself” (σκόπει

⁸¹ (cf. Antiph Soph. fr. 4.13-14, Isoc. 1.17.2-3, Pl. *Soph.* 233c10-11, Aristot. *SE* 173a29-30)

⁸² McCabe (2015: 122) offers a similar reflection, that “philosophical conversation... can be done well, or badly”, which depends on whether “the dialectician is in the right (discursive and synoptic) state for the truth which is presented.”

δὲ καὶ σὺ 473a4). This marks the passage from the first half of the Polus section to the second.⁸³ What follows is the infamous justice-argument of *Gorgias*. The scholarship disagrees on exactly how the logic is defective, and the extent to which Socrates *purposely* argues fallaciously. Vlastos dramatically asks how Plato could have seen Socrates as “the wisest and most just of all those he had ever come to know” if he knew that “Socrates [was] cheating Polus in this argument.”⁸⁴ He could not see a way to explain the passage because he was committed to the idea that Socrates always said what he believed and only aimed for truth, that Socrates never argued in the eristic mode.⁸⁵ Vlastos developed this view in response to passages such as those presently under discussion, for example, Socrates’ claim that “The truth is never refuted.” (473b10-11). We have read enough, however, to realize the seriousness with which we should treat Socrates’ arguments against Polus.⁸⁶

I think that we will read the second half of the Polus refutation more productively by considering it as eristic. Socrates has good reason to argue contentiously: Polus has shown himself incapable of “concluding an argument” (*Top.* 161a1). He cannot have a real conversation with Socrates because of his obsession with how the *rhetor* appears to others and his *dyskolia*.⁸⁷ What Socrates does comes straight from the dialectician’s handbook. “Argue plausibly (ἐνδόξως)

⁸³ The first is the “intellectual attack on rhetoric”, against which Polus “offers no defence”; the second half deals with the “moral status” of political life. (Kahn 1983: 85).

⁸⁴ Vlastos 1991: 148.

⁸⁵ Vlastos 1994: 8-9.

⁸⁶ On the other hand, “the lack of commitment on the part of the questioner to the truth of peirastic premisses and conclusions does not at all impugn the seriousness with which the questioner views the peirastic discussion.” (Blank 1993a: 430). Socrates’ purpose is always serious, the improvement of his interlocutors, even if the arguments are sometimes farcical.

⁸⁷ If we think back to the discussion of the two kinds of *elenchi*, rhetorical and Socratic (471e-472a), we see that Polus cannot aspire to the goal of the latter, the truth (πρὸς τὴν ἀλήθειαν). Socrates’ eristic argument against Polus is closer to what Socrates described as the rhetorical *elenchus*.

rather than truthfully (ἀληθῶς)”, advises Aristotle, when one “has to fight against contentious arguers (τοὺς ἐριστικούς).” (*SE* 172a31-35). What could this curious advice mean? Part of the answer has to do with the uncomfortable closeness between these two emerging *technai* of dialectic and rhetoric. Dialectic may be nobler for testing each claim an answerer makes, but like rhetoric, it is open to error. It deals with *doxai*, and *doxai* can switch from true to false as easily as the reverse (cf. Aristot. *Cat.* 4a-b). Persuasion as such is truth-independent, and the dialectician who aims to persuade interlocutors without concern for the truth will only with difficulty be distinguished from the truth-oriented dialectician. So, if Socrates decides to debate eristically, he may be no less persuasive on that account. The difference is that, on closer examination, his premises will be only apparently plausible and/or the reasoning only apparently valid.

We should not be scandalized to hear that Socrates would engage in the eristic arts, because to a degree he has no control over it. It takes the goodwill of both parties to have an authentic dialectical conversation, and it only takes one poor respondent to force an eristical conversation.⁸⁸ If a questioner has gone on long enough with a poor respondent, then the questioner *cannot* leave (which might be interpreted as “losing”), and he should not lose (lest he confirm the answerer in his willfulness). But losing is a real possibility because the clever eristic can trip up even an expert (*SE* 168b6-10). This, incidentally, seems to be part of that thin line separating “good” and “bad” dialectic.⁸⁹ In “good” dialectic, the responsibility for the error lies with the “expert” and her alleged expertise. In “bad dialectic” ignorance is not exposed, because

⁸⁸ “For often the answerer is the reason for an argument not being well discussed. This happens when the answerer does not make admissions through which there would have been a good argument against his position. For it is not the responsibility of just one interlocutor to discharge the common task correctly.” (*Top.* 161a17-21).

⁸⁹ For a good overview of the controversial differences between eristic and philosophical dialectic, see Shields (2016), Szaif (2017: 39-43).

the answerer does not say what she believes, but moves around among sophistic stratagems and seeming opinion.⁹⁰ We see examples of such “seeming opinion” in other dialogues. For example, in the *Euthydemus*, the sophist brothers roll out such “seeming opinions” as “Socrates wishes Cleinias to die” (283d6), because Socrates wants him to “be no longer what he is now.” (283d3). In this section, Socrates signals that this is the sort of “refutation” that he is going to pull on Polus. Socrates starts the conversation with the ἄδοξον claim “Everyone, even you, already believe that doing wrong is worse than suffering it, and escaping punishment worse than incurring it.” (*G.* 474b2-5).

Aristotle offers advice for questioners caught in this situation. They should “attack the speaker and not his thesis”, especially when the dialogue becomes “eristic, and not dialectical.” (*Top.* 161a21-24). This compels us sometimes, when we are arguing for the sake of examination, to “reason not only truly but falsely as well,” (161a26-27), but only in moderation. A fallacious premise won’t vitiate a conversation, so long as “all or most” are not. (161b19-24). As we will see, this is precisely how Socrates proceeds. By no means is this poor sportsmanship on Socrates’ part. It may be that being beaten at his own game is the best medicine for Polus.⁹¹ Or perhaps Socrates has given up on Polus.⁹²

2.7.8 The Refutation of Polus: The Justice Argument

The argument (from 474c-475e) can be summarized as follows:

1. Polus’ commitments:

⁹⁰ See Nehamas (1990: 11), Bailly (1999), Bolton (2012: 280-81).

⁹¹ Polansky and Carpenter 2002: 99.

⁹² As Blank (1993a: 431) shows, there is a kind of questioning in which we “merely try to trip up respondents. They will also experience a strong emotional reaction, but a far less useful one: they will hate philosophy.” Blank connects this with the discussion of misology in *Phd.* 89e, and the inexperienced dialecticians discussed in the *Apology* (23c7) and *Republic* (539bc).

- a. All wrong-suffering (τὸ ἀδικεῖσθαι) is worse (κάκιον) [than wrongdoing (τὸ ἀδικεῖν)].
- b. All wrong-doing is more shameful (αἰσχίον) [than wrong-suffering].⁹³
2. Polus' concessions:
 - a. All fair things (καλά) are useful (χρήσιμον) and/or pleasurable (ἡδονή) [to behold].
 - b. All fair things are good (ἀγαθόν) and/or pleasurable.
 - c. All shameful things are either painful (λύπη) and/or bad.
 - d. No wrong-doing is more painful.
3. Consequences:
 - a. All wrong-doing is either more painful and/or worse. (1b, 2c)
 - b. Therefore all wrong-doing is worse. (3a, 2d). (Contra 1a)

A fatal equivocation occurs between 2a and 2b. Socrates claims that “All fair things are either useful or pleasurable [to behold].” In other words, an object is καλόν when an agent deems (“calls”) it useful or pleasurable.⁹⁴ Socrates asks Polus if he agrees. Polus praises Socrates skill at definition (καλῶς γε νῦν ὀρίζη, ὃ Σώκρατες 47a2-3), and in the same breath misquotes him. Polus rephrases the definition as “All fair things are either good (ἀγαθόν) and/or pleasurable.” But χρήσιμον and ἀγαθόν are not always synonymous. Someone or something χρήσιμον has that quality to or for (εἷς ἐπί πρὸς τι/τινι) another person or thing. (LSJ s.v.). But ἀγαθόν is ambiguously referential. It *can* mean “*capable*, in reference to ability”, i.e. πρὸς τι (LSJ s.v. A.I.3). But it can also mean “*good*, in moral sense” (LSJ s.v. A.I.4), i.e. in an absolute sense. Even Aristotle saw the ambiguity within ἀγαθόν,⁹⁵ and recognized the danger of too easy an

⁹³ It is curious that Polus is not bothered by this position, given his earlier obsession with the status of rhetoric as καλόν. Perhaps Polus does not care if wrong-doing is αἰσχρόν so long as its shamefulness goes undetected by others. (Thanks to D. Blank for pointing out this discrepancy in Polus' positions).

⁹⁴ cf. *Crat.* 416b6ff., which tries to etymologize κάλλος from καλεῖν (an erroneous etymology, cf. Beekes 2016 s.v. καλέω & καλός). The *Cratylus* passage corroborates the need of external agency for an object to become καλόν (note especially 416c7-8).

⁹⁵ “Let the good be that which would be choiceworthy in itself, and that on account of which we choose something else.” (*Rhet.* 1362a21-23), see also *EN.* 1096b10ff.

equivalence between two terms. (He uses the example of a *rhetor* conflating “the good” and “the just” in *Rhet.* 1397a20-22.)

Polus’ carelessness costs him the round. Socrates introduces a false antonym set from *χρήσιμον* / *κακόν*, while these two terms should have the antonym sets *χρήσιμον* / *ἄχρηστον* and *ἀγαθόν* / *κακόν*. Socrates gets Polus to admit that wrong-doing is not more painful than wrong-suffering, so the reason that wrong-doing must be more shameful is because it is worse than wrong-suffering. It seems that Polus can no longer hold 1a, “All wrong-suffering is worse than wrong-doing.” But what Polus *meant* by 1a was “All wrong-suffering is worse *for me* (i.e. is less useful).” Presumably, Polus would have readily agreed to the proposition “Wrong-doing is *morally* worse than wrong-suffering.”⁹⁶ We know that negotiating opposites is the bread and butter of competitive *logoi*: Aristotle mentions it as the first *topos* of the demonstrative enthymeme (1397a7-10), a distinction easily transferable to the realm of dialectical reasoning. Polus, then, by failing to keep track of these antonym sets, reveals himself to be a particularly inept reasoner.

There appears to be a second equivocation regarding “pleasure.” Most commentators focus on this equivocation as the source of the fallacy.⁹⁷ Socrates first has Polus concede that a thing is *καλόν* when it is pleasurable *to behold* (*ἐὰν ἐν τῷ θεωρεῖσθαι χαίρειν ποιῆ τοὺς θεωροῦντας*);). But in the examples Socrates offers in reinforcement, and asks Polus to concede, he omits *θεωρεῖσθαι*, and thus the premise becomes: “each fair thing (*καλόν*) is useful and/or pleasurable.” In the last of his examples, the viewer-requirement of pleasure does not even seem

⁹⁶ The same confusion happens in English, of course. Cf. the OED entry for ‘bad’. I.2: “lacking favorable qualities; that one does not like; not such as to be hoped or desired.” (cf. Gower *Confessio Amantis* (Fairf.) i. l. 1357 (MED) “Thei despise the goode fortune as the badde.”) II.7: “Lacking or failing to conform to moral virtue, immoral; wicked, evil.” (cf. Gower *Confessio Amantis* (Fairf.) ii. l. 1092 “Oon Thelous... which al was badde, A fals knyht.”)

⁹⁷ See Dodds (1959: 249), Irwin (1979: 157-159), Vlastos (1991: 139-146).

to apply (τὸ τῶν μαθημάτων κάλλος). One does not gain pleasure from μαθήματα by beholding them, but by μανθάνειν. This difference permits Socrates to make the move from 2b to 2c, and have Polus concede “All shameful things are either painful (λύπη) and/or bad.” Now Polus is left with the proposition “All wrong-doing [that is more shameful than wrong-suffering] is either more painful and/or worse [than wrong-suffering]”; and since wrong-doing is not painful, he has to call it worse. But this did not have to be the case. A thing is καλόν when it is pleasant to behold, so a thing should be αἰσχρόν when it is painful to behold. On this reading, wrong-doing is αἰσχρόν either because it is more painful *to view*, or because it is worse. So Polus could claim, “wrong-doing is αἰσχρόν because it is more painful to view wrong-doing than wrong-suffering.” This may not be intuitive but is at least defensible.⁹⁸ For example, it can cause pleasure to view those who suffer their wrongs patiently (this is often described as “heroic”). Likewise, it is revolting to behold the one inflicting the wrong. But Polus is not that clever.

2.7.9 The Refutation of Polus: Awareness of Fallacy

So, we have two fallacies undergirding the justice argument. The question remains: did Plato *know* that his Socrates was arguing fallaciously? The argument’s unnecessary length is the first cause of suspicion, as length conceals the cause on which a deduction rests.⁹⁹ Apparently, smuggling in premises by these antonymous flips was a known dialectical stratagem.¹⁰⁰ The ancient debaters were also savvy to fallacies that could result from the similarities between adjectives.¹⁰¹ Persuasion came easier when the questioner used more believable (*endoxoteron*)

⁹⁸ Even Aristotle was aware of the “relational requirement” of κάλλος (and by extension αἴσχος) (*Rhet.* 1361b7-14.)

⁹⁹ Aristotle recommends protracted arguments in *Top.* I.15, *SE* 174a17-18.

¹⁰⁰ Aristotle advises dialecticians to examine pairs of opposites as a test for fallacy in *Top.* 106a10ff.

¹⁰¹ Aristot. *Rhet.* 1367a33ff.

synonyms for the terms they mean to use.¹⁰² But *testimonia* aside, there is evidence internal to the *Gorgias* that suggests an awareness that the argument here is fallacious. Callicles accuses Socrates of arguing about the foul and the fine according to nature (κατὰ φύσιν), while Polus was arguing about them on a conventional understanding (τὸ κατὰ νόμον). (483a) That is, Polus had originally understood the fine by the external-referent terms “useful” and “pleasurable to behold”, but was swept into an understanding of the fine as intrinsically “good” and “pleasurable”. In all, if Polus were a better answerer, he would have entertained a healthier skepticism about Socrates’ premises.¹⁰³ Otherwise, Socrates is free to cook up whatever contradictions he likes. We know from dialogues with better interlocutors that, when challenged, Socrates is open to compromise. In the *Philebus*, Protarchus’s goodwill and healthy detachment from Phileban hedonism move Socrates to “modify his own position to quite some extent.”¹⁰⁴ As for doing and suffering injustice, it will take a Glaucon and Adeimantus to motivate a fruitful philosophical discussion.¹⁰⁵

Besides the clues we can cull from the *Gorgias*, other Platonic dialogues exhibit parallel cases of the “Socratic eristic”.¹⁰⁶ In *Hippias Minor*, Socrates makes a fallacious deduction based on a non-standard usage of the term *pseudes*.¹⁰⁷ Blondell notes that the “peculiarity of [Socrates’]

¹⁰² See discussion in Bensen Cain (2008: 229-230).

¹⁰³ See Rowe (1996: 178) on “Phaedran dialectic” and the requirements of a good answerer.

¹⁰⁴ Frede 1996: 220-21.

¹⁰⁵ This raises the issue of whether the best interlocutors are those with less personality. See Blondell (2002: 326ff). (“Homogenized, Pasteurized Respondents.”)

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Szaif (2017: 40): “Since [Socrates] shows himself able to discern and expose such trickery in arguments proffered by the two sophists [Euthydemus and Dionysodorus] (e.g. *Euthd.* 277d–8b, 295b–6d), we have to suspect that he is aware of illicit ambiguities and non-sequiturs in his own inferences and that he exploits them knowingly.”

¹⁰⁷ For detailed coverage, see Blondell (2002: ch. 3).

definition” of *pseudes* is such that Socrates must be aware, or else “we are to suppose him oblivious to ordinary usage.”¹⁰⁸ This shouldn’t alarm us, she reassures us. Hippias has a responsibility to monitor the argument, and ultimately the ambiguity “increase[s] the victim’s awareness of his own confusion.”¹⁰⁹ Of course, there is a deeper irony at play in that dialogue. Socrates and Hippias argue about whether it is better to deceive voluntarily or involuntarily, and Socrates has meta-reinforced his argument *for* knowing deceptions. Incidentally, Aristotle would later agree that fallacy is only the fault of the arguer “when he is not aware of it” (*Top.* 162b16-18).

The refutation, though fallacious, lowers our estimation of Polus. He cannot separate synonyms (as any sophist could do),¹¹⁰ an elementary feature of contemporary debate (*Top.* 106a9ff., *Rhet.* 1397a7-10). We sense that “unlike Gorgias and Callicles, Polus has been outwitted rather than substantially refuted.”¹¹¹ This is the point: Polus, naively enamored of rhetoric’s promised powers, has fallen for the most elementary of *topoi*. Frankly, the whole refutation is an embarrassment. This is no mark against Socrates: Polus bought the premises as they came.

As a side note, all this is not to say that Plato and/or Socrates did *not* subscribe to the justice argument. Aristotle comments on this very *problema* (“Whether it is preferable to suffer

¹⁰⁸ Blondell 2002: 138.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*: 120.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Prodicus’ skill with synonyms (See *Eud.* 27764-5, 305c; *Prt.* 337a-c, 358a-b; *Ar. Top.* 112b22; *Ar. Rh.* 1415b2. See discussion in Bensen Cain 2008: 225-226) on Protagoras’ *orthoepia* (See DK 80 A27-29, *Pl. Phdr.* 267c); for discussion see Segal (1970: 161), Fehling (1976), and Schiappa (2013: 163-64).

¹¹¹ Kahn 1983: 93. On the other hand, we have to keep in mind that “one must not demand that for every problem the deductions should be equally reputable and convincing; for it is a direct result of the nature of things that some subjects of inquiry shall be easier and some harder.” (*Top.* 161b34-38)

injustice or commit injustice?”), and claims that each answer is *adoxon*. (SE 173a19-22). The many answer that committing injustice is preferable, and the wise answer that suffering it is preferable. Aristotle has the *Gorgias* in mind (he refers to the dialogue explicitly just before this discussion). Nevertheless, if we follow Aristotle, Socrates’ opinion here is irrelevant: the questioner has to argue on behalf of the many if the answerer chooses to answer according to the wise, and vice-versa.

2.8 Conclusion

The task of this chapter has been to highlight the less honorable argumentative tactics that Socrates has seen fit to wield in the refutation of Polus. The question remains: is Socrates an eristic interlocutor? I provide only the facts of his behavior judged by the dialectical standards recorded by Aristotle in *Topics* and *Sophistical Refutations*. Obviously, we can infer that “eristic is as eristic does.” But there are reasons to hold off our judgment.

