Moral Expertise and Moral Education: A Socratic Account

by

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B.A., Reed College (2005)

Submitted to the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy
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Abstract

What is virtue and can it be taught? These questions preoccupied Socrates and this dissertation offers a Socratic answer to them.

In Chapter 1 ("Virtue as Expert Moral Knowledge") I develop and defend a novel interpretation of the Socratic thesis that virtue is a kind of knowledge. I argue that the relevant kind of knowledge of interest to Socrates is expert moral knowledge or moral expertise—a complex epistemic state that integrates practical knowledge, theoretical knowledge, and self-knowledge. This account unifies several seemingly disparate epistemological threads that run through Plato's Socratic dialogues, it helps us resolve other interpretive questions surrounding Socrates and Socratic philosophy, and it is philosophically attractive in its own right.

In Chapter 2 ("Socrates the Educator and Socratic Education") I confront a puzzle about Socrates' status as a teacher. It's natural to think of him as one, yet (1) Socrates persistently denies that he is or ever was anyone's teacher, (2) he seems to think knowledge of some sort is necessary for being a teacher while disavowing knowledge himself, and (3) he argues on occasion that virtue—the thing he took to be most important of all—cannot be taught. I use the account from Chapter 1 to resolve this puzzle. I conclude the chapter by considering some of the further benefits of Socratic education and some of the limitations it faces.

In Chapter 3 ("Moral Deference and Moral Development") I explore the interaction between expertise and education by examining Socratic policies regarding each. In particular, I consider how Socrates thinks we ought to interact with moral experts, and I consider how he thinks we ought to promote our own moral development (in light of the account of virtue from Chapter 1). I argue that while there appears to be a trade-off between deference and development, Socrates' characteristic method of inquiry, elenchus, offers a way to reconcile the two. I bookend the chapter with a discussion of some recent work in moral epistemology on the puzzle of pure moral deference. The Socratic perspective on deference and development supplies a new diagnosis of this puzzle.

Thesis supervisor: Sally Haslanger
Title: Professor of Philosophy
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Chapter 1

Virtue as Expert Moral Knowledge

There are many things to know and we take ourselves to know some of them: what we had for breakfast, how to tie our shoes, or why helium-filled balloons tend to rise, to name a few. There are also many ways to be, morally speaking, ranging from shining sainthood to abject depravity, and we (or most of us, at any rate) take ourselves to be somewhere in between: we may be quick to help our friends move apartments, but also quick to anger when stuck in slow-moving airport lines; or we may feel emboldened to stop a bully among youths, but hesitate when it comes to stopping the destructive behavior of a peer. Our epistemic lives and our moral lives are both quite intricate, to say the least. But what exactly is the connection between them, between the epistemic state of an agent, on the one hand, and his or her moral state, on the other? Plato’s Socratic dialogues suggest a particularly provocative answer: virtue just is a kind of knowledge. But what kind of knowledge? Here the picture becomes a bit complicated.

Throughout these dialogues, we find the character Socrates returning frequently to the analogy of skilled craftspeople and the knowledge they possess; we find him pressing his interlocutors to display their purported knowledge by furnishing definitions; and we find him exhorting Athenians young and old to seek out a peculiar sort of self-understanding. Each of these threads seems to lead us to a different kind of knowledge: practical knowledge, theoretical knowledge, and self-knowledge, respectively. And these seem quite different from one another. Is Socrates, then, simply interested in them as three completely disconnected epistemic states?

Although there have been numerous discussions of each of these kinds of knowledge as they occur in the Socratic dialogues, as of yet there has been no satisfactory unifying account, one that draws all three together and shows how they interact. That is what I aim to provide here. I will argue that there is a conception of moral knowledge that can tie together these apparently disparate threads: expert moral

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1I take the following works to be Socratic dialogues: Apology, Charmides, Crito, Euthydemus, Euthyphro, Gorgias, Ion, Laches, Lesser Hippias, Lysis, Menexenus, and Protagoras. Although possibly spurious, we should consider Alcibiades, Clitophon, Greater Hippias, and Second Alcibiades along with these other dialogues. For further discussion of this grouping and additional methodological remarks, see my Appendix A, below.

2In this dissertation, I will primarily be interested in this individual—the character of this name who is represented in Plato’s dialogues—and will mostly side-step questions as to whether his views are the same as those of the historical Socrates or as those of the author, Plato.

knowledge or moral expertise—a complex epistemic state that integrates practical knowledge, theoretical knowledge, and self-knowledge. Taking Socrates to be interested in a complex epistemic state such as this helps us to explain the recurring presence of these three sorts of knowledge in these dialogues and allows us to bring them together into a cohesive account, one that provides an especially attractive interpretation of the Socratic thesis that virtue is knowledge.

Part of my interest here is squarely historical: what conceptions of knowledge are at play in these texts? But my project also involves charitable reconstruction: is there an account of moral knowledge that could do the work Socrates seems to want it to do? And part of my concern should be of contemporary appeal: is there a conception of moral knowledge, inspired by these texts but philosophically attractive in its own right, that offers us a way to understand the epistemic state of a morally excellent person? Virtue as moral expertise can do all of this: it is strongly suggested by the texts; it can do the work Socrates wants it to do; and it offers a promising way to understand the thesis that virtue is knowledge.

Here's the plan for what's to come. In Section 1 I use a paradigm case of expertise to motivate the thought that expertise is a complex epistemic state, one that integrates practical knowledge, theoretical knowledge, and self-knowledge. In Sections 2–4 I turn to Plato's texts and flesh out each of these components further. In the course of doing so, I specify what role each kind of knowledge plays for expertise in general and for moral expertise in particular. In the final section (Section 5) I bring all three pieces together into an account of virtue as moral expertise and I present some of its interpretive and philosophical benefits.

1.1 Expert knowledge: a sketch

Consider an expert physician—a general practitioner or primary care provider, suppose. What is she like? (Insofar as she's a physician, that is, not, say, as a roommate.) For one thing, there is much she knows how to do: she can use various instruments to measure patients' vital statistics, palpate bodies in search of irregularities, formulate hypotheses about the causes of ailments, and prescribe regimens once she reaches a diagnosis. What's more, she's good at all of this and reliably so. She has a theoretical understanding that supports her practice. She knows about human anatomy and physiology. She understands the relation between ailments and the symptoms they manifest. And she knows the difference between the healthy and sick condition of human beings. On the basis of this understanding she will be able to offer explanations of her expert actions and she can draw on this understanding when teaching others to become better doctor themselves. She will also possess a certain degree of self-awareness of her own abilities as a physician. She
will recognize when a patient is better served by a specialist. And she will know when to seek out a second opinion (to confirm or confute her diagnosis).

Such a physician possesses a mixture of practical knowledge, theoretical knowledge, and self-knowledge. Of course, we could imagine cases where these kinds of knowledge come apart. Some doctors might possess considerable theoretical knowledge amassed during medical school, and yet be terrible at using that knowledge to bring about health in patients. Some doctors may have considerable practical knowledge of how to implement various courses of treatment for a familiar range of cases, and yet, lacking an understanding of why what they typically do brings about health, they are stymied by unusual sets of symptoms. And you could imagine some doctors who, through a lack of awareness of the limits of their own knowledge or fallibility, routinely fail to draw on the expertise of their colleagues and of specialists. These doctors, in one way or another, fall short in their knowledge. The expert physician described above does not. She possesses all the requisite practical, theoretical, and self-knowledge. What's more, this knowledge is integrated: it is coordinated than rather than compartmentalized.4

What goes for physicians goes for many other advanced experts, such as musicians, carpenters, and chess masters. The expertise that each of these individuals exhibits is a complex cognitive state that integrates practical knowledge, theoretical knowledge, and self-knowledge. It is this integration that sets the advanced expert apart. Such advanced experts will be the focus of my discussion.5 We may sometimes use the term ‘expert’ for people who fall short of this advanced stage. Nevertheless, we can identify features of the ideal toward which those individuals are advancing. And with a model of advanced expertise in hand, we can characterize those who fall short of that level by reference to those facets of advanced expert knowledge they have or have not yet developed and the extent to which those elements have been integrated.

This account of expertise offers us a nice way to unify the kinds of knowledge we find referenced throughout the Socratic dialogues. But to better understand Socrates’ conception of each of these components of expertise, we need to turn to the texts themselves.

4Recent empirical research on medical expertise, summarized in Ericsson et al., eds. (2006), Chapter 19, theorizes that such expertise “involves coordination among multiple kinds of knowledge” (p. 340), where the relevant kinds of knowledge are described as “formal knowledge” (knowledge of basic science and of the relationship between particular ailments and their symptoms) and “experiential knowledge” (knowledge, developed over time, of a wide range of actual cases).

5Some of the empirical literature on expertise posits a skill spectrum ranging from Novice to Master (see, for example, Ericsson et al., eds. (2006), Chapter 2). I’ll be talking primarily about the Master, but I don’t really like that term and so won’t use it.
1.2 Practical knowledge

Reading the Socratic dialogues, one cannot help but notice Socrates' recurring use of analogies involving skilled craftspeople. Plato even seems a bit self-conscious of this when, in the *Gorgias*, he has Callicles complain to Socrates, "By the gods! You simply don't let up on your continual talk of shoemakers and cleaners, cooks and doctors, as if our discussion were about them" (491a1–3). What these craftspeople all have in common is that each possesses a τέχνη (technē, plural technai, henceforth transliterated)—an art, skill, or craft. They are experts at their craft. An essential feature of technai is that each involves practical knowledge—which, as I develop it below, is knowledge of how to engage in some domain-specific activity and reliably produce some end. If virtue is expert moral knowledge, then it too will be concerned with activity and with an end: virtuous behavior aimed at the human good—that is, aimed at ευδαιμονία (eudaimonia, i.e., happiness or flourishing). Focusing in on the practical side of expertise—a side brought out nicely by analogies to the crafts—emphasizes how virtue, being a form of expertise, is intimately connected with action.

References to technai occur in almost every Socratic dialogue and the diversity of examples is striking. In the *Euthydemus* we hear of fighting in armor (i.e., armed as a hoplite), carpentry, lyre-making and lyre-playing, speech-writing, generalship, and the “kingly art.” In the *Gorgias* we encounter painting, sculpture, arithmetic, computation, geometry, and checkers-playing. What do such disparate occupations have in common that justifies considering them all to be technai? For one thing, each technē has some associated productive activity. Cobbler cobbles, cleaners clean, and so forth. Furthermore, these experts operate within delimited domains of expertise (shoemaking-related matters, cleaning-related matters, and so forth). Call this the domain constraint. I'll say a bit about each, beginning with the

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6 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of Plato in this dissertation come from Cooper, ed. (1997), occasionally with slight modifications. For the Greek, I use the current Oxford Classical Texts, with a couple (noted) exceptions.

7 As stated, this clause leaves open whether the relation between virtuous activity and eudaimonia is instrumental or constitutive. This is the crux of the dispute between Irwin (1977) and Vlastos (1991). I want to remain neutral on this dispute, so for the purposes of this dissertation I'll leave this matter unresolved.

8 For an exhaustive catalogue of these occurrences, see Appendix 1 of Roochnik (1996).

9 Strictly speaking, the phrase ‘associated productive activity’ is a bit misleading. In some cases the product of a technē just is its activity, e.g., in the case of dancing. What is true is that each technē has some product and the exercise of a technē is an activity. For most cases—and for the paradigm cases of technai—the activity produces the product. I will continue to use the phrase ‘associated productive activity’ but it should be understood to carry the caveat of this footnote.

10 My domain constraint is similar in spirit to what Smith (1998) calls the ‘integrity of subject matter’ requirement” (p. 135), which, in turn, is a fusion of Woodruff (1990)'s “specialization” and
latter. Doing so will illuminate just how Socrates thinks of the practical knowledge side of expertise.

1.2.1 Practical knowledge: the domain constraint

Genuine technai will have domains of the appropriate scope. To use Smith (1998)'s memorable example, making size nine sandals will be too narrow to count as a genuine technē. And there is something quite plausible about this. It would be odd if there were experts who could make only size nine sandals: whatever practical knowledge equipped them to produce size nine sandals would enable them to make size 8.5 and 9.5 sandals as well. But, as it turns out, a genuine technē also can’t be too wide. One can’t be an expert at, say, making. These restrictions emerge most clearly in the Ion and the Gorgias.

Socrates encounters the rhapsode Ion (in the dialogue of the same name) as the latter is making his way around the festival circuit. Rhapsodes were professional reciters of Homeric poetry and Ion is not at all shy about proclaiming himself to be the very best. Socrates asks him, though, whether he is “so wonderfully clever about Homer alone—or also about Hesiod and Archilochus?” (531a1–2). Ion replies: “No, no. Only about Homer. That’s good enough, I think” (531a3–4). What Socrates goes on to argue is that, if this is the case, then Ion cannot be speaking “on the basis of mastery and knowledge [τεχνη και ἐπιστήμη]” (532c6). For, he says to Ion, “if your ability came by mastery [τεχνη], you would be able to speak about all the other poets as well” (532c7–8). The problem seems to be that Ion has claimed too narrow a scope of knowledge for it to qualify as a genuine technē. Given the stylistic similarity between Homer, Hesiod, and Archilochus, if Ion really were an expert at Homer, he would be able to speak knowledgeably about Hesiod and Archilochus as well (assuming he is familiar with the content of their works).12

Gorgias, in the eponymous dialogue, has the opposite problem. Socrates would like to find out from Gorgias “what the power of his craft is [τὸς ὁ δύναμις τῆς τεχνῆς], and what it is that he both makes claims about and teaches” (447c1–3). A short while later, Gorgias names his craft: oratory or rhetoric (ῥητορική).13 What he hasn’t yet specified is the domain of this putative craft. This

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11This is one of many places where Socrates is loose with his epistemic vocabulary. I don’t think we should make much of the fact that he uses this conjunctive phrase τεχνη και ἐπιστήμη. Throughout the Platonic corpus, Socrates regularly slides between these expressions and others (such as σοφία, ἐπιστήμη, γνώσεως, and εἰδέναι).
12Socrates assumes—and Ion accepts—that being clever about or speaking well about Homer means being able to make judgments of the form ‘this sentence is well said.’
13Nominalized adjectives ending in -οντι typically imply the noun ‘τεχνη’ (see Smyth (1920),
is what Socrates pushes him to furnish in what follows, and Gorgias’s initial proposals all fail. In each case he assigns rhetoric too broad a scope. First he says that it is “about speeches [περί λόγων]” (449e1). Socrates responds by noting that each craftsman is best able to speak about matters pertaining to his craft (450a7–b2)14 and that, furthermore, rhetoric isn’t even unique in being primarily concerned with speaking, as this is also the case (Socrates claims) for arithmetic, computation, geometry, and (oddly enough) checkers (450d6–7). Gorgias next suggests that rhetoric is concerned with “the greatest of human concerns, Socrates, and the best [τὰ μέγιστα τῶν ἀνθρωπῶν προγνώσεων, ὃς Σωκράτης, καὶ ἀριστοτέλεις]” (451d7–8).15 But (Socrates claims) every craftsman will claim that the product of his craft is best. So what is the product of rhetoric? Gorgias answers: “The thing that is in actual fact the greatest good, Socrates... I’m referring to the ability to persuade by speeches” (452d5–e2). Against this, Socrates argues that insofar as every craftsman is able to teach his craft and all teaching involves persuasion (or so he claims), this feature will not be unique to rhetoric (453d7–454a5). Again, the domain is too broad. Eventually (at 455b5–7) Gorgias hits upon a better candidate: persuasion about the just and the unjust. This account runs into other problems which I won’t discuss here. What matters for our purposes is the condition on a genuine technē revealed over the course of their discussion: it cannot have too broad a domain.

What emerges from these texts is the domain constraint. The domain of a technē must be of the appropriate scope: it cannot be too narrow and it cannot be too broad. The prohibition against overly narrow domains of expertise might seem ill-conceived, particularly in our age of specialization. Still, we can take Socrates to be especially interested in a particular type of expertise—one that has a sufficiently general (but not too general) scope of concern. This fits well with how we think of many contemporary forms of expertise. Consider again the physician. Some doctors are specialists. They focus on particular systems of the body, the ailments peculiar to those systems, and the treatment of those ailments. Other doctors are generalists. They are concerned with the overall health of a patient. And when it comes to our overall health, we are often better served by the generalist than by the specialist. Ask yourself: if you could consult only one doctor for the remainder of
your life, would you choose a specialist or a generalist?

What about virtue? If virtue were moral expertise, what would its domain be and would it satisfy the domain constraint? One candidate for the domain of virtue is the good and the bad for humans.\(^\text{16}\) This is hinted at in numerous Socratic dialogues, such as *Laches* (199c4–e4) and *Charmides* (174b11–d7). Such a domain certainly doesn’t suffer from being too narrow. The natural worry is that it’s too broad. In the dialogues I’ve been considering, Socrates never further specifies the nature of the human good.\(^\text{17}\) We do get a more fleshed out suggestion in the *Republic*: what’s good for humans is to have a harmoniously ordered soul.\(^\text{18}\) This fits well with the focus on the soul we find throughout the Platonic corpus. And it helps to make sense of why self-knowledge is of paramount importance for virtue (see Section 4, below). We need to be aware of the state of our soul in order to take proper care of it. Doing this is part of what it is to be virtuous.

Even in the absence of a more specific conception of the good, the domain constraint does make this much clear: whatever the domain of expert moral knowledge is, it must have the appropriate level of generality. And this seems right. If virtue is expert moral knowledge, it must be knowledge that can guide us throughout our lives. It will not be enough to know how to act well in narrow domains, such charitable giving. Just as a general practitioner takes a concern for the overall health of an individual, moral expertise must be concerned with the overall morally good activity of an agent.

We’ve now seen that *technai* must be of the appropriate scope. Next I want to consider another aspect of *technai*: their associated productive activities.

### 1.2.2 Practical knowledge: associated productive activity

As noted above, one feature common to all *technai* is that the “technician” (i.e., the person with *technē*) reliably performs the productive activity associated with his or her craft and does so well. There are two dimensions to this: first, each craft has an associated productive activity; and second, the technician is a reliably good executor of that activity.

The requirement that *technai* be associated with productive activities emerges in a number of dialogues. We’ve already seen it in passing when considering the

\(^{16}\)Why also the bad? Because Socrates thinks that the domains of *technai* encompass both positive and negative components, such as health and illness for medicine. On this, see the *Lesser Hippias*. Cf. *Republic*, Book I, 333e3–334a9 and *Crito* 44d6–10. Cf. also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE), V.1, 1129a12.

\(^{17}\) *Protagoras* 351b3–359a1 may be an exception. There Socrates considers whether pleasure might be the good. See the *Clitophon* for a pointed complaint about Socrates’ general lack of specificity about the good.

\(^{18}\)On the harmony of the soul see, for example, *Republic*, Book IV, 443c–444a2.

15
Gorgias. After Gorgias has claimed that his craft is concerned with "the greatest of human concerns" (451d7), Socrates asks: "What is this thing that you claim is the greatest good for humankind, a thing you claim to be a producer of?" (452d3–4, my emphasis). Similarly, in the second protreptic section of the Euthydemus (288d5–292e5), Socrates pushes Clinias to figure out what kind of knowledge he must acquire (given their earlier agreement that Clinias needs to acquire some kind of knowledge). It turns out that the relevant kind of knowledge will be productive (289b4–6). Thus, Socrates seems to think that each craft has an associated activity and that this is a productive activity.

The products of the crafts, however, vary considerably in kind, and counting them all as "products" stretches the normal sense of that word a bit. Some crafts fashion their products anew: a carpenter makes cabinets from wood. Other crafts, such as fishing, acquire their products (namely, the fish caught). The products of some crafts are tangible things (such as shoes, the product of cobbling), whereas the products of other crafts are intangible (such as the theorems of arithmetic). And, for some crafts, their product is not separable from the exercise of the craft-knowledge itself, as in dancing. It is this generous sense of 'product' that we must bear in mind when thinking of crafts in the way Socrates does. And, as he thinks of them, all crafts have some associated productive activity.

What separates advanced experts from novices is that the experts can reliably execute the activity associated with their craft and they do so well. This requirement comes through quite clearly in the first protreptic section of Euthydemus (278e3–282d3). Clinias and Socrates have been enumerating things that are good for people. They've named a number of items, including wisdom. Soon thereafter they add good fortune to the list. But Socrates has second thoughts, saying "in putting

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19 That is, hortatory. The dramatic action of the Euthydemus centers around competing attempts to exhort the young Clinias "to love wisdom [φιλοσοφεῖν, philosophein] and have a care for virtue" (275a6). The sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus have their own approach, but Socrates at two points explicitly says (to paraphrase), "Now I'll show you how it's really done." These sections are called 'the first and second protreptics.' The word 'protreptic' comes from the Greek verb 'προτρέπω (proterepo)', meaning 'to urge forwards.' See LSJ s.v. προτρέπω and προτρέπτικος.

20 Socrates pushes Clinias to identify a knowledge of not only how to produce but also use some beneficial product. This proves difficult. For a diagnosis of the problem, see Jones (ms).

21 Jones (ms) uses the tangible/intangible and made/used distinctions to partition the products of crafts. Smith (1998) takes a different approach in classifying technai. She distinguishes between productive, performative, and theoretical technai. Carpentry is a productive technē. Musical arts are performative technai. And geometry would be a theoretical technē. As it stands, this won't do. Consider fishing: is it productive, performative, or theoretical? It's none of the above. It's acquisitive (in a non-greedy sense). But once we make this amendment, why not include geometry as "acquisitive"—it acquires theorems. In fact, this is how Socrates himself characterizes geometry at Euthydemus 290b10–c6 (although there he says that what the geometers acquire are diagrams, by which he may mean constructible geometrical objects).
good fortune in our previous list we are now saying the same thing all over again” (279d2–3). Although the interpretation of this argument is a bit tricky, Socrates’ examples strongly suggest that what he has in mind here is that an individual possessing wisdom will reliably produce the best results (relative to its domain). A novice physician might accidentally prescribe for you the right course of treatment for your illness, but, if so, you’ll have lucked out, as he just as well might have erred. An expert physician, however, will almost always make the correct prescription. In short: “wisdom [i.e., here, expert knowledge] makes people fortunate in every case, since I don’t suppose it would ever make any sort of mistake but must necessarily do right and be lucky—otherwise it would no longer be wisdom” (280a6–8, trans. slightly modified).22

These requirements on technai—associated productive activity and reliably-good execution—fit nicely with a general conception of expertise. In some cases, such as cobbling, it is easy to identify the product (in this case, shoes). Other cases are trickier. What of, say, U.S. Civil War experts? What productive activity do they engage in? What historians do is develop explanations of historical phenomena. This is an intangible product, but a product nonetheless. Even in the case of disciplines like history and mathematics, experts at these disciplines will have some associated productive activities. The condition on reliable execution seems uncontroversial, once you grant the activity point: there is a stability to the high-quality activity the expert engages in.

If we think of virtue as a kind of expertise, then the virtuous agent (the moral expert) will reliably engage in some associated productive activity. What is this activity? Good human behavior. What will its product be? Eudaimonia.23 Even if this activity and product remain somewhat under-described, this much is made clear by taking virtue to be a craft of the sort Socrates had in mind: the moral expert won’t accidentally do the right thing or act in the virtuous way; she will do it from a stable disposition to so act.24 This is part of how we distinguish those more advanced in virtue. Think of a friend, perhaps, who consistently acts in virtuous ways. She may not be perfect. But a mark of her progress is the reliability with which she engages

22This passage is compatible with such expert knowledge not being sufficient for good outcomes: sometimes circumstances may just be too bad even for the expert to handle. The point is simply that the expert is the one who reliably pulls things off the best one could, given the circumstances. Jones (2013) defends an interpretation along these lines.

23This is one point where the caveat of fn. 9 becomes especially important. For views that identify virtuous activity and eudaimonia, it would be incorrect to characterize this activity as productive (insofar as it would then be productive of itself, which is odd). Whether, for Socrates, virtue (or virtuous activity) is identical to eudaimonia, (partly) constitutive of it, or instrumental to it is a key point of disagreement among ancient historians. For some references, see fn. 7, above.

