

THE VIRTUE OF SOCRATIC DIALECTIC

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the *Meno*, Socrates asserts, "I would contend at all costs both in word and deed as far as I could that we will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know, rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it" (86b-c). In light of Socrates' repeated professions of his own ignorance, this is an interesting claim. It would seem that if Socrates truly has no knowledge of the good, he would have no basis from which to contend that any given course of action will make one better. As Socrates' own life demonstrates, the course of action which he takes in order to "search for the things [he] does not know" is that of continually engaging others in dialectic. In this essay I will examine this claim, which I take to be the one which Socrates advances in the *Meno*: the pursuit of virtue (through dialectic) has as its effect the betterment of the pursuer. I will show that this claim is not merely wishful thinking on the part of Socrates, but that dialectic—inasmuch as it is good dialectic—is *itself* a virtuous activity and thus results in the improvement of its practitioners.

In order to study this claim, I will first examine Socrates' method of dialectic. I will show what distinguishes Socratic dialogue from the pseudo-dialectical maneuvers of the Sophists. Specifically, I will point out what distinguishes good dialectic from bad dialectic.

An integral part of Socrates' method of dialectic is the demand for strict definitions. Despite this demand, most of the Socratic dialogues end with the interlocutor finding himself in a state of *aporia*, and Socrates himself admits to no knowledge. It would appear that satisfactory definitions of the sort which Socrates demands cannot be found. I will attempt to discover why it is that Socrates must demand strict definitions, and what it is that dialectic accomplishes if it is not the production of final definitions.

Lastly, having examined the method of dialectic, I will briefly explore the nature of virtue. Virtue, I will show, is not simply some ideal quality which one can "possess." Virtue can never be separated from "virtuous activity." Virtuous activity effects a movement—a movement which serves to better the virtuous one and offers a possibility of improvement for those whom the virtuous one engages. Such an activity can be found in the searching process in which Socrates engages through dialectic.

II. DIALECTIC

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates specifically points out that his investigations of the "truth of things" and his search for the good are accomplished by "means of words" (99d-100a). We find in the *Alcibiades I* an argument as to why this is so.

What Socrates wishes to show by his argument is that in order to make oneself better one must know oneself, and that this can only be accomplished through discourse with another person.

Socrates begins his argument by raising a genuine concern. Both he and Alcibiades agree that they are ignorant in matters of justice, and that they need to “take pains over themselves” (127d-128a). In order to be certain about taking pains over themselves, however, they need to be sure what it is precisely that they mean by “themselves.” Indeed, this is no simple matter. As Socrates points out, it was no “mere scamp” who wrote the words “know thyself” on the temple at Delphi (129a).

Socrates determines through his interrogation of Alcibiades that what one refers to when one speaks of the self must be the soul. After all, in using words to direct himself toward Alcibiades, Socrates does not speak with Alcibiades’ face, but with Alcibiades himself—“that is, with *his soul*” (130e, my emphasis). It is the soul then, and not the body or its ornaments, that they must concern themselves with.

Having decided what it is they must take pains over, they must determine the means of accomplishing this. Socrates uses here an intriguing analogy. The eye, in order to see itself, may look into another eye and see its reflection “at that region of the eye in which the virtue of the eye is found to occur,” i.e. the pupil (133b). In like manner, the soul, in order to know itself, must “surely look at a soul, and especially at that region of it in which occurs the virtue of a soul—wisdom” (133b). For Socrates, this “intercourse of soul with soul” can be accomplished by two souls “conversing with each other, while [they] make use of words” (130d). The method, then, by which a soul might look at another soul is by means of words (*logoi*), through dialectic.¹ Thus it is through dialectical interaction that Socrates and Alcibiades can begin to “take pains over” themselves.

In his book on Plato’s metaphysics, Henry Teloh examines two complementary activities which distinguish Socratic dialectic: *elenchus* and *psychagogia* (61). *Elenchus* is an essentially negative technique which involves the refutation and destruction of dogmatically held opinions, yet its effects are positive in that by revealing the flawed understandings of the interlocutor, it makes possible the search for new understanding. *Psychagogia*, which literally means “to lead or guide the soul,” is positively directed toward the “drawing out of true beliefs by argument, suggestion, innuendo, and informal paradox” (Teloh 61).