Shields has recently argued for the similarities between eristic and “philosophical” proceedings.¹¹² Relying on an Aristotelian paradigm, he claims that the two differ in that the philosopher separates appearances and the ὄντα. Or, to put it more strongly, even to recognize a difference between the two is “already to side with the philosophers.”¹¹³ This is the tension between Polus and Socrates: the former only wants to know whether rhetoric *seems* καλόν, and Socrates wants a definition of rhetoric. Their interview is one long tug-of-war over the goal of the discussion. Are we surprised, then, that Socrates only *appears* to refute Polus? On Shields’

¹¹² The arguments for this paragraph are from Shields (2016: 42-45).

¹¹³ Shields 2016: 45. The same criticism can apply to the Platonic *Gorgias*, who likewise struggles to understand the difference between rhetoric and Socratic questioning. He also has trouble seeing beyond appearances (cf. *Gorgias*’ praise of Polus’ definition of rhetoric at 448d4).

reading, if Polus could—and he cannot—work through the puzzles with Socrates, he would have “already sided” with Socrates.

But the apotreptics are not merely logical. Rhetoric was a rival *logos* to Socratic question-and-answer, a rival for which Plato is at pains to arrest our enthusiasm. For this emotional appeal, he relies on the qualities of his characters. Platonic characters, argues Blondell, are “bearers of an ethos”, and this ethos aimed to “exert an emotional effect on [the dialogue’s] consumers.”¹¹⁴ We as readers project ourselves onto the flawed interlocutors, and so recognize their faults.¹¹⁵ The reader of the refutation of Polus will not be looking for a rhetorical education.

The argument has a protreptic function as well, as it “tries to turn [us] to a new way of life.”¹¹⁶ The interlocutors of the *Gorgias*, especially Polus, do not seem to have benefitted much from the conversation. They have not let their conversation with Socrates “train or habituate [them] to display the proper emotions in the proper measure in response to dialectic.”¹¹⁷ Their shame gets the better of them. They have not evinced the dialectical virtues necessary for a sustained investigation of τὰ ὄντα with Socrates, and their prior commitments prove too strong for conversion to this sort of life. But the dialogue is not without value to us readers: Aristotle records the intellectual conversion of a Corinthian farmer who, after reading the *Gorgias*,

¹¹⁴ Blondell 2002: 80

¹¹⁵ Blondell 2002: 89.

¹¹⁶ Collins 2016: 34.

¹¹⁷ Blank 1993a: 438. Blank considers this an Aristotelian way to understand how dialectic should work, and cites House (1956: 105-12) and Janko (1987: xviiiiff., 200).

“mortgaged his soul” to Plato.¹¹⁸ Socrates has tested the “worthless” and “harmful” lifestyles depicted in the dialogues as a warning to would-be philosophers to come.¹¹⁹ The glamor of rhetoric is exposed, such that we no longer have the appetite for their “intellectual fast-food.”¹²⁰

There are not many interlocutors like Polus. We have adduced many instances of his *dyskolia*. This personality type was, as far as possible, excluded from the company of serious dialecticians.¹²¹ We might recall that the *Topics* begins with a list of purposes for which the treatise might be useful, one of which was “for encounters” (πρὸς τὰς ἐντεύξεις 101a26), which many consider a reference to extramural debate. The *Topics* ends, however, with a warning about these encounters: do not argue with those with “whom arguments will necessarily become base.” These people “are ready to try all means in order to seem not to be beaten”, and they “cannot refrain from having a competitive dialogue.” (*Top.* 164b8-11, 13-15). Against such, though it is “not good form”, “it is altogether fair to try to reason by any means.”¹²² In this episode of the *Gorgias*, Socrates tried to help Polus develop as a reasoner and debater, only to be met with inconsistency in holding to premises, a failure to develop arguments, and an obsession with

¹¹⁸ See *Them. Or.* 295c-d. This farmer “gave up his farm and his vines” to follow Plato. See Kahn (1996: 141) for discussion. For a similar, later conversion narrative, cf. *Mt.* 4: 18-21.

¹¹⁹ Collins 2016: 4. See also Tarrant (2000: 78-79), who comments on late antique classifications such as “anatreptic” and “peirastic” of dialogues in which Socrates exhibits this sort of behavior.

¹²⁰ The phrase is from (Blondell 2002: 100). Along these lines, she also argues that the portrayal of character in the dialogues “exerted an emotional effect on its consumers.... That tend[ed] to assimilate them to the characters represented.”

¹²¹ On the other hand, rare is the person fit for dialectic. Such a person must have “qualities of character as well as intellect, of accepting the kind of conclusions which Socrates regards as the only philosophically coherent outcome of the argument.” (Gill 1996: 288) In other words, the dialectician must be smart enough to follow the argument and humble enough to relinquish prior commitments at odds with τὰ ἐπόμενα.

¹²² Nehamas (1990: 7) argues for “a connection between victory in argument and knowledge of the truth” in Plato that persists even into the middle books of the *Republic*. Perhaps this reads too much into the Socratic claim that the truth is irrefutable. Rather, I think it would make for poor protreptics to depict a losing Socrates!

appearing καλός. Finding himself unable to extricate himself from the argument, and unable to beat him with sound argumentation, Socrates was forced to rely on some eristic tricks of his own to make sure Polus didn't walk away feeling smug. Does this make Socrates an eristic debater? This is a "matter that wants argument." (*Rhet.* 1356b35-37). For our part, we would close with a diagnosis of counterfeit reasoning from the Philosopher: it's not skill, but intention, that makes the sophist.¹²³ Polus wants to win, Socrates wants to learn.

¹²³ ἢ γὰρ σοφιστικὴ οὐκ ἐν τῇ δυνάμει ἀλλ' ἐν τῇ προαιρέσει. (*Rhet.* 1355b17-18).

Chapter 3: Persuading Meno to Learn

3.1 Introduction

The *Meno* begins with the question, “Is virtue teachable?”¹ The question generated much discussion in the Academy² (motivated perhaps by the sophists, who answered affirmatively) and in Greek literature generally.³ The thesis would find advocates even among Socratics (*Antisth.* fr. 23.1-3 (ed. Caizzi) = D.L. 6.105), and would later find traction among the Stoics.⁴ As for Plato himself, the question was a secondary consideration, just like all questions that ask what virtue is like (ποῖόν τι ἐστίν). The logically prior question was what virtue is (ἀρετὴ ὅτι ἔστιν). Platonic interlocutors who do not detach themselves from the ποῖόν question become paradoxically unable to answer it.⁵

That said, an interlocutor’s interests need not be so binary. Meno will show himself less interested in the what-ness of virtue than Socrates would like, but more so than, say, Protagoras.⁶ Meno’s philosophical aptitude has (partially) motivated the claim that this dialogue is

¹ I use “virtue” only as the traditional translation of ἀρετή. I will note the instances where “virtue” falls short as a translation.

² E.g., *Protagoras*; the pseudo-Platonic dialogues *Clit.* 408b5-c4, *de Virt.*, *Eryx.* 398c-d, 404c8-d3.

³ Pind. *Olymp.* 9.100, *Nem.* 3.40-42; the Presocratics (DK 23b33, 80b3, 88b9, 89.1, 90.6, 90.10-11); *Dissoi Logoi* 6; Eur. *Sup.* 911-17, *Hec* 599-602; Thuc. 1.121; Xen.*Mem.* 3.9.14, 4.1.4; Is. 13.21, 15.274; Aristot. *EN* 1099b9-11. For discussion see Shorey (1909), O’Brien (1967: 144-46 n. 27), Dover (1974: 88-95), Scott (2006: 16-17).

⁴ D. L. VII 91. διδασκτὴν τε εἶναι αὐτὴν (λέγω δὲ τὴν ἀρετὴν) καὶ Χρῦσιππος ἐν τῷ πρώτῳ περὶ τέλους φησὶ καὶ Κλεάνθης, καὶ Ποσειδώνιος ἐν τοῖς προτρεπτικοῖς.

⁵ cf. *Euthph.* 11a6-b1, *La.* 189e3-190c2, *Prot.* 361c2-6, *G.* 463c3-5. See Scott (2006: 20 n. 28). Platonic interlocutors usually ask the ποῖα question with mixed motives. Here, “Meno impatiently seeks to be assured either that he has already come by virtue... by having apprenticed himself appropriately to Gorgias.” (Weiss 2001: 18-19).

⁶ He is an “intermediate” level interlocutor. Woolf (2006) characterizes Meno well: “Meno is not in the business of issuing serious philosophical challenges... Nor, on the other hand, is Meno particularly stupid or badly behaved... [he is] an imperfect but relatively decent interlocutor.”

“transitional”.⁷ According to this claim, the beginning of the dialogue features the “elenctic” or “early” Socrates, who argues Meno into *aporia*. Then, in the middle of the dialogue, he transforms into the hypothesizing, recollecting philosopher of Plato’s “middle” period, who guides Meno through key Platonic teachings.⁸ This chapter is not concerned with problems in chronology. In fact, it will challenge the view that the Socrates of the *Meno* argues differently from the Socrates of other dialogues in “stylometric group 1”.⁹ The “middle” Socrates who is apparently readier to theorize about “ourselves, our world, and our need to negotiate them”¹⁰ will turn out to be far more akin to the “elenctic” Socrates, who argues without knowledge and is eminently interested in the consistency of an interlocutor’s belief-set, than is usually thought.

Much ado has been made of the method of hypothesis introduced in the *Meno*, along with the theory of recollection, and whether/to what extent these ideas that are reinforced in the *Phaedo* and *Republic*.¹¹ We will see that the method from hypothesis (at least in the *Meno*) is not a new technique, but rather a new description for Socrates’ usual argumentative strategies. The theory of recollection will be argued not to be a new Platonic teaching, but itself an example of a hypothesis meant to stimulate rather than halt inquiry. This interpretation of hypothesis, and of

⁷ For *Meno* as a “transitional” dialogue to the epistemologically more ambitious “middle” dialogues, see Vlastos (1991: ch. 4); Ionescu (2007); Silverman (2014: 10); *Contra Weiss* (2001), Scott (2006: 194-208). Gill (1996: 288) suggests that the change in the competence of interlocutors mirrors the transition of dialogues from “aporetic” to “middle”.

⁸ See Robinson (1953: 74), Vlastos (1991: ch. 2).

⁹ As, e.g., C. Gill (2006: 142) labels them as a substitute for “early dialogues”. Out of convenience and without any chronological commitments, I will sometimes refer to these dialogues as “early”, just as the dialogues in “stylometric group 2” will be sometimes referred to as “middle”. Recent scholarship has rightly urged caution in chronological claims. See Cooper 1997: viii-xviii, Kahn 1996: 42-4.

¹⁰ Kraut 2017.

¹¹ The “keyword for the middle dialogues.” Robinson (1953: 74).

the hypothetical arguments of the *Meno*, will be confirmed by reading Aristotle’s treatment of syllogisms *ex hypothesi* in the *Analytics* and *Topics*.¹²

3.2 The Dialogue’s Problem

Let’s return to Meno’s question, “is virtue teachable?”¹³ The question, as we have seen, was common enough in Plato’s time. But Plato has thrown in a twist—not with the question, but the questioner. Meno uses the dialectical formula for questioners, “*Can you tell me* (ἔχεις μοι εἰπεῖν) whether virtue is teachable...” (70a1), the same one used by Socrates,¹⁴ the Eleatic Stranger,¹⁵ Parmenides,¹⁶ and Diotima.¹⁷ Here we find one of those rare occasions where the interlocutor wants Socrates to play the answerer. Socrates, predictably, does not deign to answer. Instead, he describes Meno’s people, the Thessalians’. He notes their newfound habit of answering any question “fearlessly and magnanimously” as it befits those who are “knowledgeable” (τοὺς εἰδότας) (70b6-c1). We should be reminded of (the Platonic) Gorgias,

¹² See the introduction of this dissertation for detailed treatment.

¹³ The question has four parts: whether virtue is teachable (διδασκτόν), whether virtue is acquired by practice (ἀσκητόν), whether virtue is neither practiced nor learned (οὔτε ἀσκητόν οὔτε μαθητόν), and whether virtue comes to people by nature (φύσει) or by some other way (ἄλλῳ τινὶ τρόπῳ). This is strategic on Meno’s part. He wants to argue for the position “virtue is teachable”, because he wants to be known as a teacher of virtue. Each of these four parts can arrive at that position, though each can stand as a separate argument. So, even if Socrates refutes the proposition “virtue is teachable”, Meno can still defend the position “virtue is acquired by practice”, and presumably something acquired by practiced requires a trainer, etc.

¹⁴ *Ap.* 24d7-8; *Crat.* 388b7, 388d9, 398e5; *Tht.* 205b9; *Phaedr.* 267d7-8; *Charm.* 162b8; *G.* 470a1, 501d7, 503b2, 503b6; *M.* 96a6; *Resp.* 403a4, 463b9, 507d5. See also *Xen. Mem.* 4.6.2.4, (Ps-) *Pl. Alc.* 1. 107e9, 109e9, 118a10, 118d10, *Theag.* 124c1; *Just.* 372a1, 375a1, *Virt.* 376d14, 379a4. In total, 4th c. philosophical literature applies the formula to Socrates 25x.

¹⁵ *Sph.* 218d6.

¹⁶ *Parm.* 161d6-7.

¹⁷ *Symp.* 206b3-4. Theaetetus also uses the formula once (*Tht.* 208c9). The formula is otherwise uncommon in Greek literature. Before Plato: Aesch. *PB.* 683; Eur. *Orest.* 439, fr. 12.171, 27.6; Xen. *Hell.* 2.3.49.1; *Mem.* 2.6.8.5 (addressed to Socrates), 4.6.2.4; *Symp.* 4.56.2 (addressed to Socrates); *Hiero* 10.1.2 (addressed to Simonides).

who took pride in being able to speak about things of which he had no knowledge (*G.* 458e-c).¹⁸ Indeed, we learn that the Thessalians' new epistemic assertiveness is the aftermath of Gorgias's trip to Thessalia.¹⁹

In Attica, claims Socrates, there is a "drought of wisdom" (70c4). No Athenian would venture to answer Meno's question, because no Athenian would claim to know what virtue even is (71a3-7). Socrates is obviously joking, but the joke points towards an ideal.²⁰ Plato considered "speaking on any subject" indicative of false pretensions to expertise (*Prot.* 329b3-5, *G.* 458e-c) and ignorance a sign of an authentic investigation. Athens did not cultivate the ignorance here envisioned, but the city can be understood metonymously for Socrates' own philosophizing, at the expense of rival schools.²¹ By extension, Thessaly can be understood metonymously for Gorgias' philosophizing.²² As we have seen in previous chapters, the intellectual scene of the 5th-4th c. featured a *battle royale* among the different wisdom traditions, in which the rhetoricians featured as one of the contestants.²³ Socrates, as another contestant, will now counter Gorgias' protreptics with his own. *He* will play the questioner and cross-examine Meno.

¹⁸ See Weiss (2001: 18 n. 2).

¹⁹ Both here and in his namesake dialogue (448a1-3), Gorgias claims to be able to answer any questions anyone may ask him. This is the inspiration for the Thessalians' new habit.

²⁰ Contrast his claim to *Th.* 175b, where the Athenians mock the philosopher for maintaining *aporia*. The interview with Anytus at the end of the *Meno* ought to leave us with no romantic notions of Athenian skepticism.

²¹ Could this joke be a jab at the σοφοί for being non-Athenians? For sophistry and rhetoric as foreign traditions, see Guthrie (1971: 40) Wolfsdorf (2015: 63-64), Tell (2011: 12). *Contra* Kerferd 1981: 22.

²² When Socrates says that wisdom has gone out of Athens to Thessaly (71a1), presumably this "wisdom" is ignorance about one's own ignorance. After all, as Professor Blank suggested to me, Socrates later blames himself for ignorance, an impossibility for someone ignorant about one's own ignorance.

²³ For the division of λόγοι into different schools, see Schiappa (1990), Cole (1991: ch. 8), and Nightingale (1995 ch: 1).

Socrates poses a new question. “If I do not know what (τί) X is, how could I know what it is even like (ὅποῖόν γέ τι)?... Do you suppose that one could?” (71b3-5, 7-8). Socrates is reluctant to have a dialogue on the secondary features of X before knowing what X is—though he ultimately does have such a dialogue, by arguing with hypotheses. This reluctance highlights a difference between Platonic and Aristotelian questioning. Aristotle seems to have less concern whether dialogues seek definition or genus (and differentia), property, or accidental feature of a thing (*Top.* 101b17-25).²⁴ That the interlocutors take two sides of a controvertible question is far more important than the type of question it is (*Top.* 104a5-8, 105a3-5). In any case, Socrates claims that Meno must give his own (read: not Gorgias’) account of what virtue is before progressing to the question Meno wants to discuss, the teachability of virtue.²⁵ “But it is not hard to say” (71e1), replies the young Thessalian. The reader of Plato may cringe, recalling that Protagoras (*Prot.* 329d4), Laches (*La.* 190e4), and Hippias (*HM* 290c1) also claimed that Socrates’ questions would be easy to answer.²⁶

Socrates surprises Meno by not knowing what virtue is, or for never having met someone who did. Meno asks Socrates whether he had ever met Gorgias (71c5). With admirable restraint, Socrates only answers, “Ἐγωγε.” Meno asks, “Didn’t he seem to you to know what virtue was?” to which Socrates replies: “I am totally forgetful of it, Meno,²⁷ such that I am unable to say at

²⁴ Chiba (2010: 204): “A dialectician on the basis of the theory of predicables, can examine any predicables, can examine any proposition whatsoever without having an answer to the ‘What is F?’ question.

²⁵ A similar moment occurs in *Prot.* 331c5-d1. See section 1.6 above for discussion.

²⁶ Weiss notes (2011: 19 n. 7) that Gorgias at least could distinguish between “speaking well about X and having knowledge of it.” (cf. *G.* 458e-459c). On the other hand, when Meno, his young enthusiast, “says in response to Socrates’ request for a definition of virtue is that it is not difficult ‘to say,’ he does not realize that his finding it easy to speak about virtue does not entail that he knows anything about it.”