24Although for some skepticism about the empirical adequacy of this, see Doris (1998) and Harman (1999). Against them, and for an account I’m quite sympathetic to, see Kamtekar (2004).
in morally good activity. This is also a place where I think we can see why the analysis of virtue in terms of expertise is particularly illuminating. Moral progress will require the same sort of training that progress in any other expertise requires. In many cases, this amounts to a considerable amount of practice at the activity until one becomes a reliable actor.25

1.2.3 Summary

In this section I've spelled out two important features of technai: first, they operate within domains of the appropriate scope; and second, they all have some associated productive activity that the technician reliably engages in well. This brings out the practical side of technai: each involves a certain amount of practical knowledge, knowledge of how to execute some skillful activity. This, however, is not the whole story. Experts have not only practical knowledge, but also theoretical knowledge. This point comes out explicitly in the Gorgias, where Socrates distinguishes a genuine technē from what he calls a mere "knack."26 Against Polus (a young, impulsive follower of Gorgias), Socrates has denied that oratory (rhetoric) is a genuine craft. Instead, he claims that it is some sort of knack (462b8–c3). He states the key difference a few pages later:

And I say it [i.e., oratory] isn’t a craft, but a knack, because it has no account of the nature of whatever things it applies by which it applies them, so that it’s unable to state the cause of each thing. And I refuse to call anything that lacks such an account a craft. (465a1–6)27

Grasp of an account—a λόγος (logos)—is part of what constitutes theoretical knowledge. The requirement that a genuine technē involves grasp of an account provides a link between the practical knowledge and the theoretical knowledge components of expertise. It’s now time to consider theoretical knowledge in more detail.

25Cf. Aristotle’s remarks about learning to be good in NE II.1, 1103a30–1103b2.
26The Greek is ‘ἐμπειρία (empeiría),’ the most basic meaning of which is experience, whence ‘empirical’ (see LSJ). The relevant sense in the Gorgias, as the context makes clear, is mere practice in the absence of knowledge of principles (see LSJ, A.11).
27There is some dispute over how to render the phrase ‘of the nature of whatever things it applies by which it applies them.’ Burnet’s text has ‘ὁ προσφέρει ἤ προσφέρεται ὅποι’ ἡγεῖται τὴν φύσιν ἔστόν. Dodds (1959) suggests adding ‘heimeron’ between ‘ὁ προσφέρει’ and ‘ἤ προσφέρεται,’ which would give us, in his translation, ‘of the nature of the patient or the prescription’ (p. 230).
1.3 Theoretical knowledge

The dramatic action of numerous Socratic dialogues revolves around the search for an adequate definition of some cardinal virtue. In the *Laches*, Socrates inquires into courage, in the *Charmides*, temperance, in the *Euthyphro*, piety. In each dialogue, Socrates encounters some purportedly-knowledgeable interlocutor whom he subjects to *elenctic examination*—a process through which he tests that individual’s knowledge by pressing him for definitions and then scrutinizing those definitions. An inadequate definition impugns the interlocutor’s knowledge. This is a familiar side of Socrates’ practice. But what sort of knowledge is at stake? In this section, I want to suggest that it is *theoretical knowledge*. Experts possess a theoretical understanding of their domain of expertise on the basis of which they are able to answer questions and provide explanations. Here I want to focus on two things that are especially relevant for understanding the nature of this theoretical knowledge: (i) the relation between Socratic definitions and theoretical knowledge; and (ii) what I will call the *articulation condition*.

1.3.1 Socratic definitions and theoretical knowledge

What is a Socratic definition? It is not the sort of thing one finds in a dictionary: Socrates’ quest for definitions is not a search for the meanings of words. Rather, in each case he is looking for an account of *what* (kind of thing) something is. This comes through clearly in the *Euthyphro*, when Socrates asks Euthyphro, “what kind of thing [ποίον τί] do you say that godliness and ungodliness are?” (5c9) and again, “tell me then, what [τί] is the pious, and what the impious, do you say?” (5d7). The demand is similar in other dialogues. But what is this *what*? The *Gorgias* passage quoted above (p. 18) suggests an answer: it is an “account of the nature” (465a3–4) of a thing. When you say *what* something is, you give an account of its essential nature, what it most fundamentally is. And Socrates seems to think it is a mark of those with expert knowledge that they can do this (within their domain of expertise). So, for example, an expert physician will be able to say what health is, what (perhaps) the various tools and techniques of medicine are, and so forth.

There’s more to definitions than the *what*; they also put one in a position to

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28 For a classic account of “the standard elenchus,” see Vlastos (1983).
29 There is a weaker—and more plausible—position available here: failure to produce an adequate definition gives the questioner *prima facie* reason to believe the respondent lacks knowledge about the topic at issue. But even this weaker condition is grounded in the idea that expert should (usually) be able to make explicit his or her knowledge, answer various questions, and so forth.
30 E.g., *Laches* 190e3 (τί ἐστιν ἄνδρεα), 191e10 (τί ὁμώ), *Charmides* 159a10 (τί φής εἶναι σωφροσύνην).
31 On this ability to *say*, see the next section, 3.2.
give the why. Once in possession of a definition of what Fness is, one should be able to explain (by reference to this) why F things are F. This connection between the what and the why comes out in Euthyphro 9e1-11b5. Although Euthyphro’s definition of the pious as “what all the gods love” (9e1-2) is formally correct as an answer to ‘What is the pious?’ (i.e., it is at the right level of generality), it is it fails as a definition precisely because it does not have the right explanatory force. If the pious were what all the gods loved, then ‘Because it is being loved by all the gods’ would be a satisfactory answer to the question, ‘Why is such-and-such an action pious?’ But Euthyphro and Socrates both agree that such an answer would not satisfactory. So Euthyphro’s definition is inadequate. This connection between the what and the why is also strongly suggested by Gorgias 465a2-6, quoted above (p. 18): the expert, who grasps an account, will be able to give explanations of things proper to his domain of expertise. So our physician, again, will not merely be able to say what health is but also why such-and-such a bodily condition is (or is not) healthy.

The ability to articulate definitions such as these is a mark of expertise. It is the theoretical knowledge of the expert that underwrites this ability. This theoretical knowledge is not the definitions themselves (or, rather, their content). Mere acceptance of a correct definition is not sufficient for theoretical knowledge. This point is suggested in a number of dialogues. For example, various interlocutors offer what might in fact be accurate definitions but nevertheless fail elenctic examination. As Benson (2000) points out: “Nicias, Laches, Critias, and Polemarchus have all been credited with giving what Socrates believes are correct answers to his ‘What is F-ness?’ question, but none can plausibly be credited with knowing what F-ness is according to Socrates” (p. 114). What’s more, Socrates himself occasionally produces definitions of the sort he demands. In the Laches he offers this example: “If anyone should ask me, ‘Socrates, what do you say it is which you call swiftness in all these cases,’ I would answer him that what I call swiftness is the power of accomplishing a great deal in a short time, whether in speech or in running or all the other cases” (192a9-b3). But Socrates, I think, would deny that he has theoretical knowledge of speed. What these examples show is that mere grasp of a definition is not sufficient for theoretical knowledge.

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32 See his footnotes for references to those authors who give such credit to these interlocutors.
33 Cf. Meno 75b9–11 (“Let us say that shape is that which alone of existing things always follows color”), 76a5–7 (“A shape is that which limits a solid; in a word, a shape is the limit of a solid”) and 76d4–5 (“Color is an effluvium from shapes which fits the sight and is perceived”).
34 Cf. Meno 82b9–85c11. After his interrogation, the slave boy has correct beliefs about the doubling of a square but nevertheless still falls short of knowing. What he requires is something more: “If he were repeatedly asked the same questions in various ways, you know that in the end his knowledge about these things would be as accurate as anyone’s” (85c10–11).
35 Euthyphro 6e4–8 makes it sound like all Socrates needs in order to have a theoretical knowledge
What would be sufficient for theoretical knowledge? Like expertise as a whole, theoretical knowledge is something that comes in degrees. It is not identical to mere knowledge—that or propositional knowledge of a single proposition, although it may be composed of such knowledge. It's the sort of thing that one develops after having studied some domain for many years and after having accrued a body of knowledge about that domain. Theoretical knowledge is something like knowledge of a cluster of interrelated propositions and of the relations among them. It is a form of understanding. You could imagine someone who has grasped a bunch of individual propositions about (say) leukemia but failed to grasp the connections between them—and through grasping their interconnections, would come to have a deeper understanding of this disease. This is why it is wrong to limit the content of theoretical knowledge to the content of individual Socratic definitions. The discussion in the second half of the *Protagoras* suggests this as well: not only must one know about the individual virtues, one must also know about the nature of the relations they bear to one another.

Such theoretical knowledge is a plausible component of expertise (although, as I've stressed, it isn't the only one). In particular, it seems like a mark of the most advanced experts, at least, that they possess a deep understanding of their domain of expertise. On the basis of this understanding, they are able to talk knowledgeably about this domain, explain domain-related matters to others, teach effectively, and so forth. Consider, for example, two physicians, both of equal technical proficiency. Now suppose that one has, in addition to this, a deep understanding of medicine. This physician will be able to explain to others why she does what she does—orders certain tests, arrives at certain diagnoses, and so forth. And these explanations will be rooted in her understanding of what (say) invasive ductal carcinoma is. It is this additional theoretical knowledge that sets this physician apart as an expert of the most advanced degree.

The same holds for an account of virtue as moral expertise. A theoretical knowledge of what is good and bad for humans will be a component of this expertise. It will not be the whole of it, but it will be a part. This should be particularly attractive to those of us working in moral philosophy who think that our theoretical work should not be completely irrelevant to our development as moral agents. But the complexity of moral expertise also helps assuage concerns about wicked moral...
theorists—individuals who study moral philosophy but who, nevertheless, seem far from moral excellence. It's not enough simply to understand the good and bad; one also needs the practical knowledge to reliably put this knowledge into action. One's practical and theoretical knowledge must be integrated in the right way. (I say more in Section 5, below, about the connections between these kinds of knowledge.)

1.3.2 The articulation condition

There's a further condition on expertise, connected with definitions, that I have alluded to above: Socrates takes it to be a necessary condition on expertise that one be able to articulate adequate definitions related to the domain of one's expertise. That he thinks this is clear enough from texts like *Laches* 190c6 ("And what we know, we must, I suppose, be able to state") and *Charmides* 159a6-7 ("Well, then, since you know how to speak Greek... I suppose you could express this impression of yours [of what sort of thing temperance is] in just the way it strikes you?"). It's also revealed in his practice: when his interlocutors fail to produce adequate definitions, Socrates takes this to show that they lack knowledge of the matter in question. This gives us the articulation condition: if one is an expert with respect to some domain D, then one will be able to produce Socratically-acceptable definitions of D-related matters.37

The articulation condition will strike many people as too strong. Surely there are inarticulate experts! And it's almost certain that there are experts who would fail to produce Socratically-acceptable definitions. Could Ted Williams have survived an elenchus about baseball? Could Robert Johnson have survived an elenchus about the blues? Maybe, maybe not. Note, however, that one of the advantages of thinking of expertise as a complex of practical, theoretical, and self-knowledge is that it offers a nice response to this worry. The most advanced experts will have each of these pieces. But there are individuals who fall short of this whom we would nevertheless count as experts. Such individuals might have highly advanced practical knowledge, even while lacking articulable theoretical knowledge. Perhaps we could even scale back the strong demand that experts be able to produce Socratically-acceptable definitions. It may be enough if they can talk knowledgeably about their expertise (answer questions, give explanations)—something most experts can do. In many cases, even self-taught individuals will have access to some amount of theoretical knowledge, but this theoretical knowledge needn't be

37 Cf. Benson (2000)'s "verbalization requirement" (p. 114).
38 As it turns out, Ted Williams wrote (with co-author John Underwood) *The Science of Hitting* (Simon and Schuster, 1986). So perhaps he could have referred Socrates to that. Thanks to Rusty Jones for the reference.
expressed in some canonical vocabulary. 39 There may be a musical-theoretical and psychological explanation of why certain so-called “blues notes” sound and feel the way they do. An unschooled yet expert bluesman may not be able to give this explanation. But when he describes those notes as “sad” he may be latching on to the right features. And he could probably explain why that note is the appropriate one to play rather than another in order to get a certain aesthetic effect, even if he couldn’t explain it with the vocabulary of a music theorist.

We should retain something like the articulation condition for expert knowledge, but we should bear in mind that it is only a necessary condition for the advanced expert (the “master” craftsperson). There will be other points along the path to expertise where one may struggle to meet this condition, but still satisfy other conditions on expert knowledge—and thus will be more advanced than the complete novice. For other individuals, the path from explicit theoretical knowledge to practical knowledge may go the other way. A novice doctor might rely more on textbook procedures and heuristics learned in medical school whereas a more advanced doctor might increasingly rely on a developed practical knowledge of treating patients. We can witness this in many cases of moral development as well: we give children overly-simplified moral heuristics to guide their actions; the reality is often much more subtle. 40 Even in these cases, though, it’s unclear whether the new doctor or the young moral learner have complete theoretical knowledge (i.e., understanding) or whether they simply have some of the content but haven’t yet grasped the interrelations. The point is simply meant to illustrate how some fields shift from explicit, articulable knowledge to implicit, practical knowledge, whereas others shift in the other direction.

1.3.3 Summary

In this section I’ve filled in some of the details of the theoretical knowledge component of expertise. Theoretical knowledge is the understanding of a domain on the basis of which one can answer questions about and give explanations of domain-related matters. In the most advanced expert, this theoretical knowledge will be integrated with his practical knowledge. In the expert, theory and practice will go hand-in-hand (see Section 5, below). But even this isn’t the full story for expertise. In addition, the expert possesses self-knowledge, which I turn to next.

39 Socrates’ remark to Critias at Charmides 163d5–7 suggests that he wouldn’t insist on a canonical vocabulary: “I give you permission to define each word the way you like just so long as you make clear the application of whatever word you use.”

40 Cf. the simplistic morality of Cephalus in Republic, Book I: some individuals may not advance much beyond these heuristics, even in old age!
1.4 Self-knowledge

The self-knowledge thread of the Socratic dialogues is intriguing yet elusive. It's clear enough that Socrates is keen to bring his interlocutors to an understanding of themselves, but the exact nature of this self-directed attitude is difficult to pin down. In the course of Socrates' discussions, two kinds of self-knowledge seem to emerge. The first I'll call formal self-knowledge: knowing what you know and don't know ('formal' because of the schematic form of this knowledge). Experts know the scope and limits of their knowledge, i.e., what their domain of expertise is. But such formal self-knowledge also has an important value even for the novice: it averts error in action and it thwarts complacency in one's development toward expertise. The second sort of self-knowledge I'll call substantive self-knowledge: this is knowledge of one's self, where for Socrates, as we will see, the self is to be identified with one's soul ('substantive' because the object of this knowledge is closer to what we tend to think of as the self). This substantive self-knowledge will amount to what I call first-personal attunement—knowing how one tends to act, think, and feel. In what follows, I'll first consider formal self-knowledge before turning to substantive self-knowledge.

1.4.1 Formal self-knowledge: knowing what one knows and doesn’t know

We can find a nice account of the nature and value of formal self-knowledge in Plato's Apology. There, from 20c4 to 24b2, Socrates reflects on the source of his reputation as someone wise in various matters. By way of explanation, Socrates reports the following story. His friend Chaerephon once asked the Delphic oracle whether anyone was wiser than Socrates; the oracle replied that no one was wiser (21a6-7). Socrates thought this a riddling response, saying: "I am very conscious [αύτόν ποιντείντω] that I am not wise at all; what then does he [i.e., the god, Apollo] mean by saying that I am the wisest?" (21b3–5). In order to better understand the significance of this oracular response, Socrates set about examining those individuals reputed to be wise.

Socrates went to various politicians, poets, and craftsmen. With the very first person he met, he had the following experience: "I thought that he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not" (21c6–7). Reflecting on this, Socrates thought, "I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know" (21d4–8). He had a similar experience with the poets: "because of their poetry,
they thought themselves very wise men in other respects, which they were not” (22c5–6). And he had much the same experience with the craftsmen:

They knew things I did not know, and to that extent they were wiser than I. But, men of Athens, the good craftsmen seemed to me to have the same fault as the poets: each of them, because of his success at his craft, thought himself very wise in other most important pursuits, and this error of theirs overshadowed the wisdom they had. (22d3–e1)

In each case Socrates found individuals who thought they knew various things, things which in fact they did not know. They all suffered from the following second-order error: they were mistaken about their first-order epistemic state(s). In particular, they thought themselves knowledgeable about the “most important pursuits [τὰ μέγιστα]” (22d7)—that is, about moral matters, such as the condition of their souls, what actions are right or wrong on a given occasion, and so forth—when in fact they were not. While Socrates would be happy to grant that the craftsmen knew many things (for example, matters related to the crafts they pursue), they nevertheless were mistaken in thinking that their knowledge in one domain made them knowledgeable in some distinct domain. Socrates, in contrast, never makes this mistake.

Self-knowledge of this sort is important for expert knowledge in general. Consider a physician who is familiar with a wide range of diseases, but not all of them, and who has moderate mastery of many diagnostic techniques, but not all. Now suppose our physician nevertheless believes that she has full mastery of medicine. With such a false belief, she may very well make a misdiagnosis. I have a difficult time thinking that such a physician has achieved advanced expertise. The expert physician would either have much greater knowledge of medicine, or, if not, she would recognize her limits. She would know when some patient’s condition was unfamiliar, and, in such cases, she would call for a second opinion or send for a specialist. This suggests that recognition of the scope and limits of one’s (first-order) knowledge with respect to a domain is a necessary condition on expertise: a failure to possess such recognition precludes one’s being an expert.

While recognition of the scope and limits of one’s knowledge is a plausible condition on expertise, such an awareness also has an important value even for the novice. There are two benefits in particular. First, as noted above, recognizing what one doesn’t know averts error in action. (Cf. Alcibiades 117d8–10: “Don’t you realize that the errors in our conduct are caused by this kind of ignorance, of thinking

41 Why think these are the most important pursuits? It is antecedently plausible given Socrates’ concerns throughout the rest of these dialogues. See also, e.g., Alcibiades 118a11–13: “Well, can you name anything more important than what’s just and admirable and good and advantageous?”
that we know when we don’t know?”) By realizing that she is facing an unfamiliar medical situation, the novice physician will avoid making an ignorant diagnosis. Second, a failure to recognize one’s ignorance can lead to a kind of complacency, a complacency that can inhibit one’s further development. (Cf. Alcibiades 106d10–12: “Would you have wanted to learn or work out something that you thought you understood?” Alcibiades responds: “Of course not.”) If a novice physician falsely believes she knows all there is to know about her medical art, it is unlikely she will seek out further instruction. Recognizing her ignorance will impel her to gain the knowledge she lacks.

If moral knowledge is a kind of expert knowledge, then these features will apply to it as well. If one fell short of moral knowledge, but didn’t recognize it, and acted on those beliefs, then one would run the risk of acting immorally or of otherwise falling short of being fully virtuous (especially if part of what expert moral knowledge brings is reliably good action—failure to recognize a lack of knowledge is failure to recognize unreliability). A doctor may make a misdiagnosis, and thus would be a poor doctor. But in the moral cases the risk is immoral action. Furthermore, falsely believing that one has moral knowledge presents an impediment to moral progress. It induces moral complacency (of the sort Cephalus suffers from in Republic Book I).

This error—mistakenly thinking oneself knowledgeable about something—is also one we’re especially prone to make in the moral domain. From the time we are born, we are inundated with advice on how we ought to live, what our rights and duties are, which character traits are admirable and which are shameful, what makes for a good human life, and so forth. We hear such things from parents, friends, religious leaders, advertisers, and more. Growing up in our peculiar social milieu, it is inevitable that we end up with a collection of beliefs about moral matters. Given this, it would be very easy to (perhaps mistakenly) think oneself knowledgeable about such things. But if knowledge of moral matters has even somewhat demanding standards—standards like those accompanying expertise in other domains—then it’s also quite likely that many of us fall short of the knowledge we take ourselves to possess. Notice, however, that we are not as susceptible to such an error in other domains. This is because few of us grow up in climates that would lead us to believe ourselves to be knowledgeable about, say, sailing when in fact we are not. With other sorts of expert knowledges we tend to be more aware of our lack of expertise. Not so in the case of expert moral knowledge.

Summing up this section, we’ve seen that formal self-knowledge—knowing what one knows and doesn’t know, i.e., recognizing the scope and limits of one’s knowledge—plays three roles in connection with expertise. First, it is a general condition on expertise: experts know the scope and limits of their knowledge. Secondly, such recognition prevents bad action: by recognizing one’s ignorance one will
avoid acting on the basis of it. And third, it is propaedeutic: falsely believing oneself to be knowledgeable about some subject, one won’t desire to learn about it; removing this false belief removes an obstacle to education. But in addition to this formal self-knowledge, there is a more substantive sort of self-knowledge hinted at in the Socratic dialogues. I turn to this form of self-knowledge next.

1.4.2 Substantive self-knowledge: knowing one’s self

Time and again throughout the Socratic dialogues we find Socrates stressing the importance of having appropriate concern for one’s soul. For example, in the Apology Socrates claims that he goes about “doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul” (30a7–b2). In the Charmides, Socrates is impressed by Critias’s description of Charmides, but thinks that his having a “well-formed soul” will make him “a man without equal” (154d7–e1). And in Laches, despite the preliminary discussion of the merits of fighting in armor, Socrates makes it clear that the real question at issue is what is the best “form of study for the sake of the souls of young men” (185e1–2). But why all this obsession with souls? The suggestion I want to pursue here is that part of what it is to be virtuous is to have an awareness of the condition of one’s soul—that is, of one’s ψυχή (psuchē, pl. psuchai). (For my purposes, we can identify the soul of an individual with a cluster of cognitive states, which will include dispositions to act, think, and feel in various ways.) If we are to be identified primarily with our souls (which Socrates seems to think, as we will see), this will amount to a kind of self-knowledge. Although my discussion here will focus on the substantive self-knowledge relevant to virtue, other forms of expertise will exhibit this self-knowledge as well. It is a mark of expertise in general that experts have an awareness of their tendencies to act, think, and feel with respect to the characteristic activities of their expertise.

The importance of substantive self-knowledge is suggested throughout the Socratic dialogues, but the Alcibiades provides the most focused discussion of the topic. By the end of the first half of this dialogue, Socrates has revealed Al-

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42 I discuss this third benefit of self-knowledge further in the next chapter (Chapter 2).
43 Plato’s Charmides complicates this account of the value of formal self-knowledge. In brief, it contains a series of arguments that cast doubt not only on the value of such knowledge, but also on its very possibility. For a via media solution to the possibility challenge, see Benson (2003). Regarding the value challenge, note that the Charmides appears to show that such self-knowledge is not sufficient for virtue. But this, of course, is compatible with it still being necessary, which is right in line with the account I’ve been developing.
44 Cf. Apology 29d9–e3 and 36c3–8.
45 Although some have challenged the authenticity of this dialogue, I think it can helpfully illumi-
cibiades’ ignorance. Socrates then asks: “Very well. What do you propose for yourself? Do you intend to remain in your present condition, or practice some self-cultivation?” (119a8–9). In what follows we get an investigation into just what form this self-cultivation should take.

The first suggestion follows a long speech in which Socrates praises the Spartan and Persian royalty. (A risky oration given the dramatic date of the dialogue—in the wake of the Persian Wars and on the brink of the Peloponnesian War!) This passage seems to offer (inter alia) a model of idealized moral upbringing. The key feature of this upbringing is that Persian boys at a young age are given explicit instruction in the cardinal virtues: wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage (121e4–122a8). If these are the individuals who have been raised properly, then I take the upshot of this passage to be that Alcibiades should measure himself up against them, not against just any old potential competitor. As Socrates says:

Trust in me and in the Delphic inscription and ‘know thyself,’ These are the people we must defeat, not the ones you think, and we have no hope of defeating them unless we act with both diligence and skill [ἐπιμελεῖτε τε ἄν καὶ τέχνη]. If you fall short in these, then you will fall short of achieving fame in Greece as well as abroad; and that is what I think you’re longing for, more than anyone else ever longed for. (124a8–b6)

Socrates is clearly goading Alcibiades a bit, appealing to his competitive nature. But the point remains: the “contest” is against those who are more advanced in virtue than us. So self-cultivation requires ‘knowing thyself,’ which here is spelled out as knowing where you stand in relation to those who are more virtuous than you.

My English text is Cooper, ed. (1997). For the Greek I use Denyer (2001). I’ve ignored the equally-long remarks about the wealth of the Persians (and Spartans). This may also be more goading Alcibiades by appeal to the sorts of things he cares about.

Annas (1985) thinks a different sort of “knowing how you stand” is at play here: knowing your place. Although she makes a persuasive case for this being a natural sense of the Greek term ‘σωφροσύνη (sōphrounē)’ (often translated as ‘temperance’), I think this can’t be the full story about Socrates’ concern. First, he himself is a notorious non-conformist. It would be odd, then, for him to stress the importance of “knowing one’s place” (in a conventional sense). Second, Socrates’ continual emphasis on elenchus as a means of self-examination, where this is directed at scrutinizing individuals’ beliefs, suggests again that his concern is much more inwardly focused than “knowing one’s place” would imply. I am willing to grant that knowledge of our place within a social scheme may be important for being fully virtuous. I just don’t think this is the relevant sense of “knowing oneself” that interests Socrates.

