

Resolving Inconsistencies in Plato: the Problem of Socratic Wisdom  
in the *Apology* and the *Charmides*

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## Declaration of Authorship

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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## Abstract of the Thesis

In the *Apology* Plato ascribes to Socrates a kind of knowledge that distinguishes him from others, viz., the knowledge that in truth he is worthless in respect of knowledge. Furthermore, the cultivation of this ‘Socratic wisdom’ is presented by Plato as necessary for anyone wishing to pursue the examined life, the only life worth living for a human being, and therefore as something that we all should seek to acquire. In the *Charmides*, however, Socrates argues at length to the conclusion that such knowledge is neither possible nor, even if it were possible, of any use. This apparent contradiction in Platonic doctrine is the problem of Socratic wisdom in the *Apology* and the *Charmides*.

The thesis first constructs the problem of Socratic wisdom from the text of the two dialogues. It then considers various strategies in the long tradition of Platonic scholarship by which proposals have been made to resolve this and other inconsistencies in Plato. These strategies are assessed and reasons are given for preferring a recent approach called the ‘double dialogue’ reading of Plato, which treats his works not primarily as vehicles for publishing his doctrines, but as philosophical challenges for the reader.

The thesis then conducts a double dialogue reading of the second half of the *Charmides* and demonstrates how this way of reading Plato provides a resolution to the problem of Socratic wisdom. The resolution lies in showing how, in the *Charmides*, Plato issues a challenge to the reader to address the inadequacies of the model of knowledge that underlies the apparent success of the dialogue’s refutation of Socratic wisdom. Thus, not only is the problem of

Socratic wisdom resolved, but the double dialogue strategy of reading Plato is validated for further employment in resolving other inconsistencies in Plato.

For Jane

οὐ τοι ἀπόβλητ' ἐστὶ θεῶν ἐρικυδέα δῶρα

— Homer, *Iliad* III.65





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*The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.*

— Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, V.i



## Chapter 1. The Problem of Inconsistencies in Plato

In 1929 Alfred North Whitehead wrote:

The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.<sup>1</sup>

However true this may or may not be, whether in 1929 or even today, it is certainly true to say that ‘Plato’, or rather, Platonism, consists in a series of footnotes that comprises the commentarial tradition upon his dialogues. Some of these footnotes are indeed just footnotes, but some, as we shall see, are entire philosophical schools. The endeavour to establish what Plato thought and what Platonic philosophy is has engaged not only the historians of philosophy, but has also stimulated the work of philosophers themselves.

The vast quantity of Platonic scholarship over the centuries pays tribute not only to Plato’s intellectual genius, but also to the seeming obscurity of his writings. When scholars have sought to extract from the dialogues a coherent philosophical system to call ‘Platonism’, they have found much to disagree about, for their readings of the texts have generated opposing interpretations. This disagreement has centred not only on claims of what Plato, the man, actually thought, which is more the work of the history of philosophy, but also on efforts ‘to construct as good an argument as possible on the foundation that Plato lays’ towards a definitive statement of the Platonic philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> Whitehead (1929).

position.<sup>2</sup> In both enterprises scholars have had to confront the issue of hermeneutic methodology and to argue in defence of the way in which they use the dialogues to arrive at their account of Platonic thought.

This dissertation will address the problem of how we are to interpret what Plato wrote. In particular, it will consider how best to seek for the resolution of inconsistencies in his written work. However, while the scope of so fundamental a question extends to every dialogue and every issue discussed in each dialogue, this dissertation will examine the problem by focusing on only two dialogues, and on an apparent inconsistency between them that forces to the fore the urgency of identifying the right way to interpret Plato's texts. The two dialogues are the *Apology* and the *Charmides*, and the apparent inconsistency is the opposing conclusions that each appears to draw on the possibility and utility of Socratic wisdom.

These two dialogues comprise, of course, only a fraction of Plato's enormous output. Furthermore, their literary style, thematic content and philosophical methodology confine them to what scholars generally call the 'early' or 'Socratic' dialogues.<sup>3</sup> We shall consider the merits of this division of the dialogues later. For now, however, it must be conceded that the conclusions this dissertation draws on the correct interpretative strategy for reading Plato will apply without qualification only to the *Apology* and the *Charmides*, and to

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<sup>2</sup> Cohen and Keyt have pointed out the distinction between a 'retrospective' and a 'prospective interpretation' of Plato, and are right to warn that whenever a Platonic scholar employs both models of interpretation, 'he needs to maintain the distinction between them'. Cohen and Keyt (1992): 195 & 199-200.

<sup>3</sup> For an account of the 'considerable degree of consensus' among scholars of a class of 'early' or 'Socratic' dialogues and their differences from the other dialogues, see Penner (1992): 122-30.

the other dialogues that closely resemble them in the respects mentioned above. The conclusions will also apply in some measure to the ‘middle’ and ‘late’ dialogues, but with qualifications. What these qualifications are, however, lie outside the scope of this dissertation. Our aim will be to look carefully for the resolution of the problem of Socratic wisdom, as evidenced in the *Apology* and the *Charmides*, as a case study in how we ought generally to deal with these sorts of inconsistencies in these sorts of dialogues.

The main concern for a student of Plato when meeting an apparent inconsistency is, of course, how to resolve it. No responsible reader will rest complacent with an interpretation that convicts the author of contradictory views. As long as he has not exhausted all reasonable means to resolve an inconsistency in the texts, his duty is to treat it only as an apparent inconsistency. We may resolve it by showing how the two opposing positions are not, in fact, opposed, in as much as there is a reasonable way in which to construe them as constituting consistent, albeit different, viewpoints. On the other hand we may resolve it by demonstrating that an inconsistency only appears to arise because of certain assumptions that we, as readers, bring to the texts. It is this latter means of resolution that I shall explore in this thesis.

Chapter 2 will set out the apparent inconsistency between the *Apology* and the *Charmides* on the subject of Socratic wisdom. This will involve the marshalling of key passages in each of the dialogues in order to formulate the affidavits, as it were, in the dispute. First, the *Apology* will be given the opportunity to present the case for the defence of Socratic wisdom. Then, the

second half of the *Charmides* will provide the material for the prosecution, by which Socratic wisdom is condemned as impossible, and worthless anyway.

Chapter 3 will survey the long history of Platonic interpretation, in order to assess where the various strategies have met with success, and where they have been shown by subsequent critical scholarship to have failed. It will become clear in the course of this survey how the reading of Plato's dialogues cannot be divorced from *doing* philosophy. The former entails the latter, and this observation of the necessary character of two and a half millennia of Platonic commentary helps to reveal, in part at least, Plato's intentions in writing the dialogues in the first place. We shall see how they are written in a way that forces the reader to think for himself in order to arrive at conclusions that are the fruits of his own philosophical work. Furthermore, this dominant feature of Plato's chosen genre, viz., the dialogue, and the manner in which he exploited it, will support claims by one particular interpretative methodology for reading Plato, the 'double dialogue' method, to surpass all other hermeneutic strategies, at least as far as the 'early' dialogues are concerned. While the double dialogue method of interpreting Plato will receive a brief description here, a full exposition of it will follow in chapter 4 in its application to the *Charmides*.

In chapter 4 the second half of the *Charmides* will be closely studied, tracking carefully the arguments, assessing the dramatic frame for its impact as the context of these arguments, and using the principles of the double dialogue method of interpretation to disclose what Plato is likely to have intended the reader to think. It is in this close reading of the *Charmides*, guided by the double dialogue methodology, that the apparent inconsistency of Socratic



wisdom will be seen to resolve into a challenge that the author sets for the reader. We shall see that Plato uses the *Charmides* not to deliver a doctrine that is inconsistent with that of the *Apology*, but to challenge the reader to confront the inadequacy of his own understanding of Socratic wisdom, as gathered from his reading of the *Apology*. But on an even larger scale than this, Plato guides the reader of the *Charmides* a stage further along the route that traces an epistemological project that winds its way through many of his dialogues. Far from contradicting the *Apology* in respect of the particular knowledge that Socrates is supposed to have had, the *Charmides* forces the reader to address what knowledge is, and what conception of knowledge ought to ground any epistemological inquiry, including the inquiry into what Socratic wisdom is.

Chapter 5 considers the merits of the double dialogue method as a means of resolving inconsistencies in Plato, in the light of its success in the case of Socratic wisdom. It also suggests, albeit speculatively, the clues that Plato appears to leave for us at the end of the *Charmides* to stimulate and direct our further research into the nature of knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I wish to acknowledge my deep intellectual debt to Drs Verity Harte and M. M. McCabe, and to thank them for their generous efforts on my behalf. Their inspiration and guidance penetrates through all but the shortcomings of this thesis. I also wish to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for its financial support and the Perseus Digital Library for the Greek font and text that is used in this dissertation.

## Chapter 2. The Problem of Socratic Wisdom

### Section 1. Socratic wisdom in the *Apology*

Plato's *Apology* is generally taken to be a vindication of the historical Socrates.<sup>5</sup> This interpretation of the dialogue comprises two claims about Plato's intentions, viz., that he intended the character Socrates as portrayed in the *Apology* to be viewed as embodying an exemplary life, and that he intended this character to represent the historical Socrates. This chapter will show that the first claim is thoroughly supported by the text, and that what makes Socrates' life exemplary is his possession of a certain kind of knowledge that guides his life. Furthermore, Plato constructs his encomium of Socrates' life through an incipient analysis of knowledge, which follows the format of an aporetic dialogue, and yet ends not in *aporia*, but in an answer to the initial question about the nature of Socrates' knowledge. No attempt will be made to support the second claim.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> E.g., W. K. C. Guthrie views 'the *Apology* and *Crito* as a defence of Socrates' whole life and a memorial to his conduct at and after his trial'. He reports the 'widely held view that Plato's aim was not to reproduce the defence made by Socrates at this trial, but to cast in that form his own defence of the philosopher's whole life, to tell of his mission and to describe in a living portrait the whole greatness, the unique personality of the "best, wisest and most just" of all men known to him'. However, Guthrie, whilst regarding it as uncontroversial that the *Apology* is 'avowedly fictitious' and 'an artist's portrait rather than a photograph', nevertheless notes that the historical Socrates himself would have had reason to speak in this way in response to his 'earlier accusers'. Guthrie (1998): 69, 73, 79 & 80.

<sup>6</sup> In a similar way Myles Burnyeat regards the *Apology* not as a historical challenge for us to decide whether it is an accurate account of Socrates, the

There are, of course, grounds for examining the second claim, also. The question of the verisimilitude of the doctrine, methodology and behaviour of the character Socrates vis-à-vis the historical Socrates is an obvious one to ask, since Plato chose the names of Socrates and his contemporaries for the participants in his dialogues and depicted them in ways that closely resemble what we know of their character from the extant historical sources.<sup>7</sup> The question is raised as early as Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, for although he does not pose the question here *per se*, he seeks to distinguish the thought of Socrates from that of Plato, in particular with regard to the latter's conviction (ὑπέλαβεν) that the historical Socrates' inquiry into universals (τὸ καθόλου) and definitions (περὶ ὀρισμῶν) was really into things that were different from the things of the sensible world (ὡς περὶ ἐτέρων τοῦτο γιγνόμενον καὶ οὐ τῶν αἰσθητῶν), which he called Ideas (ιδέας προσηγόρευσε, *Metaphysics* 987b1-10). G. C. Field in 1930 labelled this question 'one of the most troublesome controversies in the

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man, but as a personal challenge for us to decide whether Socrates, as Plato presents him, is guilty as charged. Burnyeat concludes that he is guilty, and that the condemnation of 'so good a man' secures his martyrdom at the hands of the 'wrong religion' of the Athenians. This reading supports the claim that Plato intends his portrayal of Socrates in the *Apology* to be exemplary, without further insisting that the portrayal is historically accurate. Burnyeat (1997): 1 & 12.

<sup>7</sup> The question of the verisimilitude of Plato's characters to real people has been examined by scholars not only in order to obtain a better grasp of the intellectual history of Plato's times, but also to clarify and elucidate the philosophical issues discussed within the dialogues. As representative of the former project see Field (1967). The quest for the historical Socrates is undertaken more recently in Vander Waerdt (1994). Indeed, this collection of essays seeks to use sources outside of Plato to balance the interpretation of the historical Socrates that the dialogues give, in an endeavour to identify Socrates' unique contribution to philosophy and his influence on the early Hellenistic schools. A good example of the latter project, viz., to see how Plato's treatment of historical figures may shed light on the philosophical issues discussed in the dialogues, is McCabe (2000): 9-10, 90-91 & 134-138.

history of philosophy’ and examined not only the correspondence between the views of the fictive and the historical Socrates, but also the correspondence of views in regard to the other principal characters of the dialogues.<sup>8</sup> The endeavour to differentiate the philosophy of Socrates from that of Plato continues to engage scholars today, especially in the United States, ever since Gregory Vlastos breathed vigour into the quest for a solution to the ‘Socratic problem’.<sup>9</sup>

However, even though such attempts to isolate the views of a historical individual, called Socrates, employ sophisticated philosophical techniques of analysis and enrich our understanding of the dialectic between the various philosophical positions that have been defended over the centuries, all this is the work of the history of philosophy. The aim of this chapter is not to elucidate what Plato tells us about Socrates the man, nor to assess such biographical claims as, ‘[i]t is perhaps more than anything else as his ideal of the righteous man that Socrates impressed himself on Plato’,<sup>10</sup> but to ascertain what Plato sets before the reader in the *Apology* as an exemplary life to live. Whether anyone, let alone the historical Socrates, lived this life is beyond the scope of this dissertation. The likelihood may well be that Plato will have wanted the *Apology* to exonerate his teacher, as the work navigates its way through the philosophical issues that it considers. But at least the *Apology* is a speech in

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<sup>8</sup> Field (1967): 50-51 & 188-190.