²⁷ Note the pun μνήμων, ὃ Μένων. Meno’s poor memory proves fatal, as we will see later.

present how it seemed (ἔδοξεν) to me then. Perhaps he does know, and he said what you are saying. So remind (ἀνάμνησον) me of how he expressed it.” (71c8-d1). In the *Protagoras*, as we saw, Socrates’ alleged bad memory saved him from having to put up with *macrologia* (*Prot.* 334c8-d5, 336c4-d4), and now it saves him from having to rehearse and refute Gorgias’ opinions.²⁸

3.3 Opinion and Knowledge

This passage contrasts opinion (δόξα) and knowledge (ἐπιστήμη).²⁹ The contrast establishes a critical question of the dialogue.³⁰ How do we, or can we, move from opinion to stable knowledge by having a dialogue? And what is the relationship between opinion and knowledge? Plato gives the impression that opinions are the starting point for dialogues. In the *Theaetetus*, the discussion on Protagorean subjectivism starts from Theodorus’ and Socrates’ opinions (*Tht.* 171d5.). The Stranger starts from Theaetetus’ and his own opinions to refute Parmenides (*Sph.* 242b10). In the *Gorgias* (495a7-9) Socrates takes τὰ δοκοῦντα to be the “preliminary arguments” of a dialogue. As for opinion, Plato seems to identify *mobility* as its defining feature.³¹ Opinion is “open to persuasion” (μεταπειστόν), contrasted with higher modes of knowing such as νοῦς, which is “unmovable by persuasion” (ἀκίνητον πειθοῦ) (*Tim.* 51e1-6).

²⁸ For the view that the forgetfulness is feigned, see Robinson (1953: 9), Stokes (1986: 312), Long (2013: 31).

²⁹ “MEN: You don’t know (οἶσθα) what virtue is... SO: Nor have I ever encountered one who knows (εἰδότε), at least in my opinion (ἐμοὶ δοκῶ)... MEN: As it seems to you (ἔδόκει σοι), [Gorgias] didn’t know? (εἰδέναί)... SO: [I can’t say] how he seemed (ἔδοξεν) to me then. But perhaps he knew (οἶδε)... I suppose how things seem (δοκεῖ) to him is how things seem to you.” (71c1-d2).

³⁰ Obviously, people will disagree about the “critical question” of the *Meno*. The theme I just suggested accords with Crombie (1963: 11, 534-535) and Bedu-Addo (1984: 14), who argue that the main issue is knowledge and the method of its acquisition. *Contra* Weiss (2001: 3), who cites Thompson (1901: 63), that the main concern is ethical; and Scott (2006: 3), who reasonably suggests that “there is no one topic that the *Meno* is ‘about’; its interests are irreducibly plural.”

³¹ For this discussion, see Crager (2015: 3-5).

Academic literature made a similar distinction.³² Arguing from such opinions is apparently compatible with Socratic agnosticism—we have seen Socrates happily argue for plausible opinions such as the unity of the virtues, hedonism, that rhetoric is not a *techne*, etc., views that he does not *know* are true.³³ Aristotle likewise claimed that δόξα is “unsteady” (ἀβέβαιον *APo* 89a5-6) and that it applies to things in the world that are subject to change (*Cat.* 4a20-b13). On the other hand, ἐπιστήμη is ἀμετάπειστος. (e.g., *Top.* 130b16, *APo* 72b2-3). Aristotle also would credit opinion as the starting point for dialogues (*Top.* 100a29-30, *SE.* 165b3-6).³⁴ But the two philosophers offer different explanations on how people move from opinion to knowledge. Aristotle does not credit dialectic with this role.³⁵ Instead, we achieve knowledge through certain kinds of demonstrations, or a definition, or νοῦς.³⁶ As for Plato’s view, that is one of the *Meno*’s chief concerns.

3.4 Definitions of Virtue

Socrates asks Meno to remind (ἀνάμνησον 71c10) him of what Gorgias had said about the teachability of virtue³⁷, or, if he shares Gorgias’ opinion, to provide it as his own. Meno does

³² Cf. *Ps.-Pl. Def.* 414b10-c4.

³³ Socrates only claims to know “trivial things” (συμκρά) (*Euthd.* 293b8). See Irwin (1977: 40-41), Woodruff (1987), Bolton (1993: 151), Brickhouse and Smith (1994: ch. 2), Vlastos (1994: ch. 2), Scott (2006: 19-20) for discussion.

³⁴ See Crane (2013: 7-8), who argues that both Plato’s and Aristotle’s dialectic reflect Academic debate. Common elements that he cites: yes-or-no questions, securing agreement, and refutation of the answerer from this agreement.

³⁵ Aristotle’s own view on this question is has been a source of great controversy. Unlike his master, Aristotle did not seem to think that dialectic could bridge the gap between opinion and knowledge. See Moraux (1968: 297-300), Dorion (2012: 61), Kullman (2012: 309). *Contra* Owen (1961), Nussbaum (1986: 240-251), Irwin (1988), Allen (2007).

³⁶ “So, it is manifest that [demonstrative *episteme*] does not concern [things which can be otherwise]; but neither does nous [grasp such things] (for by ‘*nous*’ I mean a principle of *episteme*) and nor does non-demonstrative *episteme* (this latter is a grasp of an immediate proposition).” (*APo* 88b33-37, Crager trans.) See Crager (2017: 38-44) for discussion.

³⁷ There are many proleptic references to *anamnesis* throughout the *Meno*.

share the same opinion as Gorgias, so he rehearses the argument.³⁸ Virtue means different things when it is applied to different people. Men, women, children, slaves, and freemen all have different excellences. (71e1-72a5).³⁹ This definition gives Socrates an opportunity to offer some reflections on definition. Just as there are many kinds of bees, but only one “bee-ness”, so “all [virtues] have one and the same form (εἶδος) whereby they are virtues. It is well that the answerer (τὸν ἀποκρινόμενον) look upon [this common form] to make it clear to the questioner (τῷ ἐρωτήσαντι) what virtue happens to be.” (72c7-d1).

Meno defends his position, and from this defense we can better understand Socrates’ young interlocutor.⁴⁰ He is not ashamed to tell Socrates that he does not understand based on a single example (72d3-4). Telling the questioner “I don’t understand” is the mark of a good interlocutor in Plato: Hippocrates (*Prot.* 312e6), Theaetetus (Tht. 155d8, 164a3-4, 164d3, 192c7-8), Young Socrates (*Pol.* 282d6, 297c5, 306a11), and Protarchus (*Phlb.* 17a6, 44b5, 48a10, 53e8, 57a7-8) do so.⁴¹ When Socrates brings forward some further examples, Meno challenges their relevance to the case at hand (73a4-5).⁴² That’s not to claim that Meno is ideal. Where Socrates

³⁸ Gorgias recurs throughout the *Meno* (73c7, 76c4). There is an irony: Meno claims that virtue is teachable, and that Gorgias taught him about virtue. The relationship between Meno’s position and Gorgias’ thus becomes part of the argument.

³⁹ There is evidence that this records Gorgias’ authentic opinion. Cf. *Gorg.* *Hel.* 1, *Aristot. Pol.* 1.13; Scott (2006: 24-25).

⁴⁰ For the characterization of Meno in Plato (and Xenophon), see Klein (1965: 35-38), Allen (1984: 134), Cotton (2014: 199ff.). Weiss (2001: esp. 20-21) is generally positive towards Meno, Scott (2006: esp. 60-65, 209-213) generally negative. For criticism of the latter see Woolf (2006).

⁴¹ cf. Blondell (2002: 328): “[Theaitetos and Young Sokrates] display an appropriately ‘Socratic’ awareness of their own ignorance and a concomitant desire to learn. They are modest about their own abilities, and admit to their aporia, ignorance, and failure to understand.”

⁴² cf. Scott (2006: 30), who argues that “the relatively protracted argument suggests that [Plato] has a more complex purpose in mind... In constructing the dialogue this way, Plato is using Meno to interrupt Socrates precisely because he needs interruption: what Socrates took to be an assumption needs instead to be grounded in argument.”

had claimed ignorance (71c8-9), Meno did not hesitate to assert knowledge (71e1). He had accepted Gorgias' account of virtue, presumably the first account he has heard, uncritically (71c5-7).

Socrates teases out Meno's position in (73a-c). Meno is committed to the position that (1) there are different virtues for the different classes of people. Socrates has him admit that (2) these apparently different virtues all have the same effect: when people have ἀρετή, they perform their function well. Meno also believes (3) that good people in different classes must have the same virtues that make them perform their function well. It seems that the virtue of the different classes of people is the same because the effect is the same. We might note that throughout the discussion, the term ἀρετή is used equivocally.⁴³ When Meno claimed (1), what he most likely meant is that each social class has a different function by which to exercise virtue.⁴⁴ When Socrates has Meno concede (2), Meno uses ἀρετή in the more general sense of "goodness."⁴⁵ It appears that ἀρετή also has a different meaning in (3). As examples of these "same virtues", Socrates mentions temperance and justice. Thus, the phrase "the same virtues" to which Meno has consented in (3) means "the moral virtues."⁴⁶

The equivocations in this passage should not trouble us. The point is not to develop a doctrine on the virtues, but for Socrates to show that Meno's ignorance of virtue is such that he cannot have a proper dialogue about it.⁴⁷ We have observed, in the previous chapters, that

⁴³ Robinson (1953: 27) and Scott (2006: 26-27) discuss other problems with the argument. Cf. Aristot. *de Int.* 19b5.

⁴⁴ i.e., the meaning of ἀρετή in Aristot. *EN* 1106a15-17. Cf. LSJ s.v. A.2.

⁴⁵ cf. Hom. *Il.* 15.642, 20.411; Hdt. 1.176, 8.92, 9.40. cf. LSJ s.v. A.1.

⁴⁶ cf. LSJ s.v. A.2; Pl. *Resp.* 500d, *Lg.* 963a-c; D. 60.17.

⁴⁷ cf. Blank's (1993: 439) assessment of the interview with Protagoras: "[T]his topic in the *Protagoras* [does not] amount to an advocacy... Socrates picks up on Protagoras' own notion that the Virtues are somehow one thing

Socrates *qua* questioner simply adopts positions that are the contrary of the answerer's. This should make us leery of calling this argument a Socratic position. In case we were in any doubt: Socrates says, within this very argument, that he does not even know what virtue is (71b9-c2), and consequently cannot make any claims about it (71b3-4). All he can do is offer premises plausible enough for an answerer to accept, and which, on the answerer's understanding, lead to a contradiction (*Top.* 175a31-33; *SE* 165a2-3, 165b3-4).⁴⁸

Furthermore, this passage contradicts the position that Socrates takes in the *Protagoras*. The eponymous sophist argued that "the virtues are like the parts of a face" (*Prot.* 329b4-8). In our present passage, Socrates has "insisted that the different types of virtue are branches that share a common trunk."⁴⁹ This is the same as Protagoras' opinion of virtue: the virtues have something in common but are not the same thing. We can do intellectual gymnastics to try to square Socrates' two positions. Or we can accept that in his verbal jousts, Socrates was not committed to the unity or diversity of, or similarity or difference between, or relationship among the virtues. He was only committed to testing the claims of those who do have such commitments.

Meno offers a second definition of virtue: "being able to rule over people, if you are looking for one thing for all cases." (73c9-d1). This definition may remind us of Meno's unsavory future.⁵⁰ For now, the attempt initiates a lesson on definition. Socrates asks Meno to

because he knows he can show that it is the ill-formed thesis of a sophist ignorant not only about Virtue but even about how one must conduct a philosophical examination of Virtue."

⁴⁸ Striker (2009: 191), putting it briefly: dialectical arguments "use plausible but not necessarily true premises... In this way one might be able to produce a formally valid argument for a conclusion that would not be acceptable as a theorem in a scientific demonstration since it might, for example, contain an accidental predication."

⁴⁹ Scott 2006: 27.

⁵⁰ *Xen. An.* 2.6.21-9.

consider the difference between “virtue” (ἀρετή) and “a certain virtue” (ἀρετή τις) (73e1). This kind of distinguishing is an elementary dialectical lesson. Separating γένη and the specific differences of things within γένη occupies one of the opening sections of the *Topics* (101b20ff.). Meno’s ignorance exposes him as a fledgling dialectician; but, unlike other interlocutors, at least he can muster the humility to ask for help (73e2, 7-8).

3.5 A Lesson in Dialectic

Socrates’ tip happens to be the key to the equivocation in 73a-c. Meno should discriminate between “particular virtues” (sense (3) above) that inform various states in life (sense (1)), and see that all these “particular virtues” fall under the genus of virtue (sense (2)). Meno confesses that he does not feel up to the task (74a11-b1). He brings Meno’s attention to the analogy of roundness and figure and has him reaffirm that the former is a figure, not figure *simpliciter* (74b2-7). Socrates wants Meno to understand the *reason why* roundness is a figure, viz. because there are other figures as well. If Meno accomplishes this, he “will understand that this is the case with respect to everything.” (74b3-4). So, he reasons that each thing, with respect to which there are parallel examples, is an individual manifestation of a genus; that Roundness is that with respect to which there are parallel examples; and that Roundness is an individual manifestation of a genus. To reinforce the point, Socrates has Meno apply the principle to colors (75c5-d1). Meno needs to understand that when a certain thing has parallel examples (many figures, many virtues, many colors, etc.), that thing and its parallels cannot be the definition of the genus under which they fall (74e11-75a9). After he understands that, Meno will be ready to move from particulars (figures) to genus (figure *simpliciter*).

Socrates has helped Meno to understand the distinction between “individual manifestations” of something and the thing *simpliciter*. Now he wants him to warm up for the

search for “virtue *simpliciter*” by having him define figure *simpliciter* (74e11-75a9). But not before Socrates gives him a criterion for making definitions. If one wants to posit that “X is Y”, one must account for whether the “same thing X is in all these Y.” (τὸ ἐπὶ πᾶσιν τούτοις ταῦτόν) (75a4-5). This may be a necessary condition, but it is insufficient for making definitions.

Euthyphro’s most famous definition of piety satisfies the “same things in all” requirement but fails because it does not offer a “reason why” (διὰ τοῦτο) (cf. *Euthyph.* 10a-d).⁵¹ Socrates offers but one lesson in the skill of defining, not the whole course.⁵²

3.6 Socrates’ Definitions

Meno, perhaps a bit wearied, tells Socrates just to tell him the answer (ἀλλὰ σύ, ὦ Σώκρατες, εἰπέ 75b1). Has Meno done what any good Socratic interlocutor ought, exhausted his ideas and exposed his philosophical barrenness?⁵³ Or, as the commentators prefer, does this behavior suggest intellectual laziness?⁵⁴ We might be surprised that Socrates agrees just to tell him. Meno will not develop if Socrates “just tells him” the answer. The key to understanding Socrates’ concession lies in the price tag: that Meno return the favor and define virtue. Socrates feels that he “must make the effort, for it is worth it” (προθυμητέον τοίνυν· ἄξιον γάρ 75b6). It’s worthwhile for Socrates “just to tell him something” on the promise that Meno will later

⁵¹ Socrates “seems to place further requirements on definition in certain contexts. These include unity and capturing the essence construed as a cause or rational ground.” (Modrak 2010: 280). She discusses the Euthyphro dilemma at (280: n. 41). Note that Aristotle seemed to judge the “reason why” requirement as the most critical (cf. the definitions in *APo* 90a14ff., 90a4ff., and the discussion in *Met.* 1041a28-31), cf. Charles (2010b, esp. 286-88, 293-300).

⁵² With a better interlocutor, Theaetetus, Socrates argues (*Th.* 205d-e) that even the “reason why” requirement (essential to the “Dream Theory” of knowledge) is insufficient. Cf. Crager (2017: 11-14); for Aristotle’s defense of the “Dream Theory”, 23ff.

⁵³ Cornford (1957: 27) offers narrative parallels between the *Meno* and *Theaetetus*.

⁵⁴ See Scott’s (2006: 60-62) admirable summary of the evidence.

investigate for himself.

Socrates now trots out his first definition of figure (75b9-c1): “Let figure be this for our purposes: the only existing thing that happens to always follow color.” We should note how tentative the defining formula is: “Let this be figure for us” (ἔστω γὰρ δὴ ἡμῖν τοῦτο σχῆμα). He warns Meno that the definition is only an “attempt to tell him” (πειρώμεθά σοι εἰπεῖν 75b8), at best only “sufficient for you” (ἰκανῶς σοι 75b11). He has reason to be cautious. His attempt suffers from the very fault that he himself censured at the beginning of the dialogue. It seems to be a description (ὅποῖός ἐστιν) and not a definition (ὅτι ἐστιν), naming a property but not grasping the essence of figure. Socrates has offered a definition that, in the mouth of a rival interlocutor, would have been met with scrutiny. But this incongruity is the point—Socrates does not want to teach Meno a definition of figure.⁵⁵ Socrates prefaced the definition with a call for Meno to “examine” (σκόπει) his answer. (75b9). Figure is not the point of the discussion; it is an example used to help Meno approach the *real* subject of the conversation, virtue. So, if the discussion of figure is only a pedagogical tool, we should expect Socrates to make the discussion that much more pedagogical. Meno should not only learn sample definitions that he can imitate, but he should also learn how to cross-examine definitions.⁵⁶

Meno is skeptical of Socrates’ answer, but perhaps for different reasons than Socrates would have expected: “If someone denied that he knew what (εἰδέναι) color was, but was similarly confused (ἀποροῖ) about it as he was about figure, how do you think you would have

⁵⁵ Pace Charles (2010a: 119-123), who argues that Socrates is establishing that there are two different kinds of “what is X?”-type questions (and answers).

⁵⁶ Pace Weiss (2001: 26-28): “We note that Socrates proffers this definition... not as the unique or even as an especially good definition of shape, but rather as one that suffices for his present purposes... All Socrates needs is a definition on which Meno can pattern his definition of virtue. Thus, unless Meno finds fault with the definition, it will stand. Alas, find fault he does.” There is no textual evidence that Meno dislikes Socrates’ definition because of “how plain, how unpretentious” it is.

answered him?” (75c5-7). Many commentators do not take the objection seriously. When Socrates complains about eristic interlocutors, they apply the criticism to Meno.⁵⁷ The reason for Meno’s quibble, they claim, is that it allows Socrates to make a forceful distinction between eristical and dialectical conversations in 75d8ff. But this is hardly fair. Meno’s objection is no “eristic quibble”.⁵⁸ It had a long afterlife as an argument for “ad infinitum skepticism”,⁵⁹ an epistemological position against which Aristotle takes great pains to argue in *Posterior Analytics*.⁶⁰

3.7 Kinds of Conversations

Whether or not we should take it seriously, the quibble does allow Socrates to reflect on the different kinds of question-and-answer bouts:

If one of the wise and eristic and competitive types (τῶν σοφῶν τις εἴη καὶ ἐριστικῶν τε καὶ ἀγωνιστικῶν) were the one questioning, I would tell him, (1) “If I don’t speak correctly, it’s your job to exact an account and refute me (λαμβάνειν λόγον καὶ ἐλέγχειν).⁶¹ But if friends like you and me wanted to discuss with one another, it is necessary (2) to answer more gently and in a manner more suitable for discussions (διαλεκτικώτερον). More

⁵⁷ Klein (1965: 62), who thinks that Meno is being “disputatious” and “merely competing for some verbal victory without caring in the slightest about the matter under investigation. And could not Gorgias' schooling be held responsible for this attitude?”