This reading also fits well with the next turn the discussion takes. Alcibiades asks, “Well,
If this is all there is to substantive self-knowledge, then it risks collapsing back into formal self-knowledge. For suppose what is needed for being fully virtuous is knowledge of the good and bad (for humans). Knowing whether you have this will then amount to knowing whether you know about the good and the bad. But this is just an instance of formal self-knowledge—knowing what you know and don’t know—albeit specified for moral knowledge. I think there’s more to substantive self-knowledge. Some hints as to what more it may involve emerge in the remainder of Alcibiades.

At 128e10–11, Socrates and Alcibiades turn to the question of what ‘oneself’ (or ‘myself,’ ‘yourself,’ ‘ourselves’—basically all the reflexive pronouns) denotes—that is, what this thing is that they each must cultivate. For, Socrates notes, they need to settle this in order to know how to cultivate it (129a2–4). So self-cultivation requires self-knowledge, knowing oneself. And, as Socrates goes on to argue (somewhat quickly), a person is “nothing other than his soul” (130c3).\(^5\) And “so the command that we should know ourselves means that we should know our souls” (130e7–8). The identification of ourselves with our souls provides the link between care for the soul and care for ourselves, between knowledge of our soul and knowledge of ourselves. What self-cultivation requires is knowledge of one’s soul. But what does this amount to? We should understand this knowledge of our souls to be what I will call *first-personal attunement*. I’ll spell this out a bit more in the remainder of this section.\(^5\)

By ‘first-personal attunement’ I mean an awareness of how one tends to act,

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\(^5\)The argument, in brief: a person who uses something is different from the thing he uses; a person uses and rules over his body; so the person is different from the body; the soul rules over the body; therefore, a person is his soul. (The argument appears to assume that there can be only one ruler over a thing.)

\(^5\)Another interesting suggestion in the text relates to how we acquire this knowledge. It may have an essentially social element: it is through others and our interactions with them that we can best develop this first-personal attunement. This is suggested by Socrates’ analogy of an eye seeing itself reflected in the pupil of another (133a1–4) and his remark that “if the soul, Alcibiades, is to know itself, it must look at a soul, and especially at that region in which what makes a soul good, wisdom, occurs, and at anything else which is similar to it” (133b7–10). (With this compare *Phaedrus* 255d–e: “[The beloved] does not realize that he is seeing himself in the lover as in a mirror”—thanks to Mary Louise Gill for this reference.) We can find this idea picked up in the Aristotelian *Magna Moralia*: “As then when we wish to see our own face, we do so by looking into the mirror, in the same way when we wish to know ourselves we can obtain that knowledge by looking at our friend. For the friend is, as we assert, a second self” (1213b20–24). There are some related remarks on the role of friends in Aristotle, *NE* IX.
think, and feel. If I’ve achieved a degree of first-personal attunement, then, for example, I will be aware that when in a pensive mood I tend to worry at my beard; I will realize that, when thinking about a Socratic dialogue, I can be overly quick to dismiss dramatic details as philosophically insignificant; and I will be sensitive to the fact that I can sometimes be a bit grouchy if I haven’t had enough sleep. Since first-personal attunement includes awareness of dispositions such as these, it will be more expansive than the formal self-knowledge described above.

Is this side of self-knowledge spelled out in these texts? Not explicitly. But in them Socrates nevertheless displays a degree of first-personal attunement. Beyond the formal self-knowledge that he clearly possesses (knowing what he knows and doesn’t know), the dialogues depict Socrates as being aware of his tendencies in action, thought, and emotion. See, for example, his remarks at *Charmides* 154b8–10: “I’m a broken yardstick as far as handsome people are concerned, because practically everyone of that age strikes me as beautiful.” Here he is aware of his own tendency to overrate the beauty of youths. In *Euthyphro*, Socrates comments on how his love of inquiry bids him follow arguments wherever they lead (14c3–5). At *Gorgias* 458a2–5, Socrates asks: “And what kind of man am I? One of those who would be pleased to be refuted if I say anything untrue, and who would be pleased to refute anyone who says anything untrue; one who, however, wouldn’t be any less pleased to be refuted than to refute.” Beyond the Socratic dialogues, we get a nice moment of self-awareness at *Phaedo* 91a1–3: “I am in danger at this moment of not having a philosophical attitude about this, but like those who are quite uneducated, I am eager to get the better of you in argument.” What these dramatic details show is that Socrates has a certain amount of first-personal attunement. We can also find Socrates revealing to others the value of substantive self-knowledge. For example, in the *Second Alcibiades* Socrates argues that the best way to pray is as the Laconians (Spartans) do: “They pray the gods to give them first what is good and then what is noble; no one ever hears them asking anything more” (148c3–5). (The risk in asking for specific goods such as wealth is that these may turn out to be bad for the asker, as they are only conditionally good.) Socrates worries that Alcibiades won’t be able to stick to this plan: “I think you would do best to hold your peace; for I expect you are rather too big-hearted (to use the favorite euphemism for stupidity) to be willing to use the Laconian prayer” (150c6–

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52 Cf. *Charmides* 166c6–d2: “How could you possibly think that even if I were to refute everything you say, I would be doing it for any other reasons than the one I would give for a thorough investigation of my own statements—the fear of unconsciously thinking I know something when I do not.” Note how here Socrates displays substantive self-knowledge while avowing a desire for formal self-knowledge.

53 And given that the author, Plato, plausibly thinks Socrates is more virtuous than many ordinary folks, it’s reasonable to suspect that this first-personal attunement may be a part of virtue.
9). This big-heartedness or greatness of soul (μεγάλοψυχία, megalopsuchia) is a complex character trait manifesting itself in certain actions, thoughts, and feelings. Given its presence in Alcibiades, the policy that is right for him differs from what is right for Socrates. An awareness of their different conditions of soul is what allows Socrates to make these different prescriptions.

Such first-personal attunement is independently plausible as a component of virtue. It is a mark of those more advanced in virtue to be aware of their tendencies to act, think, and feel in various ways. For those who fall short of the upper echelons of virtue (i.e., most of us), such awareness can be essential for averting vicious actions and for identifying areas for further moral improvement. And as our understanding of the human good progresses, we can calibrate our natural dispositions in such a way as to more accurately aim at the good. Another way to achieve this calibration is through reference to those who are more advanced in virtue. This was the upshot of the point above, where Socrates bids Alcibiades to know his real “competitors.” And this may also connect up with his cryptic remark (at 133b7–10) about the need for the soul to look at another soul. Not only can this provide us with the appropriate benchmark, it can also sometimes help us to become better aware of how our own tendencies are outwardly manifested: e.g., what you took in your own case to be clever quips at your friend’s expense you may perceive in another as incessant needling. It is sometimes through our encounters with others that we achieve such self-knowledge.

1.4.3 Summary

In this section I’ve been spelling out the self-knowledge component of expertise. We’ve seen that there are two kinds of self-knowledge at play. The first is formal self-knowledge—knowing what one knows and doesn’t know. The second is substantive self-knowledge—knowing the condition of one’s soul, which amounts to being aware of how one tends to act, think, and feel. Although both forms of self-knowledge are present in other forms of expertise, above I’ve stressed their roles in moral expertise, a domain wherein such self-knowledge seems particularly important.

1.5 Virtue as expert moral knowledge

We now have all of the pieces on the table. Expertise, as I’ve claimed, integrates practical, theoretical, and self-knowledge. And so if virtue is expertise, it too will

54 Cf. the benefits of formal self-knowledge, Section 1.4.1, above.
55 See fn. 51, above.
be such a complex epistemic state. In the preceding sections I fleshed out each of these kinds of knowledge in more detail, drawing on material we find in Plato's Socratic dialogues. In summary form, here are those results:

- **Practical knowledge**: knowledge of how to engage in a domain-specific activity and reliably produce some end.
  - *The domain constraint*: the domain of an expertise must be of the appropriate scope (neither too narrow nor too wide).
  - *Associated productive activity*: each kind of practical knowledge will have an associated productive activity; the person possessing such practical knowledge will be a reliably-good executor of that activity.

- **Theoretical knowledge**: understanding of a domain on the basis of which an individual will be able to answer questions about and give explanations of domain-related matters.
  - *Socratic definitions and theoretical knowledge*: Socratic definitions give the *what* and the *why* of matters related to a domain of expertise; they are a product of theoretical knowledge. Theoretical knowledge is knowledge of an interrelated set of propositions and of the relation(s) among them.
  - *The articulation condition*: an expert with respect to some domain \( D \) will be able to produce Socratically-acceptable definitions of \( D \)-related matters; or, minimally, experts can answer questions about and give explanations of domain-related matters.

- **Self-knowledge** (comes in two varieties):
  - *Formal self-knowledge*: knowledge of what one knows and doesn't know with respect to some domain; experts know the scope and limits of their knowledge.
  - *Substantive self-knowledge*: first-personal attunement—knowing how one tends to act, think, and feel (with respect to a domain of expertise).

I want to do three things in this section. First, I want to say a little bit about the relations among these kinds of knowledge. Second, I want to indicate a few ways in which thinking of virtue as expert moral knowledge helps us to better understand some puzzling aspects of Socrates' philosophy. And third, I want to point out some of the features of this view that make it an independently-attractive account of virtue.
1.5.1 The nature of the complex

The practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge components of moral expertise complement one another. Theoretical knowledge can offer some guidance in unfamiliar circumstances—circumstances with which an individual has had little practical experience and so hasn’t developed the practical knowledge to reliably act well in them. In such circumstances, even an expert may need to fall back on explicit, theoretical knowledge and try to work out what he or she needs to do. This fits well with the familiar experience of needing to think things through more carefully when faced with unusual or particularly challenging situations. We engage in far more explicit, cautious moral reasoning and deliberation when making big life decisions or when confronting crises (assuming we have the leisure to think things through). What theoretical understanding of the good we have guides this deliberation.

Similarly, practical knowledge can support and enhance one’s theoretical knowledge. The experience of putting theoretical conclusions into practice can deepen one’s understanding of those conclusions. Consider a physician who has a theoretical understanding of some disease and of its effects on a body but who has never encountered a patient suffering from it. By interacting with patients who are actually suffering from this disease, by seeing how it manifests itself in a variety of bodies, by working through less and more fruitful courses of treatment, the physician will develop her practical knowledge of how to diagnosis and treat this disease. This, in turn, may lead her to an enriched theoretical understanding of it. Likewise with moral expertise. Suppose you’ve reflected on the value of certain virtues, such as kindness and honesty, and contemplated the kinds of actions characteristically expressive of these virtues. By acting in such ways, you may come to a better appreciation of the nature of kindness and honesty, as you see how kind and honest acts are received by recipients, but especially as you see how these virtues may at times appear to conflict (e.g., a self-absorbed but nevertheless dear friend asks, “Do you think I’m selfish?”).

Self-knowledge—both formal and substantive—helps to guide inquiry and allows one to engage in self-aware practice, and thus supports both theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge. An awareness of the scope and limits of one’s knowledge allows one to avoid certain errors. But it can also help direct one’s studies even within a domain. It was self-knowledge of the formal sort that propelled Socrates to engage in his lifelong search for moral knowledge. By recognizing the gaps in our theoretical understanding of a domain, we are able to target those areas for further study. There is a similar connection between substantive self-knowledge and practical knowledge. An awareness of our tendencies to act, think, and feel—in particular, an awareness of our flaws in these areas—allows us to focus in on those
pieces that need improvement. For example, if I have the self awareness that I'm not as good a listener when I'm hungry I can make the appropriate behavioral correction if I need to pay attention to someone right before lunchtime. Experts isolate trouble spots and focus on these when practicing. Likewise with moral expertise, and it is substantive self-knowledge that makes this possible.56

1.5.2 Interpretive benefits

The principal interpretive benefit of taking Socratic virtue to be expert moral knowledge is that doing so allows us to explain a number of puzzling claims that Socrates makes and it also provides us with a nice account of various elements of the cluster of theses together known as “Socratic Intellectualism.” Because moral expertise is a complex epistemic state, at any given point along the path toward expertise, an individual may have developed some but not all of the pieces or may have developed all of the pieces but to differing extents. I propose that Socrates has made some progress toward advanced expert moral knowledge but has not made it all the way. More specifically, he has a high degree of self-knowledge, he may have a limited amount of practical knowledge, and he has little to no theoretical knowledge. The complexity of moral expertise helps us to make good sense of the complexity of the character Socrates and of his utterances.

Consider Socrates’ frequent disavowals of knowledge.57 What makes this particularly puzzling is that Socrates possesses a variety of epistemic states that nevertheless seem importantly connected to virtue: he has many confident moral beliefs and he is keenly aware not only of his own epistemic shortcomings but also of his own tendencies to act, think, and feel (see above, Section 1.4). So what exactly does he know, if anything? We should take Socrates to be disavowing theoretical moral knowledge. He does not have any understanding of moral matters on the basis of which he could give accounts and offer explanations. But lacking theoretical

56 What about the motivational side of agents? Socrates seems to have thought that humans have an authoritative rational desire for the good (see Protagoras 351b3–358e7 and Meno 77b7–78b1). But what if we disagree? We could try to push the analogy to other forms of expertise even harder. Perhaps training in an expertise conditions one’s desires as well. After developing substantial practical, theoretical, and self-knowledge related to the art of medicine, might a doctor still have no more desire to bring about health than illness? This seems unlikely, but not impossible, and so the connection between expert knowledge and goodness of activity is still too fragile. This may simply be a gap in the Socratic account that needs a different remedy. Plato may have come to realize this as well, for other works of his (such as the Republic) reveal a greater awareness of the significance of the non-rational parts of the soul. Aristotle, too, is sensitive to this, and training the appetitive part of the soul is an essential part of his account of moral education. For discussion of this critique of Socratic moral education, see Nussbaum (1977), esp. pp. 79–97.

57 See, for example, Apology 21b3–4; Charmides 165b5–c1 and 169a6–b3; and Laches 186b7–187c5.
knowledge is compatible with him having other sorts of knowledge. For one thing, it is evident that he possesses considerable self-knowledge. But he may also have a modicum of practical knowledge. Guided by his divine sign, Socrates reliably avoids bad behavior, even if he may be somewhat in the dark about why the behavior he avoids is bad. He’s become confident that it’s better to suffer an injustice than inflict one on another\(^{58}\) and acts on the basis of this. What he lacks is an account that grounds this principle. Furthermore, if skill at elenchus is part of the practical knowledge of virtue, then Socrates has practical knowledge at least to that extent, for he is skilled at elenchus.\(^{59}\)

Consider next his denials of teaching.\(^{60}\) This is puzzling insofar as it seems like Socrates does engage in a considerable amount of instruction. But note what he consistently avoids: instruction of a sort where a lecturer seeks to impart a body of theoretical knowledge to a listener, to explain to them why such and such is the case. Socrates never does this, and for good reason. If teaching requires knowledge (as he seems to think) and if he lacks this theoretical knowledge, he couldn’t impart it even if he wanted to. What he does teach is the kind of knowledge he does possess: self-knowledge. His elenctic procedure is well suited to bringing interlocutors to formal self-knowledge—and Socrates’ general exhortation to self-examination will likely result in substantive self-knowledge as well (at least for those who take his advice). Importantly, given Socrates’ own epistemic shortcomings, he is not equipped to take someone all the way to advanced expert moral knowledge. But it’s unclear whether this can be achieved in conventional ways anyway. The complexity of moral knowledge may impede standard methods of instruction: mere habituation is not enough; mere theorizing is not enough; and mere self-examination is not enough.

Here I’ve sketched some of the interpretive benefits of understanding the Socratic thesis that virtue is knowledge to be claiming that virtue is expert moral knowledge. The recurring discussions of practical knowledge, theoretical knowledge, and self-knowledge pointed the way toward this interpretation, for expertise is a complex epistemic state that integrates all three. Thus we can read Socrates as keenly interested in one kind of knowledge, expert knowledge, but we can appeal to the complexity of this kind of knowledge in order to explain the apparent diversity of his interests.

\(^{58}\)For a particularly confident assertion of this, see Gorgias 527b2–6.
\(^{59}\)I revisit this last point in Chapter 2, Sections 3 and 4.
\(^{60}\)See, for example, Apology 33a5–b8. I consider this topic in more detail in Chapter 2.
1.5.3 Attractive features

Stepping back from the question of whether virtue as expert moral knowledge is what Socrates had in mind, the interpretation I've offered is an independently attractive account of the puzzling Socratic thesis that virtue is knowledge. Here I want to highlight a few of its features.

We think that virtue comes in degrees. Some people are more virtuous, others are less so. To think that individuals in the world simply are or are not virtuous reflects an insensitivity to the texture of our moral lives. Likewise, we think of expertise as something that comes in degrees. Some people are more expert than others. Virtue and expertise both form spectra. Taking virtue to be a kind of expertise offers a nice explanation of this shared feature. It's the graduated nature of expertise that explains the graduated nature of virtue.

The complexity of expertise that I've dwelt on above also clarifies the different areas of work for us in our moral development. Just as the individual striving for expert mastery of medicine will need to be attentive to practical, theoretical, and self-directed matters, so too the individual striving for moral excellence will need to be attentive to these domains. We need to think hard about moral matters, seeking an understanding of them, because this contributes to our moral expertise, which is virtue. But we need to attend to the practical matter of learning how to behave in reliably good ways. And throughout this development we need to maintain a degree of self-awareness, of what we know but also of what we don't know, and of how we tend to act, think, and feel. The goal is advancement in all these areas and the integration of our practical, theoretical, and self-knowledge.

It's important to note that because of the complexity of virtue, there are many routes to it. Some will have made considerable theoretical progress; others will lack such understanding, but will be reliably good actors; and others will have the developed self-awareness that is also essential to virtue. We can give credit to each of these individuals, as each is making progress toward expert moral knowledge. This, in turn, suggests a richer account of moral worth, one that allows us to praise agents even when (in some sense) they are morally imperfect.61 If such an account of moral worth is independently plausible, then virtue as expert moral knowledge will complement it nicely.

Finally, I want to emphasize the self-knowledge component of virtue that this investigation has turned up. If this account is correct and if virtue, as a form of expert knowledge, involves self-knowledge of the kind described, then there is a step in the direction of moral improvement immediately available to each of us. We can begin by scrutinizing the scope and limits of our moral knowledge and by taking stock of our tendencies to act, think, and feel. This is what Socrates bid his

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61For an account of moral worth along these lines, see Sliwa (ms).
fellow Athenians do. In doing so, he was exhorting them—and, through Plato’s
texts, he continues to exhort us—to take a first step toward virtue, that is, toward
expert moral knowledge.
Chapter 2

Socrates the Educator and Socratic Education

It's natural to think of Socrates as a teacher of sorts—a kind of populist educator whose star pupil, Plato, went on to found a school of his own.¹ To this day, a certain pedagogical method even bears his name, one which some of us might (at least try to) employ in our own classrooms.² Socrates, however, persistently denies that he is or ever was anyone's teacher. Furthermore, if knowledge of some sort is necessary for being a teacher, then his numerous disavowals of knowledge would seem to impugn his teaching credentials. Finally, Socrates appears somewhat ambivalent about whether the thing he held to be most important of all—moral matters and, more specifically, virtue—could be taught. So one of the world's most famous teachers (1) denies being such, (2) perhaps couldn't even be such, and, in any event, (3) may have thought that the most significant subject (viz. virtue) couldn't be taught. In this chapter, I use the account from Chapter 1 to resolve this puzzle. The complexity of expert moral knowledge allows for individuals who have developed some but not all of its parts. This is Socrates' situation: he has a high degree of self-knowledge, but lacks theoretical and has at most a limited amount of practical knowledge.³ And this provides us with a solution. When Socrates denies that he is a teacher or disavows knowledge, he denies teaching theoretical and practical knowledge, and he disavows possessing this himself. What of the teachability of virtue? In a sense it can be taught. Socratic elenchus is well-suited to bring about the self-knowledge that is itself part of virtue. So, in brief: Socrates is and isn't a teacher of virtue; he provides instruction in a part, but not the whole, of virtue; and an account of virtue as expert moral knowledge helps to explain all this. I conclude this chapter by considering some of the further benefits of Socratic education and some of the limitations it faces.

¹Diogenes Laertius, in his Lives of Eminent Philosophers, encourages this way of thinking by describing the history of philosophy in terms of philosophical schools. Jaeger (1943) describes Socrates as “The greatest teacher in European history” (p. 27). (Reeve (1989), p. 160, fn. 63, drew my attention to the fantastically hyperbolic quote.) For a more recent example of this mindset, consider the second essay in the Cambridge Companion to Socrates (ed. Morrison), which is titled “The Students of Socrates.”

²I've heard that instructors at Harvard Law School claim to employ such a method. There is a philosophy pedagogy blog named “In Socrates' Wake” (http://insocrateswake.blogspot.com/). Educational theorists continue to discuss what they call 'the Socratic Method' and 'Socratic Dialogue.' See, for example, Saran and Neisser, eds. (2004) and Knezevic, et al. (2010).

³In Chapter 1, Section 5.2, and below, in Sections 3 and 4, I consider whether he might possess some practical knowledge. Even if he does, it will be practical knowledge of a limited sort.
2.1 The puzzle

As noted above, three claims in particular seem to raise trouble for the idea that Socrates is a teacher, namely:

S1. Socrates is constantly denying that he is or ever has been anyone's teacher.

S2. He thinks that (i) knowledge is necessary for teaching, yet (ii) disavows knowledge.

S3. He argues that virtue—the thing he holds to be most important of all—cannot be taught.

As things stand, there is no logical contradiction between any or all of S1–S3 and the claim that Socrates is a teacher. Each of S1–S3, as formulated, is compatible with Socrates in fact being a teacher. What they do suggest, however, is what I will call a practical contradiction: there is an apparent contradiction between Socrates' assertions about his status as a teacher and about the possibility of teaching virtue (S1–S3) and his practice, which seems manifestly educational. Any one of S1–S3, coupled with our impression that Socrates is a teacher, is enough to generate this practical contradiction, and taken together S1–S3 simply make the puzzle all the more pressing.

With a further assumption, we could convert this practical contradiction into a logical contradiction. If we assumed perfect veracity on the part of Socrates, then each of S1–S3 would entail claims that individually contradict the further claim that Socrates is a teacher of virtue (e.g., S1, together with the assumption of veracity, would entail that Socrates is not a teacher). This is a stronger assumption than I want to make. For one thing, it prematurely rules out ironic solutions to the puzzle (that is, solutions that take Socrates' claims about his status as a teacher to be offered in a spirit of irony). Even setting this to the side, there is additional reason to reject the assumption of veracity: it is far too strong. Veracity requires thinking that everything Socrates says is true. A weaker and more reasonable assumption is sincerity: everything Socrates says is believed by him to be true. Sincerity does not entail veracity (e.g., I may sincerely assert that my car is parked outside when, unbeknownst to be, it has been towed). But we don't even need sincerity to generate a prima facie puzzle. All we need is the clash between Socrates' claims, on the one

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4 Reeve (1989) puts it nicely: "There is an apparent inconsistency to be resolved, therefore, between our natural inclination to describe Socrates as an ethical teacher and his own rejection of that description" (p. 161). Nehamas (1985) suggests that the puzzle was a particularly pressing one for Plato, insofar as he "came to see Socrates not only as 'the best, the wisest, and the most just' man of his generation (Phaedo 118a16–17) but also as the ablest, thus far, teacher of areté" (p. 12).
hand, and his apparent practice, on the other. For these reasons, I prefer to formulate
the puzzle as a practical contradiction. 5

So we are faced with a puzzle. But before turning to its resolution, I want to
present the textual evidence for S1–S3.

2.1.1 For S1: denial of teaching

Some of Socrates’ most pronounced denials that he has ever been a teacher are
found in Plato’s Apology. This should come as no surprise. Such denials are a
key part of Socrates’ defense against his earlier accusers, who (he imagines) allege
that he, Socrates, “is guilty of wrongdoing in that he busies himself studying things
in the sky and below the earth; he makes the worse into the stronger argument,
and he teaches these same things to others” (19b4–c2, emphasis added). Part of
a successful defense against this charge involves rebutting the claim that he is a
teacher.

Socrates appears to do just this, saying (a few lines later), “If you have heard
from anyone that I undertake to teach people and charge a fee for it, that is not
true either” (19d8–e1). As it stands, this denial is compatible with his teaching
and not charging a fee for it; we can read Socrates as denying the conjunction
‘teach and charge’ on the grounds that he does not charge. Furthermore, this denial
is followed by an explicit contrast drawn between him and the Sophists, such as
Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, and Evenus (19e1–20c3). This strongly suggests that
one of Socrates’ main aims in denying that he has ever been anyone’s teacher is to
mark a sharp distinction between his practice and the practice of the Sophists. And
given that their methods are at times difficult to distinguish, 6 pointing to the fact that
the Sophists charged for their services whereas Socrates provided his for free offers
a relatively clear way to make that distinction. Understood in this way, Socrates’
claim that he is not a teacher amounts to the claim that he is not a Sophist. 7

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5 A third possibility in the vicinity is that the puzzle here is akin to pragmatic contradictions of
the sort revealed by “Moore-paradoxical” sentences like ‘p but I don’t believe that p.’ These are
contradictions between the content of an assertion and a pragmatic implication of that assertion (in
this case, asserting that p pragmatically implicates believing that p). In the case of Socrates’ claims
about his status as a teacher, it’s unclear to me what the relevant pragmatic implicature would be that
would give rise to such a contradiction, and so I don’t think the puzzle is best characterized this way.
Thanks are due to Rae Langton for urging me to clarify the nature of this puzzle and for suggesting
the phrase ‘practical contradiction.’