<sup>9</sup> The *locus classicus* for Vlastos’ investigation of the Socratic problem is Vlastos (1991b). Indeed, his examination continues throughout most of this volume. For recent studies of this kind see Brickhouse and Smith (2000).

<sup>10</sup> Field (1967): 8-9.

defence of a life, and it is the claim that such a life is a good life, indeed the best life for a human, that this chapter will explore.<sup>11</sup>

When Socrates sets out to make his defence at *Apology* 18a7 ff. against his first accusers (τοὺς πρώτους κατηγορούς), viz., those who had for many years condemned and parodied his way of life, he vigorously denies that there is any truth (οὐδὲν ἀληθές) in their claim that he is a ‘wise man’ (σοφὸς ἀνὴρ) and that he

... is a deep thinker about things in the heavens and a researcher into things under the earth, and makes the weaker argument the stronger. (*Apol.* 18b7-9)<sup>12</sup>

After alluding to the portrayal by Aristophanes of him spouting a load of nonsense about natural science, he claims that he knows nothing, whether major or trivial, about any of these matters (ὣν ἐγὼ οὐδὲν οὔτε μέγα οὔτε μικρὸν περὶ ἐπαίῳ, *Apol.* 19c4-5). He explains that he has nothing to do with those matters,

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<sup>11</sup> My claim will be that Plato intends us to view his fictive character, Socrates, as portraying in the *Apology* his own life in such a way that it represents an ideal life. To this extent, then, I am ascribing to Plato a view, although I venture none in respect of the historical Socrates. But it should become clear that what I shall focus on in this dissertation is not what we are to suppose *Plato* held as philosophical doctrines, but what Plato intends *us*, his readers, to think about in response to his handling of issues in the dialogue form. So, to this extent I stand close to Benson’s position in his study of Socrates’ epistemology: ‘I will be attempting to uncover the epistemological views of the Socratic character in Plato’s early dialogues. No part of my subsequent argument depends on assuming that these views represent the views of either the historical Socratic character or the author of the dialogues himself.’ Benson (2000): 7. Accordingly, when I argue that Plato, the author, promotes as an ideal a certain kind of life in the *Apology*, I intend this to be a claim about the meaning of the text, and not a claim about a historical life that was, in fact, lived.

<sup>12</sup> The translations are my own, unless I indicate otherwise.

is not concerned about them, takes no part in their investigation (ἀλλὰ γὰρ ἐμοὶ τούτων, ὧ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, οὐδὲν μέτεστιν, *Apol.* 19c7-8).

Socrates reiterates his claim of ignorance a little later, this time in response to the second part of the twofold charge that he recited at 19b4-c1, viz., the charge that he is a teacher (ἄλλους ταῦτὰ ταῦτα διδάσκων). He first expresses his opinion, no doubt with a heavy dose of irony,<sup>13</sup> asserting that

...it seems to me to be a good (καλόν) thing if one is able to educate men, just as Gorgias of Leontini, Prodicus of Ceos and Hippias of Elis do. (*Apol.* 19e1-4)

Given Socrates' general interest in people caring for their souls by striving to discover what virtue is and to become virtuous (e.g., *Apol.* 30a7-b4 & 36c3-7), the irony here would not appear to consist in Socrates' words concealing a view that the education of men in virtue or excellence is *not* a good thing. That is to say, the irony does not occur in the first half of the quotation above. Rather, the irony appears in the second half of the sentence, where Socrates' words dissimulate his incredulity that these sophists actually do bring about the

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<sup>13</sup> The attribution of irony to Socrates' words and behaviour in the dialogues, and the identification of the precise nature and purpose of it, are some of the most taxing labours that a literary, or for that matter a philosophical, critic can undertake. For critical studies of Socratic irony and Plato's use of it see Bowen (1988): 59-64, Brickhouse and Smith (2000): 63-72. For more extensive examinations see Nehamas (1998): 19-98, Sedley (2002), Vlastos (1991d). All these studies examine Socratic irony in attempts to define the boundaries of its avowals, disavowals and deliberate obfuscation. The interpretation of irony in what follows does not engage in this debate, e.g., in the disingenuousness or otherwise of the speaker, or in how instructive or opaque any 'message' in the irony is meant to be to the other respondents, to the reader or even to the author. It treats Socrates' irony simply as a rhetorical technique that Plato uses to express in an indirect way the speaker's doubt or uncertainty about the matter in hand, and that invites either the respondent or the reader to question or examine further.

education of men in virtue or excellence. Socrates makes this clear in his reported dialogue with Callias, in which he asks Callias,

Who knows (ἐπιστήμων ἐστίν) this sort of excellence  
(ἀρετῆς), i.e., human and civic (πολιτικῆς) excellence?  
(*Apol.* 20b4-5)

When Callias replies that Evenus of Paros has this knowledge and imparts it for a modest fee, Socrates exclaims that he counts Evenus a blessed man, if he really does possess this systematic and teachable knowledge (τέχνην), and yet asks for so little recompense in return for teaching it to others.<sup>14</sup> Socrates' benediction is ambiguous, in that it is not entirely clear whether he counts Evenus blessed because he possesses this knowledge or because he is so moderate in charging little for imparting it, for Socrates goes on to say how puffed up with a sense of superiority he would be if he knew these things. What is clear, however, is that Socrates reiterates his claim of ignorance, but this time with regard to the knowledge of human and civic virtue or excellence (*Apol.* 20c1-3).

Having denied that he possesses two kinds of knowledge, viz., of natural science and of human and civic virtue, Socrates anticipates the jury asking how he has gained this reputation for being a wise man, a possessor of knowledge.

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<sup>14</sup> The meaning of τέχνη and Plato's use of it as an epistemic term has received much attention, especially since Irwin (1977). There he argues for a development in Plato's moral theory that involves the abandonment, by the time of the *Republic*, of a Socratic, intellectualist conception of the search for moral knowledge as a τέχνη. He argues that this intellectualist conception had prevailed in the 'early' dialogues, when Plato was still very much under his teacher's influence. For a rebuttal of Irwin's thesis, involving an examination of the meaning of τέχνη both prior to Plato and in his dialogues, see Roochnik (1996).

He admits that this is a fair question (ταυτί μοι δοκεῖ δίκαια λέγειν ὁ λέγων, *Apol.* 20d1-2), and proceeds to try to answer it. But before we examine his reply, we should note that Plato has Socrates, once more, anticipate the jury's response. He says that some of them may think that he is merely jesting with them when he says what he is about to say (ἀκούετε δὴ. καὶ ἴσως μὲν δόξω τισὶν ὑμῶν παίζειν, *Apol.* 20d4-5). In other words, Socrates views what he is about to say as something that may appear ridiculous or insincere to some people. And when Socrates begs the jury therefore to give him credence, since he is telling the whole truth, Plato is preparing his readers to read something out of the ordinary, something that will challenge what many of us ordinarily think. We shall examine the claim he makes in a moment. But before we do, it is important to see how carefully Plato is setting the scene, in terms of the dramatic context, for the delivery of the philosophical content. That is to say, just as Socrates warns the jury that what they are about to hear may challenge their notions about what is to be taken seriously and what is mere child's play, so Plato gives notice to us, his readers, that what Socrates is about to say may provide an opportunity for us to examine our own preconceptions.

We see this sort of care in dramatic presentation in other dialogues, when Plato prepares his readers for challenging philosophical discourse by having Socrates submit a prior disclaimer or demur to offer his response. One example is the reluctance and trepidation that Plato portrays in Socrates prior to and during his exposition of the 'three waves' in his account of the ideal state in *Republic* V. At the beginning of Book V, Polemarchus and Adeimantus contrive not to let Socrates off the hook (Ἀφήσομεν οὖν, ἔφη, ἢ τί δράσομεν;, *Rep.*



449b6), accusing him of laziness and deception (Ἄπορραθυμείν ἡμῖν δοκεῖς, ἔφη, καὶ εἶδος ὅλον οὐ τὸ ἐλάχιστον ἐκκλέπτειν τοῦ λόγου, *Rep.* 449c2-3). Socrates protests that they just do not appreciate the wasps' swarm of arguments (ἔσμων λόγων, *Rep.* 450b1) that their insistence threatens to bestir, and yet he reluctantly complies, but only after disavowing that he really knows what he is saying and predicting that he may prove to be a laughing-stock (*Rep.* 450d10-451a4). Thence follows the remarkable account of the three waves of the equal treatment of men and women, the communality of women and children, and the claim that nations will be free from evils only when kings are philosophers. Indeed, just prior to introducing the third wave, Socrates again demurs, explaining that his interlocutors will understand his hesitation when they hear him state 'so counter-intuitive a proposition' (οὕτω παράδοξον λόγον, *Rep.* 472a6).

In a similar way, in the cut and thrust of the courtroom, Socrates in the *Apology* prepares his hearers, for the reception of a παράδοξος λόγος. But by the same token, we, Plato's readers, are also alerted to the probability that what we read next may warrant rather more reflection than we are accustomed to exercise. What we next read is Socrates' explanation that he possesses his reputation for wisdom for no other reason than his possession of a certain wisdom, which is perhaps a 'human wisdom', and then his claim that 'in truth I probably am wise in respect of this wisdom' (*Apol.* 20d6-9).

That this is a claim that Socrates is making becomes apparent when the jury erupts in outrage at his distancing his wisdom from that which the sophists claim to possess. One might argue that the jury's reaction may be seen merely

as their exasperation at Socrates' declaration that he is not like the sophists, in that he does not claim to have the wisdom that they claim to have and does not do as they do. But Socrates characterises the jury's reaction more specifically in terms of his own claim to have wisdom, for he responds to the furious jury by asking them not to make an uproar 'even if you think I am making a big claim' (μηδ' ἔάν δόξω τι ὑμῖν μέγα λέγειν, *Apol.* 20e4-5). Here, Socrates himself characterises his assertion that 'in truth I probably am wise in respect of this wisdom' as 'big talk', as boasting.<sup>15</sup> That is to say, he interprets the jury's clamour as an expression of their anger at what they perceive to be a boast and an extravagant claim. In this way Plato confirms that Socrates is indeed making a claim here not only by what he has Socrates say, but also by what he portrays the jury as perceiving. Furthermore, Socrates' next move also confirms that what he has uttered at 20d8-9 is a claim, for he proceeds to back up his μέγα λέγειν by referring to the god of Delphi as his corroborative witness that his μέγα λέγειν is true.

It must be said in passing that the question whether Socrates does indeed claim to know anything, e.g., that he knows that he knows nothing, has exercised Platonists for a very long time. It received special attention at the time of the New Academy, when Arcesilaus faulted Socrates for claiming to know that he knew nothing.<sup>16</sup> But at this point in the *Apology* we do not find Socrates' making the clearly paradoxical claim to which Arcesilaus objected,

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<sup>15</sup> See Burnet's analysis of Plato's use of this expression in his note on *Apology* 20e4 in Burnet (1974).

<sup>16</sup> Cicero, *Academica* I. 45.

viz., that he knew that he knew nothing. There is a difference between Socrates claiming to know nothing, and his claiming to know that he knows nothing.<sup>17</sup> In the passage here at *Apology* 20d8-9 ff., Socrates is making a claim about himself, viz., that he has a certain wisdom or knowledge. When this claim, which is perceived as a boast, is challenged by the uproar of the jury, Socrates then admits that it is not he himself who asseverates this claim (οὐ γὰρ ἐμὸν ἐρῶ τὸν λόγον ὃν ἄν λέγω, *Apol.* 20e5), but the very credible (ἀξιόχρεων) witness at Delphi. Socrates makes the claim without *explicitly* claiming that he himself knows it is true. Rather than himself, he cites Apollo as the one who is in the position to know that it is true, and it is by this authority that Socrates then regards his own claim to knowledge to be veridical.

There is no need, therefore, to examine what grounds there may be for Socrates making a claim he does not in fact make, viz., *to know that he knows* this human wisdom or knowledge. He does not make so strong a claim because his grounds amount only to the combination of the testimony of the god of Delphi and his own complete faith in the god's honesty. We do need to acknowledge, however, that Socrates is indeed claiming *to possess* this human wisdom or knowledge on the inferred authority of the Delphic god, and it is this claim that Plato will spend much of the *Apology* examining, as Socrates reports on his lifetime of practising philosophy in the company of others who prove to

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<sup>17</sup> Granted, the first claim may slip into the paradoxical second claim, if the claimant is pressed to answer whether his first claim is a matter of knowledge or not. And if the claimant refuses this slippage, he then deprives his first claim of its authority as a factive assertion. Hence, the bite of Arcesilaus' objection. But Plato does not introduce this conundrum here, for Socrates offers not himself, but the god of Delphi, as the authority for his claim to know nothing.

be less wise than he. In sum, then, Socrates denies that he has two kinds of σοφία, viz., that of natural science (*Apol.* 19c8) and that of human and civic excellence (*Apol.* 20c3), and he claims that he possesses another kind of σοφία, viz., human wisdom (*Apol.* 20d8-9 & 20e5-6).<sup>18</sup>

Exactly what is this ἀνθρωπίνη σοφία that Socrates claims to possess? So far I have translated σοφία as ‘wisdom’ or ‘knowledge’, but does σοφία have a special, technical sense in Plato? Much scholarly work has been done on Plato’s use of epistemic terms in order to settle the question of whether or not Plato uses certain epistemic terms in philosophically nuanced ways that distinguish their senses substantially from the senses of other epistemic terms that he uses. Hugh Benson has surveyed the literature and concludes that there is a

...virtual consensus of Socratic scholarship in treating Socrates’ knowledge vocabulary... and their cognates as essentially interchangeable.<sup>19</sup>

One slight amendment to this consensus, which Benson does not point out, is John Lyons’ view that the meaning of σοφία has a wide scope that is best secured by observing its predominant use as an antonym to ἀμαθής: unlearned, ignorant.<sup>20</sup> The force of this distinction is that a person is called σοφός if his possession of some knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) distinguishes him from the majority of people, who do not have that knowledge. As Lyons puts it:

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<sup>18</sup> I am following here John Lyons’ discovery of semantic equivalence in Plato between εἶναι σοφός, ἐπιστήμων or τεχνικός and ἔχειν σοφίαν, ἐπιστήμην or τέχνην, Lyons (1963): 147.