⁵⁸ Weiss 2001: 28.

⁵⁹ This passage can be read as a precursor to Aristotle’s discussion in *Posterior Analytics*, perhaps even as an influence. The *Meno* is mentioned at the beginning of *Posterior Analytics*, and the argument for *ad infinitum* skepticism concerns the infinite of posited hypotheses. (*APo* 83b38-84a6).

⁶⁰ Aristotle opens the discussion of the *Posterior Analytics* (1.1) with the *Meno*. The Philosopher cannot deny that “All teaching and all intellectual learning come about from already existing knowledge.” For the term “ad infinitum Skeptics”, and discussion, see Crager (2017: 23-38), whose full account I summarize here. Similar to Meno, these “Skeptics” claimed that all knowledge (including definitions) was demonstrative. This state of affairs created an infinite regression of premises that needed demonstration before one could arrive at knowledge. Therefore, we cannot know anything. These “Skeptics” were not the ancestors of the later ἐφεκτικοί (*contra* Ammon. *In. Cat.* 2,9 ff., Philop. *In. Cat.* 2,4 ff.); however, Aristotle’s brief account of them would inspire Agrippa’s skepticism in the first c. BCE. cf. Sext. Emp. *PH* 1.164–77, D.L. 9.88.

⁶¹ Note that τῶν σοφῶν τις εἴη καὶ ἐριστικῶν τε καὶ ἀγωνιστικῶν could be construed as “one of the experts in eristic and competitive debate” (Sedley’s transl.), in which case Socrates is referring not to early interlocutors in general, but debate experts such as Euthydemus, Protagoras, and Gorgias.

suitable for discussions perhaps is not only answering truthfully, but also to answer through those things which the questioner concedes that he knows. (75c8-d7).

For those who read the *Meno* as a “transitional” dialogue, this passage inaugurates the new Socrates. We will express our reservations about this view, but we might also give credit where it is due. The conversations described in (1) do characterize the “early” dialogues. Interlocutors in these are convinced of their own wisdom (τῶν σοφῶν) and consequently do not believe they have anything to learn from Socrates.⁶² They only want to beat him in a debate (cf. Aristot. *SE* 171b24-25). Socrates can offer them nothing constructive, so instead he “exacts an account” (λαμβάνειν λόγον) and cross-examines (ἐλέγχειν) them.⁶³ At worst these debates with Socrates become “eristic”,⁶⁴ and at best become typical of the agonistic, contest debates of the time.⁶⁵ In neither can Socrates offer his own opinions, as he only seeks to test the interlocutor’s by posing the *opposite* of his.

These contrast with the “διαλεκτικώτερον” conversation,⁶⁶ the sort we find in dialogues of “stylometric groups 2 and 3”.⁶⁷ Indeed, these dialogues voice aspirations similar to those we

⁶² *Euphro.* 5b8-c3, 13e7-9, *Charm.* 162c-d, *Hipp. Min.* 364a. See Vogt (2012) for discussion of epistemic over-optimism in the “early” dialogues.

⁶³ Note that the formula in this passage λαμβάνειν λόγον καὶ ἐλέγχειν also appears in *Resp.* 337e3, a passage in which Thrasymachus describes what Socrates does.

⁶⁴ See the introduction to the dissertation. Cf. Blondell’s treatment of eristics in *Hippias Minor* (2002: ch. 3).

⁶⁵ Cf. Le Blond (1939: ch. 1), Moraux (1968), Bolton (1990), Slomkowski (1997: ch. 1), and Castelnérac and Marion (2009: 10ff.).

⁶⁶ It is hard to translate διαλεκτικόν, because it appears to have been a term of art in Socratic circles for “good at asking and answering questions” or for “not arguing so as to trip others up.” Cf. Xen. *Mem.* 6.1.1, Pl. *Crat.* 390c10-11. In the comparative and superlative forms, it only occurs in Xenophon and Plato, and not again until Plutarch. Kahn (1996: 302ff.) claims that in aporetic dialogues, the term is used to distinguish Socratic questioning from less admirable *logoi* (eristic, rhetoric, sophistry, etc.), but that Plato came to use the term as “skill in philosophical discourse” in dialogues such as *Cratylus*, *Euthydemus*, *Republic VII*, etc.

⁶⁷ Gill (1996: 288-89) discusses the difference between early and middle interlocutors and the effect it has on their conversations with Socrates. See also Burnyeat (1977: 10).

have read in this passage. In the *Philebus* (14b7), Socrates wants to “form an alliance” (συμμαχεῖν) with Protarchus to seek the “most true thing” (τῷ δ’ ἀληθεστάτῳ). The two will “not be contentious” (φιλονικοῦμεν).⁶⁸ Socrates warns Theaetetus (*Tht.* 167e4-168a1) against the agonist (ἀγωνιζόμενος) who only wants to waste time and trip up (σφάλλη) his opponent, but praises the interlocutor (διαλεγόμενος) who corrects the mistakes of his partner and points out his “trip-ups” (ἐνδεικνύμενος τὰ σφάλματα).⁶⁹ The Eleatic Stranger (*Soph.* 217d1-3) wants an answerer who “does not cause grief” (ἀλύπως) and who “yields easily” (εὐηνίως).⁷⁰ He, like Socrates, wants his associates to become “more dialectical” because of a mutual search (ζήτησις) for definition (*Pol.* 285d4-6).⁷¹ In the *Phaedrus* (276e1-7), Socrates speaks of an “enterprise more noble” (καλλίων σπουδή)⁷² than “argumentative jesting” (τοῦ ἐν λόγοις παίζειν).⁷³ This enterprise “sows epistemic *logoi*” (φυτεύη τε καὶ σπείρη μετ’ ἐπιστήμης λόγους) within select souls.

Aristotle has a similar kind of dialectic in mind. He, like his master, recognizes a division between “constructive” and “cross-examining” dialectic. The former examines well-known

⁶⁸ Cf. the bad interlocutors described in *Gorg.* 457d: “being contentious but not investigating” (φιλονικοῦντας ἀλλ’ οὐ ζητοῦντας).

⁶⁹ Note the tripping language in the discussion of bad dialectic in *Xen. Mem.* 6.1.1.

⁷⁰ As usual, there is always the risk that Plato does not endorse the statements of his interlocutors, as Frede (1992) and Blondell (2002: 18-19) persuasively argue. The Eleatic Stranger has come under special scrutiny in this regard (Gonzalez 2000, Tarrant 2000: ch. 3, Benitez 1996). On the other hand, Plato does seem to contrast Theaetetus’ good behavior with “the philosophical resistance of others: the reluctant Theodoros, the scolding ‘Protagoras’, and the contemptuous students who abandon Sokrates’ midwifery.” (Blondell 2002: 327).

⁷¹ *Pol.* 285d4-6. For discussion, see Apicella (2016: 42 n. 34).

⁷² Cf. *Tht.* 167e: χωρὶς δὲ διαλεγόμενος... ἐν δὲ τῷ διαλέγεσθαι σπουδάζη

⁷³ In eristic debates one is allowed to “joke around”: ἐν μὲν τῷ παίζειν τε καὶ σφάλλη καθ’ ὅσον ἂν δύνηται (*Tht.* 167e). cf. *Prot.* 341d7, where Socrates and Prodicus “joke around” (παίζειν) with Protagoras.

opinions, especially those of the wise.⁷⁴ This is “dialectic in itself” (τῆς διαλεκτικῆς καθ’ αὐτήν *SE* 182a39-b1), against the elenctic “peirastic”. Aristotle concedes a “philosophical use” to this kind of conversation, in which the process of puzzling on both sides of a difficult question helps us to “see the true and the false.” (*Top.* 101a35-37).⁷⁵ This kind of dialectic is also pedagogical. A questioner can lead the answerer “through those things which the answerer concedes that he knows” (*Meno* 75d7) and help him understand the first principles (*Top.* 101a37).⁷⁶ Aristotle makes a similar distinction in the *Rhetoric* (1396b22-27). He divides two types of enthymemes, “demonstrative” (δεικτικά) and “refutative” (ἐλεγκτικά). The relevant point for our purposes is his analogy for these enthymemes—they “differ in the same way that syllogisms and *elenchi* differ in dialectical [*logoi*].”

3.8 More Definitions

Now, it might seem that Socrates has begged the question. Meno has objected that we cannot know a definition of P without knowing a definition of Q, which will require a definition of R, etc. Socrates responds that the “manner more suitable for discussions” will proceed through the things that the questioner concedes to knowing (δι’ ἐκείνων ὧν ἂν προσομολογήῃ εἰδέναι ὁ ἐρωτῶν 75d7). This line has become obscure through much textual speculation. Scott, who prefers ἐρωτώμενος instead of ἐρωτῶν, records the reasons that led most 20th c. scholars to adopt ἐρωτῶν.⁷⁷ We can understand what motivates ἐρωτῶν. The passage is already about the

⁷⁴ This difference seems to characterize the Platonic dialogues as well. Brown (1998: 182) points out that, unlike in the “early” dialogues, middle and late dialogues tend to discuss the opinions of absent persons.

⁷⁵ Puzzling is a necessary consequence of the “controvertibility requirement” of dialectical premises; if the question is too easy to answer, it is poor for dialectic (Aristot. *APo* 72a9-10, 88b32, 89a2-4, *Top.* 104a6-7, 162b1-2, *SE* 176b14-17).

⁷⁶ Cf. pg. 27. n. 113.

⁷⁷ See Scott’s useful synthesis *ad loc.* He summarizes Thompson (1901: 239-40), Bluck (1961: 246-48), and Sharples (1985: 133-34). Scott himself disagrees with these scholars (2006: 35 n. 5) and wants to keep ἐρωτώμενος,

answerer, and so ἐρωτώμενος would feel redundant. Gedike (1822), followed by Bluck, also emended προσομολογῆ to προομολογῆ. This makes the “more conversational way” function as follows: the answerer gets a prior agreement from the questioner that he understands the terms that the answerer will give.⁷⁸ Further, there is an argument for this reading based on what follows. Socrates, the answerer in the discussion about shape, asks Meno, the questioner, whether he knows certain features of geometry. Meno’s affirmations are then used to explain Socrates’ original answer to Meno.⁷⁹

In the meantime, Socrates offers Meno a second definition of figure, “the limit of a solid” (στερεοῦ πέρασ σχῆμα εἶναι 76a4-7). This definition is also problematic. It makes “figure” equivalent to “plane”,⁸⁰ even though σχῆμα can apply to two dimensional shapes,⁸¹ or to “enclosing limits”.⁸² The definition is equivocal (perhaps purposely obscure)⁸³ but ultimately inconsequential. We need not worry about its infelicities here.⁸⁴ The more troublesome point is

but have the sense be “to answer through things that, when questioned, the person [who originally asked the question] agrees he knows.”

⁷⁸ Professor Lawrence, who suggested this reading to me, called it a “dialectical prerequisite.”

⁷⁹ Professor Blank’s suggestion to me.

⁸⁰ “They say that the limit of a solid is the definition of a plane” (τὸ δὲ στερεοῦ φασὶ πέρασ [τὸν τοῦ ἐπιπέδου ὀρισμὸν] εἶναι. (Aristot. *Top.* 141b15-22). Note that Aristotle is critical of this definition of plane. It defines a prior (plane) by a posterior (solid), which makes the definition “rather unscientific” (ἐπιστημονικώτερον), but perhaps suitable for a popular audience.

⁸¹ “Figure is what is encompassed by some boundary or boundaries.” (Euc. 1.14.1). Thomas (1980: 101) argues that this passage means σχῆμα in the three-dimensional sense.

⁸² “Posidonius defines shape (σχῆμα) as enclosing limit (πέρασ συγκλειον), separating the definition of shape from quantity and making it cause of determination, limitation and containing.” (Proc. *In Euc.* 143.8-11) (Kidd transl.). See Scott (2006: 38).

⁸³ Lloyd (1992: 175ff.) observes that the mathematics in the *Meno* is not “watertight”, but that the reader undergoes an educative initiation by puzzling through the obscure analogies between geometry and dialectic. In the same article he comments on the previously cited passages from Euclid and Proclus.

⁸⁴ For a variety of treatments, see Klein (1965: 56-60), Vlastos (1991: 121), Scott (2006: 37-42).

that Meno, again forgetting Socrates' advice to "examine" his definitions, uncritically accepts it and wants Socrates to move on to defining color (76a8). Meno receives a rebuke for this (ὕβριστής γ' εἶ 76a9).⁸⁵

Socrates offers Meno a Gorgianic definition of color (76c4-d2), replete with scientific jargon and poetic allusions. Socrates rounds off the display by citing Pindar, and Meno expresses his enthusiasm for a definition in terms he can relate to (76d3-7). We need not devote much time to the definition, which the commentators have in general taken too seriously.⁸⁶ Socrates had just told Meno that definitions should not be "complicated" (ποικίλον 75e5); Socrates disowns the definition in favor of a previous one;⁸⁷ Socrates says that Meno only liked the definition because he is "uninitiated" (76e6-9); and we have seen with what seriousness Socrates indulges in high-flown rhetoric.⁸⁸

3.9 Meno's Last Attempt

Socrates now thinks the time has come for Meno to offer another definition of virtue. Meno, perhaps inspired by Socrates' last definition, offers him the poetic maxim, "χαίρειν τε καλοῖσι καὶ δύνασθαι" (77b3 = PMG fr. 986 adesp.), the basis for his definition "ἐπιθυμοῦντα τῶν καλῶν δυνατὸν εἶναι πορίζεσθαι." (77b4-5). Or it could be that Meno, stung by the failure of his first two definitions, has decided to play it safe and offer Socrates some timeless wisdom. Or

⁸⁵ Weiss (1991: 28-30) suggests that Meno is bored with Socrates' (first two) prosaic definitions of shape, and that this boredom motivates the third, Empodoclean definition. This commentary is part of her overall estimation that Meno habitually favors the exotic and enigmatic.

⁸⁶ Cf. Scott (2006: 44).

⁸⁷ Klein (1965: 70) and Weiss (2001: 30 n. 35) think Socrates means the first definition. Bluck (1961: 254), Guthrie (1975: 249 n.1), and Scott (2006: 44) think that Socrates prefers the second.

⁸⁸ See the discussion of *Protagoras* 342a-347a, and *Gorgias* 464b2-66a3 in the previous chapters. Barney (1998: 84) suggests that for Socrates to criticize rival forms of *logoi*, he must demonstrate a proficiency in them first.

the same sting, and the accusation of not being “initiated”, has motivated an exhibition of his poetic education, an elite domain of the 5th/4th c.⁸⁹ Spouting maxims is not necessarily bad form in a dialectical argument. Poetic maxims count as ἔνδοξα because they come from the wise (*Top.* 100b22-24) and as such are a fair starting point (*Top.* 100a30-100b18). On the other hand, γνῶμαι “are not arguments and do not explain themselves.”⁹⁰ Meno cannot hope that Socrates will be satisfied by an undefended poetic definition.

Socrates asks him whether one could substitute καλά in the definition for ἀγαθά (77b6-7), to which Meno consents.⁹¹ So (1) virtue is desiring (ἐπιθυμεῖν) the good and being able to perform it. Meno then concedes the converse, that (2) vice is to desire the bad.⁹² Among the vicious, (3) there are some who desire the bad knowing the bad to be harmful, and others (4) who think that the bad will be a benefit (and thus are ignorant of its evil). (5) The harmful leads to misery, and so (6) those who want (βούλεσθαι) the bad knowing it to be harmful also want to be miserable. But, Socrates has Meno grant that (7) no one wants (βούλεσθαι) to be miserable, and so Meno has hit upon a puzzle: how could anyone want the bad knowing it to be bad?⁹³ Of

⁸⁹ Cf. Aristot. *Metaph.* 995a7-8, *Rhet.* 1394b27-29. See pg. 92 n. 23.

⁹⁰ Morgan 2009: 563. See the references in the footnote.

⁹¹ As we saw in the previous chapter, the reader of the *Gorgias* will do well to be on her guard. The interlocutors of that dialogue (474c-475e) agreed that in common usage, καλά objects can be so in virtue of being ἀγαθά, but they could also be καλά in virtue of being pleasurable. Note also that a καλόν object is that which is deemed καλόν by an external agent (e.g., “This is καλόν to me/her/us,” etc.), a fact of which Plato was not unaware (see *Crat.* 416b6ff.). In that passage, we see an attempt to etymologize κάλλος from καλεῖν (an erroneous etymology, cf. Beekes 2016 s.v. καλέω & καλός). The *Cratylus* passage corroborates the need of external agency for an object to become καλόν (note especially 416c7-8). Aristotle recognized that ἀγαθόν is similarly ambiguous: ἔστω δὴ ἀγαθὸν ὃ ἂν αὐτὸ ἑαυτοῦ ἔνεκα ἢ αἰρετόν, καὶ οὐ ἔνεκα ἄλλο αἰρούμεθα. (*Rhet.* 1362a21-23). See also *EN* 1096b10ff. On the other hand, Hobbs (2000: 220-27) argues that καλόν and ἀγαθόν are the same in the *Symposium* and *Republic*.

⁹² Cf. Aristot. *Top.* II.8 (arguments ἐπὶ τῶν ἀντιφάσεων).