6 Compare the method of Sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus with that of Socrates in Plato’s
Euthydemus. For discussion of Sophistic versus Socratic method, see Kerferd (1981) and Nehamas

7 As I understand the charges of the “earlier accusers” they are that Socrates is a natural philoso-
pher and a Sophist. His denial of the second of these components occupies the bulk of his defense
against these charges. His response to the charge of natural philosophizing is comparatively succinct:
But Socrates’ insistence that he has never taught anyone anything extends beyond his “defense against the early accusers” (roughly 19a8–24b2). Toward the end of his defense proper (24b3–35d8), he has this to say:

I have never been anyone’s teacher. If anyone, young or old, desires to listen to me when I am talking and dealing with my own concerns, I have never begrudged this to anyone, but I do not converse when I receive a fee and not when I do not. I am equally ready to question the rich and the poor if anyone is willing to answer my questions and listen to what I say. And I cannot justly be held responsible for the good or bad conduct of these people, as I never promised to teach them anything and have not done so. If anyone says that he has learned anything from me, or that he heard anything privately that the others did not hear, be assured that he is not telling the truth. (33a5–b8)

Socrates’ concern here may still be to distinguish himself from the Sophists (note the remarks about fees and about private instruction), but the general tenor of this passage is much stronger than would be needed for that purpose alone. So while Socrates may still be distinguishing himself from the Sophists, he really does seem to be insisting that he is no teacher.

In addition to this direct evidence, the Socratic dialogues supply us with indirect evidence that supports Socrates’ denials of being a teacher. In particular, we rarely see Socrates engaged in the characteristic pedagogical activity of expounding on some subject, as if delivering a lecture. His avoidance of standard teaching practices supports S1, albeit indirectly. Furthermore, we frequently find Socrates seeking out those purported to be wise and asking them various questions, rather than offering himself up as a source of answers to such questions. This also provides indirect support for S1.

2.1.2 For S2: disavowal of necessary knowledge

Perhaps even more famous than his denials of ever being a teacher are Socrates’ disavowals of knowledge. The paradoxical tagline “All I know is that I know nothing” seems to be indicating that he does not.

Socrates more or less says, “You all have heard me conversing with folks and can attest that I don’t talk about natural philosophy.” (A very free paraphrase of 19d1–7.)

On this, see Devereux (1978). Cf. Nehamas (1985), p. 13. There is considerable evidence throughout the Socratic dialogues that, at least for the Sophists, a standard educational method was the epideictic lecture—that is, a display speech. See, for example, Greater Hippias 282b4–d5 and 286a5–c2, Lesser Hippias 363a1–d4, and Gorgias 447a1–c4. This is not to say that the Sophists’ teaching methods were limited to this. For more on this, see the references cited in footnote 6.

See, for example, the Euthyphro and the Laches, two dialogues where the principal interlocutors are either self-professed experts or reasonably assumed to be experts.
ing" (or variations on it) is often attached to Socrates in pop culture. Socrates, of course, never comes out and says anything quite so direct. But he does frequently disavow possessing a certain sort of knowledge. Such knowledge is typically restricted in scope to moral matters (e.g., such as about the nature of the cardinal virtues or of virtue). And we can find these denials scattered throughout the Socratic dialogues.

In the Apology, for example, Socrates denies that he possesses the knowledge Evenus claims to possess—namely, of how to make people excellent: “I thought Evenus a happy man, if he really possesses this art [ταύτῃ τὴν τέχνην], and teaches for so moderate a fee. Certainly I would pride and preen myself if I had this knowledge [εἰ ἤπειστήμων ταῦτα], but I do not have it, gentlemen” (20b8–c3). And in explaining why he found puzzling the Delphic pronouncement that no one is wiser than he, Socrates says, “I am very conscious that I am not wise at all” (21b4–5).13

In each of the Euthyphro, the Charmides, and the Laches—dialogues investigating the cardinal virtues piety, temperance, and courage, respectively—Socrates denies (either directly or indirectly) having knowledge of the thing under discussion. Socrates’ statement in the Euthyphro that “it is indeed most important, my admirable Euthyphro, that I should become your pupil” (5a3–4) strongly suggests that he, Socrates, lacks the knowledge Euthyphro claims to possess.14 Socrates’ disavowal in the Charmides is explicit: “But Critias,’ I replied, ‘you are talking to me as though I professed to know the answers to my own questions and as though I could agree with you if I really wished. This is not the case—rather, because of my own ignorance, I am continually investigating in our company whatever is put forward’” (165b5–c1).15 And in the Laches (at 186b5–187b7) Socrates disavows

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10As in the 1989 film Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure. Bill and Ted’s textbook reports Socrates as claiming that “the only true wisdom consists in knowing that you know nothing.” The heroes find this to be a rather congenial philosophy.

11As Fine (2008) demonstrates. The closest he comes is Apology 21b4–5. Fine also considers whether Apology 21d2–8, 22c9–d4, 22e7–23b4, or 20d6–e3 provide evidence for the paradoxical thesis that Socrates knows that he knows nothing. Her conclusion is that “attributing the claim to Socrates does not involve a clear misreading of the text…[but that] on balance it is better not to attribute it to him” (p. 51).

12At Euthydemus 293b7–8, when asked whether there is anything he knows, Socrates responds, “Oh yes…many things, though trivial ones.” So there are contexts wherein Socrates does claim to know things.

13We should take this as restricted to worthwhile matters, i.e., moral matters. See my Chapter 1, p. 14 and fn. 39, where I comment on the identification of what Socrates calls “worthwhile matters” or “the most important pursuits” with moral matters.

14Cf. Euthyphro 5c4–5 and 15c11–d2.

15Cf. Charmides 169a1–b3 on needing some great person to offer an interpretation of the points under discussion.
having adequate knowledge on the grounds that he has neither received instruction about courage nor figured these matters out himself. It seems that, in general, Socrates is quick to disavow knowledge of moral matters in contexts where such matters are under discussion.

Granted, it's a thorny question how we should take these disavowals. (Are they ironic? Are they earnest?) For now I suggest we take them at face value and accept that Socrates thinks he lacks knowledge about moral matters. But if this is the case, then it presents a prima facie obstacle to his being a teacher about such matters. For you might think that one could teach about a subject only if one possessed knowledge about that subject. Call this the necessity-of-knowledge-for-teaching condition. The thought here is meant to be a commonsensical one. For example, suppose that you're ignorant of quantum mechanics. Then it would seem that you're ill positioned to teach quantum mechanics. But if this is right, then by denying he has knowledge of moral matters, Socrates precludes his being a teacher about such matters.

What evidence is there in the Socratic dialogues for thinking that Socrates himself accepted the necessity-of-knowledge-for-teaching condition? The Alcibiades contains the clearest statement: “Don’t you see that somebody who is going to teach anything must first know it himself? Isn’t that right?” (111a11–b1). (More frequently, we see evidence for the converse: if you know about something then you can teach about it, e.g., Alcibiades 118c7–119a7.) In addition to this direct evidence, we get considerable indirect evidence. This is revealed by his practice in those dialogues wherein his interlocutors are self-avowed Sophists who claim to be teachers of various things. In dialogues such as the Protagoras and the Gorgias Socrates shows that the Sophists lack knowledge about the things they profess to teach (e.g., Protagoras about virtue and Gorgias about rhetoric) and thereby casts doubt on their credentials as teachers. But this would require accepting the necessity-of-knowledge-for-teaching condition.

The necessity-of-knowledge-for-teaching condition, together with Socrates’ disavowals of knowledge, presents a problem for thinking of him as a teacher—at least, as a teacher of the things of which he claims ignorance.

16 See also his claims at Laches 181d1–7 and 184d8–185a7 on how it is appropriate to figure out who has knowledge about the matters under discussion so that they may defer to that person. In the next chapter (Chapter 3) I take up questions about Socratic policies regarding deference to experts.

17 The concluding line of the Protagoras—“After saying and hearing these things, we departed [ἐπ’ αὐτοῦ]” (362a4, my translation)—strongly suggests (via the first-person plural ἐπ’ αὐτοῦ) that Socrates’ young friend Hippocrates has also become convinced that Protagoras is not a suitable teacher, despite having begun the dialogue desiring his instruction.
2.1.3 For S3: the unteachability of virtue

It should go without saying that Socrates cared quite a bit about moral matters. Throughout the Apology, we find him exhorting the Athenians to reorient their concern from worldly goods, such as wealth and power, to the state of their souls.\(^{18}\) And in the bulk of the Socratic dialogues we find Socrates investigating moral matters—either seeking out accounts of the natures of cardinal virtues such as temperance, piety, and courage (as in the Charmides, the Euthyphro, and the Laches) or investigating related issues (as he does in the Crito, the Euthydemus, the Gorgias, the Lysis, and the Protagoras). But despite this overriding concern with such matters and with virtue in particular, Socrates seems somewhat ambivalent as to whether virtue could be taught.

The question about the teachability of virtue arises most directly in Plato’s Protagoras,\(^{19}\) where from 319c10 to 320c1 Socrates offers a pair of arguments in support of the claim that virtue cannot be taught. At this point in the dialogue, Protagoras has just finished explaining what it is that he promises to teach, which he sums up as “sound deliberation [εὐδοκία], both in domestic matters—how best to manage one’s household, and in public affairs—how to realize one’s maximum potential for success in political debate and actions” (318e5–319a2). Socrates paraphrases this as “the art of citizenship [τὴν πολιτικὴν τέχνην]” which, in turn, promises “to make men good citizens [ἀγαθοὺς πολίτας]” (319a3–5). Protagoras agrees with this characterization, after which Socrates exclaims: “The truth is, Protagoras, I have never thought this could be taught, but when you say it can be, I can’t very well doubt it. It’s only right that I explain where I got the idea that this is not teachable [οὐκ ἔχει τὰ νοηματικά καλά]”, not something that can be imparted from one human being to another [μὴ γὰρ ἀνθρώπων παραδοθέντος άνθρωπος]” (319a10–b3). Following this, Socrates offers up his arguments.

Socrates’ first argument is the following (quoted here in full):

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I maintain, along with the rest of the Greek world, that the Athenians are wise [σοφοὶ]. And I observe that when we convene in the Assembly and the city has to take some action on a building project, we send for builders to advise us; if it has to do with the construction of ships, we send for shipwrights; and so forth for everything that is considered learnable and teachable. But if anyone else, a person not regard as a craftsman, tries to advise them, no matter how handsome and rich and well-born he might be, they just don’t accept him. They laugh

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\(^{18}\) See, for example, Apology 29d2–30b4 and 36c3–d1.

\(^{19}\) Cf. Plato’s treatment of the same in the Meno 89c5–96d4. The Euthydemus also contains an intimation of this worry. See 273d8–274a4 and 282c1–4.
at him and shout him down until he either gives up trying to speak and steps down himself, or the archer-police remove him forcibly by order of the board. But when it is a matter of deliberating on city management, anyone can stand up and advise them, carpenter, blacksmith, shoemaker, merchant, ship-captain, rich man, poor man, well-born, low-born—it doesn’t matter—and nobody blasts him for presuming to give counsel without any prior training under a teacher [οὐδαμόθεν μαθὼν, οὐδὲ ἄντος διδασκάλου οὐδὲνός αὐτῷ]. The reason for this is clear: They do not think that this can be taught [δὴλον γὰρ ὅτι οὐχ ἡγοῦνται διδασκόντων εἶναι]. (319b3–d7)

The Athenians seem to think there are no experts at city management, whereas they do think there are experts in a wide range of other fields. The Assembly defers to the judgement of experts on issues proper to their fields. But in cases where there are no experts with respect to some subject matter, the Assembly countenances anyone’s opinion. City management presents just such a case, at least based on the behavior of the Assembly. Socrates goes on to suggest that the reason the Athenians think there are no experts at city management is that they do not think such a skill can be taught. Noting that “the Athenians are wise,” Socrates implies that we should follow their lead and accept that skill at city management cannot be taught.

How does this connect up with teaching virtue? The link here may be *ad hominem*. Protagoras claims to teach virtue but describes what he teaches as “sound deliberation [τεῦβοιλά]” in both public and private matters. Skill at city management would be soundness of deliberation about public matters and so at least a part of virtue. (In the next stretch of text, Socrates extends his argument to private matters, which is also where he first introduces talk of virtue proper.) At any rate, the discussion shifts to talk of virtue proper (perhaps an illicit shift executed by Socrates) and Protagoras never protests this change in vocabulary. This suggests to me that he himself would be happy to say that he teaches virtue.

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20 Cf. Alcibiades 107a1–c3 and Gorgias 455b2–c2.

21 Why don’t they think it can be taught? Perhaps for reasons such as Socrates raises in the next part of his argument, 319d7–320c1.

22 Another possibility here is that the worry has more to do with identifying experts: even if there are experts at city management, there are formidable obstacles to our identifying them, especially in advance of hearing what they have to say about city management. In contrast, with the other crafts we can identify the experts ahead of time, by looking at their products or their educational pedigree. On the issue of identifying experts, compare the opening examination of Hippocrates in the Protagoras (311c8–314c2, esp. 313a1–314c2). I return to this issue in Chapter 3.

23 At any rate, he claims that he makes people better (βελτίων): “Young man, this is what you will get if you study with me: The very day you start, you will go home a better man, and the same thing will happen the day after. Every day, day after day, you will get better and better” (318a6–9).
Socrates' second argument that virtue cannot be taught follows upon the first:

Public life aside, the same principle holds also in private life, where the wisest and best of our citizens are unable to transmit [παραδόνυμι] to others the virtues they possess. Look at Pericles, the father of these young men here. He gave them a superb education in everything that teachers can teach, but as for what he himself is really wise in, he neither teaches them that himself nor has anyone else teach them either...I could mention a great many more, men who are good themselves but have never succeeded in making anyone else better, whether family members or total strangers. Looking at these things, Protagoras, I just don’t think that virtue can be taught. (319d7–320c1)

In brief: if virtue could be taught, we would expect the children of virtuous people to themselves be taught virtue (and, consequently, to be virtuous); but they are not (and are not always virtuous); therefore, virtue cannot be taught.

So here we have a pair of arguments that suggest virtue cannot be taught. The first is somewhat indirect (the practice of the Athenian assembly suggests they don’t think virtue can be taught, and we should follow their lead) and the second is a bit more direct (virtuous parents sometimes end up with vicious children; but if virtue could be taught, we’d expect them to ensure their kids get schooled in it). If Socrates offers these arguments in earnest, then we have reason to think that he believes virtue cannot be taught. Whether, in the end, we should take him to endorse these arguments (or whether, in his considered opinion, he should endorse them) is a question I take up below. But whatever one does say about these arguments, there is no question that their presence in the texts, delivered by Socrates himself, contributes to the puzzle surrounding Socrates' status as an educator.

2.2 Resolving the puzzle

The account of virtue from Chapter 1 offers a nice way to resolve this puzzle. Recall that virtue is a kind of expert knowledge, namely, expert moral knowledge. Expert knowledge is a complex epistemic state integrating practical, theoretical, *24* Pericles' sons, Paralus and Xanthippus, are both present for action of this dialogue.

*25* Cf. *Meno* 93a5–94e2 and *Alcibiades* 118b9–119a7. *Charmides* 157d9–158a7 may offer an oblique reference to this problem, as Charmides in fact turned out quite vicious. Likewise *Laches* 179c2–d5, although Lysimachus and Melesias aren't vicious; they are simply unremarkable whereas their fathers were quite accomplished. This phenomenon—of virtuous parents with vicious children—is related to the argument in *Dissoi Logoi* VI.4 for the statement that wisdom and virtue can neither be taught nor learned.

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and self-knowledge. *Practical knowledge* is knowledge of how to engage in a domain-specific activity and reliably produce some end. *Theoretical knowledge* is the understanding of a domain on the basis of which an individual will be able to answer questions about and give explanations of domain-related matters. *Self-knowledge* comes in two varieties: *formal self-knowledge*, which is knowledge of what one knows and doesn’t know with respect to some domain, and *substantive self-knowledge*, which is knowing how one tends to act, think, and feel (with respect to a domain of expertise). In the case of virtue (as with any expertise), each of these kinds of knowledge needs to be further specified. This is done by delineating their domain. In the case of virtue, that domain is the good and bad for humans. What is important for my purposes here are the claims that (i) expert moral knowledge has a certain complexity and that (ii) it is possible for an individual to possess some but not all of the parts of expert moral knowledge.

This account of virtue, together with one additional premise, points toward a resolution of the puzzle about Socratic education. The additional premise I need is the following: Socrates himself has the self-knowledge component of expert moral knowledge. Why think this? Consider each component of self-knowledge—formal and substantive—in turn. Formal self-knowledge is equivalent to the wisdom that Socrates claims for himself in the *Apology*. “What has caused my reputation,” he says, “is none other than a certain kind of wisdom. What kind of wisdom? Human wisdom, perhaps” (20d6–8). One Stephanus page later, he goes on to describe this wisdom in a bit more detail:

I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know. (21d2–8)

What of substantive self-knowledge? Although this is the more elusive element of self-knowledge, nevertheless we find it on display throughout the Socratic dialogues (as I argued in Chapter 1, Section 4.2). Consider again, for example, Socrates’ remark in the *Charmides*: “I’m a broken yardstick as far as handsome people are concerned, because practically everyone of that age strikes me as beautiful” (154b8–10). Here Socrates displays his own first-personal attunement. He recognizes his tendencies to overrate the attractiveness of young men. Next, con-

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26 There are complications here. For one thing, what Socrates claims here appears to be only half of formal self-knowledge—namely, the negative component (knowing what one does not know). For another thing, the *Charmides* appears to raise worries about the value and even possibility of this kind of knowledge. I say a bit about each of these worries in Chapter 1.
sider his remarks from a more serious, methodologically reflective section of the
Gorgias: “And what kind of man am I? One of those who would be pleased to be
refuted if I say anything untrue, and who would be pleased to refute anyone who
says anything untrue; one who, however, wouldn’t be any less pleased to be refuted
than to refute” (458a2–5).27 Similarly, Socrates is keen to have Clitophon (in the
dialogue of the same name) point out his flaws: “It would be shameful for me not to
submit to you when your intention is to help me; for clearly, once I know my good
and bad points, I will make it my practice to pursue and develop the former while
ridding myself of the latter to the extent that I am able” (407a1–4). Finally, con-
sider Socrates’ advice to Alcibiades: “I think you would do best to hold your peace;
for I expect you are rather too big-hearted [μεγαλοφυχίς] (to use the favorite euf-
phemism for stupidity) to be willing to use the Laconian prayer” (2nd Alcibiades
150c6–9). This is a morally significant context and Socrates shows the value of
substantive self-knowledge. Such knowledge allows him to make one recommen-
dation for himself but, leading Alcibiades to his own self-knowledge, it allows him
to make a different recommendation for Alcibiades.28

If I am right that Socrates has the self-knowledge component of expert moral
knowledge, then this opens up the following solution to the puzzle of Socratic ed-
ucation: when Socrates disavows knowledge, we should take him to be either dis-
avowing the whole of expert moral knowledge or those parts he lacks (namely,
practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge). But he does have a part of expert
moral knowledge, namely, self-knowledge. And this is what he teaches: he teaches
others to know themselves.

Recall S2: Socrates thinks that (i) knowledge is necessary for teaching, yet (ii)
disavows knowledge. We can still allow that knowledge is necessary for teach-
ing. Socrates possesses a kind of knowledge (self-knowledge) and this is what he
teaches to others. The combination of (i) and (ii) is problematic only when the
knowledge in each case is the same. For example, my ignorance of quantum me-
chanics may present a problem for my teaching about quantum mechanics, but it
does not preclude my teaching someone that, for example, blue jays sometimes im-
itate the calls of red-tailed hawks (which is something I do know). Similarly, even
though Socrates lacks full expert moral knowledge, my suggestion is that this isn’t
what he himself teaches to others. What he disavows is expert moral knowledge,
but what he teaches is only a part of it: self-knowledge. Socratic elenchus is well
suited to bestowing this kind of knowledge. Note that this solution avoids the need
for an ironic reading of Socrates’ disavowals of knowledge: there is a perfectly

27 Cf. Lesser Hippias 372c2–3: “I have one really wonderfully good trait, which saves me: I’m not
ashamed to learn.”
28 In the Lysis, Socrates appears to display both formal and substantive self-knowledge in his re-
marks at 211d6–212a7.
natural sense in which he lacks the knowledge necessary for being fully virtuous—
* i.e., expert moral knowledge as a whole. What he does have, however, is a part of
this.29

What of Socrates’ frequent denials that he is or ever has been anyone’s teacher
(S1)? I have to grant that these denials are a bit disingenuous, insofar as he does
teach self-knowledge to others; however, given that this isn’t the whole of expert
moral knowledge, he’s justified in claiming that he hasn’t been anyone’s teacher of
virtue—* i.e., of the whole of virtue.30 But strictly speaking, for some knowledge
and for some kind of teaching, Socrates does teach that knowledge. And this fits
nicely with our experience of these texts. Whatever else Socrates is up to with his
customary practice, *in some sense* those with whom he interacts learn something
and *in some sense* he thereby teaches them. My claim here is that the thing he
primarily teaches is a kind of self-knowledge.

We can find Socrates teaching self-knowledge (of both sorts) throughout the
Socratic dialogues. In many of these dialogues, Socrates’ interlocutors either pro-
fess knowledge of the topic in question or they are reasonably assumed to have
such knowledge. Nevertheless, these individuals prove unable to give Socratically-
acceptable definitions and, therefore, are shown to fall short of expert moral knowl-
edge.31 The dialogues end in *aporia*. Now, in some cases, it’s unclear what lesson
the interlocutor derives from this experience. Euthyphro, for example, in the dia-
logue of the same name, abruptly breaks off the conversation: “Some other time,
Socrates, for I am in a hurry now, and it is time for me to go” (15e3–4). For all we
know, Euthyphro remains unwilling to admit that he lacks knowledge of piety. If so,
he may not have gained any self-knowledge. In contrast, the discussants in *Laches*
(Laches and Nicias) and in *Charmides* (Charmides and Critias) seem to accept,
by the end, that they lack knowledge. This realization comes from having been sub-
jected to elenctic examination, and what it amounts to is formal self-knowledge.

In the case of substantive self-knowledge (* i.e., knowledge of how one tends
to act, think, and feel*), Socrates often remarks upon features of his interlocutor’s
personalities. He draws their attention to aspects of themselves and, in doing so,
contributes to their substantive self-knowledge. In the *Alcibiades*, for example,
Socrates opens his discussion by telling Alcibiades: “I’ve been observing you all
this time, and I’ve got a pretty good idea how you treated all those men who pur-
sued you: they held themselves in high esteem, but you were even more arrogant
and sent them packing, every single one of them. I’d like to explain the reason

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29 Socrates seems to recognize that there can be different levels of or degrees to knowledge. See,
for example, his comments on “human wisdom” at *Apology* 20d6–8 and 23a5–b4.
30 The denials will be a case of what Vlastos (1991) calls “complex irony” (p. 31). Vlastos would
31 On this, see my discussion of the articulation condition in Chapter 1, Section 3.2 (pp. 11–12).
why you felt yourself so superior” (103b2–104a2). Socrates then goes on to enumerate all the respects in which Alcibiades thinks himself superior to others (e.g., beauty, pedigree, wealth). By the end of the dialogue, Socrates has argued that it is not these things that Alcibiades should concern himself with but, rather, virtue (135b3–5). In the Euthydemus, Socrates admonishes the Sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus for failing to take an appropriately serious attitude toward the challenge of turning the youth Clinias toward a love of wisdom. With pugnacious interlocutors, Socrates frequently recommends that they adjust their attitude, as in the Republic with Thrasymachus (“Don’t be too hard on us, Thrasymachus, for if Polemarchus and I made an error in our investigation, you should know that we did so unwillingly” 336e2–5. Cf. 344e5–7) and in the Gorgias with Polus (“This colt here [i.e., Polus, via a pun on his name in Greek] is youthful and impulsive” 463e1–2). Socrates also at times intervenes to steer discussions away from personal attacks, as in the Euthydemos when Ctesippus and Dionysodorus get a bit hot under the collar (“Since they seemed to be getting pretty rough with each other, I started to joke with Ctesippus…” 285a2–3). Finally, Socrates’ exhortations in the Apology suggest that he targets not just the formal side of self-knowledge, but the substantive as well (e.g., 29d9–e3: “Are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?”).