<sup>19</sup> Benson (2000): 10. See especially notes 26 and 27.

<sup>20</sup> Lyons (1963): 227.

σοφία is frequently used convertibly with ἐπιστήμη, but only in contexts where ἐπιστήμη is graded ‘upwards’..., such as could be asserted only of relatively few persons in the society to distinguish them from the majority.<sup>21</sup>

But Lyons maintains that it is wrong to attribute a variety of different ‘senses’ to σοφία as some lexicographers do. The general point to make here is that when Plato examines different kinds of knowledge, he does not employ the various epistemic words in Greek to perform philosophical work by dint of any technical definitions that he gives them.<sup>22</sup>

One might challenge the validity of this consensus view of the interchangeability of epistemic terms in Plato by citing Lyons’ exhaustive examination of Plato’s use of them, in which he concludes:

...whereas εἰδέναι and ἐπίστασθαι, and εἰδέναι and γινώσκειν are frequently and clearly convertible in the text, it is not so clear that γινώσκειν and ἐπίστασθαι are ever convertible; and there are passages where they seem to be in contrast (e.g., *Laws* 942c).<sup>23</sup>

He reports that the most frequent environment for ἐπίστασθαι in Plato is where the object of the verb is either an infinitive or the name of a τέχνη, and the most common environment for γινώσκειν is where the object is a personal noun.<sup>24</sup>

However, Burnyeat warns against misinterpreting these findings:

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.: 228.

<sup>22</sup> Indeed, we might be tempted to infer, although such an inference would not be conclusive, that this was Plato’s attitude to his use of vocabulary from the disdain that Socrates exhibits for Prodicus’ practice of making endless distinctions between words (καὶ γὰρ Προδίκου μυρία τιὰ ἀκήκοα περὶ ὀνομάτων διαίρουτος, *Charm.* 163d3-4).

<sup>23</sup> Lyons (1963): 177.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.: 179.

... it would in any case be misleading to think of εἰδέναι as the expression of a third, generic concept to which the other two verbs [γινώσκειν and ἐπίστασθαι] are subordinated as species to a common genus; rather, εἰδέναι is to be regarded, according to context, as a synonymous replacement for ἐπίστασθαι or for γινώσκειν.<sup>25</sup>

He argues that ‘the Greek trio provides only two concepts’, and he proposes that, while ‘exact translation is no doubt impossible’, we might set the verb ‘understand’ to represent ἐπίστασθαι and ‘know’ to represent γινώσκειν, leaving ‘no third verb which functions like εἰδέναι’.<sup>26</sup> Burnyeat points out that in comparison with Plato, Aristotle goes on to specialise the verb ἐπίστασθαι considerably, in order to avoid circularity in the definition of systematic knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), claiming that one ‘knows’ (ἐπίστασθαι) something if and only if one ‘knows’ (γινώσκειν) the explanation for it and ‘knows’ (γινώσκειν) that it cannot be otherwise than it is.

The point to note here is that Plato gives no indication that his use of such epistemic terms in his works are intended to do the sort of technical and definitive work that Aristotle demands of them. For Plato, even the words ἐπίστασθαι and γινώσκειν, which Lyons has shown to operate in mutually exclusive syntactic environments, are meant only to convey the general notions that were common in Greek parlance of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and which approximate our use of our word ‘know’ in the sense of understanding something and ‘know’ in the sense of acquaintance, *but without implying that these two senses are somehow exclusive*. The fallacy of the claim that Plato

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<sup>25</sup> Burnyeat (1978): 104.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

reserved mutually exclusive, and therefore epistemologically distinguished, senses for the words ἐπίστασθαι and γινώσκειν, is readily seen through a single counter-example from the *Charmides*, where Socrates infers that if something is γινώσκειν τι, then it is ἐπιστήμη τις (*Charm.*, 165c4-6). Here, Socrates clearly indicates, to the satisfaction of his other Greek-speaking interlocutors, that, at the very least, γινώσκειν is interchangeable with ἐπιστάσθαι, such that every case of γινώσκειν is a case of ἐπιστάσθαι. Of course, his inference in the *Charmides* does not allow us to conclude the converse, viz., that ἐπιστάσθαι is interchangeable with γινώσκειν, in that every case of ἐπιστάσθαι is a case of γινώσκειν.<sup>27</sup> Of course, much more is said in the rest of the *Charmides* about the nature of knowledge. But the burden of proof must rest on those who wish to assert at any point in a dialogue that Plato is observing a mutual exclusivity of sense between ἐπίστασθαι and γινώσκειν. As long as this is not demonstrated, it is right for us to acknowledge that the epistemological work Plato has Socrates carry out is executed through the reasoning he conducts with his respondents, and not through special senses of the epistemic terms, which he nowhere explicitly defines.

We have seen that at *Apology* 20d8-9 and 20e5-6 Socrates claims to possess a kind of knowledge that he calls ‘human’, and that is neither the knowledge of natural science (*Apol.* 19c4-5) nor the knowledge of human and civic

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<sup>27</sup> However, it is interesting to note that Aristotle’s definition of ἐπίστασθαι does imply that ἐπίστασθαι is interchangeable with γινώσκειν, to the extent that ἐπίστασθαι is a particular kind of γινώσκειν, viz., γινώσκειν of the explanation and γινώσκειν of the necessity of the explanation being the way it is.

excellence (*Apol.* 20c1-3). We can see that Plato is here using Socrates' defence of his life to explicate different forms of knowledge. That is to say, Plato composes Socrates' fine-tuning of his particular claim to knowledge in such a way that it undertakes an epistemological analysis of knowledge, viz., into the forms that knowledge can take. Nor is this rather intellectually refined procedure lost upon the jury of 500 ordinary, plain-speaking citizens of Athens, who erupt in outrage when Socrates nicely distinguishes his knowledge from that which is claimed by the sophists (*Apol.* 20d8-e3).<sup>28</sup> Plato gets his epistemological project underway by raising the problem of forms of knowledge in a way that is surreptitiously embedded in his fictional account of the human story of a historical Socrates, within the forensic context of a trial for impiety and the corruption of youth, where the penalty is death for those found guilty of inquiring into and purveying the kind of knowledge deemed to be atheistic or destructive of the moral health of young men (*Apol.* 18c2-3 & 24b8-c1). Plato chooses to depict Socrates as a victim of mistaken identity, who claims that he is not who the jury think he is, that he is not in possession of the goods in question, viz., the kind of knowledge and conduct for which he is accused. To prove that he does not possess the knowledge of the scientists and sophists, of course, would be rather difficult to do, as the proving of absences inevitably is. And so the strategy that Plato selects for him is to spend the rest of his first speech (*Apol.* 17a1-35d8) defining the kind of knowledge that he does claim to have.

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<sup>28</sup> For the size of the jury see Burnet's note on *Apology* 36a5 in Burnet (1974).



Socrates' account of the kind of knowledge that he claims to have begins with the story of Chaerephon's visit to Delphi (*Apol.* 20e8) and ends with Socrates' interpretation of the oracle that he had derived from his laborious attempts to refute it (*Apol.* 23c1). The god at Delphi told Chaerephon that no one was wiser than Socrates (*Apol.* 21a6-7). Socrates explains that he did not understand the oracular reply, supposing it to be a riddle (τί ποτε αἰνίττεται, *Apol.* 21b3-4). He was aware (ἐγὼ γὰρ δὴ σύνοιδα ἑμαυτῷ, *Apol.* 21b4-5) that he was not knowledgeable (σοφὸς ὢν, *Apol.* 21b5) at all (οὔτε μέγα οὔτε σμικρόν, *Apol.* 21b4).<sup>29</sup> Socrates' testimony of his bemusement depicts him in the bewildering state of *aporia*, just the sort of condition that he contrives to bring about in his respondents in many other dialogues. And he confesses as much to the jury (καὶ πολὺν μὲν χρόνον ἠπόρουσιν τί ποτε λέγει, *Apol.* 21b7). He accounts for his *aporia* by explaining how it was generated by a paradox. He believes that the god cannot lie, and therefore he believes that whatever the god says is

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<sup>29</sup> Translations of the phrase σύνοιδα ἑμαυτῷ vary widely in the literature, offering different degrees to which it expresses a knowledge claim. Even though the phrase is a variation of the common verb to know, viz., εἰδέναι, it would be a mistake to try to make too much of the phrase as a knowledge claim, e.g., in order to construct, on the basis of the translation of σύνοιδα ἑμαυτῷ alone, the clearly problematical claim 'I know that I do not know'. (See earlier discussion about Plato's avoidance in the *Apology* of Arcesilaus' paradox of Socrates' disavowal of knowledge.) The use of σύνοιδα and the reflexive pronoun 'was common in 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century Attic Greek to express having this or that self-image or sense of your own abilities or character, without strong stress on the notion of knowledge'. (Private correspondence with Professor Michael Trapp.) That Socrates is claiming not to have knowledge is clear; what is not clear, as I discussed earlier, is how far, if at all, he is basing this claim on the further claim to know this for certain, and to what extent this is meant to be deliberately paradoxical. The examination of what constitutes certain knowledge is left to such dialogues as the *Meno*, the *Republic* and the *Theaetetus*.

true (οὐ γὰρ δήπου ψεύδεταιί γε· οὐ γὰρ θέμις αὐτῷ, *Apol.* 21b6-7).<sup>30</sup> And so, on the one hand he believes that it is true that he is wiser than any other human being. Yet, he knows, or at least is certainly aware (δὴ σύνοιδα ἐμαυτῷ), that he does not have any knowledge that would make him wiser than anyone else. So, on the other hand, he believes that it is not true that he is wiser than any other human being. Hence his *aporia*.

In this way the main issue in the *Apology*, philosophically speaking, comes to be expressed as an *aporia*, in which Socrates is the refutee, and the Delphic oracle (and Socrates' absolute faith in it) and Socrates' own knowledge of himself constitute the aporetic inconsistency in the structure of belief that we commonly see Socrates teasing out of his interlocutors in the 'Socratic dialogues'. However, the *aporia* in which Socrates finds himself differs *prima facie* from that of his interlocutors in other dialogues, in that there Socrates reduces his respondents to perplexity because the knowledge that they claim to possess, whether of holiness or courage or σωφροσύνη etc., is shown to contradict other convictions that they hold dear. But what is the knowledge that Socrates had claimed to possess, which then contributes to his *aporia* by contradicting and being contradicted by other convictions he clings to? The uniqueness of Socrates vis-à-vis the other victims of his elenchus is that what

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<sup>30</sup> One might argue that Socrates was trying to refute the oracle because he believed it to be untrue. However this is belied by the fact that his aim was to return to Delphi with the counter-example of someone wiser than he was in order to seek clarification of the god's meaning; the process of refutation constituted his investigation (ἐπὶ ζήτησιν αὐτοῦ, 21b8) of the oracular riddle in order to *understand* it, not in order to prove it wrong. Indeed at 22a5-7 he explains that he expended such efforts to find someone wiser than he 'in order that the oracle might stand unrefuted' (ἵνα μοι καὶ ἀνέλεγκτος ἡ μαντεία γένοιτο).

he is claiming is not knowledge, but the lack of knowledge. Where Euthyphro claims that he has knowledge of holiness, Laches of courage and Critias of σωφροσύνη, Socrates claims that he does not have knowledge of anything. The doxastic shoal that this conviction founders upon is his equally strong conviction that the god of Delphi cannot be lying in saying that he has knowledge. And so Socrates is stranded in *aporia*.

In what follows we shall see how this *aporia* is rooted in Socrates' failure—a failure that he apparently succeeds in redressing—to disambiguate his concept of knowledge, in as much as he is certain that he does not have it (σύνοιδα ἑμαυτῷ), and yet is certain that he does (οὐ γὰρ δῆπου ψεύδεται γε [ὁ θεός]· οὐ γὰρ θέμις αὐτῷ). His interrogation of the politicians, poets and craftsmen is his endeavour to redress this failure that results in the disambiguation of his concept of knowledge. In this way Plato's genius turns what superficially appears to be a monologue in the form of Socrates' *apologia* into the form of a genuine dialogue, by means of which Socrates uses elenchus to tackle *aporia*, in this case, his own *aporia*, and to find a way forward. The way forward will turn out to involve the analysis of what knowledge is by seeking to find out who can legitimately claim to possess it and who cannot. To this extent, we can see the *Apology* deeply embedded in Plato's project, which he undertakes throughout the *Meno*, *Republic* and *Theaetetus*, of defining exactly what knowledge is.