⁹³ Of course, the Platonic Socrates was fond of questioning this assumption (Pl. *Prot.* 358b-c, Aristot. *EN* VII.2). For recent discussions of Plato and Aristotle on *akrasia*: Lawrence (1987), Woolf (2002), Wolfsdorf (2006), Brickhouse and Smith (2007), Segvic (2008), Clark (2012).

course, there are further arguments that Meno could have used. For example, Santas distinguished between the craving (*ἐπιθυμεῖν*) we can have for bad things that we do not want (*βούλεσθαι*), pointing out that Plato does not appear to use the latter verb for bad or harmful things.⁹⁴ In other words, they may well be false synonyms. In any case, we should not necessarily take the conclusions of this argument to be a “Socratic position”, and certainly not the Platonic position.⁹⁵ After all, Plato is aware of *εὐπορία* to the problem.⁹⁶ For the present study, of most interest is that Socrates means to test Meno’s opinions on the subject, whatever they may be. This, in ancient argumentative theory, would exculpate Socrates from responsibility for dealing in false synonyms. Tricks like that are only the fault of the arguer “when it escapes his notice” (*Top.* 162b16-18). Answerers were expected to be on the lookout for false synonyms (*Top.* 106a9ff., *Rhet.* 1397a7-10), and Meno’s failure to do so raises further doubts about his skill as an interlocutor.⁹⁷

Socrates goes on to question the second half of Meno’s definition of virtue, “being able to acquire good things.” By good things, Meno means “health”, “wealth” and “honors.” Such an

⁹⁴ Santas 1979: 315 n. 16.

⁹⁵ For one thing, it is hard to square the claims in the *Meno* with *Resp.* IV (esp. 441c and 442c). Nevertheless, some people do gymnastics to make the two accounts compatible, like Irwin (1995: 138-39) and Weiss (2001: 138-39). Scott (2006: 52) argues against compatibility.

⁹⁶ Cf. *G.* 466-68, and the distinctions drawn between *ἂ δόκει* and *βούλεσθαι*. See also the discussion in the previous chapter. Weiss (2001: 33 n. 40) sees *ἂ δόκει* as synonymous with *ἐπιθυμεῖν*, and I agree. For other interpretations of this argument, see Santas (1979: 315 n. 15); Vlastos (1969: 83-84) and Irwin (1977: 300 n. 51) take this argument to argue for “psychological eudaimonism”, which they consider a Socratic position. Regarding Socrates’ awareness of fallacy, Szaif (2017: 40) persuasively argues that “since [Socrates] shows himself able to discern and expose such trickery in arguments proffered by the two sophists [Euthydemus and Dionysodorus] (e.g. *Euthd.* 277d–8b, 295b–6d), we have to suspect that he is aware of illicit ambiguities and non-sequiturs in his own inferences and that he exploits them knowingly.” See also Blondell (2002: ch. 3) for Socrates’ dip into the eristic, and Shields (2016) for crucial differences between Socrates’ “bad” arguments and those of eristic arguers. Against the view that Socrates “cheats”, see Vlastos (1991: ch. 5).

⁹⁷ *Pace* Szaif (2017: 25): “we wouldn’t want to recognise the success of such trickery as a reliable indicator of a fundamental cognitive and ethical deficit in the interlocutor.” Szaif perhaps does not recognize that such trickery fell within the dialectician’s wheelhouse.

answer may remind us of Meno's limitations as a philosopher.⁹⁸ On the other hand, Meno has not paired human excellence with the acquisition of pleasure, which raises him at least above some Platonic interlocutors.⁹⁹ Meno then concedes that (1) the acquisition of goods (2) must be accompanied by the individual moral virtues (justice, piety, *sophrosyne*, etc.) to count as virtue (76d-e). From there, Socrates summarizes the position as "(1) whatever comes (2) with justice is virtue and whatever is without all such things is vice." (78e8-79a1).¹⁰⁰ Socrates has persuaded Meno to make the original (1) almost meaningless, almost without argument, though (1) was initially a more important claim than (2).

Meno has still not reached a definition of virtue, much less discerned whether virtue is teachable. But the conversation has not been fruitless. Through their trial and error, Socrates and Meno have made insights about having a proper dialogue. One cannot search for qualities before essence (71b3-8); to gain knowledge of a conclusion, one must proceed through premises that one knows (75d); and that one cannot define a genus by its species (79c8-e1).

3.10 Of Torpedo-Fish and Gadflies

Next follows one of the more memorable episodes of the *Meno*. Meno loses his temper and gives Socrates a piece of his mind.

MEN. Ὡ Σώκρατες, ἤκουον μὲν ἔγωγε πρὶν καὶ σὺ συγγενέσθαι σοι ὅτι σὺ οὐδὲν ἄλλο ἢ αὐτός τε ἀπορεῖς καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους ποιεῖς ἀπορεῖν: καὶ νῦν, ὡς γέ μοι δοκεῖς, γοητεύεις με καὶ φαρμάττεις καὶ ἀτεχνῶς κατεπάδεις, ὥστε μεστὸν ἀπορίας γεγονέναι. καὶ δοκεῖς μοι παντελῶς, εἰ δεῖ τι καὶ σκῶψαι, ὁμοιότατος εἶναι τό τε εἶδος καὶ τᾶλλα ταύτη τῇ πλατεία νάρκη τῇ θαλαττία: καὶ γὰρ αὕτη

⁹⁸ These are the things which the many pursue as the highest good in Aristotle (*EN* 1095a20-24).

⁹⁹ According to Aristotle, the life of honor and the political life is higher than the life of pleasure (*EN* 1095b22-23). Cf. Callicles (*Gorg.* 494a6-b2).

¹⁰⁰ As a side note, this is a certain kind of "*topos* from contraries" that Aristotle describes (*Top.* 113b27-114a3). As Slomkowski (1997: 142-43) analyzes it, the argument runs "If A is B, then C(A) is C(B)" such that C(X) means "contrary of the term X." In Socrates' argument, A is "something done with justice" and B is "virtue."

τὸν ἀεὶ πλησιάζοντα καὶ ἀπτόμενον ναρκᾶν ποιεῖ, καὶ σὺ δοκεῖς μοι νῦν ἐμὲ τοιοῦτόν τι πεποιηκέναι, ναρκᾶν: ἀληθῶς γὰρ ἔγωγε καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν καὶ τὸ στόμα ναρκᾶ, καὶ οὐκ ἔχω ὅτι ἀποκρίνωμαί σοι. καίτοι μυριάκις γε περὶ ἀρετῆς παμπόλλους λόγους εἴρηκα καὶ πρὸς πολλούς, καὶ πάνυ εὖ, ὥς γε ἑμαυτῶ ἐδόκουν: νῦν δὲ οὐδ' ὅτι ἐστὶν τὸ παράπαν ἔχω εἰπεῖν. καὶ μοι δοκεῖς εὖ βουλευέσθαι οὐκ ἐκπλέων ἐνθένδε οὐδ' ἀποδημῶν: εἰ γὰρ ξένος ἐν ἄλλῃ πόλει τοιαῦτα ποιοῖς, τάχ' ἂν ὡς γόης ἀπαχθεῖης. (79e7-80b7)

Socrates, I heard before meeting you that your situation is nothing other than being in *aporia* yourself and putting others in *aporia*. And now, as you seem to me, you are bewitching and beguiling and just enchanting me, such that I have become full of *aporia*. And to me you altogether seem (if its necessary to jest a little) to be most similar in appearance and other qualities to the flat torpedo-fish. For it itself numbs anyone approaching it and touching it, and you now seem to have done such a thing to me, make me numb. Really, I am numb in soul and in mouth, and I have nothing to give you as an answer. Yet so many time I have given so many speeches to so many people on virtue, and I spoke really well, at least as it seemed to me. But now I have nothing at all to say. And you seem to me to plan well by not voyaging from here nor going abroad. For if as a foreigner in another city you were to do such things, you would quickly be led away as a wizard.

We might be sympathetic to Meno's annoyance.¹⁰¹ He has offered three failed definitions, and Socrates has just pressed him three times for a fourth try (79c3-5, 7-8, e1-2). Socrates has offered Meno several different definition formulae which he might have used. But instead, he riffs on a different Socratic formula, the one Socrates uses to describe the teaching of wisdom or a skill: ([σοφός] [σοφούς] ἄλλους ποιῶν).¹⁰² When Socrates uses this formula, it is usually in contempt. Unlike the σοφοί, he has no knowledge to teach others (his defense in *Ap.* 19d8-9, 21b4-5). But it turns out that Socrates practices a “trade” by any other name, that of “wizardry” (γοητεύεις), “bewitchment” (φαρμάττεις), and “simply enchantment” (ἀτεχνῶς κατεπάδεις).¹⁰³ These are fighting words. In the *Symposium*, these same labels apply to *eros* and sophistry (203d7–8); Plato applies such magical terms to rhetoricians (*G.* 483e4–6), sophists (*Euthyd.* 288b8, *Sph.* 234c5,

¹⁰¹ “Meno, too, tries to deflect the blame for his failure onto Socrates.” Szaif (2017: 36). Weiss is more sympathetic: “Meno resents being conscripted into yet another round of inquiry that is, from the start, doomed to failure.” (2001: 54).

¹⁰² *Euthph.* 3c9-d2, *Ap.* 19b4-c1, *La.* 185d5-7, *Euthyd.* 292d5-9, *G.* 455c3-4, *Phdr.* 266c2-5; also *Sph.* 232c9-10. Cf. *Gorg. Hel.* 10

¹⁰³ Or some sort of anti-trade. There may be a punch in ἀτεχνῶς,

235a1), and mimes (*Resp.* 598d3, 602d2). They are (usually) synonyms for charlatans and pseudo-intellectuals.¹⁰⁴

The passage is most famous for Socrates's comparison to a torpedo fish.¹⁰⁵ He induces the shock of *aporia* in others while being in *aporia* himself.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps we can read this passage alongside the *Apology*, where Socrates likens his activity to the gadfly, who “awakens and persuades and reproaches each person.” (30e7).¹⁰⁷ Socrates' behavior “vexes” (ἄχθόμενοι) people, and stirs them to call for Socrates' death (31a4-5). This metaphor is not exclusive to Plato. We find similar associations with the gadfly in other authors.¹⁰⁸ In Aristotle's *Historia Animalium*, for instance, we read that at the rising of Sirius, tuna and swordfish become infected with a parasite called “the gadfly.” The parasite was so-called because “the pain it inflicted was so acute that the swordfish would sometimes leap as high out of the water as a dolphin.” (*HA* 602a25-31).

The gadfly's activities are rather different from the torpedo-fish's. We can tell this difference from the latter's very name, *νάρκη*, or “numbness”. The gadfly causes pain, and the

¹⁰⁴ There are many passages in the dialogues in which an interlocutor accuses Socrates of arguing no differently than a sophist or an eristic arguer (e.g., *Charm.* 166c4-6, *G.* 494d1, 515b5, *Resp.* 338d2). Shields (2016) and Szaif (2017: 39-43) discuss the difference between Socratic questioning and eristic wrangling.

¹⁰⁵ As a pedantic side-note, Meno does not call Socrates a sting-ray (τρῦγών) (cf. Aristot. *Hist. An.* 620b20ff.) (*pace* Weiss 2001: 21; Matthews 2003: ch. 5 “The Self-Stinging Stingray”; Scott 2006: ch. 6 “The Stingray”). Ebrey 2014: 3 n 5 correctly distinguishes between the two). Sting-rays are not electric, but venomous. The confusion may lie in the English nickname “electric ray” for torpedo fish.

¹⁰⁶ Note that this passage is not the first philosophical text to appropriate *νάρκη* as a metaphor (*Democr.* 290).

¹⁰⁷ Note that in the preface to both analogies, Socrates and Meno both claim to be “joking” or “having a laugh.” Scott (2006: 69) points out the incongruity between the torpedo fish and the gadfly but does not offer analysis. Matthews (1993: ch. 9) considers the metaphors of gadfly, “stingray”, and midwife, but my account differs from his discussion.

¹⁰⁸ Especially in the tragedians: *A.Pr.* 836, *S.Tr.* 653, *E.Ba.* 119, *E.IA* 77. See also Pl. *Phdr.* 251d, *Resp.* 573e, *Th.* 179e.

torpedo-fish removes it.¹⁰⁹ The former excited extreme physical activity (*à la* stricken swordfish), while *νάρκη* refers to the paralysis of limbs.¹¹⁰ The parallels may continue. But before I conclude drawing them, I cannot resist another look at *Historia Animalium* (620b19-28) for the Stagirite’s discussion of torpedo-fish. The electric ray hides in the sand (hence its “flatness” *πλατεῖα*); it exposes bits of filament, which other fish mistake for food; when fish draw near, the ray numbs them, and then eats them (620b19-28). Would we be going too far to extend the Socratic metaphor? I will only observe that the torpedo-fish offers apparent food but delivers a shock, and that Socrates elsewhere compares the purveying of apparent food to the purveying of knowledge (*Prot.* 313c-314c).¹¹¹

Socrates has made Meno “numb in soul and mouth”, and “unable to answer.”¹¹² His soul and mouth used to give “abundant” speeches about virtue to “many” people on “myriad” occasions, but now he cannot say *anything* about it. We have to wonder whether Meno is less annoyed for not knowing about virtue than not being able to say anything about it.¹¹³ Despite the hostilities underlying the simile, Socrates does not reject it. In fact, he takes the accusation “being numb you numb others” (80e6-7), or “in *aporia* as you induce *aporia*” (80c8-d4) as a compliment rather than a criticism.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ Indeed, the Hippocratics induced *νάρκη* as an analgesic (*Aph.* 5.25, see also *VM* 22.40ff.).

¹¹⁰ E.g., Aristoph. *V.* 713-14. See Beekes 2016 s.v. *νάρκη*.

¹¹¹ Perhaps one more parallel. The electric ray is also notable for the number of eggs it carries within it (Arisot. *HA* 565b25-26), a curious irony vis-à-vis Socrates’ “barrenness” (*Tht.* 150d).

¹¹² Benson (1989: 597-98, esp. n. 16) claims that Meno shows his quality by his claim to be numbed in both “soul and “mouth”. Other “early” interlocutors, like Euthyphro, claim that they *know* what Socrates is asking for, but simply cannot articulate it (*Euthph.* 11b). Szaif (2017: 37) is less kind to Meno—while Laches blamed his inexperience as the cause of his *aporia*, Meno blames Socrates’ tricky questioning.

¹¹³ A suspicion confirmed in 95c.

¹¹⁴ See Politis (2006).

How can Socrates claim that his activities are analogous to both gadfly and torpedo fish?

Does the former capture the more “historical” Socrates of the early dialogues, and the latter the emerging “Platonic” Socrates of the middle to late dialogues?¹¹⁵ Perhaps we will understand better with a passage from the *Theaetetus* (167e-168a):

ἐν δὲ τῷ διαλέγεσθαι σπουδάζῃ τε καὶ ἐπανορθοῖ τὸν προσδιαλεγόμενον, ἐκεῖνα μόνα αὐτῷ ἐνδεικνύμενος τὰ σφάλματα, ἃ αὐτὸς ὑφ’ ἑαυτοῦ καὶ τῶν προτέρων συνουσιῶν παρεκέκρουστο. ἂν μὲν γὰρ οὕτω ποιῆς, ἑαυτοῦς αἰτιάσονται οἱ προσδιατρίβοντές σοι τῆς αὐτῶν ταραχῆς καὶ ἀπορίας ἄλλ’ οὐ σέ, καὶ σὲ μὲν διώξονται καὶ φιλήσουσιν, αὐτοῦς δὲ μισήσουσι καὶ φεύξονται ἄφ’ ἑαυτῶν εἰς φιλοσοφίαν, ἴν’ ἄλλοι γενόμενοι ἀπαλλαγῶσι τῶν οἱ πρότερον ἦσαν: ἐὰν δὲ τάναντία τούτων δρᾷς ὥσπερ οἱ πολλοί, τάναντία συμβήσεται σοι καὶ τοὺς συνόντας ἀντὶ φιλοσόφων μισοῦντας τοῦτο τὸ πρᾶγμα ἀποφανεῖς ἐπειδὴν πρεσβύτεροι γένωνται.

But in conversation he should be serious and correct his interlocutor, pointing out to him only those slip-ups with respect to which he had been deceived, either by his own fault or because of prior associations. For if you would act in this way, your associates will blame themselves and not you for their disturbance and *aporia*, they will be impelled towards you and love you, but hate themselves and flee from themselves towards philosophy, so that becoming different they might escape from the persons they were before. But if you do the opposite of these things just as the many do, the opposite will result for you, and you will make your associates not philosophers, but haters of philosophy when they grow older.

First, Socrates creates a gulf between his philosophical enterprise and that of various σοφοί.¹¹⁶

The ideal dialectician “is serious” (σπουδάζῃ).¹¹⁷ Plato (Pl. *Phdr.* 276e1-7) and Aristotle

(*Protrept.* fr. 103.7-8) both mark “seriousness” [σπουδ-] to privilege their own philosophical pursuits at the expense of other lifestyles. If we were in doubt as to what constitutes

“seriousness”, Socrates tells us. The real dialectician “corrects” (ἐπανορθοῖ) the answerer (i.e.

¹¹⁵ Such a view, of course, was dominant throughout the 20th c. For criticism, see Graham (1992), Blank (1993a), Cooper (1997), Wolfsdorf (2017). For a history of the scholarship, see Dorion (2011), Waterfield (2013), and Nails (2017).

¹¹⁶ For context: Socrates is ventriloquizing Protagoras, who is addressing this speech to Socrates.

¹¹⁷ This question of Socratic “seriousness” developed a life of its own in the secondary literature. Vlastos (1991: 133-34) rightly recognizes the importance of σπουδῆ; overemphasis of this criterion, however, led to his claim that Socrates “would [never] (knowingly, and in a serious vein) assert categorically a false premise or endorse a fallacious argument.” (1991: 134 n. 5). See the previous chapter on the refutation of Polus for my argument that Socrates can be “serious” and argue fallaciously in tandem. For other critiques of Vlastos’ vision of “Socratic seriousness”, see Klosko (1983), Beversluis (2000: 41-44); for a defense, Irwin (1992: 242-43).

instead of trying to defeat him). These corrections do not amount to the correction of *errors* in the sense of “false beliefs”, but “slip-ups” (σφάλματα). Plato elsewhere uses the term for “contradictory opinions”.¹¹⁸ These are inconsistencies that an interlocutor maintains, perhaps without realizing it herself.¹¹⁹ This interlocutor has been “deceived” (παρεκέκρουστο) in her “prior acquaintances” (συνουσιῶν).¹²⁰ But Socrates is willing to expose the inconsistencies which inevitably arise from such deceptions.¹²¹

This process of disenchantment is painful. The philosopher’s associates (προσδιατρίβοντές) experience “disturbance (ταραχῆς) and *aporia*”.¹²² I suppose this experience motivated the “torpedo-fish” analogy for Socrates. A self-confident young man has his pet theories demolished, and realizes that (at least) two of his prior commitments cannot be simultaneously believed. The young man must lay the blame for this realization somewhere, either on “himself” or on the person who pointed out his inconsistencies. In any case, he experiences a strong emotional reaction, a reaction that motivates the “gadfly” imagery for Socrates. The young man may “blame” and “hate” himself, and “pursue and love [Socrates]”; or

¹¹⁸ Even those only apparently so (*Resp.* 487b).