Taken together, these texts strongly suggest that Socrates is a teacher and that what he teaches is self-knowledge.

At this point, one might have the following worry: even granting that Socrates has self-knowledge and that he inculcates self-knowledge in others, the “self” in each case is different. Self-knowledge has an indexical aspect. In Socrates’ case the ‘self’ picks out Socrates; in Alcibiades’ case (for example), the ‘self’ picks out Alcibiades. Given this feature of self-knowledge, the knowledge Socrates bestows is not the knowledge he possesses. If so, he would then appear to run afoul of the necessity-of-knowledge-for-teaching condition.

My response to this objection exploits the very fact, noted in the preceding paragraph, that self-knowledge has an indexical aspect. According to David Kaplan’s widely-accepted account, indexicals have both a content and a character. The character associated with a sentence type is a function from an utterer to a propo-
sition. The content is a proposition—a function from a possible world to a truth value. So, for example, ‘I am hungry,’ uttered by me, will express the proposition that Daniel Hagen is hungry. But the same sentence type, uttered by David Kaplan, will express the proposition that David Kaplan is hungry. Each proposition will be true in all and only those worlds in which Daniel Hagen or David Kaplan, respectively, is hungry. For sentences that contain indexicals, there is a double aspect to their meaning: there is the character and the content. Something similar is the case with self-knowledge: there is the “content” of that self-knowledge, determined for a particular individual, and then there is the “character” of that knowledge, which is a way to get from an individual to self-knowledge for that individual. And Socrates has a good grip on both the content and the character of self-knowledge. Although Socrates’ self-knowledge and Alcibiades’ self-knowledge may differ in content, it is because Socrates also grasps the “character” of self-knowledge—it is because he understands how to get from an individual to self-knowledge for that individual—that Socrates is able to teach self-knowledge to others.

Consider another analogy, this time to a different kind of knowledge: garden variety know-how. I know how to cross-country ski. And some such knowledge is necessary for teaching another how to cross-country ski. But the way I know how to cross-country ski will have important first-personal elements to it. My weight, body type, and so forth will determine certain features of a kick and glide that will work well for me. Now, of course there will be some personal differences that will apply in your own case—perhaps differences that only you can grasp. Nevertheless, part of what I learned in learning how to cross-country ski is how to attend to these aspects in my own case. On the basis of that, I can help direct you to attend to your own peculiarities. Similarly, Socrates grasps not only the self-knowledge that is unique to himself (i.e., knowledge of Socrates) but also something more general about what it takes to acquire such self-knowledge. It is on the basis of this that Socrates is able to lead others to knowledge of themselves.

What might this “character” of self-knowledge be, this way to get from an individual to self-knowledge for that individual? A natural candidate is Socrates’ characteristic method: elenchus. Socrates has found and developed facility with a method that is particularly well-suited to developing self-knowledge. We often encounter him deploying this method in examining others (as in the *Euthyphro*, the *Laches*, and the *Charmides*, as well as many other dialogues). And we have some reason to think that Socrates either self-applies a similar method or submits himself to elenctic questioning at the hands of others. It is by living a life devoted to such examination that Socrates has developed the self-knowledge he has and helps

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36 Jason Stanley’s recent book *Know How* devotes a whole chapter to stressing the importance of this first-personal dimension to know-how.
others to develop self-knowledge for themselves.\textsuperscript{37}

So much for S1 and S2. What about S3? Can virtue be taught? On the view I've been defending here, at least a part of virtue can be taught and Socrates teaches this—namely, the self-knowledge component. But what about the arguments we considered above that seemed to show that Socrates thinks virtue cannot be taught? In brief, that those arguments are “un-Socratic.” They are arguments we have good reason to think Socrates would not—or at least should not—earnestly endorse.

Recall that the first argument claimed that the practice of the Athenian assembly suggests that the Athenians think virtue cannot be taught and that we should follow their lead and believe this as well. This is an extremely odd argument for Socrates to make. The opening line is particularly at odds with his claims elsewhere: “I maintain, along with the rest of the Greek world, that the Athenians are wise” (319b3–5). Throughout the Socratic dialogues, it is clear that he thinks few Athenians—if any at all—are wise (at least not with respect to moral matters).\textsuperscript{38} Furthermore, in other dialogues Socrates explicitly denies the view he here attributes to the common Athenian—namely, that on moral matters we may countenance just anyone’s opinion. See, for example, Crito: “We should not then think so much of what the majority will say about us, but what he will say who understands justice and injustice [ὁ ἐπιστήμων περὶ τῶν δικαιῶν καὶ ἀδικῶν], the one, that is, and the truth itself” (48a5–7).\textsuperscript{39} Given that this position is so uncharacteristic, we should be suspicious of whether Socrates himself endorses this line of reasoning.

Socrates’ second argument for thinking virtue cannot be taught drew on the case of virtuous parents with vicious children: if virtue could be taught, surely such parents would have their children educated in it. This argument is also an odd one for Socrates to make. We have good reason to think that Socrates would not agree that those people the many consider to be “wisest and best” are, in fact,
Those commonly held to be wise and virtuous repeatedly fail to survive elenctic examination. If such survival is a necessary condition on being knowledgeable with respect to a subject matter and if knowledge of some sort is necessary for being virtuous, then their epistemic failure opens up the possibility of a moral shortcoming. If, then, the “wisest and best” Athenians are, in fact, neither wise nor good, then it would perhaps be no surprise that their children also lack virtue. The worry about vicious children of virtuous parents would suffer from something like a presupposition failure: their parents aren’t virtuous.

Both of the reasons Socrates gives for thinking virtue cannot be taught are odd ones for him to give and rely on uncharacteristic presuppositions. What, then, are we to make of this? Why does Plato have Socrates endorse lines of reasoning that, I have claimed, are ones he shouldn’t accept? This is a tricky question. At a minimum, doing so forces Protagoras to articulate his own position, which instigates the central argument of the dialogue. Conventional views suffice for this purpose, even if they are ones Socrates himself wouldn’t endorse. These two stretches of argument are well-suited to play this ad hominem role. Given that Protagoras claims to teach virtue (or something near enough), it will be incumbent upon him to respond even to arguments that cast only prima facie doubt on the teachability of virtue. And in the long section that follows (“The Great Speech,” 320c2–328d2) Protagoras argues at length for an account that vindicates the teachability of virtue. (In fact, whether or not Socrates endorses these arguments, they can play this dialectical role.) So, within the context of Plato’s Protagoras, this provides an explanation of why Socrates might offer arguments he himself does not endorse.

Further reason for thinking that Socrates does or should reject arguments that appear to show that virtue cannot be taught is that, elsewhere, we get evidence that strongly suggests he in fact thinks virtue can be taught. In the Euthydemus, the Sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus claim to teach virtue: “We think we can teach [παραδοτών] it better than anyone else and more quickly” (273d8–9). After they claim as much, Socrates does little to dispute the possibility of this, save for his qualifying comment, “make sure... that you are telling the truth—the magnitude of your claim certainly gives me some cause for disbelief” (274a1–4). If Socrates earnestly believed that virtue could not be taught and had arguments that showed as much, this would be a natural place for him to deploy them, but he does not. Furthermore, at the end of the first protreptic section of the same dialogue

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40 Socrates explicitly raises this worry with reference to Pericles in Gorgias 503c4–d3 and 515e10ff. See also Alcibiades 118b9–119a7.
41 Cf. Euthyphro 6a7–7b4, where Socrates makes use of a premise that he would reject—namely, that there is discord among the gods.
42 Something similar may be going on in Protagoras 351b3–359a1 wherein Socrates seems to endorse hedonism—the view that pleasure is the good.
Socrates notes that he and his youthful interlocutor Clinias still need to establish whether wisdom can be taught (282c1–4). Clinias thinks it can be and Socrates says, “I like the way you talk, my fine fellow, and you have done me a good turn by relieving me of a long investigation of this very point, whether or not wisdom can be taught” (282c5–8). Elsewhere, such as Protagoras 361a3–c2, Socrates assumes that something is a kind of knowledge if and only if it can be taught. Why then the worry here about wisdom? If the wisdom in question is expert moral knowledge, which, as I’ve argued in Chapter 1, is virtue, then the worry is relevant. But here again Socrates does nothing to push the “virtue can’t be taught” line. Furthermore, Socrates’ very practice in other dialogues suggests that he believes virtue can be taught. Consider the Euthyphro or the Laches, two dialogues wherein Socrates is in pursuit of moral knowledge that would at least contribute to virtue. Finally, in the Clitophon, the eponymous interlocutor comments on the kinds of arguments Socrates typically makes, saying, “I dare say I never objected nor, I believe, ever will object to these arguments, nor to many other eloquent ones like them, [arguments] to the effect that virtue is teachable and that more care should be devoted to one’s self than to anything else” (408b5–c2, emphasis added). All combined, the preponderance of evidence favors taking Socrates to believe that virtue can be taught.

This, at long last, gives us the full resolution of the puzzle with which I began. The account of virtue as expert moral knowledge offers us a way to finesse Socrates’ disavowals of teaching and of knowledge (SI and S2). And I’ve developed here an independent argument that defuses S3: Socrates’ arguments against the teachability of virtue are ones he wouldn’t (or, at least, shouldn’t) endorse. In the next two sections I turn to some lingering issues connected to Socratic education—first, some further benefits it provides (Section 3) and second, the limitations it faces (Section 4).

2.3 Some further benefits of Socratic education

If the argument of the preceding section is correct, then it’s true that Socrates is a moral educator, albeit a limited one: he teaches a part of virtue, namely, the self-knowledge component. This in itself benefits those who learn from him, and various remarks from the Apology suggest that Socrates does indeed think that he has been of great benefit to his fellow Athenians. Consider, for example 36c3–8: “I went to each of you privately and conferred upon him what I say is the greatest benefit [τὴν μεγίστην εὐεργεσίαν], by trying to persuade him not to care for any of his belongings before caring that he himself should be as good and as wise as
possible.” The benefits of Socratic education, however, are not limited to this. Socrates provides those who learn from him with at least two further benefits: the provocation to pursue their moral education further and training in the skills to do so.

Although self-knowledge is a part of virtue, and thus is of value for that reason alone, there is a further value to self-knowledge: coming to possess it thwarts complacency and prompts further study. This feature of Socratic education is suggested by the famous gadfly metaphor from the Apology:

I was attached to this city by the god—though it seems a ridiculous thing to say—as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of gadfly. It is to fulfill some such function that I believe the god has placed me in the city. I never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find myself in your company. (30e2–31a2)

Here we see Socrates commenting directly on the hortatory side of his practice: he rouses those he meets out of their complacency. The “bite” he delivers is the discomfort of aporia and of realizing that one lacks the knowledge one took oneself to possess.

In other texts, Socrates directly endorses the claim that clearing away the conceit of knowledge is a necessary preliminary for education. The Alcibiades offers the clearest statement. Socrates asks Alcibiades, “Would you have wanted to learn or work out something that you thought you understood?” and Alcibiades responds, “Of course not” (106d10–12). Socrates makes a similar comment, again to Alcibiades, in the Second Alcibiades: “You too need to get rid of the fog which is wrapped around your soul, so as to prepare you to receive the means of telling good from evil. At present I don’t think you could do so” (150e1–4). In the Clitophon, Socrates suggests that after having his good and bad points brought to light (i.e., coming to self-knowledge) he “will make it my practice to pursue and develop the former while ridding myself of the latter to the extent that I am able” (407a2–3).

Thus Socratic education—that is, Socrates’ teaching of self-knowledge—has this further benefit: it is propaedeutic. It is a component of moral education that

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43 Apology 29b1–2 supports thinking that formal self-knowledge is beneficial, insofar as lacking it is a bad way to be: “It is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know.”

44 The recurring presence of Alcibiades in these discussions of moral education is a fascinating dramatic detail. Given the notoriety of Alcibiades, it’s tempting to see this detail as a subtle Platonic critique of the Socratic method of moral education.
stimulates further study. What sort of further study? Seeking out those components of expert moral knowledge that one still lacks or seeking to further one’s progress toward the highest levels of moral expertise.\textsuperscript{45}

There is a further benefit that Socrates provides: he teaches those who associate with him a method that they can use in continuing their own education. This method is elenchus, and Socrates primarily teaches it by showing how it is done. In the \textit{Lysis}, for example, Socrates tells Hippothales “if you’re willing to have [Lysis] talk with me, I might be able to give you a demonstration of how to carry on a conversation with him instead of talking and singing the way your friends here say you’ve been doing” (206c4–7). What follows is an example elenchus on the topic of love and friendship. In the \textit{Euthydemus}, each protreptic section is framed by remarks from Socrates that draw attention to his method of conversation. Leading in to the first protreptic, Socrates says, “the next thing to do is to give an exhibition of persuading the young man that he ought to devote himself to wisdom and virtue. But first I shall give you two a demonstration of the way in which I conceive the undertaking and of the sort of thing I want to hear” (278d1–5), and he brings it to a close saying, “There, Dionysodours and Euthydemus, is my example [παραδείγμα] of what I want a hortatory argument to be” (282d4–6). Socrates begins the second protreptic by saying “I think I ought once again to take the lead and give an indication of what sort of persons I pray they will show themselves to be” (288c5–6). Both of these dialogues involve youthful interlocutors, but even the older interlocutors in \textit{Protagoras} get a small lesson in how to conduct a proper discussion: “If Protagoras is not willing to answer questions, let him ask them, and I will answer, and at the same time I will try to show him how I think the answerer ought to answer” (338d1–3).

Not only does Socrates seem intent on teaching elenchus by example, he is aware people can sometimes learn in this way. In the \textit{Apology} he explains that “the young men who follow me around of their own free will, those who have most leisure, the sons of the very rich, take pleasure in hearing people questioned; \textit{they themselves often imitate me and try to question others}” (23c2–6, emphasis added). And in the \textit{Euthydemus}, Ctesippus, a young man present for the discussion, very quickly picks up the technique of eristic refutation (a method with some superficial similarities to Socratic elenchus). Remarking on this, Socrates says, “It is my opinion that Ctesippus, who is a bit of a rogue [πανορώγος], had picked up these very things by overhearing these very men, because there is no wisdom of a comparable sort among any other person of the present day” (300d7–9) and again, a bit later, he comments to the Sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, “The greatest thing of all is that your skill is such, and is so skillfully contrived, that anyone can master

\textsuperscript{45}See my additional remarks on the benefits of self-knowledge in Chapter 1, Section 4.
it in a very short time. I myself found this out by watching Ctesippus and seeing how quickly he was able to imitate you on the spur of the moment” (303e–4–8).46

Does this teaching elenchus by example flout the necessity-of-knowledge-for-teaching condition? No, for knowledge of how to conduct a conversation is one thing that Socrates does claim for himself—in fact, he even classifies it as a techne on at least two occasions. First, in the Euthyphro, he remarks to Euthyphro, “It looks as if I was cleverer than Daedalus in using my skill [τέχνην], in so far as he could only cause to move the things he made himself, but I can make other people’s move as well as my own” (11d3–6). (Euthyphro had just accused Socrates of causing their arguments to never stay put, just as Daedalus had constructed statues that supposedly moved themselves.) Second, in the Euthydemus, Socrates says to Euthydemus, “You are much better at discoursing than I, who have the skill of a layperson [οὐ γὰρ πάντως ποιήσων ἐπίστασαι διαλέγεσθαι ἢ ἐγώ, τέχνην ἐχών ἰδιώτου ἀνθρώπου]” (295e1–3). Even if Socrates here claims only the skill of a layperson, he still self-attributes a techne.

What is the significance of the fact that Socrates teaches his associates to engage in elenchus? In brief, skill at elenchus equips them to pursue their own moral education further. This is due to the versatility of the elenctic method: it can be used to test individuals, to determine whether they are moral experts; and it can be used to test claims, to determine whether they are sound.47 Furthermore, if Socratic conversation mimics the kind of internal dialogue that goes along with practical reasoning, then by engaging his interlocutors in his characteristic fashion Socrates might thereby provide some training in this skill as well. To see what I have in mind, consider the following scenario. Suppose that I am trying to decide whether to arrange for my mother-in-law to move in with me or whether to pay for her to live alone in an apartment. This will present a significant financial hardship either way, but I want for my mother-in-law to be able to lead a good, happy life. One question I might ask is which option better preserves her autonomy, something she values very much. It might appear that the apartment provides this: she’ll have her own space, and so forth. However, she will also be isolated and be separated from resources that, if she lived with us, would be ready at hand and would allow her to freely pursue her own projects. What is autonomy anyway? Is it being on one’s own, or is it being free to pursue one’s own projects? I will ask myself questions

46 For a Platonic worry about youthful dialecticians, see Socrates’ remark at Republic, Book VII 539b1–7: “I don’t suppose that it has escaped your notice that, when young people get their first taste of arguments, they misuse it by treating it as a kind of game of contradiction. They imitate those who’ve refuted them by refuting others themselves, and, like puppies, they enjoy dragging and tearing those around them with their arguments.”

47 I discuss these uses of the elenchus in more detail in the next chapter (Chapter 3).
such as these as I deliberate about how best to take care of my mother-in-law. Thus, the kind of interrogation Socrates subjects his interlocutors to can be replicated internally (as suggested by Socrates’ passing remark at *Theaetetus* 189e7–190a7 to the effect that thought is a kind of internal dialogue). Training at the external version of elenchus may develop skills applicable to the internal version of it. A final point on behalf of the significance of training at elenchus is that elenchus can be self-applied—not only to determine the answer to a practical question, but to probe one’s own pretensions to knowledge. The results of such examination can deepen one’s self-knowledge.

There are thus numerous benefits that accrue to moral education at the hands of Socrates. But there are limitations to just how much of a benefit he can provide and to just how far we can get via the elenctic method alone. In the next section, I turn to a consideration of these limitations.

### 2.4 The limits of Socratic education

As I’ve presented it in Section 2, above, the kind of knowledge that Socrates has, which is the kind of knowledge that he teaches, is self-knowledge. We’ve now seen some of its benefits as well as some of the further benefits of Socratic education (in Section 3). All of this, however, amounts to only a part of virtue, *i.e.*, a part of expert moral knowledge. Expert moral knowledge also includes practical and theoretical knowledge. So what of these components? How far can Socrates and the elenctic method take you toward acquiring each? I’ll consider the case of practical knowledge before turning to theoretical knowledge. To foreground my conclusion, I think that, in the end, Socrates himself cannot take one all the way to virtue, due to his own lack of practical and theoretical knowledge.

Could we develop the practical knowledge component of moral expertise via something like the Socratic method? One possibility is that engaging in elenchus-like discussions of virtue may be part of the practical activity of virtue. Consider Socrates’ famous remark from the *Apology*: “It is a very great good for a person to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing both myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for people” (38a2–6). Socrates describes discussing virtue as “a very great good.” What sort of good? It could be that such activity is of instrumental value: discussing virtue is good because it somehow contributes, perhaps indirectly, toward becoming virtuous and toward leading a flourishing human life. Or it could be that the relationship between discussing virtue and leading a flourishing human life is a constitutive one: discussing virtue partially constitutes leading a good human life. If this is right, then the Socratic method directly contributes toward realizing one
of the practical activities that is part of leading a good life.

Even granting this, however, such practical activity will be only part of the practical activity associated with virtue. It is not enough simply to discuss virtue; one must also act virtuously. And so while the Socratic method may contribute a small part toward developing practical knowledge, unless it also trains one in virtuous activity it will not be able to take a student all the way in developing this component of expert moral knowledge.

As noted above, the dialogues suggest another form of moral education: exemplary education. And it may be that virtuous activity is exemplified by Socrates—both "on stage" as well as "off stage." For the latter, think of references to his conduct at Delium, Amphipolis, and Potidaea. The *Apology* contains numerous descriptions of Socrates' devotion to the philosophical life and of his limited civic engagement. Outside the Socratic dialogues, consider Alcibiades' extended description (in *Symposium* 215a4–222b7) of Socrates' character and comportment. For an example of "on-stage" virtuous activity, consider *Charmides* 155c5–156d4, where Socrates (barely!) restrains his erotic reaction to Charmides' beauty. Furthermore, many of the Socratic dialogues are framed by highly practical questions (e.g., in the *Crito*, whether it would be just to escape); consequently, the ensuing elenctic discussions model the kind of inquiry and deliberation that Socrates thinks should precede action. Given all of this, it may be that the practical knowledge of virtue is taught by example: Socrates is a moral exemplar.

Although Socrates may, to this extent, be a moral exemplar, there are a number of worries about the adequacy of exemplary education for developing full practical knowledge. First, a moral exemplar will be an appropriate individual to model only to the extent that the exemplar engages in reliably good activity. While Socrates may be reliably good in a wide range of situations (and may be assisted in this by his *daimonion*), his own lack of theoretical knowledge precludes his being fully reliable. In the moral expert, practical and theoretical knowledge are integrated in such a way that each supports the other. One of the ways that theoretical knowledge supports practical knowledge is by providing guidance in unfamiliar situations, situations that call for more explicit moral reasoning. Given Socrates' lack of theoretical knowledge, his practical knowledge will lack this critical support. Thus, for a full range of circumstances, Socrates would not be a reliably good actor and therefore would not be an adequate moral exemplar. But in addition to this worry, there is a more general concern as to whether exemplary education is sufficient.

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48 Alluded to in the *Apology* (28d9–e4), the *Laches* (181a7–b4 and 189b3–6), and the *Charmides* (153a1–d1).

49 I have in mind the stories of the trial of the generals and of the persecution of Leon, both described in *Apology* 32a4–e1.

50 I discuss this in Section 5.1 of Chapter 1.
The prospective student must not only identify the potential exemplar’s activity as virtuous, she must do so in such a way that this information is then accessible to her for directing her own action. Without substantial guidance, it is doubtful that a novice could achieve this. Finally, even with a perfect exemplar and with the identification and accessibility concerns assuaged, there is the simple point that watching someone else exhibit practical knowledge will not suffice for developing it in oneself.\textsuperscript{51} By watching an expert fly-tier tie flies, I may learn something about fly tying; but to become an expert fly-tier myself I must spend considerable time tying flies.\textsuperscript{52}

So much for practical knowledge. What about theoretical knowledge? An immediate worry is that individual elenctic episodes cannot take you all the way to theoretical understanding. This is because they merely test for the consistency of a set of beliefs about a topic; however, there could be mutually incompatible but individually consistent sets of beliefs about a topic, and so there’s a worry as to whether achieving such consistency is sufficient for theoretical understanding of a subject matter. Repeated elenctic episodes, however, may hold out some promise. Consider, for example, Socrates’ remark in the \textit{Meno}: “These opinions have now just been stirred up like a dream, but if he were repeatedly asked these same questions in various ways, you know that in the end his knowledge of these things would be as accurate as anyone’s” (85c9–d1).\textsuperscript{53} The thought is that repeated examinations of the same matters, trying different tacks, exploring the subject from different angles, may provide a route to theoretical understanding. Two further things that elenchus can reveal are the interrelations among various moral concepts and counterexamples to moral principles and accounts. Discovering relations among moral concepts such as the beneficial, the good, the pleasant, and the fine may develop one’s theoretical understanding of the moral domain. Mapping out such relations helps to map out the terrain of the subject matter. Turning up counterexamples closes off fruitless routes of inquiry. These results thus contribute to theoretical knowledge and assist its further development.

\textsuperscript{51}Does this undercut my claim that Socrates teaches elenchus by example? No, because Socrates not only displays proper elenctic technique, he also draws his interlocutors into the discussion, thus causing them to practice elenchus themselves.

\textsuperscript{52}How exactly is the ignorant novice supposed to teach himself (and therefore learn) anything? We can find Plato confronting this challenge and grappling with it in at least two places outside the Socratic dialogues: the \textit{Meno} and the \textit{Theaetetus}. In each case his solution involves positing some preexisting knowledge that the learner discovers within himself. This is the implication of both the doctrine of recollection (from the \textit{Meno}) and the metaphor of the midwife (from the \textit{Theaetetus}).

\textsuperscript{53}Cf. Socrates’ remark to Callicles at \textit{Gorgias} 513c8–d1: “If we closely examine these same matters often and in a better way, you’ll be persuaded.” What could this better way be? A proposal: with Callicles as a more compliant interlocutor. In the discussion immediately preceding this, Callicles had ceased to be a cooperative conversant.
All this said, there is a persistent worry about whether this alone would be enough for developing theoretical knowledge. Even granting all of the points from the previous paragraph, there is no guarantee that a person who is subjected to elenctic scrutiny by Socrates or who inquires into these matters for him or herself will ever develop an understanding of the moral domain that rises to the level of theoretical knowledge. When the inquirer and the instructor both lack such knowledge, there is a great risk that the inquiry will be fruitless.