Socrates refuses to be complacent in the throes of his *aporia*, and his refusal is portrayed by Plato as a testament to his piety and courage as a true

philosopher, a lover of knowledge (*Apol.* 21e3-5 & 23b9-c1). As Socrates visits the politicians, poets and craftsmen, we see that what he is learning to do is to distinguish between different kinds of knowledge. Admittedly, he does not find any knowledge at all in the possession of the politician he interrogates, but he does at least learn to distinguish between thinking that one knows when one does not know, and not making this mistake about one's own epistemic condition. He does not yet, however, award the status of knowledge to his correct awareness of his own epistemic condition, viz., awareness that he does not know. Instead, Socrates moves on to the poets, and concludes that it is not through knowledge (οὐ σοφία, *Apol.* 22b9) that they compose the many beautiful things that they write, but by virtue of their nature and inspiration (φύσει τινὶ καὶ ἐνθουσιάζοντες, *Apol.* 22c1). When he discovers that they think they know what they do not know, he concludes that he is 'superior' (οἰόμενος περιγεγονέναι, *Apol.* 22c7) to them in the same way in which he is superior to the politicians, viz., he does not think he knows when he does not know.

Socrates' description of himself as superior invites the question, 'Superior in respect of what?' The answer must be 'superior in respect of knowledge', though this is implicit, not spoken by Socrates. For his interrogation of the politicians and poets is intended to enable him to come to an understanding of the Delphic 'riddle' that he is the wisest of mortals, either by finding a wiser person and returning to the oracle for clarification or by solving the riddle himself in coming to the realisation that he indeed is the wisest of all. Therefore, given this context, his conclusion that he is superior to the politicians and poets denotes a superiority in respect of wisdom, i.e., that he is

not less wise, but wiser than they. However, Socrates does not express this as such. He will later at 23b, but not yet. What gradually dawns upon the reader at this stage is that Socrates may, in the end, not succeed in refuting the oracle after all. His ‘solution’ of the riddle may, in fact, turn out simply to be the acceptance of its truth, but only after his investigations have analysed knowledge into what is and what is not claimed on his behalf. That is to say, Plato subtly portrays Socrates accidentally stumbling upon the analysis of knowledge in his search to refute the oracle, while in fact Plato is conducting this epistemological analysis as part of the plot of Socrates’ defence of what makes him different from others and vulnerable to slander. By the time Socrates has finished with the poets, he has not yet found an example of someone who has knowledge, but he has convinced himself that his inquiry so far proves he surpasses others in respect of knowledge or wisdom, in that at least he knows not to claim to have knowledge that he does not, in fact, have.

It is only when Socrates visits the craftsmen that he comes across people whom he *knew* (ἤδη) *did* have knowledge (τούτους δέ γ’ ἤδη ὅτι εὐρήσοιμι πολλὰ καὶ καλὰ ἐπισταμένους, *Apol.* 22d1-2), in response to which he reiterates his claim that he was aware that he himself knew virtually nothing (ἐμαυτῷ γὰρ συνήδη οὐδὲν ἐπισταμένῳ, ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν, *Apol.* 22c9-d1). Here, for the third time in the dialogue, Socrates distinguishes a kind of knowledge, viz., that of the τέχνηαι. Just as he denied having knowledge of natural science and of human and civic excellence, so now he denies having knowledge of the crafts. He confirms that his investigation of craftsmen proved that they indeed did have knowledge, and were therefore more knowledgeable than he (μου ταύτη σοφώτεροι ἦσαν,

*Apol.* 22d4). When, however, Socrates discovers that, because of their possession of the knowledge that they do have, they also claim to have knowledge which they do not have, he speaks not only about different kinds of knowledge, but also about how the possession of some kinds of knowledge seems to bring about a fault (πλημμέλεια) that has the effect of ‘covering up’, ‘concealing’ or ‘obscuring’ (ἀποκρύπτειν) the very knowledge that one possesses.<sup>31</sup> He concludes that he is better off (μοι λυσιτελοῖ) without such knowledge and the ignorance that accompanies it (*Apol.* 22e4-5).

Even at this stage Socrates is not *explicitly* claiming that he is *more knowledgeable* than the craftsmen and others. He only claims that he is better off than they. And yet, he expresses this conclusion as an answer both to himself and to the oracle (ἀπεκρινάμην οὖν ἑμαυτῷ καὶ τῷ χρησμῷ, *Apol.* 22e4-5). The answer, of course, is to the question that has motivated his inquiry, viz., ‘Is Socrates wiser than everyone else?’ So, once again, just as we had to ask in what respect Socrates thought himself ‘superior’ to the politicians and poets, we must now ask, ‘Better off in respect of what?’ Again, the answer to this question is, ‘Better off in respect of wisdom or knowledge’.

Ever since 21b1 Plato has been guiding his readers through analysis of the various forms of knowledge towards the climax that ends in Socrates’ finally

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<sup>31</sup> The phenomenon that Socrates mentions here is what gives rise to such expressions as Alexander Pope’s ‘A little learning is a dangerous thing’. Socrates’ observation appears to be that those craftsmen who were proficient in their craft allowed this confidence to spread to their judgements in areas outside their expertise, and in particular, in respect of the most important things (καὶ τἄλλα τὰ μέγιστα), e.g., what the virtues are and how best to care for one’s soul.

giving his interpretation of the oracle. We, no less than the jury, are charged with determining whether or not Socrates has knowledge. Within the context of the dialogue and Socrates' being on trial, he either has knowledge or he does not. The god has said he does; Socrates is aware that he does not. Through Socrates' initial *aporia* and his subsequent resourcefulness, Plato is helping us to distinguish different kinds of knowledge. The question for the reader becomes not just *whether or not* Socrates has knowledge, but *what kind* of knowledge Socrates has, if indeed he has any.

Socrates' analysis of knowledge into its various forms in this part of the *Apology* now enables Socrates to account for his reputation for possessing the very knowledge that he denies possessing. Immediately after drawing his conclusion that he is better off without the knowledge (and the ignorance) of the craftsmen, he blames his reputation for having knowledge on the investigation he undertook to test the oracle (*Apol.* 22e6-23a3). He explains that bystanders made a critical error in attributing knowledge to him, by virtue of which they supposed he was able to refute others. It is easy for us to understand why they erred. They assumed that Socrates refuted others in the way in which they refuted each other, viz., in virtue of knowledge that they deemed they possess. Bystanders figured that Socrates refuted others by virtue of some kind of knowledge that he possessed. But because Plato has brought us through an analysis of kinds of knowledge, he is able to move the argument on from Socrates' initial disavowal of all knowledge (ἐγὼ γὰρ δὴ οὔτε μέγα οὔτε μικρὸν σύνοιδα ἑμαυτῷ σοφὸς ὢν, *Apol.* 21b4-5) to an avowal of a kind of knowledge, earlier dubbed 'human knowledge' (ἄνθρωπίνη σοφία, *Apol.* 20d8).

First, Socrates avows that ‘probably in truth’ only god has knowledge, ‘is wise’, and that the god was probably saying in his oracle that human knowledge is worth little or nothing. Plato’s repetition of the phrase ‘probably in truth’ here (κινδυνεύει, ὧ ἄνδρες, τῷ ὄντι, *Apol.* 23a5) recalls its use at 20d8-9 (τῷ ὄντι γὰρ κινδυνεύω) where Socrates employs it whilst making his claim to have a ‘human knowledge’ (ἄνθρωπίνη σοφία). Here at 23a5-7 he also repeats the term ‘human knowledge’ (ἄνθρωπίνη σοφία). He uses the phrase ‘probably in truth’ in his interpretation of the god as saying that human knowledge is ‘worth little or nothing’ (ὀλίγου τινὸς ἀξία ἐστὶν καὶ οὐδενός). The intratextuality is patent, and Plato’s use of these identical terms and phrases brings these two statements of Socrates closely together in the reader’s mind.

Since Socrates has been distinguishing different kinds of knowledge in the material between these two passages, the question arises whether the ἄνθρωπίνη σοφία in the earlier passage is meant to be identical with the ἄνθρωπίνη σοφία in the second one. Given the absence of evidence to the contrary, the answer would appear to be ‘yes’, but with rather stark results for the position that Plato has Socrates defend. For at 20d8, ἄνθρωπίνη σοφία corresponds to the knowledge that Socrates claims to have, which is opposed to the knowledge of the physical world and of civic and human excellence that is attributed to him by his ‘earlier accusers’. Here at 23a7, the contrast is between human knowledge and the knowledge possessed by the god. The god alone has knowledge and human knowledge is virtually worthless. By reading these two passages in the light of each other, Socrates’ pronouncement of the epistemic condition of mankind comes across as rather dire and uncompromising.



Socrates is making the twofold claim that the knowledge he has, *whatever that turns out to be*, is the most that a human can hope for, in as much as it is the ‘human’ kind of knowledge, and that even this epistemic condition is virtually worthless, for in truth it is not really knowledge at all: only god has that (κινδυνεύει... τῷ ὄντι ὁ θεὸς σοφὸς εἶναι, *Apol.* 23a5-6).

In this way Plato sets the stage for Socrates’ resolution of the riddle of the oracle, and the solution stems entirely from the analysis of knowledge that Plato conducts in the form of Socrates’ Herculean labours to investigate the meaning of the god’s words in order to address his *aporia*. Plato brackets this investigation with the intratextuality of 20d7-9 and 23a5-7 in the repetition of ἀνθρωπίνη σοφία, and from 23a7-c1 Socrates announces what he understands the god, who alone has knowledge and cannot lie, to be saying in his oracle. Socrates’ interpretation of the oracle constitutes the culmination of his analysis of knowledge into kinds, and defines the kind of knowledge that he claims to have, resolving his initial *aporia* by confirming the god’s avowal of his knowledge and confirming his own disavowal of his knowledge. Both are right, but this could be seen only through Socrates’ disambiguation of the concept of knowledge by means of his interrogation of others. The god of Delphi, whom Plato elsewhere associates with the inscription ‘Know thyself’,<sup>32</sup> designates Socrates as an example for all mankind both of the knowledge to which they can successfully aspire, and which they, as human beings, cannot exceed.

That person among you, mankind, is most  
knowledgeable (σοφώτατος) who, like Socrates, knows

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<sup>32</sup> *Charmides*, 164d4-165b4, *Alcibiades* I 124a8-b1, 129a2 & 132c8-9, *Protagoras* 343b3, *Phaedrus* 229e6, *Philebus* 48c10 & *Laws* XI 923a3-5.

(ἔγνωκεν) that he in truth (τῇ ἀληθείᾳ) is worthless in respect of knowledge (πρὸς σοφίαν). (*Apol.* 23b2-4)

What Plato places before the reader is not only an analysis of knowledge and of the form that is accessible to humans, but also a life that is made exemplary by both the possession and the use of this form of knowledge.

Much later in the dialogue, we find Socrates convicted of impiety and corruption of youth, and coming to the end of his ἀντιτίμησις, his speech counter-proposing a penalty. He remains defiant in maintaining that he has done nothing wrong; he has protested that his penalty should rather be a reward for service to the state, as an Olympic victor would receive. He then considers at 37c4 ff. the possibility of exile as his punishment. The reasons he gives for not proposing this as his penalty include his reiteration of the moral imperative of pursuing his divine mission (τῷ θεῷ ἀπειθεῖν τοῦτ' ἐστίν, *Apol.* 37e6). But the reasons Plato now gives him expand to express the moral imperative not only for Socrates, but also for us, the readers. After Socrates discloses to the jury his divine mission at 23b4-c1, he reiterates his conviction that the god had commanded him to live a life examining himself and others (τοῦ δὲ θεοῦ τάττοντος... φιλοσοφοῦντά με δεῖν ζῆν καὶ ἐξετάζοντα ἑμαυτὸν καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους, *Apol.* 28e4-6). Plato then places in Socrates' mouth words that resonate strongly with his definition at 23a5-b4 of the kind of 'human knowledge' he possesses. Socrates argues that to renege on his divine mission because he feared death would

... be nothing other than thinking that one is wise (δοκεῖν σοφὸν εἶναι) when one is not, for it is to think one knows (δοκεῖν γὰρ εἰδέναι ἐστίν) when one does not. (*Apol.* 29a4-6)

Here we have a restatement of his human knowledge, viz., not thinking that he knows, when he does not know, but rather knowing that he in truth is worthless in respect of knowledge (*Apol.* 23b2-4).

This intratextuality between 23a and 29a provides the platform for Plato in 29b1ff. to universalise Socrates' divine mission so that it becomes the ideal life for all human beings to live. Immediately after saying that the fear of death constitutes an arrogation of knowledge that one does not have, Socrates launches into a tirade against the 'most reprehensible ignorance' (ἀμαθία... ἢ ἐπονείδιστος, *Apol.* 29b1-2) that man can possess, viz., the ignorance of thinking one knows when one does not (*Apol.* 29b2). He says that in this he probably is superior to the majority of men (διαφέρω τῶν πολλῶν ἀνθρώπων), and that if he indeed is the wisest of all, it is in this respect, for he does not share this most reprehensible ignorance; he does not think he knows that death is bad, when he does not know sufficiently about the world of Hades (*Apol.* 29b5-6). Socrates' repeated formulations in 29b of his distinctive 'human knowledge' reinforce the intratextuality of what follows after 29b with what preceded at 20c-23a. However, what was a personal divine mission for him is now presented to the readers as their own highest duty. From 29b9 to 30c1 Socrates explains why he can never voluntarily cease practising philosophy. He cites his divine mission, as he did at 23b, but now the mission is defined as the god's instrument for bringing about man's best interests. That is to say, Socrates' examination of the

lives of others in respect of virtue is the god's way of directing mankind to the care of his soul, as more important than anything else both for the individual and for the state, since all good things come from this alone (*Apol.* 30a5-7 & 30b3-4).