In order for negative dialectic, or *elenchus*, to be effective, the dialectician must first attempt to induce the interlocutor to reveal his core beliefs. As Nicias explains in the *Laches*, whoever enters into conversation with Socrates “will be continually carried round and round by him, until at last he finds that he has to give an account both of his present and past life; and when he is once entangled, Socrates will not let him go until he has completely and thoroughly

¹ In order to justify the use of dialectic, Socrates must use dialectic. He must ask questions, refute assumptions, and risk assertions and analogies in order to attain agreement. This may shed some interesting light on the nature of Socratic dialectic. Its justification is not established by means of proofs, but in the effective motion of the conversation which takes place. Later I will examine this movement both in terms of its motion and in terms of its effects.

sifted him" (187e-188a). When the interlocutor has given account of his beliefs, the dialectician can proceed to show by counter-example ways in which these beliefs are flawed. It is essential for the success of this method that the interlocutor be the one to commit himself to a given position or belief so that when this position is shown to be flawed he will fully recognize his own ignorance. This recognition of ignorance is necessary to place the interlocutor in a position from which he might be willing to learn.

Psychagogia, rather than trying to refute false beliefs, attempts to guide the interlocutor toward true beliefs. Henry Teloh points out that the object of *psychagogia* is not simply to "teach by telling" but "to engage the autonomous resources of the answerer," so that what is learned is not simply a set of words to be recited, but is actively understood (63-4).

In the *Alcibiades I* we find Socrates engaged in both *elenchus* and *psychagogia*. Socrates shows Alcibiades through *elenchus* that he (Alcibiades) is utterly unable to give adequate counsel in matters of justice. Socrates then proceeds to guide Alcibiades (through *psychagogia*) toward an understanding of what he must do in order to improve his moral condition. He can no longer remain entirely independent, but must devote himself to a friendship with Socrates in which they will both become more aware of their own moral conditions by continually engaging in discourse. The effectiveness of the dialogue is evidenced by the change it brings about in Alcibiades. Whereas, prior to the dialogue, Alcibiades claimed to "have no need of any man in any matter" (104a), he proclaims to Socrates near the end of their conversation that "from this day onward it must be the case that I am your attendant, and you have me always in attendance on you" (135d). Note here that the effects of *psychagogia* are not the production of some cognitive knowledge within Alcibiades, but rather the commitment to a specific activity: friendly dialectic. I will discuss this notion of friendship later, as it appears to mark an essential distinction between Socratic and sophistic dialectic.

One other specific characteristic of Socrates' dialectic can be seen, as noted previously, in his demand for strict definitions. In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates chastises Euthyphro for giving a specific example of piety (i.e. his own action in prosecuting his father) in response to Socrates' more general question, "What is piety?" Socrates says, "Bear in mind then that I did not bid you tell me one or two of the many pious actions but *that form itself that makes all pious actions pious*" (6d; my emphasis). Socrates does not want to focus the discussion on pious things but on defining piety itself. In general, Socratic dialectic claims to be concerned not with specific instances, but with the nature of a thing which makes itself manifest in all its different instances.

Why is it that Socrates consistently demands strict definitions when this demand is never met?² It seems that the demand for strict definitions is not a

² Nicholas P. White, in his book *Plato on Knowledge and Reality*, points out that in his quest for definitions, "one of Plato's aims is to determine the extensions of general terms" (13). He compares Plato's quest to the familiar experience of being confronted with an unknown or unfamiliar word. We repair to a dictionary, or to another speaker of the language "and are given some expression or string of expressions that [we] understand ... and that purports to provide an explanation ... of the word or

demand imposed by Socrates, but by the very nature of *logos*. *Logoi*, or words, demand specificity. In order to function (i.e. be understandable by someone other than the speaker), a given word must be limited in extension. If a word can mean anything then in a real sense it has no meaning. There must be boundaries. In his demand for definitions, Socrates attempts to describe these boundaries. Another point we can make about words is that though they must have limits in order to function, they always seem to escape these limits. This aspect of words distresses Euthyphro. He complains, "Whatever proposition we put forward goes around and refuses to stay put where we establish it" (11b). Euthyphro wishes that his words would always express that which he intends to communicate, but in the movement of dialectic, words slip out of their original context, and, therefore, their original meaning.