In the end, Socrates himself cannot take anyone all the way to virtue. This is because he himself lacks the practical and theoretical knowledge necessary for him being a reliable teacher of these components. And we have good evidence that he in fact is not a reliable moral educator: consider people like Critias, Charmides, and Alcibiades, and contrast them with individuals such as Plato, Xenophon, Antisthenes, or Aeschines. Socrates' lack of knowledge might best explain these mixed results.54

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I've raised and defused one worry about Socrates' status as an educator: the account of virtue as expert moral knowledge from Chapter 1 helps to resolve the practical contradiction with which I began. Whatever the ultimate solution to this puzzle is, we do need a solution. The success of my account of virtue for solving it provides some reason for accepting it. Its value is in part revealed by the interpretive work it can do. I've also offered an independent argument that addresses Socrates' apparent denials that virtue can be taught. Such denials are "un-Socratic" and he either would not or should not earnestly endorse them. Finally, I have illustrated some of the further benefits of Socratic education but have also argued that Socrates' potential as a moral educator does have its limits. Due to his own epistemic shortcomings, Socrates himself cannot take anyone all the way to virtue. This, in turn, points the way toward larger questions: Could a full moral expert lead us all the way to virtue? What should our attitude toward moral experts be? And how do policies of deference toward them contribute to or interfere with our own moral development? I turn to these issues in the next chapter.

54 Another possible explanation for the mixed results of Socratic moral education is that something is missing from the picture—namely, an attentiveness to the affective side of individuals. (See my Chapter 1, footnote 54.) Note the shift of focus to this that we find in Plato and Aristotle. Note also, for both Plato and Aristotle, the emphasis on the need to start early. Socrates seems to have thought protreptic works at any age. Plato and Aristotle think there are some lost causes.
Chapter 3

Moral Deference and Moral Development

This chapter is about the interaction between two issues raised in Plato’s Socratic dialogues. The first concerns experts—in particular, moral experts—and how we ought to interact with them. The second concerns our own moral development, how we ought to go about promoting it. Although my principal aim in this chapter will be to investigate the relationship between these two issues from a Socratic perspective, and hence will often focus on exegetical matters, I will bookend my argument with some reflections on a matter of contemporary philosophical interest: the puzzle of pure moral deference.

3.1 The puzzle of pure moral deference

In a recent paper,¹ Sarah McGrath discusses what she calls “the puzzle of pure moral deference.” Pure moral deference is exhibited in cases where one agent adopts a belief about some moral matter because another agent holds that belief. Such cases are pure when the deferring agent knows all the relevant non-moral facts and when that agent’s moral sensibility is not compromised with respect to the issue at hand. So, for example (to use McGrath’s case):

You tell me that eating meat is immoral. Although I believe that, left to my own devices, I would not think this, no matter how long I reflected,² I adopt your attitude as my own. It is not that I believe that you are better informed about potentially relevant non-moral facts (e.g. about the conditions under which livestock is kept, or about the typical effects of eliminating meat from one’s diet). On the contrary, I know that I have all of the non-moral information relevant to the issue that you have.³

This case is meant to contrast with cases where I simply reflect on such matters myself and come to my own conclusion (this would be moral non-deference) and with cases where I defer to you, but because I know either that you have better

¹McGrath (2009). See also her (2011).
²McGrath includes the qualifier that I would not adopt this attitude if left to my own devices, but I think it is eliminable. Including it might serve to strengthen the intuition that there’s something bad about pure moral deference, but I worry that what is then doing the work is the fact that you form a contrary attitude than the one you would have formed, rather than the pure moral deference per se.
access to some relevant non-moral information or that my moral judgment with respect to this matter is somehow compromised (this would be what McGrath calls “impure moral deference”).

Is pure moral deference something that arises among peers, or is it confined to cases of novices deferring to experts? Although the example above doesn’t make this clear, McGrath holds that in cases of pure moral deference, the person deferring “treats the other person as a moral expert.”⁴ At any rate, I will be concerned with cases of novice-to-expert deference. The reason for focusing on such cases is that the peer-to-peer case introduces the added worry that such deference would be irrational. Why should one carpenter purely defer to another if each is equally adept at carpentry? That would be rather odd. But so too in the moral case.

The worry that concerns McGrath is different from this. She is interested in an apparent variance between the moral and the non-moral case. There is something that can seem a bit odd about cases of pure moral deference, and many people feel that they are in some way problematic. In contrast, few people think there is something problematic about non-moral deference, for example, deferring to a carpenter about matters of woodworking or a historian about matters of (say) the U.S. Civil War (assuming these individuals are more knowledgeable than you about such matters). The puzzle of pure moral deference is to explain this (alleged) asymmetry.

McGrath considers a number of strategies for explaining this asymmetry and raises questions about each of them. Here I want to skip over most of her discussion so as to highlight the final explanation she offers, which she describes as a (neo-)Socratic proposal:

Moral deference is in principle no more problematic than deference in other domains. But in practice, there are formidable epistemological difficulties that arise when one attempts to recognize or identify someone with superior moral judgment; moreover, we (perhaps implicitly) recognize that this is the case.⁵

Although I am sympathetic to this worry about the epistemological difficulties of identifying moral experts, I don’t think this is the best diagnosis of the puzzle of pure moral deference.⁶ In the concluding section of this chapter (Section 6), I will

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⁵McGrath (2009), p. 334.

⁶In her (2011), McGrath modifies her view and effectively concedes that the neo-Socratic proposal from her (2009) “does not provide a sufficiently deep explanation of the datum [i.e., the puzzle]” (p. 129). For the purposes of my discussion here, I will stick with the neo-Socratic proposal, as it raises the question that interests me: what would Socrates think about moral deference?
offer an alternative explanation. At this point, though, I want to turn to the texts of Plato and consider what Socrates would say about such matters, for, in developing her Socratic proposal, McGrath draws on Alexander Nehamas's work—in particular, his account of the Socratic policy on identifying experts. Unfortunately Nehamas's view on this is not quite right, as I argue in the next section. This, in turn, opens up broader questions about Socratic policies regarding experts, which will be the focus of the bulk of this chapter.

3.2 Identifying moral experts: does it take one to know one?

In his (1987), Nehamas makes two slightly different arguments to the effect that, when it comes to identifying moral experts, Socrates thinks it takes one to know one. This, Nehamas thinks, “is one of the most crucial, interesting, and paradoxical consequences of Socrates’ view on moral education: only one good human being can recognize another.”

Nehamas’s first argument takes its inspiration from the episode in Protagoras 313a1–314c2. At the start of this dialogue, Socrates recounts how he was visited early one morning by his young friend Hippocrates (who is distinct from famous doctor). Hippocrates had recently learned that Protagoras, the famous Sophist, was in town and was eager to seek out his services as a teacher. Before heading out to find Protagoras, Socrates subjected Hippocrates to some light elenctic examination (“I wanted to see what Hippocrates was made of, so I started to examine him with a few questions” 311a8–b2). In the course of this examination (in the stretch of text that interests Nehamas, 313a1–314c2), Socrates contrasted the comparative risks of accepting teachings, without yet knowing their value, with purchasing some food or drink from a merchant: “If you are a knowledgeable consumer, you can buy teachings safely from Protagoras or anyone else. But if you’re not, please don’t risk what is most dear to you on a roll of the dice, for there is a far greater risk in buying teaching than in buying food” (313e2–314a3). In the case of food or drink, “you can take each item back home from the store in its own container and before you ingest it into your body you can lay it all out and call in an expert for

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7 McGrath cites Nehamas (1998) and (1987). I will focus on the presentation in his (1987). In making use of Nehamas’s exegesis in this fashion, McGrath would appear to provide us with an example of non-moral deference. I should also note that while I take issue with the details of Nehamas’s interpretation, both he and McGrath are absolutely right that Plato’s dialogues are rife with questions and concerns about moral expertise, including the issue of identifying experts.


consultation" (314a3–7). Not so with teaching: "You cannot carry teaching away in a separate container. You put down your money and take the teaching away in your soul by having learned it, and off you go, either helped or injured" (314b1–4).10

Nehamas takes this episode to show that, in order to recognize a professed teacher of virtue (ἀρετή, aretē)—that is, a moral expert11—we must know that his "product" is good. To know this, we must know what is good for the soul. But this just is the moral knowledge that is virtue (he thinks), and so "we already know what they profess to teach. Teachers of aretē are simply useless."12

Nehamas’s second argument takes its inspiration from an episode described in the Apology. In the course of justifying his philosophical lifestyle (a lifestyle he took to have been divinely ordained), Socrates compares his situation to that of a person ordered by a military commander to stay at his post (28d9–29a2). Socrates sums up his position: "It is wicked and shameful to do wrong, to disobey ἀπειθέων one’s superior, be he god or man" (29b6–7). Nehamas notes that Plato uses the verb ἀπειθέων [apeithēn] here. Although this verb is standardly translated as ‘to disobey’ (see LSJ, s.v. ἀπειθέων), Nehamas argues that here it is best understood as ‘to be unconvinced.’13 This reading then sets up Nehamas’s argument about identifying experts.

Nehamas takes this passage to suggest that recognizing moral experts requires conviction. As he puts it:

Experts, then, cannot be recognized unless you are convinced by their arguments. But what does such conviction involve? It involves accepting the conclusions of these arguments as well as the methods by which the arguments reach their directions for how to act. And what,

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10I set to the side questions about why Socrates adopts this somewhat peculiar view of teaching and learning, although it is an interesting question why Socrates doesn’t think we can provisionally and non-committally accept teachings. It’s also not obvious that the “it takes one to know one” point is what is at issue in this passage. Socrates’ main point seems to be that there is a distinctive risk associated with moral instruction: successful teaching effects a fundamental change in you. Because of this, the only person who could pursue moral instruction without risk would be the one who already possessed the knowledge in question, but such a person would no longer need that instruction.

11For Socrates these will be the same individuals—at least, at the upper echelons of expertise. But maybe also lower down. Even to be a partial teacher of virtue (as I think Socrates is) one must be a partial expert at virtue (as I think Socrates is). For more on this, see the previous chapter (Chapter 2).


13He derives this reading from the verb’s etymological connection to the verb ‘πιθεῖν,’ which standardly means ‘to persuade’ but in the Middle and Passive voices means ‘to be persuaded’ and, hence, ‘to obey’ (see LSJ, s.v. πιθεῖν). Nehamas reads ἀπειθέων; then, as alpha-privative (‘ἄ-’) plus ‘to be persuaded’ (‘πιθεῖν’) hence, ‘to be unpersuaded,’ i.e., unconvinced. I find this reading of the verb extremely strained. The most natural reading is ‘to disobey,’ with no connotation that this implies anything about having found the arguments of your superiors unconvincing.
in turn, is this? Is it not a way of saying that one has become, at least to that extent, a moral expert, a virtuous agent oneself? Is it not to say that only one virtuous agent can recognize another? \(^\text{14}\)

Again, it seems that it takes one to know one. Recognizing moral experts requires that we already possess the thing we had hoped to acquire from them.

If the account of moral knowledge from Chapter 1 is correct, there is a quick way to block each of these arguments. Note that each makes an inference from acquiring some knowledge to becoming virtuous. Now suppose that knowledge is, in fact, sufficient for virtue. Even so, these inferences will go through only for the proper sort of knowledge: expert moral knowledge. And there can remain a gap between knowing what is good for the soul and knowing this as the expert does. Likewise for being convinced by an expert’s arguments about virtue and becoming an expert oneself. (It would be as if one could become a mathematician simply by following someone through a proof of a theorem. Even working it out for oneself—albeit with some help—isn’t adequate.) Nehamas’s arguments go wrong because of the model of knowledge they tacitly assume.

The argument of the previous paragraph shows that something has gone wrong in Nehamas’s reasoning, but it doesn’t really address whether or not Socrates thinks it takes one to know one. Setting aside the account from Chapter 1, we can still show that Nehamas is wrong on this point. First, note that, by Socrates’ own lights, recognizing an expert without being one is not a problem in the non-moral case. He can recognize an expert carpenter while not being a carpenter himself (see, e.g., Apology 22c9–e6).\(^\text{15}\) How does he do so? The Laches suggests one answer. The way we typically identify experts is by finding out whether they have studied the relevant art and have had good teachers or, if self-taught, by pointing to “some well-executed product of their art” (185b1–186a2). As long as we have a grip on this, we can identify experts.

Is there an analogue of this “well-executed product” in the moral case? And if there is one, is it of the sort that could be readily identified even by a non-expert (as a functional chair is even by a non-chairmaker)?\(^\text{16}\) One possibility might be a

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\(^{15}\)Cf. Laches 180c8–d3, where Nicias reports that Socrates “only recently recommended a man to me as music teacher for my son.” This suggests that Socrates is adept at identifying experts at music. From the Euthydemus we learn that Socrates has been taking music lessons himself (272c1–d3).

\(^{16}\)Cf. Irwin (1977): “[The final good of virtue] must be clearly identifiable apart from disputable beliefs about virtues; and it must clearly be what everyone already wants, so that knowledge of how to achieve it guarantees right action” (pp. 6–7). For contemporary discussion of the need for such an “independent standard,” see McGrath (2009), p. 134, McGrath (2011), p. 127, and (against such a need) Sliwa (2012), pp. 22–25. Goldman (2001) explores the more general challenge of how a non-expert might go about assessing the credibility of rival (putative) experts.
well-ordered soul. If we could see that an individual has a good condition of the soul—lacks unruly appetites, for example—then perhaps this would give independent grounds for thinking she is a moral expert. In many of Socrates’ dialectical contexts, however, it is a controversial matter not only whether there are teachers of virtue but also just what this well-executed product might be. (Consider dialogues like *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, and *Republic*, Book I.) An analogous problem might arise in the non-moral case, for example, when comparing the conventional to the *avant garde* in art. Nevertheless, Socrates thinks he has a method that could identify experts in general and moral experts in particular: his elenctic practice. This would seem to hold some promise even in such difficult cases because elenchus homes in on features internal to the agent.

Elenctic examination is, *inter alia*, a test for expertise. It proceeds by having the putative expert answer questions and give explanations related to his or her claimed subject matter. Failure to survive elenctic examination gives the examiner reason to believe that the respondent is not an expert at the subject in question. Surviving elenctic examination, in turn, gives the examiner some reason to believe that the respondent is an expert. This method is especially useful on account of its topic neutrality: failure is revealed by contradictory responses or the inability to provide a response; success is revealed by lack of contradiction and facility in response. These are things the elenctic examiner can often spot even when ignorant of the subject matter in question.

What kind of certainty is provided by this method of identifying experts? Does it offer a decision procedure or is it merely a proof procedure? A decision procedure test for validity, for example, will show, for any argument, whether it is valid—if it is valid, it will tell us that; if it is invalid, it will tell us that. (And this can be decided within a finite number of steps.) Truth-tables can be used to set up a decision procedure test for validity. In contrast, a proof procedure test for validity will show, for any argument, if it is valid, that it is valid, but if it is invalid, it will

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17 In conversation, Sally Haslanger suggested to me something along these lines.

18 This might seem to raise worries about Socrates’ account being too “intellectualist.” The worry, in brief, is that elenchus seems to test only for theoretical knowledge. But if my Chapter 1 account is right, this is but one component of expertise. Consequently, while failure at elenchus will rightly exclude someone from being a complete expert (since theoretical knowledge will be necessary for this), it may mistakenly cast aside someone with considerable practical knowledge. If part of the practical knowledge of moral expertise is skill at elenchus (a possibility I explore in Chapter 2, Sections 3 and 4), then elenchus could test for this as well, but this would still only reveal part of the practical knowledge of virtue.

19 Cf. Benson (2000), p. 17, fn. 1: “Failing to have consistent beliefs would falsify a claim to knowledge. Having consistent beliefs would make a knowledge claim quite probable but by no means certain.”


21 Thanks to Rae Langton for putting the question to me in this form.
not show this. Derivations in a natural deduction system are proof procedures. If you find a derivation, you know the argument is valid. If you don’t find a derivation, you haven’t thereby shown that it is invalid.

The elenchus offers a proof procedure test for expertise rather than a decision procedure: failure at elenchus decisively settles that the interlocutor is not an expert; success at elenchus does not decisively settle that he is, and may not settle this decisively in a finite number of steps. Nevertheless, continued success at elenchus gives us reason to think the interlocutor is an expert. In this respect, the elenchus test for expertise can be compared to the confirmation of a universally quantified statement: a counterexample decisively refutes such a statement, but confirming evidence is not similarly decisive. But even if confirmation is not decisive, repeated confirmation should boost one’s confidence in the truth of the claim in question. Likewise in the case of testing expertise via elenchus: failure decisively confirms that someone lacks expertise and success should boost the questioner’s confidence that the answerer is, in fact, an expert.

The method of elenchus provides a way to determine whether or not someone is an expert and it can function successfully even for questioners who are not themselves experts. Thus, pace Nehamas, it does not (on Socrates’ view) take one to know one. To press this point home, consider Nehamas’s own remarks from a different paper: “One does know what one does not know because questioning and the inability to answer continued questions determine that knowledge is lacking. Conversely, the continued ability to answer such questions suggests that knowledge has been reached and that ‘you have happened upon’ what you did not know (80d8).”

But why can’t we shift this from the first and the second person to the third? The inability of individuals to answer questions confirms them to be ignorant; their continued success at responding suggests that they are knowledgeable.

While the epistemic worries about identifying experts that McGrath and Nehamas raise are not so pressing for Socrates, a different set of worries concerning moral experts will emerge as we consider, in the sections that follow (Sections 3–5), the interaction between Socrates’ views about moral deference, on the one hand, and what the Socratic account of virtue, from Chapter 1, requires for moral development, on the other. This, in turn, will point to a different diagnosis of the puzzle of pure moral deference, which I will develop in the final section of this chapter (Section 6).

3.3 Socratic moral inquiry: deference or do-it-yourself?

Suppose that we've got our experts. Now what? How does Socrates recommend that we interact with them? What behavior does he recommend? What attitudes should we adopt toward them? In the Socratic dialogues we can find a number of different suggested policies. Broadly speaking, these policies fall into one of two types, which I will call DEFERENCE and DO-IT-YOURSELF, respectively. Spelling these out brings to light an apparent tension between them. In the final part of this section (3.3), I suggest a way to fit them together.

3.3.1 Concerning DEFERENCE

The simplest case of DEFERENCE is strict obedience to one's superiors. We can find such a policy expressed in the Apology (in a passage I already considered, when discussing Nehamas, above). Socrates brings it up in the context of justifying his behavior during the Peloponnesian War and during his domestic life of philosophical inquiry:

> Wherever a man has taken a position that he believes to be best, or has been placed by his commander, there he must I think remain and face danger, without a thought for death or anything else, rather than disgrace... it is wicked and shameful to do wrong, to disobey one's superior [τὸ βελτίον], be he god or man (28d5–9, 29b6–7, emphasis added)

This appears to recommend a straightforward principle of deference: if someone is your superior, then you must obey him; to do otherwise is wrong, which is wicked and shameful. But superior in what respects? Does Socrates mean I should do whatever (say) the Provost orders? We should take him to be referring to a superior with respect to some subject matter.23 For example, if someone is superior to me at scrimshaw, I should defer to her on scrimshaw matters. In general, it is your epistemic superior to whom you should defer. Your moral superior will be a special case of this.24 What Socrates isn’t committed to is thinking that one must obey an arbitrary superior (in a conventional sense) about any matter whatsoever, e.g., obeying my Provost on matters of duck decoy painting, which neither of us knows anything about, suppose. (Socrates’ own willingness to disobey conventional authorities, described in Apology 32a4–e1, confirms this point.) Note also that in this

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24 See Laches 184d5–185a3 and Crito 47a2–48a10. See also Socrates’ remarks on the authority of knowledge at Protagoras 352b–d.
context the policy specifically applies to action: you must do whatever your superior tells you to do. But it plausibly extends to belief as well: if they tell you that P, you should believe that P. (This isn’t meant to presuppose doxastic voluntarism. I simply have in mind the mundane case of testimonial deference: you believe that P on the grounds that your superior said that P.)

In Plato’s *Laches*, Socrates develops what appears to be an even more demanding version of deference. Call it *drop everything and find the expert*. The policy shows up following an abortive inquiry into how best to train the sons of the Athenians Lysimachus and Melesias—that is, an inquiry concerning “what form of instruction or practice would make them turn out best” (179d6–7). The two parents are consulting the Athenian generals Laches and Nicias. Nicias recommends fighting in armor (i.e., armed as a hoplite). Laches disagrees, and so the company seems to have reached an impasse as to the value of such a course of study. This is where the policy is introduced:

So in this present case it is also necessary to investigate first of all whether any one of us is an expert in the subject we’re debating, or not. And if one of us is, then we should listen to him even if he is only one, and disregard the others. *But if no one of us is an expert, then we must look for someone who is* (184e11–185a3).

The part that interests me here is the concluding line, which I’ve emphasized. It suggests a particularly strong policy: if no one in a given context is an expert at some subject matter under discussion, then one must seek out an expert.

Remarks later on in the *Laches* and from other dialogues strengthen this policy even further and suggest that not only must we seek out an expert, we must drop everything and do so. For example, at *Laches* 186b5–8 Socrates notes that if none of the present company is an expert at the care of young men’s souls, then “we should give orders that a search be made for others and should not run the risk of ruining the sons of our friends and thus incurring the greatest reproach from their nearest relatives.” It is this moral risk that motivates dropping everything. Note also the conclusion of the same dialogue: “What I say we ought to do, my

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25 A special case of strict obedience to superiors may be Socrates’ treatment of his daimonion, or divine sign. Although the presence of Socrates’ divine sign raises of a host of interesting questions (Is he justified in deferring to it? How exactly does it work anyway?), I won’t be addressing any of them here. For an excellent discussion of some of the complex questions surrounding Socrates’ divine sign, see the correspondence among Gregory Vlastos, Thomas Brickhouse, Mark McPherran, and Nicholas Smith, reprinted (in part) as Chapter 10 in Smith and Woodruff, eds. (2000).

26 This policy is bundled together with another thesis about expertise: namely, when it comes to some subject matter S, we should listen to an expert at S and disregard non-experts, even if the latter outnumber the former. We can find this policy in other dialogues as well, such as *Crito*. 

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friends—since this is just between ourselves—is to join in searching for the best possible teacher first for ourselves—we really need one—and then for the young men, sparing neither money nor anything else. What I don’t advise is that we remain as we are” (201a2-7). Socrates’ closing remarks in the Euthyphro also suggest this stronger “drop everything” policy: “If you[, Euthyphro,] had no clear knowledge of piety and impiety you would never have ventured to prosecute your old father for murder on behalf of a servant. For fear of the gods you would have been afraid to take the risk lest you should not be acting rightly” (15d4-8). 27

This is even stronger than a comparative policy—viz. of deferring to whomever in a context is most expert. Rather, if we have reason to think we aren’t experts, then we should postpone action—table the matter—and seek out an expert. This might seem impossibly demanding. Even so, compare our behavior in the case of other crafts. Suppose that I’m trying to fix my toilet. I don’t know too much about plumbing, but suppose that I am the most expert in the context. In this case, though, if I try to proceed on my own, I may end up in over my head. 28 I really should just call a plumber rather than pressing on. Sometimes we do the same in the moral cases: rather than forging onward on some moral issue, we take time out to consult those we judge to be wiser than ourselves.

What does dropping everything amount to? It amounts to ceasing independent inquiry into or deliberation about some matter once you have realized that you aren’t (and no one else in the present context is) an expert about such matters. Consequently, drop everything strengthens the policy of deference recommended by strict obedience. (Once you’ve found the experts, strict obedience will apply.) Alone, strict obedience could be taken as recommending that we obey experts in those contexts in which they are present, but it remains silent on what to do in their absence. Drop everything speaks to this issue and says, in such cases, one should drop everything and seek out an expert. The former is compatible with a recommendation to muddle about on your own in the absence of experts; the latter blocks this recommendation.

Is this a policy of testimonial deference or something else? The immediate context of the policy suggests that it is testimonial, i.e., a matter of forming beliefs on the basis of an expert’s testimony. This is also strongly suggested by the argument that sets up the policy. There Lysimachus suggests that he’s willing to go along with whatever the majority thinks is the best way to educate the kids. Socrates disputes the adequacy of this policy, and, pushing on the craft analogy, puts a series of questions to Melesias (the other parent). Suppose the question were about gym-

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27 Crito 47a2–48a7 also suggests a similarly strong deferential policy and includes explicit mention of the harm one incurs when disobeying experts.

28 So to speak!
nastic matters. "Would you be persuaded by the greater number or by whoever has been educated and exercised under a good teacher?" (184e1–3). Melesias would be persuaded by the latter. From this Socrates makes an inference: "So I think it is by knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) that one ought to make decisions, if one is to make them well, and not by majority rule" (184e8–9). And from this, he infers the principle expressed at 184e11–a3. In stating the principle, Socrates says that "we should listen to him [i.e., the expert] even if he is only one, and disregard the others." It is a matter of being persuaded to believe something. And Socrates thinks we should be persuaded by the one with knowledge, not by the majority. This suggests a policy of pure deference: if an identified expert at some subject S claims that P (about some S-related thing), then we should believe that P as well. So if an identified expert says that fighting in armor is the best way to train youths, we should believe this as well. And if no expert is available to supply us with an answer, we should seek one out. All this is to say that the policy from Laches suggests that the kind of deference is what I've called testimonial deference—namely, adopting a belief on the basis of (deference to) expert testimony. (Below, in Section 5, I will revisit the question of whether Socrates need restrict deference to testimonial deference.)