The care of one's soul (ἐπιμελεῖσθαι... τῆς ψυχῆς, *Apol.* 30a8-b2), then, becomes for the reader the end that Socrates' service of the god itself is meant to serve. The excellence of the soul ([τῆς ψυχῆς] ὅπως ὡς ἀρίστη ἔσται, *Apol.* 30b1) and its possession of virtue is the source of all good for man (ἐξ ἀρετῆς χρήματα καὶ τὰ ἄλλα ἀγαθὰ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἅπαντα, *Apol.* 30b3-4), and just as the most reprehensible ignorance is for one to think one knows when one does not (πῶς οὐκ ἀμαθία ἐστὶν αὕτη ἢ ἐπονείδιστος, ἢ τοῦ οἶεσθαι εἰδέναι ἃ οὐκ οἶδεν, *Apol.* 29b1-2), the most reprehensible domain of that ignorance is thinking that one has virtue when one does not, for then one is caring most for what is least important, and least for what is most important (ἐάν μοι μὴ δοκῆ κεκτῆσθαι ἀρετὴν, φάναι δέ, ὀνειδιῶ ὅτι τὰ πλείστου ἄξια περὶ ἐλαχίστου ποιεῖται, τὰ δὲ φαυλότερα περὶ πλείονος, *Apol.* 29e5-30a2). Plato makes this connection between the most reprehensible (ἐπονείδιστος, *Apol.* 29b1) ignorance and its most reprehensible domain by matching the adjective 'ἐπονείδιστος' with its cognate verb 'ὀνειδιῶ', when Socrates explains how he spends all his time searching out and reproaching (ὀνειδιῶ, *Apol.* 30a1) those who think they have virtue when they do not. The message for the reader in 29a1-30c1 advances the argument of 20c4-23c1 by depicting Socrates' 'human knowledge' not just as the ideal for a human being *if he wants to have knowledge*, but the ideal *if he wants to live a good life*.

Plato presents the readers of his ἈΠΟΛΟΓΙΑ ΣΩΚΡΑΤΟΥΣ with an ideal life for them to emulate.<sup>33</sup> The first principle of this ideal life is the knowledge of Socrates, without which the most important part of life, viz., the care of the soul, is neglected, and upon which all good things for a person therefore depend. For without Socrates' 'human knowledge', people will not think to care for their souls, and will not strive to possess that excellence of soul from which all good things for man come. As Richard Robinson points out, Socrates' account of his life examining himself and others

... represents the ultimate aim of the elenchus not as intellectual education but as moral improvement.<sup>34</sup>

And the ethical ideal at which the examined life leads, as Myles Burnyeat explains, is a virtuous living that is conceived

... [not as centring on] the intrinsic or consequential values of the actions which make up a particular way of life, but on virtue conceived as something which the soul both has and benefits from much the same way as the body both has and benefits from health.<sup>35</sup>

That the acquisition and exercise of this 'human knowledge' is not meant to be for Socrates alone, but for the readers also, is confirmed in his ἀντιτίμησις. At 36c, with words almost identical with 30a-b, he repeats that he has devoted his life to encouraging others to pursue their best interests by first realising that

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<sup>33</sup> Just as the *Apology* is Plato's defence of a life of philosophy, as depicted in the life of Socrates, so McCabe points out in regard to the *Phaedo* that 'Plato's passionate account of Socrates' death—and in Socrates' own impassivity to it—is a defence of the philosophical life'. McCabe (2006a): 11 (draft copy).

<sup>34</sup> Robinson (1980): 86.

<sup>35</sup> Burnyeat (1980): 211.

they do not know, when they think they know, i.e., that they are virtuous or are caring about what really matters in life, and then endeavouring to care for their souls and become the best they can be. Furthermore, in explaining why he cannot simply promise to refrain from practising philosophy, he asserts that the greatest good for the human being is, ‘to make conversation’ (τοὺς λόγους ποιῆσθαι, *Apol.* 38a3) about virtue, which involves examining (ἐξετάζοντος, *Apol.* 38a5) oneself and others.

Socrates is quite specific: the care of the soul and the attending to the most important thing in life amounts to *dialogue* about virtue, and the form that this dialogue must take is *examination* (ἐξέτασις). The best that a human being can do is fleshed out as the life that Socrates has lived and has been describing. The intratextuality between this passage and Socrates’ initial description and defence of his life as examination (ἐκ ταυτησὶ δὴ τῆς ἐξετάσεως, *Apol.* 22e6) is reinforced by Plato’s use of the cognate forms of ἐξέτασις (ἐξετάζοντος, *Apol.* 38a5) when Socrates proclaims the greatest good (μέγιστον ἀγαθόν) for man. And the intratextuality is further strengthened in the sentence that has become such a hallmark of the Socratic ideal, viz., ‘For a human being the unexamined (ἐξετάζοντος) life is not to be lived’ (*Apol.* 38a5-6). It is Socrates’ life of continual self-examination and cross-examination that is the ideal life for the human being to live, until such time as the person’s soul is ‘as good as possible’ (ὅπως [ἡ ψυχὴ] ὡς ἀρίστη ἔσται, *Apol.* 30b1).

Whether Socrates’ words are rightly taken to imply that the soul can ever actually reach perfection in respect of excellence is a moot point, but what is clear is that until such perfection is attained, the attainment of excellence and

the good for man, which derives from excellence alone, all depend upon our possession of Socrates' 'human knowledge' and the examined life that this knowledge alone makes possible. Such is the invitation that Plato issues in the *Apology*, and when Socrates' speech that follows his sentencing has been read, the reader is left with the impression that Socrates' execution is a martyrdom in the name of the god of Delphi and for the sake of mankind.

## Section 2. Socratic wisdom in the *Charmides*

It is in turning to the *Charmides* that Plato's readers meet the problem of Socratic wisdom.<sup>36</sup> For it is here that they find the existence and worth of Socratic wisdom, which Plato so carefully embeds in the character of Socrates in the *Apology*, refuted by none other than Socrates himself. The nature and scope of the problem will become clear in this chapter, as we examine the conclusions that Socrates and Critias arrive at in the arguments in the second half of the *Charmides*. This chapter will demonstrate how halfway through the *Charmides* Plato uses the dramatic frame of the dialogue and close intertextuality with the *Apology* to throw the reader into *aporia* regarding the

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<sup>36</sup> There has been much debate over the centuries regarding the order in which the dialogues should be read. For a consideration of the issues involved see Annas (2002). In the arguments that follow I shall imagine the reader turning to the *Charmides* at some point after reading the *Apology*, but this is only to present one way of illustrating the problem of Socratic wisdom. We can equally imagine a reader turning to the *Apology* after reading the *Charmides*, and being alarmed at the endorsement of Socratic knowledge there, when it appears to have been refuted in the *Charmides*.

nature and possibility of the ideal life for man. This will constitute the problem of Socratic wisdom that the rest of this dissertation will seek to resolve.

The *Charmides* opens with Socrates' return from the battle at Potidaea in 432 BC and his recourse to the palaestra of Taureas in order to resume his customary practice of passing the time in conversation. He first satisfies the curiosity of those present by reporting on the battle, and then asks them how philosophy has been faring in his absence, and in particular, whether any of the youths are excelling in wisdom or beauty or both. Critias heaps praises upon his kinsman Charmides, which appears to be deserved, if the latter's fawning retinue is a valid criterion. Socrates, however, is unwilling to confer the highest praises on Charmides until he has ascertained that he possesses excellence of soul as well as beauty of form (*Charm.* 154d6-e1). Critias sends a slave to summon Charmides over so that Socrates will have an opportunity to converse with him, but he does so by employing the ruse that Socrates can cure Charmides of his morning headaches.

Such headaches are, of course, characteristic of hangovers after excessive drinking, as the doctor Eryximachus remarks at the beginning of Plato's *Symposium* (ἄλλως τε καὶ κραιπαλῶντα ἔτι ἐκ τῆς προτεραιίας, *Symp.* 176d3-4).<sup>37</sup> In the absence of any other evidence for the cause of Charmides' morning headaches, and given the fact that the rest of the dialogue is about σωφροσύνη,<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Aristotle also alludes to headaches after excessive intoxication, and reports on the alleviating effect of cabbages and the cleansing power of their juice (*Problemata* 873<sup>b</sup>37-<sup>a</sup>23).

<sup>38</sup> The translation of σωφροσύνη is very difficult to capture in English, and translators have proposed numerous equivalents, including temperance, moderation, prudence, self-control, sensibility and soundness of mind.



it is likely that the headaches are indeed the effect of Charmides' immoderate drinking the day before.

Socrates, in his turn, uses the ruse of the leaf and charm of Zalmoxis, along with the principle of holistic therapy, to focus the conversation on the condition of Charmides' soul, especially in respect of σωφροσύνη. For the leaf will cure the head only if the soul is already σώφρων, and if it is not, then the charm must be used first, which consists in fair discourse (τοὺς λόγους... τοὺς καλοὺς) that engenders σωφροσύνη in the soul (*Charm.* 157a3-6). And so, Socrates seeks to discover whether Charmides already has σωφροσύνη by asking him what it is, on the grounds that if he has it in him, he can perceive it so as to form a judgement (δοξάζειν) about what it is (*Charm.* 159a1-3).<sup>39</sup>

The rest of the *Charmides* proceeds through successive definitions and refutations of σωφροσύνη, and the dialogue ends in *aporia* with regard to what σωφροσύνη is, and whether Charmides already has it so that Socrates can dispense with the charm of Zalmoxis and apply the remedy of the leaf for his patient's headaches (*Charm.* 176a1-5). Modern commentators disagree about the number of definitions attempted, although there is general consensus that

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Furthermore, the very subject of the *Charmides* is the inquiry into what σωφροσύνη is, the results of which would, of course, determine how we best translate it. The inquiry, however, ends without discovering what σωφροσύνη is. Rather than beg the question, therefore, I shall leave σωφροσύνη untranslated.

<sup>39</sup> This premise, viz., that if one possesses σωφροσύνη, one knows (or at least can perceive) what it is, is an early appearance of the sort of self-knowledge that gets discussed in the second half of the *Charmides*. Indeed, it is the denial of this proposition at 164c5-6, which Socrates shows to be a consequence of Critias' definition of σωφροσύνη as 'doing one's own', that Critias himself cannot accept, thereby forcing him to abandon his definition in favour of σωφροσύνη as 'knowing oneself'.

the dialogue considers at least four. Charmides first defines σωφροσύνη as ‘a quietness’ (ἡσυχιότης τις, 159b), then ‘shame’ (αἰδώς, 160e4), and finally ‘doing one’s own’ (τὸ τὰ ἑαυτοῦ πράττειν, 161b6). When Charmides can no longer defend this third definition, Critias steps forward to do so at 162e6. However, despite Critias’ semantic machinations to salvage this third definition by modifying it to ‘doing what is good’ (τὴν τῶν ἀγαθῶν πράξιμ) at 163c3-e2, Socrates forces him to abandon it at 164c7.

At 164d4 there begins what turns out to be a sea change in the dialogue, and the point at which the *Charmides* begins to make its contribution to the problem of Socratic wisdom by setting what appears to be a collision course with the *Apology*. Critias has been defending the third definition of σωφροσύνη as ‘doing one’s own’, but as a result of the pressure of Socrates’ cross-examination he seeks to exploit a quotation from Hesiod in order to interpret this as meaning ‘doing what is good’. Socrates makes clear that this is at least a modification of the third definition, if not in fact a fourth (163d7). Socrates then uses the example of a doctor to point out a consequence of this definition that Critias will be unable to accept, viz., that it is possible for a person to be σώφρων without knowing that he is being σώφρων.<sup>40</sup> This consequence is reached on the one hand by Critias’ equation of σωφροσύνη and doing good things, and on the other hand by Socrates’ observation that, for example, a doctor does not necessarily know in advance whether his cure will be successful and will ‘do

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<sup>40</sup> Critias here endorses Socrates’ earlier premise at 159a1-3, that the possession of σωφροσύνη implies (is a sufficient condition for) the knowledge of it.

what is good'. So on those occasions when his cure is being successful and he is 'doing what is good', by definition he will be σώφρων. But in as much as he does not necessarily know for certain that his cure is working, i.e., that he is doing good things and that he is therefore being σώφρων, he can be σώφρων without knowing it. Socrates demonstrates that, given Critias' definition of σωφροσύνη, it is *at least possible* (ἐνίοτε, 164c5) for the σώφρων person to be ignorant that he is being σώφρων (ἀγνοεῖ δ' ἑαυτὸν ὅτι σωφρονεῖ, 164c6). Critias' uncompromising denial that this is possible constitutes a turning in the dialogue, where Plato from this point forward focuses the attention of his readers on the question of what knowledge is, and in particular, what knowing oneself is.