This trick of words, which Socrates compares to the magic of Daedalus in bringing inanimate objects to life (11c-e), can occur precisely because of Socrates' insistence on definitions. He refuses to examine statements solely on the basis of what the speaker "means" but insists on examining the limits of meaning outside of this original intention. These limits on words expand or contract depending on the context created by the movement of the dialectic. For example, certain arguments or analogies might expand the defining limits of the notion of the "just" within a dialectic.

It seems then that the Socratic search for definitions is not the attempt to define an ideal concept but is rather the attempt to delineate the range within which something might be said to correspond to a given idea.³ In the case of the "just" or the "pious," the purpose of finding such a definition would not be to absolve moral responsibility by a complete determination of "just" or "pious" action. A definition of piety, for example, will not necessarily render decisions regarding pious action easier to make. Decisions must still be made from within a realm of possible choices. Such a definition rather allows one to become more responsible and autonomous by providing suitable limits to and providing insights into this realm of possibility from which decisions are made.

III. "GOOD" AND "BAD" DIALECTIC

In order to discover whether Socratic dialectic is in itself a virtuous activity which can make one better, it is important that we distinguish between

phrase that was causing the problem" (13). The difference in Plato's attempt lies in the fact that we generally do not concern ourselves over this process, while for Plato the validity of such a process is a great concern: "Plato does not accept what can be seen, from certain viewpoints at least, as a basic presupposition underlying this way of acquiring confidence about one's judgements and use of language" (15). Plato (and Socrates) is concerned with analyzing these presuppositions carefully through dialectic.

³ According to this interpretation of the Socratic search for definitions, we can view Socrates' attempt in the *Euthyphro* to define piety as successful in that he, in part, points out the limits of "piety." He establishes the boundaries within which pious action must be determined; specifically, he shows that the pious must be separated from the realm of only "what is pleasing to the gods" and determined first within the realm of virtuous activity.

good and bad dialectic. Socrates was, of course, not the only practitioner of dialectic. In Socrates' day many others would have called themselves "dialecticians." However, many of these, while engaging in discourse, did not become better but were either unfruitful or became worse (i.e. more arrogant, less willing to "take pains over themselves"). In this sense, the dialectic they engaged in could be called "bad" or "false" dialectic.

We find several fairly obvious examples of bad dialectic in the *Euthydemus*. It should be immediately clear to readers of the *Euthydemus* that the dialectical maneuvers of Euthydemus and his brother Dionysodorus do not bring them any closer to virtue.⁴ What is not as immediately clear is why this should be. One must ask: What is it that distinguishes the sophistry of Euthydemus from Socratic dialectic?

At first glance, the answer to this question might seem simple. Euthydemus and Dionysodorus are obviously unconcerned with logic or consistency. They seem to take pride in their ability to refute arguments they had previously made. It might seem at first that one could immediately classify the brothers' dialectic as "bad" on these grounds.

An example of the logical unsoundness of the sophist brothers' arguments is found in a humorous interchange in which Dionysodorus asks Ctesippus if he has a dog. Ctesippus answers affirmatively, whereupon Dionysodorus also finds out that Ctesippus's dog is a father. Based on these assertions, Dionysodorus makes the preposterous claim: "he is a father, and he is yours; ergo, he is your father" (298d-e). His logical mistake is plain: the adjective denoting possession, "yours," does not modify "father" but "dog."

The most obvious mistake of the sophists in the *Euthydemus* is inconsistency. Despite this, they are unwilling to be called inconsistent. When Socrates points out inconsistencies in their statements, they reply, "and are you such an old fool, Socrates ... that you bring up now what I said at first—and if I had said anything last year, I suppose you would bring that up too" (287a-b). They do not wish to accept responsibility for their own statements, for their real intent is not to aim at truth, but merely to "astound and amaze" others with their "skill" at word play.