3.3.2 Concerning Do-it-yourself

A passage from the Crito offers a rather different sort of policy from the deferential ones we've seen so far. In it Socrates suggests that we can inquire or deliberate even in the absence of experts. We can do so by making use of those principles we've already arrived at through prior deliberation (or we can examine matters anew):

We must therefore examine whether we should act in this way or not, as not only now but at all times I am the kind of man who listens to nothing within me but the argument that on reflection seems best to me. I cannot, now that this fate has come upon me, discard the arguments I used; they seem to me much the same. I value and respect the same principles as before, and if we have no better arguments to bring up at this moment, be sure that I shall not agree with you, not even if the power of the majority were to frighten us with more bogeys, as if we were children, with threats of incarcerations and executions and confiscation of property (46b3–c6).

29 The language suggests the policy is inferred from what precedes it: "So [Ὁξοξεύ..." typically marks an inference. (Although it could be progressive.) See Denniston (1950), pp. 434–5. Smyth (1920) takes non-interactive uses of this particle to be inferential. See S2952.

Socrates is discussing with Crito whether he (Socrates) ought to escape from prison. Crito, a man of some means, tries to convince him to escape; Socrates urges Crito to pause and reflect with him on the question of whether escape would be just. The issue at hand is practical: what ought he to do? The framing is normative: would it be just to escape. But in the face of this question, Socrates doesn't tell Crito, "Well, neither of us is an expert at such matters—indeed, I don't even know what justice itself is, let alone whether escaping would be just" (compare statements of this type elsewhere). Rather, Socrates says, in effect, "Let's look into the matter together." Before proceeding, he reviews with Crito various conclusions they've arrived at in prior discussions about moral matters. Socrates takes these as starting points; they function as premises in the argument to come (an argument that is conducted in the voice of the personified Laws of the city). The key feature of the policy that is exemplified by this passage is that Socrates appears to think it is permissible to abide by the results of prior non-expert inquiry and to use those results in theoretical and practical reasoning in contexts devoid of experts. In essence, there is latitude for doing it yourself. Thus the policy DO-IT-YOURSELF.

We can find a similar sentiment expressed in various other dialogues, wherein Socrates maintains firm commitment to moral principles even while acknowledging his own lack of knowledge about such issues. The Apology is one such dialogue. The Gorgias also offers a good example. Toward the end of his long argument with Callicles, Socrates makes this famous remark:

> These conclusions at which we arrived earlier in our previous discus-
> sions are, I'd say, held down and bound by argument of iron and adamant... And yet for my part, my account is ever the same: I don't know how these things [i.e., (principles about) moral matters] are, but no one I've ever met, as in this case, can say anything else without being ridiculous. So once more I set it down that these things are so. (508e6–509a2, 509a4–7).

What exactly are these results? In the immediate context, Socrates refers to the principle that “to commit any unjust act at all against me [or, presumably, anyone] and my possessions is both worse and more shameful for the one who does these unjust acts than it is for me, the one who suffers them” (Gorgias 508e4–6). But we can find other examples throughout the Socratic dialogues. The Apology is full of

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31 Although this is a near-standard interpretation of the Crito's argumentative structure, Harte (1999) offers an excellent challenge to this orthodoxy. She argues that the Crito in fact reveals a deep conflict of values and lack of common ground among Crito, Socrates, and the personified Laws.

32 "No one I've ever met, as in this case, can say anything else without being ridiculous"—Socrates means that those who deny these conclusions end up in aporia.
them: e.g., “it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what
one does not know” (29b1–2), “I do not think it is permitted that a better person
be harmed by a worse” (30d1–2), “it is the greatest good for a person to discuss
virtue every day... for the unexamined life is not worth living” (38a2–3, 38a5–6),
a good person cannot be harmed either in life or in death” (41d1–2). Socrates
mentions several early on in the Crito: e.g., “the most important thing is not life,
but the good life” (48b4–5), “the good life, the beautiful life, and the just life are
the same” (48b7–8), “one must never in any way do wrong willingly... to do wrong
[is] never good or admirable... wrongdoing or injustice is in every way harmful and
shameful to the wrongdoer” (49a4, a5, b4–5).

Such principles typically function as lemmas in the broader arguments Socrates
makes. He offers them up and, when assented to by his interlocutors, they are
assumed thenceforth. I take it that these are principles that have held good in prior
elenctic arguments. Because of this, Socrates makes regular use of them. That
said, their status is fragile, insofar as he is open to the possibility that someone
may yet show them to be incorrect. But, as he notes in the Gorgias passage quoted
above, as of yet no one has demonstrated this. And so Socrates abides by these
results, making use of them in his own non-expert moral inquiry and deliberation,
<i.e.,</i> when “doing it himself.”

But why follow this policy as opposed to, say, flipping a coin? Why think that
abiding by such results furnishes better than even odds for hitting on a good out-
come? One possibility is that some non-expert inquiry may encourage confidence
that some beliefs (or proposals for courses of action) are better than others. How
might this come about? For one thing, elenctic examination turns up inconsisten-
cies.33 If these principles are the ones retained after such a process of removing
inconsistencies, one might then have some reason to think one’s epistemic house is
in better order than previously. This, in turn, might offer some consideration in fa-
vor of the beliefs in such a consistent set. Another feature of elenctic examination
is that it turns up counterexamples.34 Susceptibility to counterexample suggests
that a principle is incorrect as stated; resistance to counterexample provides prima
facie evidence for its truth. If elenchus gives us some reason (even if highly defea-
sible) to believe that the principles we’ve employed (or examined) are on the right
track, then this warrants abiding by them as opposed to flipping a coin. At any rate,

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33 See, for example, the line of argument in Charmides 163e1–164d3. Socrates reveals an in-
consistency in Critias’s beliefs, which Critias promptly seeks to revise. (Although Critias still runs in to
trouble, so it’s not clear that the results of this revision are better off than where he stood prior to that
revision.)

34 Consider, for example, the quick counterexample in Republic Book I to the definition of justice
as “speaking the truth and repaying what one has borrowed”—namely, it would not be just to return
borrowed weapons to a person who had lost his or her mind (331c1–d3).
there's good reason to think Socrates thought such principles had something in their favor. After all, he doesn't completely start afresh in each elenchus, but continually returns to the same or similar principles. Presumably, these are principles that he has employed in the past that have survived scrutiny or otherwise fared well.35

Socrates, then, seems to allow us to abide by the results—even if provisional—of prior moral inquiry. We stick to these results and use them when engaged in non-expert inquiry into or deliberation about moral matters. The policy DO-IT-YOURSELF says that this is perfectly permissible: even in the absence of experts, we may avail ourselves of those provisional non-expert results that we have arrived at on our own.

3.3.3 A coherent set of policies?

We have now taken a look at the two broad classes of policies that Socrates appears to endorse regarding experts. But now we face a problem: DEERENCE and DO-IT-YOURSELF seem to be in tension. Has Socrates recommended an incoherent pair of policies? In the remainder of this section, I will flesh out this worry and then outline a response to it.

The tension between DEERENCE and DO-IT-YOURSELF becomes clear when we consider a non-expert in a context devoid of experts. Consider first a non-moral case. Suppose that Steve has a broken window in his home. Steve is no glazier, but he lives in Cambridge (MA) and winter is coming, so he needs to repair the window soon. Suppose further that he has all the necessary tools at hand (despite not really knowing how to use them—don’t ask why he’s got them). How should he proceed in light of the Socratic policies outlined above? DEERENCE requires Steve to drop everything and seek out an expert. In particular, it forbids him to try to solve the problem himself. DO-IT-YOURSELF, in contrast, permits Steve to forge ahead, making use of whatever non-expert knowledge he has about such matters (even if this means working from a state of complete ignorance). The policies contradict one another: DEERENCE says, in effect, that he may not do it himself, whereas DO-IT-YOURSELF says that he may.

The same problem arises in the moral case. Suppose that Simone wants to intervene to help stop a friend’s self-destructive behavior. She is no moral expert and her experience with cases of this sort is limited. Suppose further that this friend faces imminent harm. Simone is not sure what to do. (She is concerned that direct confrontation might result in greater harm or irreparable damage to her friendship;

35 On this, Cf. Vlastos (1985) on elenctic knowledge. We needn’t to go all the way with Vlastos on this. We can allow that Socrates is confident while still agreeing that he falls short of knowledge. Note how in Gorgias 508e6–509a7, quoted above, Socrates immediately follows his assertion of confident belief with a disavowal of knowledge.
she worries that indirect means may not succeed or—if discovered—will appear conniving; she believes that inaction will lead to disaster but hopes someone else might act in her place.) How should she proceed in light of the Socratic policies? Should she drop everything and seek out a moral expert or try to solve the problem on her own, working from her own inexpert knowledge? Again, it seems like the policies contradict one another: DEFERENCE says that she may not do it herself, whereas DO-IT-YOURSELF says that she may.

In situations that call for immediate action, agents often will have neither the time nor the opportunity to seek out expert advice; hence, such situations present a practical constraint that precludes satisfying DEFERENCE while still meeting the challenge at hand (and in extreme cases, it may simply be impossible to “drop everything and seek out an expert”—in fact, “dropping everything and seeking out an expert” may involve deciding the very issue at hand, which is the situation facing Socrates in the Crito); yet, as spelled out above, the policies seem not to take this into account, which generates contradictory recommendations.

We can resolve this conflict by letting DEFERENCE trump DO-IT-YOURSELF: in situations where it is possible to satisfy the recommendations of either DEFERENCE or DO-IT-YOURSELF, one ought to act in accordance with DEFERENCE. DO-IT-YOURSELF then functions as a fallback norm: if one can’t satisfy DEFERENCE, then one ought to act in accordance with DO-IT-YOURSELF. In brief, if there’s time, drop everything and find an expert; otherwise, abide by the results of your prior (non-expert) inquiry or deliberation. Applying this to the cases from above, if there really is no opportunity to delay, then Steve and Simone should do it themselves as best they can; however, if there is an opportunity to seek out and solicit expert advice, they are required to do just that.

This presents us with a simple solution to the problem of coherence. The question, though, is whether we have reason to think Socrates would (or should) accept it as well. While Socrates never comes out and explicitly endorses this proposal, it is consistent with the views he expresses in the dialogues. And his behavior provides further support: for most matters under discussion, Socrates has ample time and freedom, and so he goes about seeking experts, i.e., abiding by DEFERENCE; but when constrained by his circumstances, as in the Crito, we find Socrates most clearly articulating the DO-IT-YOURSELF.

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36 Thanks to Rusty Jones for suggesting this solution and to Jennifer Carr for the term ‘fallback norm.’
3.4 Socratic moral education: deference versus development

Initially there appeared to be a practical tension between DEFERENCE, on the one hand, and DO-IT-YOURSELF, on the other: they seemed to make contradictory claims on us. While I have shown this tension to be illusory, what I aim to do in this section is explore whether there may still be a tension between them, but one that arises at a somewhat different level. The new problem concerns right action and moral development, and whether the one comes at the expense of the other, given the Socratic account of virtue from Chapter 1 and his policies regarding deference from the preceding section.

3.4.1 Virtue as expert moral knowledge: a review

To review the account of virtue from Chapter 1: virtue is expert moral knowledge, where this, in turn, is a complex epistemic state integrating practical knowledge, theoretical knowledge, and self-knowledge. Practical knowledge is knowledge of how to engage in a domain-specific activity and reliably produce some end. Theoretical knowledge is understanding of a domain on the basis of which an individual will be able to answer questions about and give explanations of domain-related matters. And self-knowledge is of two types: first, formal self-knowledge, which is knowledge of what one knows and doesn’t know (i.e., knowledge of the scope and limits of one’s expertise); and second, substantive self-knowledge, which is first-personal attunement, knowledge of how one tends to act, think, and feel (with respect to some domain). These are the components of expert moral knowledge. Moral development, then, will amount to acquiring (and integrating) these various components. So how does one typically acquire (and integrate) them?

Practical knowledge comes in part from doing: as Aristotle notes, “For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. people become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts” (NE 1103a32–b2). In most cases, developing practical knowledge requires that one spend considerable time engaged in the relevant activity. This, however, is not sufficient to develop an expert level of practical knowledge. It’s not enough simply to do; an expert is able to do it well. How then does one develop this excellence? In some cases—where good and bad products are easily identified even by the non-expert—learners can receive immediate feedback as they train. A

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37Cf. Metaphysics Θ.8, 1049b29–32.
38K. Anders Ericsson’s work on expertise is illuminating here. See, for example, Ericsson, et al. (1994). For a more popular treatment, see Gladwell (2008).
faulty chair will make its flaws manifest. In other cases, the quality of any given product is not so obvious, and in such cases the value of an instructor is clearest. An instructor more advanced than oneself can point out the flaws in one’s work, make suggestions for how to adjust one’s technique, and so forth. In the absence of such an instructor, the learner must supply the constant critical attention and, even still, good results aren’t guaranteed. In some cases, developing a practical knowledge may require a considerable amount of “unthinking” rote drilling or unquestioning obedience to an instructor. (Think of learning the piano: various drills, such as scales, might seem completely pointless to the novice, but nevertheless develop valuable muscle memory and train one’s ear to hear the sounds of harmonies, keys, modes, and so forth.) But at some point the learner must become able to arrive at the correct results on his or her own.

Theoretical knowledge comes from developing an understanding of a domain. This comes via learning various propositions about the subject matter and coming to see how they are interrelated—and all of this in such a way that one can thereafter answer questions and give explanations related to these matters. Although we frequently do achieve understanding by being led to it through the explanations of an instructor, there is reason to think that testimony alone is not sufficient for developing understanding—at least, testimony of the strict “assert that P” variety, absent any explanation. One prima facie obstacle to gaining understanding in this way is that understanding is closely tied to explanation: understanding is exhibited by giving explanations and it is often acquired by receiving them. Explanations, however, are highly context dependent. The quality of an explanation is tied closely to the interests of the one requesting (or in need of) an explanation, his or her background knowledge, and so forth. Consequently, furnishing an understanding-imparting-explanation will require that the teacher be extremely sensitive to the condition of the student. It is because of this that not just any form of deference to testimony will do as a route to theoretical knowledge, at least as I’m understanding it here.

Self-knowledge—of both varieties—comes about in numerous ways. Introspective examination can lead to formal self-knowledge as it exposes inadequate

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40 There are some tricky questions here. For example, consider a person who has learned ten propositions about some subject matter but doesn’t see how they fit together, the interrelations among them. Compare that person to someone who knows only three propositions but does know how they fit together. Which has the better understanding—and therefore theoretical knowledge—of the subject in question?


42 For some discussion of the interest-relativity of explanations, see Lipton (2004), Chapter 3, pp. 46–53. See also Garfinkel (1981), Chapter 1 (on “explanatory relativity”).

43 For further discussion of this, see Chapter 2, especially Section 2.
justifications, manifest errors, and blatant inconsistencies. Not all such epistemic shortcomings need be transparent to us; nevertheless, we can identify some of them by looking inward and considering the quality of what we take to be our knowledge. Likewise, attention to our own tendencies—how we regularly act, think, and feel—can develop substantive self-knowledge. We can observe how we behave in various situations, how we typically form beliefs and judgements, what emotions we experience in different scenarios, and so forth. Finally, acting on the basis of (what we take to be) knowledge and then succeeding (or failing) can contribute to our self-knowledge (if we are sufficiently reflective about our success or failure). Each type of self-knowledge thus has self-directed routes leading to it. But the acquisition of self-knowledge needn’t be a completely lonely process. We can also come to it through encounters with others. Sometimes another person is better positioned to notice our shortcomings and our strengths. At other times we can better observe these features of ourselves when we see them reflected in another. And so friends, companions, co-workers, and others can each provide us with opportunities for developing additional self-knowledge: we can solicit their candid judgments about ourselves or we can reflect on the respects in which they resemble (or differ from) ourselves.44

Having sketched some of the ways in which the components of expert knowledge can be acquired, what I want to do now is consider how the policies from Section 3, above, interact with our moral development.

3.4.2 Moral development and DEFERENCE

Consider first strict obedience to one’s superiors. How does this interact with the acquisition of practical knowledge, theoretical knowledge, and self-knowledge? Let’s suppose for now that strict obedience works something like this: an individual I have identified as my superior with respect to some issue advises me with respect to that issue by simply telling me what I ought to do or what I ought to believe. (Later I intend to relax this assumption when I revisit these issues in Section 5, below.) How—if at all—does accepting and acting on the basis of such a pronouncement contribute to or interfere with developing the components of expert moral knowledge? I’ll consider each component of moral expertise in turn. First, it seems like an individual must already believe himself to be a non-expert with respect to the issue at hand if he is pursuing DEFERENCE. If he were to think himself an expert, he wouldn’t be seeking one out. But this would seem to require a modicum of self-knowledge—at least of the formal kind. Recognizing that these are circumstances in which I ought to obey a superior requires recognizing that I

44On this last point, see Chapter 1, footnote 49.
am not better positioned with respect to these issues. What of substantive self-knowledge? This seems like it may be closer to identifying an impairment, as in McGrath's cases of impure moral deference. If I recognize that I am unreliable with respect to some issue, that might give me reason to defer to a superior—i.e., someone at least as equally well positioned with respect to the issue but reliable in a way that I am not. In either case, pursuing DEFERENCE seems to require antecedent self-knowledge. But does it contribute to it at all? Does one develop additional self-knowledge when deferring? It's hard to see how one could. The self-knowledge has already been taken into account in seeking out advice. Once you gain the advice on how to act, there's no additional self-knowledge that comes along.

So much for self-knowledge. What about practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge? Take practical knowledge first. There's prima facie reason to think that strict deference impedes the development of practical knowledge. Consider a case of non-moral expertise with a clear practical component: medicine. Suppose that on medical matters, I always defer to those more expert than I—about diagnoses, treatment recommendations, and so forth. Given that I am no expert about such things, this policy would seem to ensure that I arrive at the correct diagnoses, prescriptions, and so forth (or, at least, it will better ensure this than if I had struck out on my own). The worry, though, is that continual reliance upon the medical expertise of another will impede the development of that expertise in myself. This is clearest in cases where the expert doctor simply issues a diagnosis or prescription without explaining her reasons or without walking me through the steps she took to arrive at those conclusions. By simply deferring, I never have an opportunity to exercise the skills (or even begin to develop them) which are partly constitutive of medical expertise—namely, the knowledge of how to engage in the practice of medicine and reliably produce health in patients.

As stated, this conclusion is a bit too strong. It's not as if any amount of deference will forever taint one's progress toward expertise. We have to start from somewhere, and for many of us, when developing a new skill, we have no prior context. There is a certain amount of pure deference we must engage in. A long-term policy of deference, however, would seem to interfere with developing (and truly possessing) an expertise. Imagine a "doctor" who had a little ear piece and had all his medical judgments fed to him by another doctor. In most contexts we'd be reluctant to say the first is an expert doctor. But note, if our only interest were

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45 Cf. my remarks on the propaedeutic value of self-knowledge, Chapter 1, Section 4.1, and Chapter 2, Section 3.

46 A possible exception is that the advice might somehow further highlight your lack knowledge, e.g., I know I don't know about X, I ask expert for advice, get an answer, and, upon receipt, think "Wow, I really didn't know about these things, I wasn't even close!"
getting healthy, we might not care.\footnote{With this case, compare the case of "the Incompetent Judge," discussed in Hills (2009), p. 110.}

So much for practical knowledge. What about the theoretical knowledge component of expertise? The key feature of this is the fact that it is a form of understanding, which equips the knower to answer questions and give explanations. It seems fairly straightforward that one could learn that P without thereby understanding why P. For example, someone might tell me that ice floats in water, but I don’t thereby learn why this is the case. But if deference to an expert takes the form of simply accepting that P on the basis of her testimony, it would seem that such a policy of deference would not be adequate for developing theoretical knowledge.\footnote{Cf. Hills (2009) on the inadequacy of moral testimony for developing moral understanding.}

This point requires two qualifications. First, theoretical knowledge may in part be made up of the acceptance of a large number of propositions, so learning propositions through pure deference might build up one’s stock of knowledge; however, this will fall short of the theoretical knowledge of at least an advanced expert insofar as the novice lacks knowledge of the interrelations between these propositions and lacks a general explanatory principle unifying his understanding. Second, it’s not as though deference or testimony couldn’t bring understanding (we are, after all, able to explain things to other people in a way that helps them understand). Rather, a certain picture of what testimony and testimonial deference looks like—namely, of the “assert without explanation, accept without question” variety—seems particularly vulnerable to this worry.

What about the enhanced version of DEFEERENCE (“drop everything and find the expert”)? For the most part, this will have the same results as strict obedience: both recommend strict obedience. But what drop everything brings to light is that this pair of deferential policies dramatically close off opportunities for self-directed inquiry into those matters with respect to which one is inexpert. Once we learn that we are not an expert at some matter, we should drop everything and find an expert. There’s no interim period of consulting do-it-yourself manuals or experimenting on one’s own. Consequently, this obstructs developing the practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge that comes via working through issues on one’s own. But note, as with strict obedience, drop everything also seems to require a modicum of self-knowledge in order for it to be (recognized to be) in effect. Before I can drop everything and find the experts I must realize that no one in the present context is an expert—a fortiori, I must recognize that I am no expert.

While pursuing DEFEERENCE may interfere in some ways with developing moral expertise oneself, in many cases it may nevertheless ensure correct action.\footnote{On this, compare Sliwa (2012), p. 10. She argues that one good thing about moral advice is that it can help us to “do the right thing in cases in which we might otherwise fail to do so.”} Consider the medical case again. As a novice physician, in many cases I would ensure...
making the correct diagnosis if I were to defer to the judgment of a physician more expert than myself. And in some cases, if my primary concern were arriving at the correct diagnosis, then it would seem that I should pursue the deferential policy. To do otherwise would risk misdiagnosing a patient, even if a misdiagnosis could present a valuable learning experience that could positively contribute to the development of my own expertise. This reveals a deep and important point about the trade-off between deference and development: with some skills and in some cases, deference comes at the expense of development, but with the reward of ensuring correct action. I will return to this point at the conclusion of this chapter, when I revisit McGrath’s puzzle of pure moral deference (Section 6, below).

3.4.3 Moral development and Do-it-yourself

Do-it-yourself allows us to abide by the results of prior (non-expert) inquiry or deliberation. How does this (if at all) contribute to the components of expertise? Take the self-knowledge component first. It seems like this policy could promote self-knowledge in a couple of ways. First, if things go poorly, it could bring about a (hitherto non-existent) recognition that one is not an expert about such matters. But suppose this is already in place. Does this contribute further? Acting on the basis of what prior knowledge you have might encourage self-knowledge of the second sort—substantive self-knowledge. Heading out without training wheels, so to speak, might give one a better sense of one’s tendencies to act, think, and feel (when engaged in the business of moral inquiry and deliberation).

This policy requires that, at some prior time, one engaged in reflection on, inquiry into, or deliberation about moral matters—even while recognizing that one is a non-expert. It is during this period that one has the potential to contribute positively toward developing expertise in a way that is obstructed—or at least not aided—in cases of pure deference. The simplistic thought is that “doing it yourself”—and even failing—can often contribute more to the development of skill than being guided by another in a purely deferential fashion.

How does “doing it yourself” contribute to theoretical knowledge? One of the best ways to acquire theoretical knowledge is to receive instruction from a knowledgeable teacher, instruction that takes the form of furnishing explanations that contribute to the learner’s understanding—a method of instruction that requires great sensitivity to the learner’s interests, background knowledge, and so forth. One reason that doing it yourself might hold out some promise for developing theoretical knowledge is that the learner may be well-positioned to know her own interests, background knowledge, and so forth and, consequently, can focus her inquiry in a way that better contributes to developing understanding. She can engage in a targeted investigation, one much more focused than receiving explanations insen-
sitive to her own present state of understanding. An additional reason for optimism about self-direction bringing understanding is that sometimes exploring a space of possibilities—even wandering down dead-ends—without excessive oversight can lead to a better understanding of the issues one is exploring. Of course, there is the real possibility of never figuring things out. That said, once the inquirer hits on an answer, it will be situated within this space of possibilities that he has explored.