¹¹⁹ Blank (1993a: 431), commenting on this passage, agrees: “[this process] does not involve correcting the questioner’s own mistakes or ensuring the truth of his arguments or even saying only things he believes. It merely requires him to correct only the mistakes which his respondent makes due to his own ignorance or that of his former associates, that is, *only the things he actually believed before the present conversation began.*”

¹²⁰ In his dialectical handbooks, Aristotle applies the verb (παρακρούω) to clever arguers, who shift the meaning of apparent homonyms (*Top.* 157a27, *SE* 165a14-17, 175a41-b3). Aristotle provides an example of this shifting, the argument regarding willing and unwilling deception in the *Hippias* (*Met.* 1025a6-70). See Blondell (2002: ch. 3) for commentary on Socratic deception in that dialogue. The term συνουσία was often applied to pedagogical association with sophists. *Pl. Ap.* 19e6-20a2, *Prot.* 318a2-3, 335b3-5; cf. Philostr. *VS* 1.494.27, 2.604.8; *DL* 9.50.8, 52.5, 56.9-12; *Alex. in Top.* 549.4-5; *Proc. in Alc. I* 253.10; *in Parm.* 1023.23-24.

¹²¹ Again, Aristotle rightly held “contradiction” to be the aim of dialectical conversations and *elenchi*, as in *Top.* 100a20-21, *Top.* 159a.30-32, *SE* 165b3-4.

¹²² προσδιατρίβω, a *hapax* in Plato, in other authors refers to diligent study. See Posidipp. 28.4, *Phld. Oec.* p.25 J.; *Plu.* 2.725f, *Aristid.* 1.135 J.

he will blame and hate philosophy. No matter what, hatred and love will be aroused, but the objects of those emotions differ according to the quality of the pedagogue (and of the student. See, e.g., *Resp.* 539d).

3.11 *Aporia* and the Possibility of Inquiry

Socrates is indeed in *aporia* and not ashamed to admit it. Meno's simile expressed more shame, but confirmed that he too was in *aporia*. So, the two are on equal footing. The two together are in a privileged position to "examine together" (μετὰ σοῦ σκέψασθαι) and "co-search" (συζητῆσαι).¹²³ The dialogue can go in one of two directions. Meno can muster "hatred" for his prior answers and love for Socrates for having cross-examined them. Or he can feed hostility for Socrates and end the discussion. The latter sort of interlocutors will be rather familiar. They are like Euthyphro and Protagoras, invited to a deeper "co-search" with Socrates, but who reject the offer. The *Meno* is at risk of ending here, and of being one of the shortest dialogues of Plato. Fortunately for us, Meno decides to keep going forward.

Meno responds with his namesake (so-called) paradox. He asks (1) how will Socrates search (ζητήσεις) for X when he is ignorant about the nature (ὅτι ἐστίν) of X; and (2) if Socrates chances upon X, how will he know it is X if he doesn't know what it is (80d5-8).¹²⁴ The paradox rejects the possibility of inquiry. By extension, it also rejects the possibility of inquiring with Socrates (συζητεῖν). The verb συζητεῖν was quite marked—it is a word first found in Plato,

¹²³ The invitation to "search together" recurs throughout the Platonic corpus. See *Charm.* 166c-d, *Grg.* 505e-506a, *Prot.* 348c5-e1, *Soph.* 218b-d, *Phlb.* 19a-c, *Plt.* 258b-c, *Tht.* 150a-151e.

¹²⁴ Scott (1995: 29) points out that "Meno's paradox" has two paradoxes within it. Note also that there are subtle differences between Meno's formulation of the paradox and Socrates' restatement of the problem (Moline 1969: 154). Moravcsik (1978: 57) and Thomas (1980: 123) argue that the Socratic version is easier to resolve—Meno asked about scenarios in which we are "altogether" (*parapan*) ignorant of X, an adverb that Socrates omits. McCabe (2009: 240-41) agrees that a substitution has been made, though that the Socratic version has its own complications. Neither view significantly affects the interpretation of this chapter.

in this very passage.¹²⁵ The sense of the passage, if we can English it, appears to be, “SO: I want to examine with you and co-search what [virtue] is. ME: How will *you* search?”¹²⁶ By divesting the verb ζητεῖν of the prefix σύν, he offers Socrates a subtle rejection,. perhaps too angry with him to acknowledge his own ignorance.

The paradox harks back to the dialogue’s beginning. Socrates had criticized Meno for wanting to investigate *how* something is without knowing *what* it is. Meno’s paradox takes this criticism to another extreme: how we can investigate what something is if we do not know what it is. This is a parody of Socrates’ epistemological priorities.¹²⁷ We can understand why Socrates’ objects that this is “eristic” arguing (80e2). Now, the intention might have been quarrelsome. But the problem Meno identifies is real.¹²⁸ It is the starting point for the rest of the conversation of the *Meno*, as well as the first part of Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics* (I.1).¹²⁹

3.12 *Anamnesis*

¹²⁵ The only other dialogues in which it occurs is in *Cratylus* and (Ps-Pl.) *Hippias Major*. These are the only attestations of the term in Classical Greek. However, the concept occurs throughout the works of Plato and Aristotle. The invitation to a joint search occurs in *Prot.* 361e6, though Protagoras refuses and the dialogue ends. Aristotle mentions dialecticians engaged in constructive dialectic having a common project in (*Top.* 161a38). See section 0.6.3 of this dissertation for discussion, and Politis (2006: 105-107), Nightingale (1995: 17), and Szaif (2018: 43).

¹²⁶ Moline (1969: 155-57) also sees criticism in Meno’s use of the second person. Scholars from Shorey (1933: 109) through Bluck (1961: 8) tended to read the paradox as an eristic dodge or red herring. They take Socrates’ rebuke (80e) at face value. Nehamas (1985: 8) and Weiss (2001: 53ff.) are more sympathetic.

¹²⁷ McCabe (2009: 246) compares Meno’s objection to the paradox of learning in *Euthd.* 276a1-277c7. Benson (2015: ch. 3) argues that they are dissimilar, in that μανθάνειν is equivocal in a way that ζητεῖν is not.

¹²⁸ Eristic arguments, which raise apparent difficulties in the *phainomena*, do serve to stimulate philosophical reflection. E.g., Zeno’s dichotomy (Aristot. *Phys.* VI.2, VIII.8), *ad infinitum* demonstration (*APo* I.2-3). Scott (2006: 84 n. 13) suggests that Meno’s position derives from Parmenides’ paradox that “what-is cannot derive from what-is-not: knowledge can only come from pre-existent knowledge.” (DK 21 B34). As Kahn summarizes it, “[A]s Being cannot come from Not-being, so knowledge cannot come from what is not-knowledge. If knowledge of essences can ever be realized in actual cognition, that is because it was already present in some way in our soul.” (1996: 162).

¹²⁹ Aristotle offers his solution in *APo* 71b9–16. Similar solutions to Meno’s paradox are advocated in Fine (1992:212–213) and Irwin (1995:131–132), who both distinguish between “beliefs about X” and “knowledge of X.”

The formulation of the problem leads to the theory of recollection. This is a theory Socrates has heard from “wise men and women”, “priests and priestesses.” (81a5-10). Such is the “mythologizing preface” that we often find in Plato. For example, Socrates introduces the story of the water-carriers in the *Gorgias* with a quote that he heard from “wise men” (ἤκουσα τῶν σοφῶν *Gorg.* 493a2).¹³⁰ Later in the dialogue, the circumstances regarding the judgment of the soul are “things which I have heard” (524a8). The case is similar with Diotima’s tale about Eros (ἤκουσα γυναικὸς Μαντινικῆς Διοτίμας (*Symp* 201d2) and the myth of Theuth (ἀκοήν γ’ ἔχω λέγειν τῶν προτέρων *Phdr.* 274c1), and the *Timaeus* is the tale of an ancient priest (22b). So, *anamnesis* belongs to the discourse of μῦθοι.¹³¹ We should hesitate to call *anamnesis* a “solution” to the problem of knowledge.¹³² *Anamnesis*, by being embedded in a myth, is flagged to stimulate further inquiry into epistemology, not end it.¹³³

Socrates’ first explanation of *anamnesis* does not only pertain to mythic discourse. It comes in a long speech (almost a full Stephanus page), marking it as rhetoric; and Socrates’ citations of archaic poetry (seven lines of Pindar), connecting his discourse with rhapsodic wisdom.¹³⁴ The theory is rolled out with all the trappings, but Socrates provides few reasons to accept it. Instead, it should be upheld on pragmatic grounds. Thinking that knowledge is

¹³⁰ For discussion of these “wise men” and the “clever Sicilian mythologizer”, see Blank (1991).

¹³¹ Others have considered the mythological aspects of *anamnesis*, e.g., Frutiger (1930: 67-72) and Elias (1984: 196-98), whom Morgan (2000: 222-23) cites in her own discussion. For the other views that *anamnesis* was not meant as seriously as the text makes it appear, see Weiss (2001: 63-76), who cites Ebert (1973: 177ff.) and Rohatyn (1980: 71) in support. Bartlett (2004: 146-47) is also skeptical.

¹³² Morgan (2000: 17) argues that myth checks our optimism about the potential of philosophical discourse to arrive at “the way things are”.

¹³³ Cf. Morgan (2000: 164). Bäck (2011: 9) offers the less attractive (but widespread) alternative view of Platonic myth as a last resort for stubborn interlocutors.

¹³⁴ None of the poetry furthers the argument for *anamnesis*. Bluck (1961: 277) and Klein (1965: 94–95) remark that the speech in general has little substance.

impossible would make us “idle”. To get out of that rut, we can believe in *anamnesis* so that we will be “industrious and searching” (ἐργατικούς τε καὶ ζητητικούς 81e1). Believing *anamnesis* to be true, (πιστεύων ἀληθεῖ εἶναι 81e1-2), Meno should move on now to discuss what virtue is.

Plato has preempted the discussion of hypotheses. The existence of *anamnesis* is hypothetical, a substituted proposition (τὸ μεταλαμβάνομενον) agreed upon to move the argument along.¹³⁵ Socrates piques Meno’s curiosity with this strange new idea. He asks Socrates to “teach” (διδάξαι) him how recollection works (81e3-5). Socrates reinforces our skepticism with his joke—he denied that teaching exists but only recollection, so how could he teach Meno how it works without contradiction? (82a1-3). It’s a theory that by its own claim disavows further explanation. The theory becomes a perfect evasion for Socrates, who only hypothesizes it to go back to talking about what virtue could be. Nevertheless, at Meno’s insistence, Socrates agrees to “show some enthusiasm” (προθυμηθῆναι 82a7-8) and try demonstrating it. This is not the first time Socrates has had to muster his enthusiasm. We saw that when Meno gave up trying to define virtue, Socrates had to show enthusiasm (προθυμεῖσθαι) to help Meno make definitions (75b6). The circumstances are the same. Meno has stopped searching for virtue and wants Socrates just to “tell him” (75b1) or “teach him” (81e3-5) something.

3.13 The First Geometry Lesson

What follows is the famous geometrical lesson with the slave. Vlastos (1965), Irwin (1973), Sharples (1985:8), Fine (1992), and Gentzler (1996) give the traditional account that the lesson seeks to establish *anamnesis* as a sort of Platonic doctrine. An alternative reading,

¹³⁵ See the introduction to this dissertation (1.4).

especially for those skeptical of *anamnesis*, would suggest that Socrates introduced it as an argumentative move, to sidestep Meno's paradox and to move the conversation back to virtue.¹³⁶ If Meno had not been so curious about the mechanics of *anamnesis* ("What we call learning is anamnesis?... How does it work?" 81e4-5), Socrates would not have staged the lesson at all. That said, though the introduction of *anamnesis* is useful for Socrates in answering Meno's objections to inquiry, it is not only a dialectical stratagem. It (obviously) is philosophically interesting in its own right, and itself a starting point for further inquiry (especially in other dialogues, such as *Phaedo* 72e).

The geometry of passage 82b-85d may be briefly summarized.¹³⁷ Socrates draws a square ("Square A") for the slave that is 2x2. The slave says that the square is 4 ft². Then Socrates asks him to imagine a second square ("Square B") that is 8 ft², twice the size of Square A. How long will each side be, asks Socrates. The slave offers the plausible (to someone with no knowledge of geometry) but false answer that each side of Square B will be four feet, or twice the size of each side of Square A. This is the slave's first error. Socrates then draws the false square described by the slave ("Square C"). The slave recognizes that Square C is not double, but quadruple the size of Square A. So, if the sides of Square A (2 feet) are shorter than those of Square B, and the sides of Square C (4 feet) are longer than those of Square B, then how long will the sides of Square B be? The slave again offers a plausible (to a non-geometer) but false answer, 3 feet. This is the slave's second error. Socrates draws out the consequences of this error and the slave sees that his answer would lead to a square of 9 ft². The slave must reject his guess of three feet. As a result,

¹³⁶ Of course, this is not incompatible with the notion that Plato/Socrates argue seriously for *anamnesis*. It only claims that the Socrates' motivation for making the claim must be read in the context of a question-and-answer bout.

¹³⁷ I rely on the helpful footnotes in Lamb (*ad loc.*), the charts in Grube (1997: 881), and the explanations in the commentaries.

the slave is put into *aporia*. 2 is too short, and 3 is too long, and the slave probably has never thought of fractions. Socrates then divides Square C into quarters (i.e., each one becomes the size of Square A). Then he cuts each quarter into halves. The four halves together make Square B. This yields the answer to the original problem of how to find a square double the size of Square A.

Within this demonstration, Socrates embeds a “meta-dialogue” with Meno to discuss the progress of the slave. This meta-dialogue is ostensibly held to prove the theory of *anamnesis*. I am more sympathetic to Scott’s reading. He argues that the deeper meaning behind the slave’s lesson is to “change [Meno]’s attitude to inquiry and the benefits of the elenchus,” and that “Socrates constructs a dialogue to make Meno reflect on his own failings from the outside.”¹³⁸ Scott does not treat the meta-dialogue with much detail until 85b8, and so I will draw parallels between the slave’s dialogue and that with Meno up to that point.

The first interruption to the slave-demonstration occurs after the slave has deduced that Square A is 4 ft². Socrates points out a similarity between the slave and Meno. The slave thinks he knows “what sort of thing (ὁποῖα) it is from which the eight-foot area will come.” (82e). But the slave does not know the essence (ὅτι ἐστίν) of squares, ignorant as he is of the causes behind the increases in square-footage.¹³⁹ As a result, he will make mistakes about “what-it-is-like” features of squares. Meno should take note. He should also be wary of Socrates’ claim in this interruption to be teaching nothing, and asking for each point. This remark does not only apply to

¹³⁸ Scott 2006: 99-100.

¹³⁹ We can draw a parallel from the *Theaetetus*. In 207bff., Socrates and Theaetetus discuss the claim that right belief with an account is knowledge. Without such an understanding, someone can know how to spell “Theaetetus” correctly, but fail to spell “Theodorus” correctly. Cornford (1957: 158) argues that Meno’s slave is at this level. “He does not understand the proof or see how the conclusion necessarily follows from the premisses.” What the slave needs is to “grasp the necessary connexion which will make all these beliefs abiding and unshakable.”

the slave. Meno himself is not being *taught* that “teaching” and “asking” are opposed, but is *asked*.¹⁴⁰ And indeed he has grounds to disagree with Socrates.¹⁴¹ Aristotle would later envision a dialectic that both asked and taught at the same time, a “pedagogical” (διδασκαλική) dialectic, in which a questioner reasons “from the principles of each science and not from the opinions of the answerer, for it is necessary for the student to believe [the teacher].” (*SE*. 165b1-3).¹⁴² The geometrical episode in the *Meno* seems to match Aristotle’s description.¹⁴³

The slave’s second mistake is to guess that a 3x3 square will have an area of 8 ft². Socrates does not rebuke the slave but shows him that such a belief leads to odious consequences (83e). Despite the slave’s mistake, Socrates assures Meno that he is making progress. The slave had answered “brashly” (θαρραλέως), “as if he had knowledge.” (84a).¹⁴⁴ But now he has had the “torpedo’s shock”, and Meno, having heard the slave’s poor geometry, thinks that the slave has been rendered a favor by being shocked. Before, the slave would have “told many people on many occasions” (πρὸς πολλοὺς καὶ πολλάκις) his mistaken views about geometry, thus embarrassing himself. In other words, he imitated his master Meno, who said: “I often said many speeches about virtue to many people” (καίτοι **μυριάκις** γε περὶ ἀρετῆς **παμπόλλους** λόγους

¹⁴⁰ This is the problem of reading, famously discussed in *Phdr.* 277eff. See discussion in Blank’s (1993b) review of Szlezák (1985) and Erler (1987).

¹⁴¹ Socrates doesn’t want us to take this point for granted—he does encourage Meno to “be on his guard” for moments when he starts to teach the slave. See Kraut (1984: 204-5), Weiss (2001: ch. 3) for a skeptical take on the whole demonstration.

¹⁴² Note that these arguments are a different breed from the demonstrations classified in *Prior Analytics* (*pace* Evans (1977: 32), Reeve (1998: 235), Spranzi (2011: 28), and perhaps Cotton (2014: 149)). The premises of demonstrations are trustworthy in themselves, but a student must take the premises of a didascalical argument on trust. This error results from a superficial comparison between *Topics* (100a27-b25) and *Sophistical Refutations* (165a38-39), which appear to describe the same thing, but do not.

¹⁴³ Thus, e.g., Blank (1993a: 429).

¹⁴⁴ Note that this is the way Euthydemus answers questions (*Euthyd.* 287b7-c1).

εἶρηκα καὶ πρὸς πολλούς 80b2-3). Now, the slave is in *aporia*. But *aporia* goes further than that. It is an invitation to “examine” and “seek” with Socrates: “from this *aporia* he will also make discoveries by seeking with me” (ἐκ ταύτης τῆς ἀπορίας ὅτι καὶ ἀνευρήσει ζητῶν μετ’ ἐμοῦ 84c10-11). This in turn is an invitation for Meno to reconsider his rejection of co-searching with Socrates.