Socrates clarifies the problem of the young sophists, saying, "Even your skill in the subtleties of logic ... has not found out the way of throwing another and not falling yourself" (288a). As I mentioned earlier, one might at first believe that herein lies the difference between good and bad dialectic: that the "good" dialectician is the "skilled" dialectician who uses logically sound and consistent arguments, one who in refuting another's position does not contradict himself. This criterion of logical consistency, however, does not aid us in our purpose of discovering why Socrates can be confident that through dialectic he will become better. For Socrates himself sometimes uses arguments which are illogical and inconsistent.⁵

⁴ By "virtue" I am referring to a type of self-understanding which I will develop in the final section of this essay.

⁵ A particular example of Socrates' use of inconsistent argument can be seen in the *Alcibiades I*. In attempting to lead Alcibiades towards an understanding of the good,

It would seem, then, that it would be difficult to argue that Socratic and sophistic argument can be distinguished simply on the basis of logical consistency. We will have to look elsewhere for an adequate distinction. I believe that there are at least three essential differences which distinguish good dialectic from bad.

A clue to the first distinguishing mark of good dialectic can be found in the *Alcibiades I*. Alcibiades, it seems, had become fully aware of his own "disgraceful condition" and asked Socrates what he must do. Socrates first tells him that he must answer the questions asked (i.e. engage in dialectic) and then gives him the intriguing reassurance that "if we are to put any trust in my divination—you and I shall both be in better case" (127e). That which motivates or guides the conversation and subsequently allows its participants to be "in better case" is Socrates' "divination."⁶ Perhaps by his "divination" Socrates is referring to "the god" which motivated him to converse with Alcibiades in the first place (cf. 103a-b, 105e). It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze what Socrates meant by "the god" or his "divination" and in what way these directed the movement of the dialectic. We only note that for Socrates, at least, some sort of "god" was extremely important in his quest for knowledge.⁷

The motivation for sophistic dialectic (at least in the *Euthydemus*), on the other hand, seems to be simply the self-aggrandizement of its practitioners. Evidence of this can be found in the arrogance of Dionysodorus' comment to Socrates at the beginning of their exposition: "Whichever he answers, said Dionysodorus, leaning forward so as to catch my ear, his face beaming with laughter, I prophesy that he will be refuted, Socrates" (275d). The sophist broth-

Socrates refutes the idea that "goodness" and "intelligence" are equivalent. He claims that a shoemaker is intelligent in the making of foot-gear and so he is good in that area. On the other hand, he asserts, the same shoemaker is unintelligent in the making of clothes and is thus bad in that area. Based on these assertions, he claims that if "goodness" and "intelligence" are equivalent, then "the same man is both bad and good" (125a-b). The logical fallacy here is that though the same man is perhaps "both bad and good" it is clearly not in the same respect. This argument is also inconsistent with Socrates' prior reasoning, for Socrates had previously contended against Alcibiades that a courageous but failed rescue could not be called both good and evil in the same respect (115c). By his own reasoning, Socrates should realize that the "shoemaker argument" is invalid. George Klosko points out in "Plato and the Morality of Fallacy" that Socrates does use "a number of arguments ... which he undoubtedly knows to be fallacious" (614). He argues that Plato (or Socrates) would not have viewed this usage to be morally objectionable, but that it was a standard practice of the day for a speaker to use fallacious argumentation to refute an opponent. This still does not help us, however, to distinguish between Socratic and sophistic argument.

⁶ Another statement of what motivates Socrates in his dialectical endeavors can be found in the *Euthyphro* where Socrates tells Euthyphro, "The lover of inquiry must follow his beloved wherever it may lead him" (14c). Socrates as "the lover of inquiry" will never be satisfied, for his guide (inquiry) will always continue to lead him.