Plato marks this abrupt change of direction in the *Charmides* with Critias' willingness to jettison anything he has asserted so far, rather than agree that the person who does not know himself is σώφρων (ἀγνοοῦντα αὐτὸν ἑαυτὸν ἄνθρωπον σωφρονεῖν, *Charm.* 164d2-3). This humility (οὐκ ἂν αἰσχυνθείην, 164d1) jolts the reader, who has become acquainted with a Critias whose deceitful arrogance had propelled him into debate with Socrates at 162c, when Charmides with mischievous glee fumbled what seems certain to have been Critias' own definition (*Charm.* 162b10-11 & 162c4-6). Now, at 164d, the change in the direction of the dialogue's arguments is heralded by the astonishingly uncharacteristic generosity and humility of Critias, who suddenly appears to have 'seen the light', as it were. He has found a humility that allows him publicly to abjure as erroneous everything he has said so far about

σωφροσύνη. What he now insists upon at all costs is the identity of σωφροσύνη and the knowledge of oneself.

For I say that this, pretty much, is what σωφροσύνη is, namely, knowing oneself. (σχεδὸν γάρ τι ἔγωγε αὐτὸ τοῦτό φημι εἶναι σωφροσύνην, τὸ γινώσκειν ἑαυτόν, *Charm.* 164d3-4)

Plato marks this fresh start in the dialogue not only with this new, fourth definition, and not only with Critias' unmitigated renunciation of any claims that he has made so far in the dialogue, but also, and especially, by the wholly uncharacteristic behaviour that seems to descend upon and inspire Critias. Indeed, he appears to be as Socratic as Socrates, in this liberal spirit of abandoning all in the pursuit of what appears to be right and true. It is not only reminiscent of the account of Socrates' life in the *Apology*, where he renounces any claim to have knowledge that is more than the mere cognisance of his own ignorance, but also prescient of Socrates' characteristic plea in the *Charmides* two pages later. In the space of these two pages Critias will have forgotten his humility and will revert to his proud character that bristles at being shown to be wrong. In order for the dialogue to continue any further, Socrates will have to coax him into abandoning his pride so that he can disregard whether it is he who is being refuted or someone else, and focus all his attention instead on the argument itself (αὐτῷ... τῷ λόγῳ, *Charm.* 166d8-e2).

The literary skill that Plato has worked into the dramatic frame of this fresh start to the inquiry into σωφροσύνη demands some sort of explanation. Why does Plato portray Critias at 164c8-d3 in a way that at the same time so closely resembles Socrates' characteristic behaviour, and is so opposed to Critias' own

nature? This question becomes even more pressing when we come to read the remarkable speech that Critias gives immediately after his graceful capitulation, with its re-interpretation of the Delphic inscription ‘Know thyself’. This speech has puzzled scholars, for Plato appears to have given lines to Critias to speak that Socrates ought to have said. Drew Hyland notes that Critias’ formulation of σωφροσύνη ‘construes *sophrosyne* as a kind of responsive openness’, which is characteristic of *Socrates*’ questioning stance, and he asks why Plato ‘put these words in Critias’ mouth’, rather than in Socrates’.<sup>41</sup> Hyland concludes that Plato intends to give expression to a ‘deep and almost bitter irony’, by which he portrays Critias as an example of someone whose arrogance leads him to think that he knows, when in fact he does not:

... even though Critias can *utter* his suggestive formulation of *sophrosyne* as self-knowledge, he does not really *know* it.<sup>42</sup>

David Levine disagrees with Hyland’s conclusion, arguing that the real problem is not Critias’ ‘ingenuineness’ in giving his formulation of σωφροσύνη as self-knowledge, but ‘its perverted understanding’.<sup>43</sup> For Levine the key passage for explaining the apparent anomaly of Critias behaving and speaking like Socrates before and during his Delphi speech comes a little later at 167a1-7. There Socrates augments Critias’ explication of self-knowledge as ‘knowledge of knowledge’ by the addition of ‘and of the lack of knowledge’. This addition demarks the difference between what Critias understands self-knowledge to be and what Socrates actually exhibits. Whereas Critias’

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<sup>41</sup> Hyland (1981): 91-92.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.: 92.

<sup>43</sup> Levine (1984): 69.

conception of self-knowledge is the self-conscious arrogation of knowledge that has no capacity for cognising one's lack of knowledge, Socrates' 'double-sided wisdom' embraces both 'knowing what one knows and what one does not know (167a1-7)'. As Levine sees it,

The rest of the dialogue is an analysis of the significance of this 'small' addition. Thus, Socrates' discussion of self-knowledge illuminates, not only Critias' self-knowledge, but his own as well and thus is a reflexive exemplification of what is in question.<sup>44</sup>

This digression into the view of scholars such as Hyland and Levine illustrates the awkward nature, from the point of view of the reader, of this fresh start in the *Charmides*. Hyland is right to highlight this puzzle and see in it a portrayal by Plato, in the character of Critias, of the very absence of Socratic knowledge that we find in the *Apology*. Levine is also right in perceiving the second half of the *Charmides* as a study of a 'counterposing' of two conceptions of self-knowledge: Critias' 'singular mode of knowledge' that promises a 'tyrannical presumption to mastery', and Socrates' unique 'double-sided wisdom' that consists of knowing what one knows and what one does not know.<sup>45</sup> But Plato's brief unexpected portrayal of Critias and the Delphic speech that follows also forces the reader to examine, in the light of this part of the *Charmides*, his own understanding of Plato's 'message' of the *Apology* in praise of the exemplary life for a human.

Up to this point in the *Charmides* the three definitions of σωφροσύνη given so far have all targeted the behaviour or conduct of the σώφρων person as the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.: 71.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

domain in which to discover the distinctive feature or *definiens* of σωφροσύνη.<sup>46</sup> The fresh start, on the other hand, targets the σώφρων person's cognitive condition as the domain in which, according to Critias' proposal, the defining feature of σωφροσύνη is to be sought. For Critias, whatever else is true of the σώφρων person, he enjoys a particular cognitive condition, viz., of knowing that he is σώφρων. The dialogue now moves on to consider what σωφροσύνη entails with regard to the σώφρων person's knowledge. This major shift in the focus of the dialogue, as it inclines towards the exploration of self-knowledge and its relation to σωφροσύνη, becomes inextricably associated with what the *Apology* tells us about Socrates' epistemic condition, which enabled him to live the exemplary life. Furthermore, Plato reinforces the thematic juxtaposition of the *Apology* and *Charmides* by means of the ample intertextuality offered by Critias' lengthy citation, in support of his definition of σωφροσύνη, of the Delphic inscription, 'Know thyself' (*Charm.* Γνωθι σαυτόν, 164e7).

In what follows, it will become clear how Plato motivates the problem of Socratic wisdom for the reader through thematic and textual juxtaposition. By bringing the two dialogues so closely together, Plato forces the reader to reconcile the contradiction generated by the *Apology's* encomium of Socratic wisdom and the *Charmides'* apparent refutation of it. When we see how closely Plato crafted the intertextuality between these two texts, we shall see that it was his intention to force us to confront the shortcomings of our own understanding of what Socratic wisdom is.

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<sup>46</sup> Even *Charmides'* second definition of 'shame' is conceived of in terms of behaviour, as Socrates' counter-example of Homer's needy man illustrates (*Charmides* 161a4).

First of all, the intertextuality of the *Charmides* 164c7 ff. with the *Apology* 20c4-23c1 is established in general terms simply by the reference in both dialogues to the god at Delphi as an authority on knowledge and the welfare of mankind. In addition to this, these two passages are connected even more closely by the instrumental role that Chaerephon plays in obtaining the oracular response mentioned in the *Apology* (20e) and his devoted presence from the very beginning of the conversation in the *Charmides* (153b). However, the intertextuality between the two dialogues is established beyond doubt by the similarity of the vocabulary that Socrates and Critias use in their representation of the advice that is attributed to the god. For Socrates the god's oracular reply is posing a riddle (αἰνίττεται, *Apol.* 21b3-4), and for Critias the Delphic inscription, interpreted as the god's greeting to man, comes rather in the form of a riddle (αἰνιγματωδέστερον, *Charm.* 164e6-7). In this way the two dialogues are intimately bound together in their shared project of seeking to understand the mind of the Delphic god on the subject of human knowledge.

The intertextuality is further secured by the way in which Socrates and Critias match each other in their unusual reception of their Delphic texts. Chaerephon's question to the god seems simple enough: 'Is there anyone wiser than Socrates?' When the answer is 'No', Socrates receives this as a riddle, not a gratifying compliment. Likewise, Critias does not understand the Delphic inscription as everyone else does, but sees it as a riddle. Unlike others, Critias applauds the anonymous dedicator in the *Charmides* for inscribing what he interprets really as a greeting from the god (πρόσρησις τοῦ θεοῦ, 164d7 & 165a5-6), rather than mere advice (συμβουλήν, 165a4). Just as in the *Apology*



the oracular response to Chaerephon receives a special interpretation from Socrates, so here in the *Charmides* Critias interprets the Delphic inscription in a special way.

The reciprocity of these two passages is even further established by the particular form that their unusual interpretations take. On the one hand, Socrates translates the indicative mood of the oracular response, ‘There is no one wiser’ (*Apol.* 21a6-7), into the imperative mood, commanding him to undertake a divine mission (*Apol.* 28e4, 31a7-8 & 37e5-6). On the other hand, Critias interprets ‘Know thyself’ as a salutation from god to man.

The difference between advice and salutation relevant here is that a salutation carries with it the ardent wish of the speaker, or perhaps more precisely, his *will* that his salutation be realised in the person receiving his greeting. So, in ordinary parlance, when the Greek speaker hailed a friend with the customary χαῖρε, he used the imperative mood of the verb meaning ‘to be of good cheer’; he was commanding him, not merely advising him, just as a Roman would will his friend to be of good health with ‘*salve*’. The speaker not only expresses an optimal condition that the hearer may enjoy, but also expresses the speaker’s will that the person greeted be in this condition. The use of the imperative mood in salutations is therefore appropriate, for a greeting is a *command* that a particular situation or condition obtain in the person greeted. This differs from the giving of advice in that the giver of advice suggests what the recipient ought to do, but does not necessarily will that the recipient follow that advice, let alone enjoy its fruits. For example, a criminal lawyer may offer

advice to a client, despite the fact that he entertains no expectation, or even wish, that the client heed it.

In Critias' speech Plato presents the inscription 'Know thyself' as the god's salutation. As a salutation, and not just a piece of advice, it conveys the god's *will* that such and such be so. It amounts to a *command* that the visitor 'Know yourself' (Γνῶθι σαυτόν), which Critias takes to be equivalent to 'Be σώφρων' (Σωφρόνει). Since γνῶναι and σωφρονεῖν are verbs that predicate states of their subjects, viz., 'to be a knower of' and 'to be σώφρων', while their use in the imperative mood may imply 'Try to know yourself' and 'Try to be σώφρων', their primary sense is 'Have knowledge/Be a knower of yourself' and 'Be in the state of being σώφρων'. The god's salutation amounts to his *command* not only that human beings *practise* knowing themselves, as one might practise being σώφρων, but also that they *be in the condition of* knowing themselves, as one might be in the condition of being σώφρων. Plato has Critias interpret the inscription so that the god of Delphi is seen to express a command that all men embody self-knowledge.

What this 'knowing oneself' is the reader has yet to examine in the *Charmides*. But the connection with the *Apology* is clear. There, too, Plato presents the god as expressing a command that Socrates bring human beings to know themselves, in as much as Socrates interprets the oracular reply as commanding him (*Apol.* 29e4 & 37e6) to carry out the divine mission of helping the god show people that they do not have knowledge, when they think they do have it (*Apol.* 23b6-7). So, the intertextuality of the *Apology* and the *Charmides* is reinforced by the unusual way in which both Socrates and Critias

interpret words attributed to the Delphic god as commands, whether to Socrates on behalf of all mankind, in the case of the *Apology*, or directly to all mankind, in the case of the *Charmides*.<sup>47</sup>

As yet, Critias' interpretation of the Delphic inscription as a salutation from god to man does not identify the self-knowledge enjoined by it with the peculiar 'human knowledge' of Socrates in the *Apology*. That is to say, the reader has no grounds, as yet, for thinking that the self-knowledge enjoined upon mankind by the god is the knowledge that he specifies as distinguishing Socrates as the wisest of all men. Perhaps there will turn out to be a difference—perhaps there will not—between the self-knowledge enjoined by the inscription in the *Charmides* and Socrates' knowledge in the *Apology*. Either way, Plato introduces a tension between the two appearances of self-knowledge that is exacerbated by the intertextuality of these two passages. And yet, the special

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<sup>47</sup> Hyland goes rather further in his interpretation of the act of greeting, which he takes to be the taking of a stance of 'responsive openness' towards someone, and which he views as a 'well-chosen image' for the taking of a 'stance of wonder', of 'responsive openness', of the 'interrogative stance of philosophy'. He considers Critias' account of the Delphic inscription to be an accurate formulation of what it is to be *σώφρων* and to possess self-knowledge, but that although Critias manages to formulate correctly the definition of *σωφροσύνη*, the virtue of philosophy, he fails to understand it, 'because he does not embody it'. Hyland (1981): 89-92. But this account of what a greeting is, viz., the expression of responsive openness, allows Hyland to read into the text much more than the text offers, e.g., Heidegger's 'patient noble mindedness' (*Gelassenheit*). But greetings may or may not express such openness on the part of the greeter. And in order to show that Critias depicts *σωφροσύνη* as the dispositional stance that Hyland hails as Socratic wisdom, Hyland must do more than merely define a salutation in the way he does. Indeed, Levine is right to fault Hyland's interpretation for going too far in construing Critias' Delphic speech as a statement of the Socratic philosophical stance: 'the text is eclipsed as Hyland pursues his ulterior philosophical intention... to superimpose Critias' view on Socrates, despite the latter's continued lack of approbation'. Levine (1984): 69.

interpretations given to the god's words in the two dialogues gives the reader grounds for viewing both forms of knowledge, if indeed they are different forms of knowledge, as knowledge that the god recommends to man. If the reader is to heed this highest recommendation that Plato lavishes upon the self-knowledge of the *Charmides* and the Socratic knowledge of the *Apology*, then he must make some effort to comprehend what this knowledge is, if they are the same, or what they are, if they are different.