How does “doing it yourself” contribute to practical knowledge? The value of such a policy is clearest when contrasted with testimonial deference. One will never develop the practical knowledge of how to independently engage in the activities of an expertise if one is constantly deferring to an authority’s testimony. It is not enough simply to be told what to do or think; practical knowledge involves the ability to arrive at this for oneself and to be able to do so reliably and in response to changing circumstances. What “doing it yourself” furnishes is the possibility of discovering for oneself what such practical knowledge requires. (Certain forms of deference may furnish this—in particular, if the expert walks you through the process by which he or she determined the correct course of action.) Of course, as with theoretical knowledge, there is the risk of failure. But even failures (in both the practical and theoretical realms) can be productive in the course of developing expertise. An important aspect of “doing it yourself” is that it makes such failure a live possibility.

While DO-IT-YOURSELF might hold out some hope for developing expertise on one’s own, this seems to come at the cost of ensuring right action. “Doing it yourself” is something of a high-risk strategy. Furthermore, even if things go well, there’s a worry that the agent won’t be able to recognize this, insofar as she lacks an independent grip on what the good product of the craft is (a problem especially in cases where the good product is not readily identifiable, as may be the case with moral expertise).

What this section has brought to light is the fact that there is a deep trade-off between ensuring right action, on the one hand, and promoting moral development, on the other. DEFERENCE secures the former, but at the expense of the latter; DO-IT-YOURSELF promotes the latter, but at the expense of the former.

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50 Some empirical work on the value of “productive failure” seems to support this. See, e.g., Kapur and Bielaczyc (2012).
51 Self-directed inquiry might also be well-suited to discovering novel insights, insofar as deference to expert testimony seems only to reinforce already established results.
52 Assuming here, as Socrates would, the infallibility of the experts to whom you would defer on the deferential policies. The Sophist Thrasymachus also endorses the infallibility of experts: see Republic Book 1, 340d1–341a4.
3.5 Deference and development reconciled?

We've seen in the preceding section that Deference and Do-IT-YOURSELF offer a trade-off: the former ensures right action at the expense of moral development, whereas the latter supports moral development while risking wrong action. What I want to do now is consider whether, for Socrates, there is a way to reconcile the two—in particular, whether we might still develop morally while attempting to pursue a deferential policy. The key to this reconciliation will lie in Socrates' characteristic method of inquiry: the elenchus.

In his (2000), Hugh Benson has a nice discussion of the multiple aims of the elenchus. Benson argues that Socrates' elenctic method has a number of distinct aims and that these aims are organized in a structure (some aims are more immediate, others more remote). We can set aside the issue of organization. Here I want to focus on the variety of aims. Benson identifies eight:

1. interpreting the statements of others,
2. testing or examining the knowledge or wisdom of those reputed (by themselves or others) to be wise,
3. showing those who are not wise their ignorance,
4. learning from those who are wise,
5. examining oneself,
6. exhorting others to philosophy,
7. examining the lives of others, and
8. attaining moral knowledge. 53

Thus, on Benson's reading—and I agree with him—the elenchus is a high-efficiency method that Socrates puts to work in pursuit of numerous distinct aims. It is this aspect of elenchus that points toward a way to reconcile deference and development.

Suppose Socrates is in a situation where he needs to deliberate about or inquire into moral matters. How should he proceed, according to the policies we've been considering? The first step is to consider whether anyone in his present context is a moral expert, and so he needs to try to identify any experts present. But, for Socrates, this will involve examining moral issues with those individuals (and also examining these things introspectively, to test himself). 54 Identifying experts involves examining moral issues. Thus, attempting to pursue a deferential policy—given Socrates' method for identifying experts—may actually impart some of the benefits that accrue to DO-IT-YOURSELF: it might contribute a little toward theoretical knowledge, it certainly contributes to one's self-knowledge, and it may even develop some practical knowledge (if skill at elenchus is part of this). All of this comes while attempting to identify experts.

54 We can see this exemplified in Laches.
If Socrates doesn’t find any expert, the process repeats itself, thus affording even more opportunities to examine moral matters as he goes about seeking a moral expert. If he finds himself in a situation where the need to act is pressing (or otherwise forced upon him) and there’s no time or opportunity to continue his search, DO-IT-YOURSELF will apply: if there’s opportunity, DO-IT-YOURSELF allows for self-directed, non-expert inquiry (and if there’s no opportunity for even that, it allows one to act on the basis of any results—even non-expert ones—arrived at previously). Abiding by this policy will bring along its contributions to moral development. But if there is opportunity to continue the search for an expert, Socrates will continue on until he is satisfied that he has found the moral expert he seeks.

Now suppose Socrates does find his expert. If that is the case, then DEFERENCE will apply, and Socrates will have to obey him or her. Nevertheless, even in such a case, Socrates will subject the expert’s pronouncements to examination. This is exactly what Socrates did when Chaerephon reported to him the Delphic Oracle’s pronouncement that none is wiser than Socrates (described in Apology 20e8–23c1). Socrates examines such pronouncements in order to understand them. To take another case, even when Euthyphro offers a formally adequate definition of piety (i.e., one of the appropriate level of generality), Socrates subjects it to scrutiny in order to figure out just what it means (which, in this case, simultaneously tests the definition and the definer).55

Furthermore, even if Socrates has his expert, it’s unclear that DEFERENCE is limited to testimonial deference. I’ve assumed this so far, but this isn’t the only form of deference to experts. There might be something like explanatory or exemplar deference—the expert explains something to me or shows me what to do/how to do something, and I take up that explanation or copy his/her example. Then there might be something like educational deference—I turn myself over to the expert to be trained in the right sort of way, which will provide a rich sort of exposure that might succeed in conferring the elements of expertise that strict testimonial deference would seem to preclude. On this compare the ending of the Laches. There Socrates’ language suggests that he and his friends should seek out an expert at the care of young mens’ souls not merely so that this expert might tell them whether (say) training in armor is the best policy; rather, Socrates suggests that he wants to find someone who might teach him and his friend (and the children) to be as good as possible. This is not mere testimonial deference. This is more like seeking out a coach or trainer. Again, with the plumbing example (from several pages back), the analogy would be not merely having the plumber tell you what to do, but having him train you to address plumbing problems yourself. Or perhaps it would be akin

55On this, compare the discussion in Hills (2009) of two sorts of testimonial deference, pp. 122–123. Regarding the second type, she writes, “You may treat the testimony as moral advice, which you subject to critical scrutiny, and you decide whether or not to accept, on its own merits” (p. 123).
to signing up for an adult education course on plumbing.\textsuperscript{56} Finally, in some cases, an expert may recommend that you pursue \textsc{do-it-yourself}, perhaps recognizing in a particular case that the cost of failure is relatively low whereas the benefits of self-direction are quite high.\textsuperscript{57}

What all of this shows is that identifying experts, deferring to experts, and doing-it-himself all interact in a complex way for Socrates. And he has a single method that he puts to work in the service of each: his elenchus. Given the way Socrates goes about identifying experts and deferring to them, this does more to contribute to one's moral development than my initial discussion (in Section 4, above) suggested. Sometimes a policy of deference won't preclude moral development. That said, individual instances of testimonial deference may, although such cases will do much to ensure right action. While the trade-off between right action and moral development hasn't disappeared completely, the rich possibility of Socratic elenchus shows that in some cases we can at least attempt to satisfy both. By going about Athens examining people about moral matters, Socrates was a limited moral educator (per my argument in Chapter 2), he attempted to identify experts, and, in the course of doing so, he and others developed a deeper understanding of moral matters—even if he himself wouldn't be satisfied that he or anyone else had yet achieved full moral expertise.

3.6 The puzzle of pure moral deference revisited

Having now seen the contours of Socrates' treatment of various issues concerning expertise, I want to return to the puzzle with which I began: the puzzle of pure moral deference. The challenge McGrath raises is to explain the asymmetry in our judgments about the propriety of non-moral versus moral deference (namely, that the former is unproblematic whereas the latter is problematic). Recall that McGrath recommends a neo-Socratic response: it is epistemic concerns about identifying moral experts that generate this asymmetry. Now, although many of us may indeed harbor these epistemic concerns, I have argued that Socrates, at any rate, did not. He believes that we can identify experts (both non-moral and moral). He has a method that can reliably pick out the non-experts and provide defeasible evidence that someone is an expert (Section 2). Nevertheless, the Socratic position regarding deference to such experts is a nuanced one (as developed in Section 3). While he thinks we should, in general, defer to experts, his view does allow for cases

\textsuperscript{56}Thanks to Rusty Jones for suggesting this interpretation of the concluding lines of \textit{Laches}.

\textsuperscript{57}Compare Socrates in the \textit{Clitophon} versus the \textit{Second Alcibiades}: in the former, Socrates seems content to let Clitophon try to figure things out for himself, whereas in the latter Socrates takes a much more proactive role in ensuring that Alcibiades ends up with correct beliefs.
of inquiry into or deliberation about matters in the absence of experts. Broadly speaking, there are two types of policies, which I’ve called DEERENCE and DO-IT-YOURSELF, respectively. And while there is a way to harmonize the recommendations of each policy (Section 3.3), they also reveal a more general tension between policies that ensure right action and those that promote our moral development (Section 4). In the preceding section (Section 5), I outlined how elenchus holds some promise for attending to each. That said, in many cases there will be a trade-off that must be made between ensuring one’s moral development, on the one hand, and ensuring right action, on the other. Oftentimes the one comes at the expense of the other.\textsuperscript{58} This phenomenon—which has emerged in the course of reflecting on Socrates’ treatment of expertise—points to a different, and I think deeper, diagnosis of the puzzle of pure moral deference.

My suggestion is this: the apparent asymmetry in our judgment about pure moral versus non-moral deference stems from implicit ambivalence about such a policy in the moral case; while it seems a fine way to ensure right action, it may at the same time impede our moral development. This is exactly the trade-off that emerged above. And I think that this hits on what many of us find discomfiting about cases of pure moral deference. We feel especially uneasy about such deference because pure moral deference often comes at the expense of moral development. And I think many of us implicitly believe that we have something like a standing \textit{pro tanto} obligation to promote our development—or, at any rate, that constant neglect of such development is impermissible or somehow problematic.\textsuperscript{59} But it is also clear that in some cases we really ought to defer—even at the expense of moral development!—because doing so will lead us to do the right thing. The fact that we don’t categorically reject pure moral deference suggests there is something to it, but the fact that we harbor concerns about it suggests that it comes at some expense. The trade-off between right action and moral development offers a nice explanation of these intuitions.

With this trade-off in mind, we can generate a worry about cases of non-moral deference as well. The comfort or discomfort with such deference will be determined by what’s at stake in the context: in cases where right action (or belief) is

\textsuperscript{58}While both Hills (2009) and Sliwa (2012) appear to be sensitive to this point, I think neither goes far enough in confronting this trade-off. Hills is concerned to argue \textit{against} the value of moral testimony on the grounds that it is not up to the task of cultivating moral understanding; only in passing does she acknowledge the value of moral testimony for ensuring right action (pp. 123–124). Sliwa is concerned to argue \textit{for} the value of moral testimony; only in passing does she address the issue of moral development (\textit{e.g.}, pp. 181 and 192–193). In effect, I want to say that both Hills and Sliwa are right about deference to moral testimony: Hills is right that it’s bad for moral development and Sliwa is right that it’s good for right action.

\textsuperscript{59}Kant thought as much. See his remarks on duties of self-perfection in his \textit{Doctrine of Virtue} (Part II of the \textit{Metaphysics of Morals}).
of paramount importance, deference will seem unproblematic (and perhaps will be required); but in cases where development of one's own expertise is at issue, deference will seem problematic. Take an example. Suppose I take a walk in the woods with my father, an expert at identifying trees, and he begins to tell me which tree is which and he does so by pointing and saying 'that is a Douglas fir' or 'that is an Oregon white oak.' If my primary concern here is to form correct beliefs about the trees in the forest, there's nothing wrong with my simply deferring to him; however, if I myself aim to become an expert at tree identification, there is something wrong with it. Unmodified, simply deferring to him will not develop my own ability to identify trees. If my aim is development, deference is problematic; if my aim is correct belief, it is not.⁶⁰

While this explanation may be compatible with McGrath's own, I think mine goes deeper into the matter. Pure moral deference remains disquieting even on the hypotheses that (i) there are moral experts, and (ii) it is possible for non-experts to identify them.⁶¹ The reason this is so is that, in the moral realm, we aim not merely at right action, but personal development. The hope is that, with sufficient moral development, we will no longer need to avail ourselves of experts and can direct ourselves to act rightly. But until we reach that point we will have to decide, case-by-case and depending on what's a stake, which is better: deference or doing-it-ourselves.

⁶⁰ On this point, compare Sliwa (2012)'s argument that "moral testimony is no more problematic than nonmoral testimony" (p. 3).

⁶¹ McGrath (2011) concedes this point, p. 129: she thinks that even if we were confident that someone was a moral expert, "it is doubtful that our sense that there is something peculiar about pure moral deference would vanish entirely." The explanation she considers there is that moral deference undercuts the moral worth of action. On this compare Hills (2009). Against this position, see Sliwa (2012).
Epilogue

Two questions in particular preoccupied Socrates: what is virtue and can it be taught? Over the course of this dissertation I have developed a Socratic answer to them. The answer to each, in brief, is “It’s complicated.”

Virtue, it turns out, is a complex epistemic state. In the virtuous person, three kinds of knowledge are integrated: practical knowledge, theoretical knowledge, and self-knowledge. In Plato’s Socratic dialogues, we can find Socrates investigating the nature of virtue by investigating each of these kinds of knowledge. On some occasions Socrates focuses on the practical component of virtue; on others, the theoretical component; and on others still, the self-knowledge component. Despite this apparent diversity of interests, my account of virtue as expert moral knowledge allows us to interpret Socrates as having a singular focus across these contexts: on each occasion he is investigating virtue.

Given the complexity of virtue itself, it should come as no surprise that the teaching of it is a complicated matter as well. There is no simple method of instruction that can impart the whole of virtue all at once. The kinds of knowledge that make up virtue constrain how it can be learned and taught. And, as it turns out, the predominant methods of moral instruction of Socrates’ day were not fit to the task of imparting any of the components of virtue (properly understood). One such method was expository: a professed teacher of virtue would deliver a lecture on moral matters and the prospective learner would listen passively. Another such “method” was the unconscious absorption of norms that comes from obeying the laws and the customs of one’s community. Neither of these methods is particularly well suited for developing practical knowledge, theoretical knowledge, or self-knowledge, and so neither method is particularly good for learning virtue.

What would suffice for teaching and learning virtue? One crucial requirement on any method that promises to succeed is that it must engage the learner as an active participant in the learning process. This requirement follows from the natures of the kinds of knowledge involved in virtue. This feature of Socratic moral education has been noted, with differing degrees of emphasis, by numerous historians, but their discussions are typically divorced from any discussion of the

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62 This was a method associated with the sophists in particular. See Chapter 2, fn. 8. Devereux (1978) argues that when Socrates claims that virtue cannot be taught—and when he claims that he himself is not teaching—we should interpret Socrates as restricting the sense of ‘taught’ and ‘teaching’ to instruction of this expository sort.

63 Protagoras, in his Great Speech (Protagoras 320c8–328d2), argues that this is how virtue is taught. Cf. Alcibiades 111a1–d5.

64 For further discussion of this, see Chapter 3, Section 4.1.

nature of virtue. The account of virtue I develop in this dissertation offers a natural explanation of this constraint on moral education.

The idea that, when it comes to learning virtue, the student must take an essentially active role, is a potent one. Socrates’ insistence on directly engaging his interlocutors to examine their own moral beliefs reveals his sensitivity to this idea. And I think we can see the author, Plato, respecting this idea as well in the very form in which he wrote. There is some reason to think that Plato was suspicious of the adequacy of treatises. Dialogues—a novel literary form for the time—replicate dialectic as far as possible and engage the reader in a way that treatises do not. By writing dialogues rather than treatises, Plato arguably sought to provoke his readers not merely to read philosophy, but to do philosophy and to thus take an active role in their own learning.

Given this essential role for the prospective learner of virtue, it can start to seem a bit mysterious what role remains for the teacher. And what of the necessity-of-knowledge-for-teaching condition? These remain important insofar as a knowledgeable teacher will be able to reliably guide a learner toward virtue. Bereft of such a knowledgeable teacher, the learner may never make it to the highest levels of expert moral knowledge. But even granting this, it doesn’t thereby follow that a teacher of virtue should simply tell the learner what to think (or do). A certain amount of “doing it yourself” (directed by a teacher) is necessary.

But is a knowledgeable teacher necessary at all? We can see Plato grappling with this question—and with the implications of the necessity-of-knowledge-for-teaching condition—beyond the Socratic dialogues. One particularly vivid example of this is from the Meno. There we find Plato exploring a metaphysical explanation of the centrality of the learner: the Doctrine of Recollection. The knowledge to be acquired is within the learner already. This idea of drawing knowledge out of the learner, rather than putting it into him or her, is also suggested by another famous Platonic image: that of the teacher as midwife. In the Theaetetus, Socrates claims that, like his mother, he practices the midwife’s art, but whereas she brings children to birth, Socrates brings ideas to birth. Again, the implication is that the knowledge is within the learner already.

We needn’t follow Plato in making such assumptions. We can accept the necessity of an actively engaged learner of virtue even while accepting that the learner presently lacks the knowledge he or she seeks. The key point is this: there is an interplay between the nature of virtue and the nature of moral education; the one constrains the other, and questions about each should be investigated together.

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66 See, for example, Protagoras 347d3–348a9, Phaedrus 275c5–277a4, and Letter VII 341a–345c.
67 See Chapter 2, Section 1.2.
68 Meno 81a5–e2.
69 Theaetetus 148e1–151d3.
Appendix A: Some Methodological Remarks

In this appendix I spell out some of the methodological assumptions that have guided me throughout this dissertation.

First, who is Socrates? We have good reason to believe that there was a historical figure named ‘Socrates.’ He lived in Athens from ca. 469 BCE to 399 BCE.\textsuperscript{70} In 399 BCE he was put to death on the charge of “corrupting the young and of not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other new spiritual things” \textit{(Apology 24b9–c1)}. This historical Socrates was interested in various philosophical questions and spent much of his life interrogating the people he met about such matters. If the historical Socrates wrote anything, none of it survives. What we know of the historical Socrates we must infer from the writings of his contemporaries, people such as Plato, Xenophon, and Aristophanes.

Another Socrates is the character featured in many of Plato’s writings. He is represented as subjecting the views of those he meets to persistent questioning. He rarely puts forward positive theses of his own, more often scrutinizing the theses of others. He is primarily concerned with ethical matters, although for him these are deeply intertwined with epistemological matters.\textsuperscript{71}

The study of Socratic philosophy, as I approach it, is concerned with developing an interpretation of the views of the character Socrates. Whether or not the historical Socrates held these views is a separate question. I am inclined to think that the character Socrates mirrors the historical Socrates in many important respects and that by studying Socratic ethics we gain some insight into the views—or at least the philosophical interests—of the latter; however, the interpretations I offer in this dissertation do not, at the end of the day, require this assumption.\textsuperscript{72}

The dialogues that are my focus are a subset of those that Plato wrote. I will call them (following others) the \textit{Socratic dialogues}.\textsuperscript{73} These are dialogues wherein Socrates is the central character and the principal leader of the discussion. Socrates rarely argues for substantial theses of his own; rather, the discussion typically proceeds by having him question an interlocutor or a group of interlocutors. In most such dialogues, Socrates seeks answers to questions of the form ‘What is Fness?’ where ‘Fness’ is typically replaced by the name of a cardinal virtue such as courage.

\textsuperscript{70}These are the dates suggested by Diogenes Laeritus in his \textit{Lives of Eminent Philosophers} (see the Loeb edition, p. 175).

\textsuperscript{71}Gregory Vlastos famously declared in his (1991) that Socrates “is exclusively a moral philosopher” (p. 47). Hugh Benson, in his (2000), notes (rightly) that “even Socrates the moralist is flush with epistemological presuppositions and commitments” (p. 5).

\textsuperscript{72}A further question is whether the views of this Socrates are views that Plato held. Although I am sympathetic to this position—for a defense, see Vlastos (1991)—I won’t assume it here.

\textsuperscript{73}Cooper, ed. (1997), pp. xv–xvi for a brief discussion of this grouping.

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temperance, or piety. Other Socratic dialogues, while not directly focused on a ‘What is Fness?’ question, nevertheless show Socrates pursuing related questions, such as whether virtue can be taught. Many of these dialogues are inconclusive: by their end, Socrates still does not have what he would take to be an adequate answer to the question. They end in *aporia*—contradiction or puzzlement. Finally, the more robust metaphysics and epistemology present in Plato’s other works (e.g., the theory of Forms) appear to be absent from this set of dialogues. Socrates rarely if ever discusses mathematics, natural philosophy, cosmology, and so forth. The Socratic dialogues are, to this extent, “metaphysically innocent.”

I take the following works to be Socratic dialogues in the relevant sense: *Apology, Charmides, Crito, Euthydemus, Euthyphro, Gorgias, Ion, Laches, Lesser Hippias, Lysis, Menexenus, and Protagoras*. I will also treat *Republic* Book I as belonging to this set. It has the form of a Socratic dialogue, even if prefaced to a work that is clearly not “Socratic” in the relevant sense. We should also consider *Alcibiades, Clitophon, Greater Hippias, and Second Alcibiades* along with these other dialogues. Even though the authenticity of these dialogues is disputed, they depict a familiar character (Socrates) engaged in a familiar activity (elenctic examination) on familiar topics (ethics and epistemology). Thus they can serve to illuminate our picture of Socratic philosophy. Finally, there are a couple of other dialogues that aren’t squarely Socratic but which I will nevertheless consult from time to time. The *Meno* shares many points of similarity with the Socratic dialogues; however, it differs in that it contains more robust epistemological and metaphysical theses (e.g., the Doctrine of Recollection) and employs some novel methodologies (e.g., the method of hypothesis). The *Theaetetus* also shares many similarities with the Socratic dialogues although is generally taken to be not Socratic.

Why consider this particular group of dialogues? Their thematic unity justifies one in considering them together—namely, their recurring concern for ethical issues and closely related topics, approached via the character Socrates. In addition to this, there is reason to think that these dialogues are unified not only thematically, but also temporally: they may be the earliest works that Plato wrote. Although I am sympathetic to this view on the chronology of Plato’s corpus, I rely on it as little as possible here.

I’ve approached these dialogues with the view that they can be read together. In trying to answer a question of the form, ‘What does Socrates think about X?’ we can look to see what Socrates says about X in various Socratic dialogues. I find this to be an interesting and fruitful way to study Socratic philosophy. Some

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74 Which is not to say that the views under discussion are completely free from metaphysical commitments.

75 For a defense of this thesis see Irwin (1977), Ch II, fn. 33, pp. 291–293, and also Vlastos (1991).
philosophers, however, are staunchly opposed to this approach and believe that each dialogue should be read and interpreted on its own. To compare what Socrates says in one dialogue to what Socrates says in another would be like comparing what Hamlet says in Hamlet to what MacBeth says in MacBeth. I want to grant that the “single dialogue” approach is also a legitimate way to read these works, but I also want to briefly defend my approach. The Shakespeare analogy, as given, isn’t quite apt. Imagine instead that every one of Shakespeare’s plays featured a character of the same name. Suppose, e.g., that Puck (from Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream) appeared in each play. And suppose that in these plays Puck espoused similar views or expressed similar concerns. It would be tempting to start to refer to a view as ‘Puckish.’ We could ask what Puck would think of Hamlet’s soliloquy and try to develop a Puckish rejoinder to it, using what we know of Puck from his appearances in the plays to constrain our proposal. Because Socrates recurs throughout Plato’s dialogues and in such familiar form on each occasion, the synoptic approach to Socratic philosophy is, I think, justified.

In developing my interpretation of Socratic philosophy, I take these Socratic dialogues to jointly place a constraint on my interpretation. They are the source material from which I extract my account and that account is then tested in part by comparison with these texts. But these dialogues underdetermine which interpretation is the correct one. If they were straightforward in this respect, they wouldn’t have successfully fueled over two thousand years of interpretive debate. So while these dialogues place constraints, they don’t thereby determine which interpretation is correct. Given this underdetermination, a certain amount of rational reconstruction is necessary. The view I defend is one that I believe to be Socratically acceptable—that is, it is one that I think Socrates would (or at least should) endorse—while at the same time philosophically respectable. Hence my use of the phrase ‘a Socratic account’ as opposed to ‘Socrates’ account.’

Why think we will find a coherent doctrine—Socratic or otherwise—implicit in these dialogues? Why think we could reconstruct one? Plato was one of the world’s greatest philosophers. He wrote a series of dialogues featuring a character who doggedly pursues an interrelated set of issues. In these dialogues, this character, Socrates, often returns to similar positions, or approaches the same issue from different angles. This persistence and the abiding interest of the issues themselves is, I think, at least sufficient reason to attempt a coherent reconstruction of Socratic philosophy. In this dissertation, I’ve attempted to do just that.

76In fact, we do use this adjective, although typically it is used to evoke his mischievous demeanor.
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