⁷ See, for example, *Alcibiades I* 124c, where Socrates claims that his case is identical with that of Alcibiades except in one point: Socrates' master ("the god") is better and wiser than Alcibiades' master.

ers are not motivated to seek understanding, but rather intend to prove their cleverness by refuting any possible answer.

A second distinguishing feature of Socratic dialectic is that it is genuine. Hans-Georg Gadamer points this out, saying, "The difference between Socrates and the sophists is in no way an obvious one; rather it is a difference evident only to someone who has not only the *logos* [word] in view but also the *ergon* [deed]" (5). Socrates truly *wanted* to become better, to learn, and was thus willing "to take pains" to improve himself and others through dialogue. It is because of his genuine intent that Socrates' words in dialectic reflect precisely the deed he was engaged in: the quest for understanding.

The root of the Socratic intent to become better lies in his recognition of his own ignorance. Socrates points out that Alcibiades would only inquire "if [he] thought [he] did not know" (*Alcibiades* I 109e). For Socrates, the most important knowledge is knowledge of one's own ignorance. It is only by coming to know this that one will begin to inquire and thus begin to learn. Genuine dialectic, then, requires this recognition of ignorance.

A third, and perhaps the most important, feature of Socratic dialectic is its attempt to cultivate friendship. As I have mentioned, the idea of the importance of dialectical friendship was developed in the *Alcibiades* I. Friendship establishes a basis from which a virtuous dialectical relationship can take place. In such a friendship, both parties can both become better and provide a means for the friend to "take pains over [himself]." Friendship provides the most stable foundation for the virtuous activity of Socratic dialectic.

I have shown some of the ways in which "good" (or "Socratic") and "bad" (or "sophistic") dialectic can be distinguished. The first of these is the motivation or guide of the discourse which for Socrates is "the god," "divination," or possibly "inquiry." The next is found in Socrates' genuine intent to learn, which arises out of his recognition of his own ignorance. The final difference is the pursuit of friendship, which I will examine in the next section in terms of virtue.

IV. VIRTUE AS AN ACTIVITY

In his article "Socratic Ignorance—Socratic Wisdom," J. Claude Evans analyzes the *Meno*—not through a distillation of its philosophical content as if it were essentially a philosophical treatise, but in order to "interrogate the movement of the dialogue" (94). From his analysis, Evans determines that for Socrates, "virtue follows the teaching of virtue in the sense that it is essentially the activity of teaching virtue which is constitutive of virtue itself, which makes us virtuous" (105). Evans maintains that despite Socrates' claim to ignorance he is possessed of the "human wisdom," which he attributes to himself in the *Apology* (cf. 20d; 29e-30a; 38a), which is "summed up in the claim that virtue is rooted in inquiry" (106).

What Evans has pointed out is that virtue itself is bound up with activity. It does not lie above activity as some prior category, but is rather a term which describes what takes place in certain types of action or *praxis* (specifically the actions of teaching and inquiring into virtue). What "virtue" describes is an activity in which those involved become better by coming to a greater under-

standing of themselves and their relationships with others—which in turn allows them to act more virtuously.

Friendship can now be seen as a type of relationship in which a virtuous movement of understanding can take place. Gadamer describes Socratic friendship as a “tension-laden relationship in which need and fulfillment coexist” (18). What is needed (particularly in the case of Socrates and Alcibiades) is to become better, more able, and more just. The fulfillment of Socratic friendship is a never-complete process of growth. This growth takes place as the friends through their dialectical interactions discover their own false assumptions and recognize their own faults of character—faults which will perhaps only become apparent when exposed through genuine dialogue with another person.

Socrates engages in dialectic both to establish dialectical friendship and to investigate the “truth of things” for himself. Through his strict demands for definition Socrates is able not only to remain aware of his own ignorance, but also, through the movement of dialectic in response to this demand, to become better aware of the limits within which his words function. This understanding, in turn, motivates him to continue to act virtuously. By showing Alcibiades and others the need for dialectical friendship, Socrates’ dialectic also makes them better. Socratic dialectic, then, consists of a movement in which both Socrates and his interlocutors do not remain the same, but are rather transformed, becoming “better men, braver and less idle” (*Meno* 86b-c).

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