The intertextuality that we have seen so far between the two dialogues constitutes for the reader an opportunity for further work of the kind that Socrates carried out in the *Apology*, and indeed we shall see that this is exactly what happens after Critias' Delphic speech in the *Charmides*. That is to say, the analysis of the various forms of knowledge that Socrates conducts in the *Apology* establishes a framework with reference to which the reader can ask exactly what kind of knowledge the self-knowledge in the *Charmides* is. And such an analysis is exactly what is going to be furthered when Socrates responds to Critias' speech with his extended elenchus.

The effect of intertextuality arises not only from the similarities between the two dialogues; the differences, too, make a contribution. For example, we saw above that Plato's choice of Critias as the proponent of the definition of σωφροσύνη as self-knowledge strikes us as bizarre and out of Critias' character. After his *volte-face* at 164c7 he speaks about the Delphic oracle in a way that mirrors Socrates in the *Apology*, and yet the two speakers are so different in

nature, at least according to Plato's portrayal of these two characters in the *Charmides*.

Furthermore, to the educated reader of Plato, this difference in their natures has a dimension beyond Plato's portrayal of Socrates and Critias. The incongruity of Plato's choice of Critias not only as an interlocutor, but also as the one who speaks Socrates-like, will not be lost on any well-informed reader of Plato. Nor will Plato have been ignorant of the historical figure and kinsman after whom his character was named. Plato depicts his character Critias as having special insight into the mind of the god of Delphi. And yet, every reader of the *Charmides* who has even only a little knowledge of the turbulent times prior to Socrates' trial and execution will know, thanks to the efforts of historians like Xenophon,<sup>48</sup> that the historical Critias was one of the least σώφρων of villains of the oligarchic party in Athens toward the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>49</sup>

It was Critias and his colleagues, whose efforts he largely orchestrated as a principal player in the party, who issued such illegal and intemperate commands as the one that Socrates describes himself as courageously and lawfully disobeying in the *Apology* (32c4-e1). Critias was foremost in contriving and administering this reign of terror, and Socrates through his conduct figures in the *Apology* as foremost in opposition. When Socrates mentions this in the *Apology* he is stressing that his greater regard for what is

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<sup>48</sup> Xenophon, *Hellenica* II. iii.2 – iv. 19.

<sup>49</sup> See the account given by Debra Nails. 'Critias... was certainly a member and leader of the Thirty in 404/3... [He] appears to have been one of the extreme members and personally to have plotted some of its most reprehensible measures: murders, confiscations, banishments, mass execution of the citizen population of Eleusis.' Nails (2002): 110.

right and righteous expressed itself not only in words, but also in deeds (*Apol.* 32a4-5 & 32c8-d1). But he also clearly indicates that his actions are the fruits of his ‘human knowledge’, in that he does not think he knows that death is an evil, when he does not know this (*Apol.* 29a4-6). In this way Plato construes Socrates’ actions as expressions of his knowledge, viz., Socratic wisdom.

When the reader recalls the atrocities that Critias is mainly remembered for, and reads in the *Charmides* of the special insight that he is claiming to have into the mind of the god of Delphi and the knowledge that he enjoins upon mankind, the project of the analysis of knowledge that follows Critias’ Delphic speech takes on a practical significance that challenges the way that we, the readers, lead our lives. Through this tension between the kinds of knowledge that Socrates and Critias claim to have, Plato exerts pressure upon us to examine the knowledge that guides our own lives. Critias’ actions will have been expressions of whatever debased kind of knowledge he possessed, and yet here he professes to have a special understanding of the knowledge that divinity enjoins. As has been shown, we already have cause to wonder whether this knowledge is the same as the Socratic knowledge that informed and guided Socrates’ life as depicted in the *Apology*, but now we also have reason to wonder how such apparently similar kinds of knowledge, if indeed they are not the very same knowledge, can engender diametrically opposite actions. On the one hand there is the ideal life for a human, on the other hand the life of one of history’s greatest villains, and binding them together is a joint claim to have a special insight into the knowledge—the progenitor of deeds—that divinity prescribes as constituting mankind’s best welfare.

In the *Apology* Plato scripts Socrates as Apollo's messenger, conveying to mankind the knowledge of what the god commends, viz., human wisdom. In the *Charmides* Plato scripts Critias also as Apollo's messenger, conveying to mankind the knowledge of what the god commends, viz., self-knowledge. The similarity of the message is made all the more striking and enigmatic by the extreme dissimilarity of the lives of the two messengers.

We have seen how Plato uses intertextuality between the *Apology* and the *Charmides* to juxtapose the self-knowledge that Socrates describes in the *Apology* and the self-knowledge that Critias and Socrates examine in the *Charmides*. Having done this, Plato then uses the rest of the *Charmides* to reflect upon self-knowledge in a way that clearly has Socratic wisdom for the target of its exposition. What actually results, however, is more of an exposé than an exposition, for by the end of the *Charmides* Socrates has apparently managed to refute the possibility of his own 'human' knowledge, thereby elaborating the problem of Socratic wisdom. In the remaining part of this chapter, a cursory glance at the stages in this apparent refutation will reveal how Plato constructs for us a problem that cries out for resolution.

At 164b3-4 in the *Charmides* Critias offers to explain to Socrates how it is that  $\sigma\omega\phi\rho\omicron\sigma\upsilon\eta$  is knowledge of oneself, if Socrates does not agree that it is. Socrates answers that he does not know whether he agrees or not, and will not know this until he has examined what it means. Their joint examination concludes that, in as much as it is self-knowledge, it must be knowledge of itself, i.e., knowledge of knowledge and the lack of knowledge (*Charm.* 166e7-

9). Socrates then fleshes out this definition by describing what powers the possessor of such knowledge would have, and gives as close a depiction as one can imagine of Socrates as he portrays himself in the *Apology* 23b4-7.

[H]e will be able to test to discover (ἐξετάσαι) what he happens to know and what he happens not to know, and he will likewise be able to inspect (ἐπισκοπεῖν) what a person knows and thinks he knows, if indeed he knows, and in turn what he thinks he knows, but does not know, and no one else will be able to do this (τῶν δὲ ἄλλων οὐδεὶς). (*Charm.* 167a1-5)

Socrates then sums up this ability as the knowledge of what one knows and what one does not know (τὸ εἰδέναι ἃ τε οἶδεν καὶ ἃ μὴ οἶδεν, *Charm.* 167a6-7), and Critias concurs. Socrates then proceeds to refute this definition of σωφροσύνη by failing to find a way in which self-knowledge could exist at all (*Charm.* 169a7-b1).

Since Critias is floundering in *aporia*, Socrates tries to give Critias' definition of σωφροσύνη as 'self-knowledge' another chance by assuming for the sake of argument that self-knowledge is possible, and then examining it for its usefulness. The constraint for self-knowledge being useful is set by Socrates' 'divining' σωφροσύνη to be 'something useful and good' (τὴν γὰρ οὖν δὴ σωφροσύνην ὠφέλιμόν τι καὶ ἀγαθὸν μαντεύομαι εἶναι, *Charm.* 169b4-5). The justification for Socrates' divination would appear to be the fact that σωφροσύνη, whatever else it turns out to be, is universally agreed to be an excellence (ἀρετή), i.e., a 'superlative goodness', and therefore by definition is something good (ἀγαθόν). After all, if goodness is good, superlative goodness *a fortiori* is good. However, Socrates' subsequent examination of self-knowledge



for usefulness strips it of the capacity to know *what* one does and does not know, leaving it only with the ability to know *that* someone knows something (*Charm.* 170c9-10).

Nevertheless, Socrates perseveres in giving Critias' definition of σωφροσύνη as self-knowledge a chance for having the sort of utility one expects from σωφροσύνη. His suggestion that Critias' definition of σωφροσύνη as self-knowledge reduces to 'the knowledge only that one knows and that one does not know' (ειδέναι... ὅτι οἶδεν καὶ ὅτι οὐκ οἶδεν μόνον, 170d1-3) still sounds very much like the knowledge that Socrates claims to have in the *Apology*. There, he is aware that he does not know anything 'great or trivial' (*Apol.* 21b4-5) and he concludes that the knowledge he does claim to have after all, having interrogated other 'knowledgeable' people, consists in his not thinking that he knows when he does not know (ἔοικα... σοφώτερος εἶναι, ὅτι ἂ μὴ οἶδα οὐδὲ οἶομαι εἰδέναι, *Apol.* 21d6-7).

In the *Charmides* at 170d1-9, Socrates again, just as he did at 167a1-5, speaks of self-knowledge as conferring the capacity to examine others for the possession of knowledge. While it cannot reveal what knowledge a person does or does not possess, it can reveal whether he possesses it or not.

Therefore this person [who has σωφροσύνη, defined as the knowledge *that* one does or does not know,] will not be able to examine (ἐξετάσαι) anyone who claims (φάσκοντά) that he knows something (τι ἐπίστασθαι), that is, whether he knows what he says he knows or does not know it. But only this much, so it seems, will he know (γνώσεται), namely, that he has some kind of knowledge, but σωφροσύνη will not enable him to know (γιγνώσκειν) of what this knowledge is. (*Charm.* 170d5-9)

The Socratic wisdom of the *Apology* still appears intact, granted what the argument denied at *Charm.* 169a7-b1, viz., that it can exist in the first place. But it is beginning to appear inadequate to the task that engaged the Socrates of the *Apology*, who alone of all Athenians and foreign visitors alike spent his life examining his own knowledge and that of others, thereby succeeding in living the examined life (ἐμοῦ ἀκούετε... ἐμαυτὸν καὶ ἄλλους ἐξετάζοντος, ὁ δὲ ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπων, *Apol.* 38a4-6). The knowledge that can tell *that* one knows or does not, but cannot tell *what* it is one does or does not know, no longer seems capable of conferring the greatest blessing on oneself and the state, as if from divine dispensation (οἷος ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ τῇ πόλει δεδόσθαι, *Apol.* 38a7-8). For us to care for our souls, which alone ensures our greatest good (*Apol.* 30a7-b4), we need to know that the knowledge we have is not just any knowledge. We need to know whether the knowledge we have is the right kind, viz., the knowledge of what is good for the soul. As a case in point, Socrates admits that the craftsmen possessed *some* kinds of knowledge, but failed to recognise that they lacked knowledge about the most important matters (καὶ τἄλλα τὰ μέγιστα σοφώτατος, *Apol.* 22d7). Socrates' elenchus in the *Charmides* has, for a second time, apparently undermined his wisdom in the *Apology*.

The rout of Socratic wisdom continues in the *Charmides* as Socrates continues his search for some utility for it. He argues, using the example of medicine, that anyone who wishes to examine a doctor rightly (ὁ ὀρθῶς σκοπούμενος), in order to tell whether he really knows medicine or not, will

examine him (ἐπισκέπεται) by examining the truth of what he says (εἰ ἀληθῆ λέγεται) and the correctness of his actions (εἰ ὀρθῶς πράττεται)—but he can do this only by possessing the knowledge itself in regard to matters of health and disease (*Charm.* 171a11-c2). From the point of view of the reader, this is a most astonishing conclusion for Socrates to draw, viz., that it is not possible to examine anyone’s claim to possess knowledge *unless one has that knowledge himself*. It is astonishing because this is exactly what Socrates was *denying* in the *Apology*. There, he contradicted his earlier accusers, who had inferred from his success in examining others that he must have the very knowledge that he proved others did not have:

... many slanders have arisen against me, and this report is made of me (ὄνομα δὲ τοῦτο λέγεσθαι) viz., that I have knowledge (σοφὸς εἶναι), for on each occasion the bystanders think that I have knowledge of those things in respect of which I cross-examine and refute someone else (οἴονται γὰρ με ἐκάστοτε οἱ παρόντες ταῦτα αὐτὸν εἶναι σοφὸν ἢ ἄν ἄλλον ἐξελέγξω). (*Apol.* 23a3-5)

Socrates insists in the *Apology* that he succeeds in examining what others in fact know and do not know *not* by possessing the knowledge they profess to have, but by possessing another kind of knowledge, viz., his ‘human knowledge’ that consists in knowing that in truth he is worthless in respect of knowledge, i.e., that he knows nothing of any value (*Apol.*, 23a7-b4). But in the *Charmides* Socrates’ own train of reasoning appears to vilify the defence of his life in the *Apology*. In effect it brands the seventy-year-old Socrates a liar and a fraud, and secures the justice of his conviction at the hands of his accusers and the jury. For according to Socrates in the *Charmides*, the Socrates of the

*Apology* could not possibly have ‘pursued the inquiry’ (ἐπακολουθήσαι, *Charm.* 171b12) into the truth of what his respondents said and the correctness of their actions without possessing the knowledge in question, the very knowledge that he denied possessing.