Now, the most suspect part of the demonstration is the solution: cutting the squares within Square C into halves (85a). The slave’s abysmal geometry suggests that he would never have reached this critical step by himself.¹⁴⁵ He is stumped when Socrates shows him that he must cut out the diagonals, and cannot figure out how to use the triangles created by the diagonal incisions without an assist (85a). If the slave has geometrical ἐπιστήμη buried within, it must be quite deep. Our suspicions grow that Socrates may be less than doctrinaire on the status of *anamnesis*. Indeed, the demonstration does nothing to answer Meno’s questions about the mechanics of *anamnesis*, even if it sates his curiosity.¹⁴⁶ Further, Meno could ask how *Socrates* learned about geometry, which raises the threat of infinite regression once more.¹⁴⁷ Despite these problems, many seem to take the view that Plato uses demonstration to *establish* the concept.¹⁴⁸ I would instead suggest that Plato discusses *anamnesis* as a philosophically interesting solution to a difficult problem—though perhaps with an interlocutor (Meno) that is less than qualified to treat the concept well. Such an interlocutor would have to wait until the *Phaedo*. For now, the introduction of *anamnesis* also has a useful function within the dialectical game.

¹⁴⁵ A point even Vlastos (1991: 119) concedes.

¹⁴⁶ Weiss (2001: 78ff.) chalks this up to Meno’s “gullibility”.

¹⁴⁷ Arieti (1986: 132 n. 8) discusses this problem, citing Cobb (1973: 619-21).

¹⁴⁸ Bluck (1961: 13, 296), Guthrie (1975: 255), Vlastos (1965: 158-59), Devereux (1978: 119), Desjardins (1985: 276), Fine (1992: 210).

3.14 Reflections on the Lesson

The problem of *anamnesis* can be set aside without detraction from the passage's other lessons. The demonstration teaches us a few things about philosophical pedagogy. Just as the Stagirite might advise, Socrates began with the observation of *phainomena*.¹⁴⁹ He turns the slave's attention to the measurement of the perimeters of the square(s). But *phainomena* can deceive, and cause various opinions to explain them.¹⁵⁰ The slave lacks all knowledge of geometry, and so his mistaken beliefs about the appearances of squares is understandable. He is fortunate, though, to have an interlocutor who does seem to know the principles of geometry, who can, by question-and-answer, help him see the basic principles involved.¹⁵¹ This questioning requires no little skill; the first principles can be difficult to acquire.¹⁵² They are also difficult to teach: we could have the most exact knowledge (ἀκριβεστάτην ἐπιστήμην) of a subject, and still find it hard to persuade others. (*Rhet.* 1355b24-26). But, as Socrates comments at the end of the slave episode, "If someone raises questions with respect to these things many times (πολλάκις) and in many ways (πολλαχῆ)", then there will be knowledge about these matters "no less than anyone else's." (85c).¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ *APr* 46a17-22, *DC* 297b23, 303a22, 306a17, *APo* 99b23. In this case, the *phainomena* are only with difficulty perceived, owing to the difficulty of portraying exact geometrical dimensions in the sand. This is in itself a point of interest—the slave knows innately that the roughly drawn sides of the square are *meant* to be equal.

¹⁵⁰ *de Coel.* 306a5ff., *Rhet.* 1402a33-34.

¹⁵¹ *SE* 165a38-b3. This is the pedagogical dialectic mentioned above.

¹⁵² *EN* 1095b3ff. cf. also the discussions of εὐφροία in *EN* 1114ab, *Top.* 163b15-16.

¹⁵³ That said, there is a reason to doubt Socrates' egalitarianism (see Scott 2006: 107-8 for a defense). Plato suggests elsewhere that some people have more intellectual finesse than others (e.g., *Phdr.* 248c2-e3). Of course, given Socrates' general skepticism we should be wary of the claims made in the present passage.

Now, if we needed any further cause to question the status of *anamnesis* as a sort of Platonic doctrine, Socrates ends the discussion with an admission that he is not too confident about *anamnesis* and the prior existence of the soul. (86b6-7). Nor should he be. He himself had just affirmed the necessity to revisit a subject, and submit an idea to questioning “at many times (πολλάκις) and in many ways (πολλαχῆ)”. Meno, of course, has not subjected Socrates’ theory to questioning.¹⁵⁴ But the merits of *anamnesis* are secondary, as interesting as the concept is philosophically.¹⁵⁵ Socrates only wants Meno to acknowledge “that because of a belief that it is necessary to inquire (ζητεῖν) about what one does not know, we would be better and braver and less useless than if we believed that it is impossible to discover and seek what we do not know.” (86b7-c1). So, Meno should kindly resume the investigation into what virtue is (86c5-6). But he still insists on knowing whether virtue is teachable or not. This leads to a methodological problem. Socrates is now forced “to examine what X is like when we do not know what X is.” (86d8-e1). We should be reminded of Polus, who was more interested in *how* rhetoric appeared than *what* it is, a concern that hampered his progress with Socrates.¹⁵⁶ But if Meno insists on asking this question, the only way to proceed in the absence of knowledge is to argue from a hypothesis (ἐξ ὑποθέσεως). (86e4).

3.15 Hypothetical Reasoning

¹⁵⁴ This sort of scrutiny would have to wait until *Phaedo*.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Bedu-Addo 1984, that *anamnesis* is a primary concern, and that other features of the *Meno* (like hypotheses) support it.

¹⁵⁶ See previous chapter. Thanks to Karasmanis 2004: 348 for the comparison between Meno and Polus.

Socrates' description of hypothetical reasoning is notoriously opaque.¹⁵⁷ Wolfsdorf notes that by the mid 19th c., there were 30 different interpretations of 86e-87c.¹⁵⁸ Perhaps its very difficulty is an invitation to the reader to puzzle over the passage. We are *not*, that is, to imitate Meno, who at the end of, as Scott puts it, "one of the most perplexing passages in all the works of Plato" only replies "ἔμοιγε δοκεῖ."¹⁵⁹ We might be reminded of the so-called "intellectualist interpretation", that would have "the failings of respondents... spur us on to more adequate responses."¹⁶⁰

That said, by the end of the 20th c., readings developed by Cook Wilson, Heath, Knorr, and Menn became influential.¹⁶¹ Since Menn's account is the latest, I rely on it for this discussion.¹⁶² First, the description from Plato:

Relax a little bit of your authority, and allow this to be examined ἐξ ὑποθέσεως: whether [virtue] is teachable or otherwise. I mean ἐξ ὑποθέσεως in the same way that the geometers do when they make examinations (σκοποῦνται), when someone asks them a question. For example, concerning an area [X, see diagram below], if this area can be inscribed into this circle as a triangle, one of

¹⁵⁷ Scott cites Heath (1921: 300 n. 1) and Knorr (1986: 71) for the view that Plato simply did not describe the problem clearly enough. Weiss (2001: 133) thinks that Socrates is deliberately esoteric to have a joke at Meno's love for the exotic. Scott (2006: 136-37) suggests that this problem might have been familiar to Academics, and so Plato simply did not need to devote much time to it.

¹⁵⁸ Wolfsdorf 2008: 46 n. 30.

¹⁵⁹ Scott 2006: 134. This strains the passage far less than the alternative, that "if Plato was communicating with a well-informed and esoteric readership, does Socrates really expect Meno to understand what he is saying? ... Plato, it seems, has suffered a rare lapse of dramatic realism, momentarily transporting Meno into the ranks of his own Academy." (ibid. 137). Scott himself does not credit this view.

¹⁶⁰ Cotton 2014: 45. For the "intellectualist interpretation, she cites MacKenzie (1982: 69), Gifford (2001: 87-89), Blondell (2002: 105), Cotton (2014: 45). Closely related is the "modeling" interpretation, where we initially are inclined to identify with Socrates, but further reflection suggests that we might have more in common with the refuted interlocutors. See Nehamas (1998: 11-12, 27-32, 43-44), whom Cotton (2014: 46) cites. A similar reading is Cotton's "dialogic reading" (2014: 48-49), in which the dramatized debate "enables us to engage in a kind of dialogue with ourselves, in which we monitor and mediate our own responses." She seems indebted to the reading advocated in Frede (1992).

¹⁶¹ Cook Wilson 1903, Heath 1921: 298-303, Knorr 1986: 71-3, Menn 2002: 209-211. Scott (2006: 134ff.) follows this view.

¹⁶² Note that Menn's overall purpose is to account for geometrical analysis in Plato. As my interest has more to do with the application of the geometrical example to dialectic, I will omit certain features of Menn's treatment.

them would say, “I don’t know yet if this area [sc. X as a triangle] is such [as could be inscribed within the circle], but I think I have, as it were, a certain hypothesis useful for this purpose. It is as follows: if this area [X as a rectangle] is such that, on the given extended line [viz., the diameter AB], it falls short by such an area similar to whatever [area] has been extended, one thing seems to be to result, and another if this is impossible for these things to happen. So, having hypothesized [ὑποθέμενος], I am willing to tell you the result concerning the inscription [of the triangle’s area] into the circle, whether it is impossible or not.” (86e1-87b2).

a diameter of the given circle Y, and let the rectangle CDBE be equal to the given area X, and let the rectangle CDBE fall short of the line AB by the rectangle FADC, in such a way that the rectangle CFAD is similar to the rectangle CDBE. Thus the line CD is a mean proportional between the line AD and the line BD. Produce the line CD beyond D to G, so that GD = CD. Since the rectangle on GD and CD (being equal to the square on CD) is equal to the rectangle on AD and BD, it follows (by the converse of Euclid III,35) that the points A, B, C and G lie on a circle. Since the chord AB perpendicularly bisects the chord CG, AB must be a diameter, so the circle on which the points A, B, C and G lie is in fact the

We want to know whether we can “inscribe in a given circle an isosceles triangle equal to a given area.”¹⁶³ Plato mentions the hypothesis that “the given area can be applied to the diameter of the given circle (in the form of a rectangle) in such a way that it falls short by a figure similar to the applied area,” which is “a necessary and sufficient condition for the problem to have a solution; furthermore, any solution to the application-of-areas problem can be straightforwardly converted into a solution of the problem ‘to inscribe in a given circle an isosceles triangle equal to a given area.’”¹⁶⁴ If the area of X is drawn into a rectangle (CDBE), such that (1) its height is not taller than the radius of the circle, and (2) its length is more than half the radius but less than the diameter, and (3) that it is similar to “leftover” rectangle ADCF, then it will be possible to draw X as an isosceles triangle (CGB) within Y. For example, let X have an area of 32 sq. ft. and the diameter (AB) of circle Y be 10 feet. We draw a rectangle (CDBE) that is 4 feet tall (CD) and

¹⁶³ Menn 2002: 209. The diagram is from the same source.

¹⁶⁴ Menn 2002: 2010. The following discussion is also derived from Menn.

8 feet long (DB). Since (1) its height is less than the radius of Y (5 feet), and (2) the length is less than the diameter (10 feet), and (3) rectangle ADCF (2x4) is similar to rectangle CDBE (4x8), we will indeed be able to create isosceles triangle CGB (= X).

The point of the hypothetical method is not to give us an answer to the question “Can X be inscribed in a circle Y?” Rather, when the answer to that question is yes, we are shown *how* to make the inscription, i.e., by reducing the problem.¹⁶⁵ That’s helpful, but we might be left wondering whether there is any technique involved in these reductions. Aristotle provides material to help us think about this in *Prior Analytics* (II.25), in a passage that seems to be a commentary on this section of the *Meno*.¹⁶⁶ Aristotle claims that “reduction is when it is clear that the major term belongs to the middle term, and unclear that the middle term belongs to the minor.” (69a20-21). It is thus a search for the middle term, or the “reason why” in an inquiry (cf. APo 89a13).¹⁶⁷ His example uses the same terms as the *Meno*: “Let A be ‘teachable’, B be ‘knowledge’, C be ‘justice’.” (69a24-25). The desired conclusion was “C is A”, and to get there, Aristotle recommends we introduce the middle term “knowledge.” We know that knowledge is teachable and it is plausible that justice is knowledge.¹⁶⁸ But the latter proposition is easier to prove than the conclusion “justice is teachable.” And, if we prove that proposition, then we will have gained our desired conclusion through the syllogism.

¹⁶⁵ Thus Menn 2002: 211-12.

¹⁶⁶ Menn (2002: 212: n. 25) alludes to the passage without much commentary. Ross (1949: 490) claims that Aristotle’s ἀπαγωγή is the same as arguments ἐξ ὑποθέσεως in the *Meno*.

¹⁶⁷ I suppose this is what de Pater meant: “on pourrait traduire hypothèse par ‘le vrai sujet de discussion’ ou par ‘le vrai point de départ.’” (de Pater 1965: 30)

¹⁶⁸ “This type of argument may be said to be semi-demonstrative, semi-dialectical, inasmuch as it has a major premiss which is known, and a minor premiss which for the moment is only admitted.” (Ross 1949: 489-90). Ross notes that this argument is often sufficient for refuting an opponent in a question-and-answer setting.

This is the situation we find in the *Meno*. Socrates reminds Meno that they do not know what virtue is (86d5-6), so they cannot know if it is teachable (86d4-5). However, we have enough information to construct the schema:

X is teachable
Virtue is X
Therefore virtue is teachable

What Socrates must do is identify a term X that satisfies the major premise, and then test to see if it also works in the minor. “Knowledge” then appears as an easy choice.¹⁶⁹ So, in order to test whether virtue is teachable, Socrates and Meno only have to investigate the easier proposition, “Virtue is knowledge.”¹⁷⁰ Meno’s desire to know about a quality of virtue had seemed to derail the search for the essence of virtue. But now, Socrates has supplied a way for them to explore both Meno’s question and the essence of virtue at the same time.

The substituted premise “knowledge is teachable” demands scrutiny. Doesn’t Meno remember that learning is simply recollecting (81d), and recollection (at least as practiced by Socrates) is induced by question-and-answer, not teaching (84c11-d2)?¹⁷¹ Socrates seems to be testing Meno’s skill in following the consequences of an argument. This testing is appropriate to the case at hand. Hypothetical reasoning hinges upon following consequences. If Meno cannot follow them now, we should not entertain much hope he will do so later.

¹⁶⁹ Of course, it will end up not being so easy. Meno forgets the point of the *anamnesis*-digression, that knowledge is *not* teachable.

¹⁷⁰ Scott (2006: 136-38) helpfully makes the analogy to the geometrical example: “Virtue is teachable = Area X can be inscribed as a triangle in the given circle” and “Virtue is knowledge = Area X can be placed as a rectangle ABCD on the diameter of the circle BH, such that it falls short of the length of the diameter by another rectangle DCHG which is proportionately similar to ABCD.”

¹⁷¹ The commentators do gymnastics to circumvent this problem. e.g. Bluck (1961: 325-6), Scott (2006: 143). Of course, question-and-answer can be a kind of teaching (i.e. didascalical arguments), as Professor Blank has noted to me. Didascalical arguments are then a kind of reminder.

Arguing from hypotheses does not stop after the first substitution. The two must investigate whether virtue really is knowledge. The two need to hypothesize further, and they introduce another premise “virtue is good” (87d2-3).¹⁷² If “all good is knowledge”, suggests Socrates, then the two will have proven that virtue is (at least partly, if not entirely) knowledge. As Aristotle would analyze Socrates’ procedure, he wants to introduce “good” as a middle term between “virtue” and “knowledge”:

- [All good is knowledge]
- All virtue is good
- All virtue is knowledge

But now Socrates must prove that all good is knowledge. So he introduces the term “beneficial”:

- [All good is virtue]
- All good is beneficial¹⁷³
- All virtue is beneficial

Here the two encounter a snag. The middle is not distributed, the reasoning is invalid. Meno does not notice, however, and the argument moves forward, with even less preciseness,

- Some beneficial things are harmful
- Some features of the soul can be harmful
- All beneficial things are done-with-wisdom
- All virtue is done-with-wisdom.

Now, Socrates has only “proven” that all virtue is done with wisdom. He has not shown that virtue *is* wisdom. Socrates draws the dubious premise “All that is wisdom cannot arise from

¹⁷² As Menn (2002: 211) notes, this premise is called a hypothesis at 87d3. As I argued in the introduction, “hypothesis” began life as a metaphor from geometry. As the metaphor was extended, particularly in *Prior Analytics*, the correspondences between the mathematical procedure and dialectical crystalized. But even there (and, *a fortiori*, in Plato) there is a looseness in the application of terms (as Ross (1949) notes *passim*). We should not be too bothered by this looseness. The procedure remains more or less consistent.

¹⁷³ We have already seen the equivocations between the good and the profitable. See previous chapter (2.7.7).

nature” (89a5-6). And as nature is apparently the opposite of teaching, wisdom (which is virtue and not of nature), must be teachable.

Despite some scholarly enthusiasm for this new “hypothetical method” as a means to establish more doctrinaire theses, it is difficult to escape the feeling that all we have seen is another Socratic argumentative manoeuvre,¹⁷⁴ one that appears even in the “aporetic” dialogues.¹⁷⁵ For each substitute that fills out the syllogism under discussion, there arises the need for another argument from hypothesis to explain that term. We have Meno’s paradox all over again. There is nothing in the passage to make us optimistic about the epistemic contributions of hypotheses, except that they seem to work analogously in geometry. In dialectic, it seems only to test an interlocutor’s endurance for skepticism.¹⁷⁶ Once the interlocutors are satisfied, hypothesizing can come to a halt.

So, Socrates and Meno appear to have proven their desired conclusion. Meno is enthusiastic about the result, an enthusiasm that Socrates decides to temper: What if “we did not agree to that [hypothesis] correctly?” (89c5-6). Meno is worried, and tells Socrates that it all “seems (ἐδόκει) just then to be argued correctly.” (89c7). Socrates responds that if the argument is to hold, then it cannot just “seem” to be the case then, but has to hold “now and in the future.”

¹⁷⁴ Blank (1986: 157) comments similarly on the hypothetical method in the *Phaedo*: that it is “a typical piece of Socratic dialectic” and that “the hypothetical method described in [*Phaedo*] 101 d - e is nothing other than the dialectic Socrates habitually uses: 101b1ff. refers not only to the specific hypothesis of, but also to the method as a whole. This is shown clearly in the application of the method, the actual proof of the soul’s immortality, which is a typical piece of Socratic dialectic.” *Contra* Vlastos (1991: 120): the “whole purpose [of hypothesis] is to illuminate the process by which according to this new, all-too Platonic Socrates, *all* inquiry... must proceed.”

¹⁷⁵ De Pater (1965: 31) cites examples of hypothetical reasoning from *Euthyphro* and *Protagoras*.

¹⁷⁶ Hamlyn (1990: 466), commenting on the *Phaedo*, puts it well: “the hypothesizing of higher hypotheses until one comes to ‘something adequate’ (ti hikanon)... is what is enough for the purposes of the discussion, what would be agreed by all parties to that discussion. If that is so, the main issue is not the truth as such, but what will be accepted as such.” That said, (as Crager has pointed out to me), the fact that Socrates and Meno have not yet found a hypothesis as analogously good in their discussion of virtue as a geometrical hypothesis is not a mark against the method in dialectic *per se*.

(89c9). We see once more the tension between opinion (δόξα) and knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) that has run through the whole dialogue. Meno is content with opinion as long as it matches his desires. Meno asks why Socrates is being “difficult” (δυσχεραίνει) (89d1) and “distrustful” (ἀπιστεῖς) (89d2) about what the two have come up with. Meno has good reason to be annoyed because he *wants* virtue to be knowledge (so he can keep making speeches about it).

3.16 The Intrusion of Anytus

Fortunately, another interlocutor arrives who could not care less about the answer to the question “is virtue teachable?” This is Anytus, an Athenian politician infamous for his role in Socrates’ trial and execution. Meno represents one extreme (for money, one can teach others virtue), Anytus the other (no one is improved by voluntary association with other people; virtue just happens naturally). With such an interlocutor, Socrates can make his case against the hypothesis “virtue is knowledge”. Socrates offers the propositions “We send people to professionals to become professionals”¹⁷⁷ and “professionals claim to belong to their profession” (90c-e). Therefore, if someone wants to become virtuous, they should go to a professional who claims to belong to the profession of virtue-making, i.e., a sophist. Anytus angrily rejects the consequence. (91c1-5). Socrates may be no friend of sophists, but Anytus has not offered a real counterargument, and so Socrates must pester him. “Don’t people get angry with professionals who do not deliver on their services?”, he asks. “So why do the students of the sophists not get angry with the services that they receive?” (91c6-92a6). Anytus still does not offer a counterargument. Instead, he calls the sophists madmen (μαίνεσθαι) and rages against all cities that have not expelled the sophists (91c7-b4). Surely such a strong reaction, says Socrates,

¹⁷⁷ Cf. *Prot.* 311b8-c8.

suggests that Anytus is familiar with sophists (92b5-6). But in fact, Anytus has never encountered any sophists and hopes he never will. Socrates realizes that the argument is going nowhere.¹⁷⁸ Socrates puts aside the emotionally vexing subject of the sophists and asks to whom Meno should apply to learn virtue. (92d1-5).

Anytus argues that “any gentleman of Athens” (ὅτι γὰρ ἂν ἐντύχη Ἀθηναίων τῶν καλῶν καγαθῶν 92e3-4) could teach virtue, gentlemen who in turned learned from prior gentlemen (93a2-4). Socrates finally has a solid claim to examine. He asks whether these good men of Athens, present and past, know how to hand on virtue to others, or whether it is unteachable (93a5-c1). Socrates, perhaps as a concession to Anytus’ frail dialectical powers, gets the conversation rolling with an example (93cff.): was Themistocles a good man? Anytus agrees. And if anyone were a teacher of virtue, it would be he? Anytus also agrees. But how could it be that Themistocles did not teach his own son virtue? Especially when he deigned to teach his son other skills, such as javelining and horseback riding. Socrates makes the same considerations vis-à-vis the sons of Aristides and Pericles (94a-d). Anytus has nothing to say against these examples. He only tells Socrates that he is too quick to speak ill (κακῶς λέγειν) of others, and that “it’s easier to treat people poorly than well, especially in this city.” (94e3-95a1) Anytus is too angry to continue, notes Socrates, because he counts himself among the class of men under discussion (95a2-7). As for Meno, the discussion is coming too close to home, and Anytus is too invested in the outcome to make good progress.¹⁷⁹ Socrates lets him go, but not before a good

¹⁷⁸ Anytus evinces the dialectical vice of *dyskolia*. See section 2.7.7 above for discussion of this vice. The *Topics* ends (164a8-15) with a warning about conversations with *dyskolois*: do not argue with those “with whom any argument is bound to degenerate.” These people “are ready to try all means in order to seem not to be beaten”, and they “cannot refrain from a contentious argument.” Against such, though it is “not good form”, “it is indeed fair to try all means of bringing about one’s conclusion.”

¹⁷⁹ See pg. 81 n. 153.

pun. If Anytus knew what “speaking ill” was, his anger would cease.¹⁸⁰ It turns out that Anytus stands in need of education himself. But this education would be “a horse of a different color”: the sifting of his own unexamined and dogmatic opinions.¹⁸¹

3.17 Final *Aporiai*

Now Socrates returns to Meno. The two return to the source of their *aporia*: Meno is confused by the affirmation of certain public figures that virtue can be taught, and the denial of others (95b-c). Meno mentions Gorgias as an authority for the former view, and expresses bizarre admiration for the rhetorician’s disdain for the sophists. Gorgias “ridiculed” these sophists for their promises to teach virtue and only collects tuition for teaching public speaking (95c1-4). We would do well to ask why Meno, after arguing throughout the whole dialogue for the teachability of virtue, now praises a man for rejecting its teachability. Perhaps it exposes deeper commitments in Meno than “I can teach virtue by my public speaking”: getting money for teaching public speaking, or perhaps reputation.¹⁸²

But Socrates lets this contradiction pass and moves the conversation back to virtue. He has Meno repeat the claim that virtue seems (δοκεῖ) to be teachable or not depending on whom one asks (95c9-d1). In fact, the question of virtue’s teachability is so vexing that even Theognis appears to give contradictory opinions in two different passages. (95d3-e1, 95e4-96a2). There is a special irony to citing poetic authority. Classical poets were considered educators in virtue,¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ Lamb (*ad loc.*) notes that “speaking ill” in Greek can signify “maliciously,” “untruthfully” “ignorantly,” etc.

¹⁸¹ Gonzalez (1998: 186) argues that Anytus represents dogmatism, a foil to Socratic skepticism.

¹⁸² Meno’s first declaration of *aporia* (79e7-80b7) betrays anxieties about the latter consideration.

¹⁸³ Cf. *Prot.* 338e7-339a3, *Resp.* 599c-600e.

and the citation of poetry signaled acquired wisdom in elite circles.¹⁸⁴ But even the teachers of virtue are in *aporia* about the teachability of virtue, a phenomenon not present in other fields of knowledge. (96a5-b4). So, Socrates declares that virtue apparently is not teachable (96c10), and that virtue is not knowledge.¹⁸⁵ But this is no demonstration. If Meno were a better interlocutor, he could object that the arguments against the teachability of virtue may be *plausible*—but so were the arguments *for* the teachability of virtue. And Socrates has not adequately addressed those arguments. Meno, though, cannot live up to the mnemonic skill suggested by his name, and allows himself to be persuaded by Socrates’ arguments against the teachability of the virtues (96c-d). We are back in *aporia* as to how people learn virtue (96d1-4).¹⁸⁶ It seems that Socrates’ hypotheses have not yielded knowledge after all.¹⁸⁷

If virtue cannot be taught, asks Meno, then how *do* people become good? (96d1-4). It is painful to the reader that Meno does not remember the theory of *anamnesis*, which Socrates offered as an answer to this same question. We might expect Socrates to “remind” Meno of their earlier discussion. Instead, he suggests that knowledge is not the only means by which people can become good. Opinion, *doxa*, is just as useful if the goal is running the city. (97a-c). Meno then asks why one should seek knowledge instead of correct opinion. Socrates suggests that

¹⁸⁴ See above 44 n. 47.

¹⁸⁵ Kahn (1996: 312) has argued that what Socrates has shown is not the virtue *cannot* be taught, but that it “cannot be taught under present circumstances.” Further, “the Greek term *didakton* is conveniently ambiguous between ‘taught’ and ‘teachable.’”

¹⁸⁶ I struggle to understand a current in the secondary literature that asserts “it is first in the *Meno* that the meaning of dialectic has more to do with the answer than with the question.” (Meyer 1986: 105).

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Aristot. *APo* 92a5ff.

opinions are flighty, and knowledge is stable, just like the statues of Daedalus.¹⁸⁸ If Meno were more thoughtful, he could well apply this criticism of opinion to his own behavior. Within the dialogue, Meno has accepted *anamnesis*, then forgot about it; accepted the teachability of virtue, and then forgot about it. But there's still flightiness left in him: Meno has just argued for the superiority of knowledge over opinion, but shortly he will concede that knowledge has no superiority over opinion. (98c). Meno is living witness to the frailty of *doxai*. He lacks “αἰτία λογισμός” to make his opinions steady (98a3-4), just as the slave lacked it.

Socrates then summarizes the arguments for Meno (98c8-99c5). First: “No right opinion/knowledge is by nature. Right opinion/knowledge makes people good. So no people-made-good are by nature.” This is already invalid (illicit minor). In any case, if virtue is not by nature, then it must be considered whether virtue is teachable—a consequence that Socrates then works through. Socrates argues that “if virtue is wisdom, then it is teachable” and “if it is teachable, then it is wisdom” (if p then q, if q then p); also, “If there are teachers, then it is teachable” and “if there are no teachers, then it is not teachable.” But Meno and Socrates had agreed (ὁμολογήκαμεν 98e4) that there are no teachers. So, now Meno and Socrates must agree that it is neither teachable nor wisdom (98e7-8). So, virtue must be acquired by “good opinion” (εὐδοξία 99b11).

Many of the premises offered are questionable. All are hypothetical, based on agreement (ὁμολογία). But Meno is not the interlocutor to work through the premises. He accepts Socrates' argument, which terminates the discussion. It takes two to have a dialogue, and without good objections the conversation cannot progress. If Meno was left wondering how the great ones of

¹⁸⁸ Aristotle seems to have picked up from his master this notion of the flightiness of opinion, and the stability of knowledge (see *Cat.* 8b26). Interestingly, Aristotle not only identifies the reasoner's instability as a cause of “opinion”, but the instability of the object to which ratiocination is attached (*Cat.* 4a26-30).

the past became great, Socrates offers a final suggestion. These virtuous ones must have been “divine” and “inspired” (θείους τε εἶναι καὶ ἐνθουσιάζειν 99d2-3). It seems that virtue comes by a “divine dispensation without understanding” (θεία μοίρα παραγιγνομένη ἄνευ νοῦ) (99e6). That’s all good enough for Meno (Κάλλιστα δοκεῖς μοι λέγειν, ὦ Σώκρατες 100b1), but perhaps not for us.

We saw above in the passage on *anamnesis* that “shifts to mythic discourse” flag outstanding problems. Socrates’ closing speech, with talk of Tiresias (100a4), Hades (100a5) and divine inspiration should put us on the lookout for such problems. We don’t have to look far. We will only have clarity (τὸ δὲ σαφές), claims Socrates, about virtue-by-inspiration if we seek what virtue is (100b4-6). That is to say, because Meno and Socrates have not done what Socrates wanted all along, they still know nothing about virtue’s qualities.

3.18 Conclusion

I have argued that the *Meno* is not the “transitional” dialogue that scholars in the last century have understood it to be. It does not “introduce” the method of hypothesis. Hypothetical reasoning is not a new way of arguing for Socrates, but rather is a geometrical analogy for a move sometimes used by Socrates in question-and-answer sessions, even in the “aporetic” dialogues. But by making the metaphor, Plato is able to raise one of the problems of the *Meno*: can we ever reach knowledge, or will we have to hypothesize *ad infinitum*? The myth of *anamnesis* flags the same problem, and as a hypothesis itself is useful for keeping the dialogue going. How, or whether, Plato ever develops uses for *anamnesis* and *hypothesis* is beyond this chapter. For now, we have found that the *Meno* partakes of the same question-and-answer tradition we saw in the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*.

Conclusion

Plato's dialogues show many types of conversations. In this dissertation, we have seen Socrates act the "torpedo-fish", stunning the over-confident (like Gorgias and Meno) into silence. We have also seen him play the "gadfly", who tries to wake up and persuade each person for the good of the city, but who ends up arousing the indignant emotions of the likes of Protagoras and Anytus. We have also seen that with the right interlocutor, Socrates is willing to explore the consequences of beliefs and investigate education, rhetoric, virtue, etc. In the dialogues treated in this dissertation, though, he does not make much headway into these topics. Socrates and Meno were no closer to knowing what virtue is than he and Protagoras were.

This is because these dialogues are heirs to a tradition of debate, the "dialectical joust", in which two interlocutors matched wits for sport. The goal was not to discover truths, but to win or appear to win. Protagoras and Gorgias apparently were experts in these bouts of words. They both met Socrates with the promise that they could successfully answer any questions that anyone could raise to them. What they meant by this promise, however, and how Socrates interpreted it are two different things. Protagoras invited Socrates and Polus to "converse" (διαλεχθῆναι) with him, whether alone or with everyone around (316b). However, we see that "to converse" does not exclude the possibility of an *epideixis* (320c). Then, in 335a, we see that within the realm of question-and-answer there seemed to be a tradition of allowing the answerer to choose whether to answer in a long speech or briefly.¹ If we read the beginning of the *Gorgias* carefully, we see that when Gorgias makes this claim, he means that he can make an *epideixis*

¹ Protagoras is a master in question-and-answer because he chooses the more advantageous speech form when the need arises. Perhaps this is reflected in the title of his book *καταβάλλοντες λόγοι*: like a wrestler, he knows which moves to make and when to make them.

based on any question from the audience. In fact, Callicles says that the solicitation of questions was part of Gorgias' *epideixis*. (*Gorg.* 447c6). So the Socratic contribution to question-and-answer was an insistence on keeping the answers brief, to force the answerer to give an account of each point.

Socrates was a questioner sharper than either had counted on. Socrates refutes all the positions that the two σοφοί stake out (diversity of the virtues, anti-hedonism, the technical status of rhetoric, etc.). He does not refute these positions because he *disagrees* with them, but only because his opponent had staked them out. Socrates never remarks, "Well, I agree with that, so I won't argue against it." But Socrates' program goes beyond beating others in debate. It's therapeutic. He checks the undue over-confidence of his associates, in the hope that they will imitate his professed ignorance.

Aristotle's account of dialectic is indebted to the "jousting" tradition, even as he adds his own theoretical innovations. He realizes that question-and-answer bouts only deal in plausible opinions, and as such are to be distinguished from demonstration. On the other hand, dialecticians don't merely (ἀτέχνως) throw out plausible opinions and hope they stick. This is precisely Aristotle's contribution: debaters (ought to) reason through these plausible opinions using deductions in a (semi)-technical fashion. Aristotle's patent indebtedness to the tradition and his deductive innovation is the only way to account for both Aristotle's descriptive account of dialectic and his claims to have had no predecessors. In other words, Aristotle inherited a tradition of dialogues, but not a true dialectical *techné*. Once I argued for all this, I argued that Aristotle's logical works are a response to, and fruitful interpreter of the Platonic dialogues. The student who analyzes the dialogues in this fashion can use them for his or her own argumentative training.

The *Protagoras* is a classic example of the ἀγών λόγων. Socrates shows himself as a master strategist. The question behind all the questions of the dialogue is, “is virtue teachable?” All the other discussions held between Socrates and the elder sophist are subordinated to what pedagogy Protagoras can offer to Hippocrates. We see the genius of the dialogue at its very end, when we realize that no matter how Protagoras would have argued, Socrates would still have worked him into a defeat, or apparent defeat, regarding this question.

Does Socrates dip into the eristic? By no means. The eristic is predicated on trick premises, opinions that are only plausible according to an ambiguity in language, but which an answerer would reject if he knew what the questioner really meant. As long as Protagoras understood each premise as it came, and accepted the ones that seemed plausible to him (whether they were true or false, or Socrates thought they were true or false), the interlocutors are in the realm of good dialectic. When he falls into contradiction, the responsibility lies with him as a poor performer in the ἀγών. His ultimate loss to Socrates in this verbal joust is therapeutic. Protagoras enjoys his status as an expert-debater, a source of revenue and renown. By beating him, Socrates offers him an opportunity for personal reform.

But in the *Gorgias*, Socrates does employ some tricky reasoning. He defeats Polus with some apparently plausible opinions about the good and fine, and these put Polus into an apparent contradiction about whether doing or suffering injustice is preferable. But Socrates is only doing what Aristotle would advise: make deductions by any means when faced with a contentious answerer. Polus had shown himself unfit to participate in these competitive debates. He is a *dyskolos*, unable to follow arguments, unwilling to concede key premises, and in denial about the conclusions of deductions. He cares nothing for truth, but only how rhetoric appears to others. Socrates patiently tries to teach the young man how to conduct a proper question-and-answer

session, but Polus shows himself unable to learn. Faced with the threat of losing to Polus in discussion, Socrates is forced to defeat him by premises that are only seemingly plausible. This is shock therapy for Polus. He, who has shown himself to be singularly interested in whether rhetoric *appears* fine, is in turn defeated by an *apparent* deduction. Such is the only medicine Socrates can offer to him.

The *Meno* has become almost a by-word for “middle” dialectic. *Anamnesis* and hypotheses have been treated as innovations to give an epistemic edge to Socratic questioning. Instead, we can now see that the *Meno* evinces the qualities of a standard “aporetic” dialogue. *Anamnesis* flags epistemological problems that Plato wants us to think more about, and hypothesis is a geometrical metaphor for how Socrates always argues. By making the metaphor, Plato is able to raise the problem of the *Meno*: can we ever reach knowledge, or will we have to hypothesize *ad infinitum*? How, or if, Plato develops the theories of *anamnesis* and *hypothesis* in other dialogues is beyond the scope of this dissertation. For our present purposes, we can now understand the *Meno* as part of the same tradition of verbal jousts that we saw in the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*: plausible premises, plausible conclusions, and no knowledge.

This work began with a larger vision. I had naively hoped that, in the space of a single dissertation, I could give adequate treatment to all the varieties of Platonic dialogues. I could not pass beyond the first stylometric group, and can only suggest directions for further research. One follow-up study could treat the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, and see whether *anamnesis* remains hypothetical and hypotheses remain Socrates’ standard way of arguing. A study further down the road could look at Aristotle’s reception of *diaeresis*, and see whether we find any clues to suggest that this method is also a descriptive of a standard type of argument in Plato. Finally, I

would also be curious to see how the framework put forward in this dissertation applies to the fragments of the dialogues of other Socratics, and to Aristotle's own.

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