The argument that Socrates pursues in the *Charmides*, as guided largely by Critias’ responses, rejects the notion we find in the *Apology* of a ‘human knowledge’ by means of which one can examine the validity of one’s own and other’s claims to knowledge. After a reverie in which Socrates imagines the benefits of such a kind of knowledge, if it did exist and prevailed in the life of a community, he concludes with Critias that this knowledge ‘clearly does not exist’ (*Charm.* 172a7-8). In yet another attempt to salvage some usefulness for σωφροσύνη as Critias defines it, however, Socrates returns to Critias’ initial formulation at 166e7-8 of σωφροσύνη as ‘knowledge of knowledge and the lack of knowledge’, i.e., prior to the two attempts to construe it either as knowledge of *what* one knows and does not know, or knowledge *that* one knows or does not know. Socrates suggests some claims on behalf of σωφροσύνη, viz., that its possessor would learn more easily, apprehend more clearly, and be able to examine others more robustly about the knowledge that he himself has acquired (*Charm.* 172b1-8). But this usefulness of ‘knowledge of knowledge and the lack of knowledge’ still depends on its possessor also *actually* possessing the knowledge that the person he is examining *claims* to possess. In this way Socrates’ exposition of the knowledge of knowledge and the lack of knowledge in the *Charmides* sallies forth as the *contradiction* of the knowledge of knowledge and the lack of knowledge that he claims to have in the *Apology*.

The climax of the attack in the *Charmides* upon Socratic wisdom comes when Socrates re-admits, for the sake of argument, the possibility of the existence of knowing what one knows and what one does not know (τὸ εἰδέναι ἅ τε οἶδεν καὶ ἅ μὴ οἶδεν, *Charm.* 172c8-d1). He does this in order to retract the statement he made earlier (*Charm.* 171d1-172a5) that the community that possessed and acted upon this knowledge would fare well and be happy. For in his ‘dream’ of a community governed by the knowledge of what one does and does not know (173a7 ff.), it is not *this* knowledge that confers happiness and well-being; only the knowledge of good and bad can do this. Socratic wisdom, as the knowledge of what one does and does not know, is useless, contrary to what Plato proclaims in the *Apology*.

Critias then makes a last ditch attempt to assert the utility of knowledge of knowledge, on the grounds that it would rule over (ἄρχουσα, 174e1) the knowledge of what is good and bad, just as it presides over (ἐπιστατεῖ, 174d9) the other kinds of knowledge. With these few words Critias moves from the language of epistemology to the language of political power, and indeed, tyranny. Plato’s choice of Critias as the character to spar with Socrates is apt. Such language concerning an over-mastering knowledge well suits the mouth of the historical Critias, whose deeds were evidence of his lust to exceed measure in the coercion of others, and whose life exhibited the antithesis of Socrates’ σωφροσύνη, as portrayed elsewhere (*Symp.* 219e-220e) in Alcibiades’ description of him in the campaign at Potidaea, to which the *Charmides* alludes when it begins (*Charm.* 153a).

Critias' language of political power betrays a more sinister motive for his interest in knowledge. Here, at the end of the dialogue, we gain an insight into how differently Critias and Socrates conceive of knowledge and its uses. Critias is quick to portray self-knowledge as the knowledge that over-masters the uses of all other kinds of knowledge in a community. And by doing so he reveals how differently he conceives of the value of self-knowledge, when we compare it with the use of self-knowledge depicted in the *Apology* that keeps Socrates too busy and too just to engage in political activity in Athens (*Apol.* 23b7-c1 & 31d5-32a3). As we shall see, Plato exploits this difference of viewpoint about self-knowledge, and indeed about knowledge itself, in the *Charmides* in such a way that the reader is compelled to inspect closely the model of knowledge that lies behind Critias' responses to Socrates' questions. After all, Socrates allows the argument to be guided by the responses that emerge from the understanding of his interlocutor. As it stands at the end of the *Charmides*, Socrates' probing of Critias' account of self-knowledge, which so closely resembles the self-knowledge depicted in the *Apology*, is denied any utility, since only the knowledge of good and bad confers that. But even worse than this, by the end of the dialogue the Critian defence of self-knowledge, as teased out by Socrates, appears to have repudiated even the coherence of the conception of Socratic wisdom.

Socrates' summing up speech (*Charm.* 175a9 ff.) catalogues his and Critias' failure to discover what σωφροσύνη is. In particular, Socrates states that their most egregious error, in point of reason, was their agreement, contrary to

reason, that it is possible for someone to know what he does not know, even if only to the extent that he knows *that* he does not know it.

[We came to these agreements] not even examining (ἐπισκεψάμενοι) the impossibility of a person knowing (εἰδέναι) in any way (ἀμῶς γέ πως) that which he does not know (ἄ τις μὴ οἶδεν) at all (μηδαμῶς); for our agreement states that he knows them, that is, knows that he does not know them (ὅτι γὰρ οὐκ οἶδεν, φησὶν αὐτὰ εἰδέναι ἢ ἡμετέρα ὁμολογία). And yet, I think, nothing would appear more unreasonable than this. (*Charm.* 175c4-8)

Socrates here passes his final condemnatory sentence on that part of the discussion of self-knowledge in the latter half of the *Charmides* that targets the Socratic wisdom of the *Apology*. Indeed, the knowledge that one does not know receives the harshest of denunciations, in as much as it is consigned to the lowermost dungeon of ‘least rationality’ (οὐδενὸς ὅτου οὐχὶ ἀλογώτερον, *Charm.* 175d7-8). Socrates makes the unequivocal and extreme claim that there is nothing that is more irrational than the knowledge of what one does not know. He brings to a head all his arguments in the second half of the *Charmides* and focuses the force of their criticism intensely on this single most illogical of all propositions, a proposition that precisely characterises the epistemic virtue of the Socrates of the *Apology*. And whichever of these alternatives is correct, what are we to infer about what *Plato* thinks? Hence, we can see that *Plato* composes in the *Charmides* in a most conspicuous way an apparent refutation of Socrates’ claim in the *Apology* to possess a ‘human knowledge’ by virtue of which he recognises that he does not know, and therefore does not think he knows what he in fact does not know. And in doing

this, Plato presents the reader with the problem of Socratic wisdom, viz., how are we to reconcile these two dialogues and their contradictory conclusions? Is Socrates right in the *Apology* to claim possession of a knowledge by which he recognises what he does and does not know, and is it right that such knowledge is the ideal epistemic condition for the human being? Or is the *Apology* wrong on both these counts? Is it rather the *Charmides* that is right in its arguments denying both the possibility of such a knowledge and its usefulness towards securing the good life for us, if indeed it ever could exist?

The problem of Socratic wisdom manifests at the level of doctrine, in that the reader wishes to know what position Plato takes on the question of the possibility of Socratic wisdom, and if it is possible, then what its nature is. But the problem also appears at the ethical level, at the level of the habits that we seek to cultivate, in that both dialogues are about how the human being should live his life. The *Apology* presents an ideal of the examined life, and the *Charmides* has for its central theme one of the chief human virtues that make for a successful life. The effect of the intertextuality between the *Apology* and the *Charmides* regarding self-knowledge is to focus the mind of the reader on the twofold question that the *Apology* was meant to answer, viz., what is the knowledge that makes a person most wise and what is the knowledge that is best for securing the greatest good for man? If the readers have come to the *Charmides* after having read the *Apology*, they are likely to believe that they have the answer ready to hand. The answer is the one Socrates gives, viz., the awareness (συνειδέναί ἑαυτῶ) of what one does and does not know, and



therefore (since ‘probably only god has knowledge’) the realisation (τὸ γινώσκειν) that one is worthless in respect of knowledge (*Apol.* 21b4-5, 21d4-7, 23a5-6 & 23b2-4). The god of Delphi stands surety for this knowledge being the one that makes a human being most wise. And the ‘proof’ that this knowledge is the best for a human being to possess, at least prior to his putative perfection in virtue which alone is the source of good for man, is its being the *sine qua non* for the human being to undertake the search for virtue in the first place.

The reader is primed to heed the message of the *Apology*, in which the arguments that Socrates offers in defence of his way of life and the dramatic frame that Plato depicts proclaim the martyrdom of the wisest of men and divine gift to mankind (*Apol.* 23b2-4, 30d7-e1 & 31a7-8), whose only motivation for his penurious toil has ever been the service of the god and a fatherly concern for the welfare of humanity (*Apol.* 23b7-c1, 31b4-5 & 36d4-5). The *Apology* moves the reader to agree that only the examined life is worth living, and that this is nothing less than a life’s work, a way of life, as described by Socrates. Indeed, like so many other individuals and even schools of Hellenistic philosophy, the reader is likely to emulate Socrates and to endeavour to succeed in living the examined life. But how is he to go about this? Antisthenes and Aristippus demonstrated how divergent were the possibilities for Socrates’ own associates to lead a ‘Socratic life’.<sup>50</sup> If we focus

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<sup>50</sup> Guthrie illustrates how differently Antisthenes, Aristippus and Euclides sought to continue the Socratic way of life. Guthrie (1971): 169-187. See also the next chapter for a fuller account of attempts throughout history to emulate the Socratic life.

only on the direction that the *Apology* gives to its readers, the clear prescription is to acquire and practise Socrates' 'human knowledge' for the sake of the care of our souls. That is to say, one must not think one knows, when one does not know, especially in regard to the moral condition of one's soul, and one must cling to this Socratic self-knowledge throughout one's campaign to rectify the moral shortcomings that this self-knowledge reveals.

But, once again, what is the reader of the *Apology* to do? Does he henceforth simply proclaim that he does not really know, whenever he is inclined to make an epistemic claim? Surely, this is not enough. For the god states that a person has Socrates' wisdom only if he *realises* (ἐγνώκε) that he is not wise; merely proclaiming falls short of realising. Well then, how does he get himself to realise this? Does he go about *thinking* that he is not wise, meditating constantly upon this proposition and putting himself under a strict mental discipline not to allow any assent to any propositions that may cross his mind? But again, even if he were to succeed in adopting such a sceptical posture by exercising ἐπιτοχή in respect of all doxastic assent, this still falls short of *realising* that he does not know. This Socratic wisdom, that one knows nothing of any real value, must be *seen*, must be *known* to be so, if one is to succeed in attaining the Socratic ideal. One must *be aware* that one knows nothing. Believing or even being convinced is not knowledge.

After reading the *Apology* we shall have formed our own view of what constitutes Socrates' 'human knowledge', and if we have cared enough to try to emulate Socrates, we shall have found that Socratic wisdom is not as easy to come by as may have appeared at first from Plato's artful depiction of the plain-

talking defendant. The *Apology* does not explicitly say how we are to go about acquiring this ‘human knowledge’, but Socrates’ gadfly analogy implies that it is by subjecting ourselves tirelessly to cross-examination by him or someone like him (*Apol.* 30d5-31b5). It certainly demands of us a programme of continual inquiry and continual defeat in our inquiry. And it is likely, sooner or later, to occur to us to question what its usefulness will really turn out to be, if we were ever to succeed in doing this all our lives. In theory the acquisition of Socratic wisdom makes possible the care of the soul by providing the knowledge of our own moral ignorance to motivate the inquiry into virtue. But at the end of the *Apology*, after the din and brawl of the courtroom drama has settled, we bid Socrates farewell and find ourselves left alone to the devices of our own understanding of what the ideal examined life is. And in the same way we are also left to discover for ourselves what the payoff of Socratic wisdom, in practice, *really* is.

Plato’s use of Socrates as the flesh and bones of his moral philosophy, with his rousing call in the *Apology* that we all live the examined life and strive for moral goodness, renders us poised with interest upon hearing Critias’ salutation from the god of Delphi to know ourselves. Indeed, the interest is heightened by that fact that it is Critias who proposes the topic, so that it will be Socrates, the master-revealer of ignorance, who will sift Critias’ understanding of self-knowledge, and hence our understanding also, separating what is known from what is not. Socrates, the champion of self-knowledge in the *Apology*, undertakes in the *Charmides* to examine our understanding of his, and potentially our, self-knowledge. But far from emerging from the scrutiny with a

clearer understanding of Socratic wisdom and more detailed guidance for attaining to what our mentor embodied, we find Socrates—himself, no less—rubbishing his own formulation in the *Apology* of his own wisdom, as something that is not possible, and even if it were possible, as something that would be worthless (*Charm.* 175b6-d5). What are we to make of this? What is Plato up to? Was he genuinely confused? Did he change his mind? The *Charmides* offers no apologies, no retractions, no explanations, just refutation and abjuration of the Socratic wisdom of the *Apology*. Socrates and his wisdom have managed to throw us into *aporia* about Socratic wisdom, made all the more acute because our *aporia* manifests itself both at the intellectual level, with the question of what Plato's doctrine is, and at the ethical level, with the question of how we can best live our lives.

In the next chapter we shall see how this inconsistency between the *Apology* and the *Charmides* is placed in the context of the many inconsistencies that appear throughout the Platonic corpus. We shall review and assess the various methodologies that interpreters of Plato have used over the centuries in order to reconcile such apparent contradictions in his doctrine. This survey will elucidate reasons for preferring a method of Platonic interpretation called the 'double dialogue' reading, which treats many of the inconsistencies in the dialogues as deliberate clashes constructed for the reader by authorial design. Thereafter we shall apply this hermeneutic method in a close reading of the arguments in the second half of the *Charmides*. This reading will demonstrate the superiority of this method over the others, in that it resolves the problem of Socratic wisdom by explaining how, far from being an embarrassment for

Plato, the 'problem' is an essential part both of his epistemological project in his written work and of his programme as a teacher.

### Chapter 3. Strategies for the Resolving of Inconsistencies in Plato

#### Section 1. The need for a strategy to resolve inconsistencies in Plato

The inconsistency between the *Apology* and the *Charmides* in respect of Socratic wisdom is, of course, not the only inconsistency we find in Plato. Over the centuries commentators have struggled to derive a consistent doctrine from the dialogues, a struggle made arduous because of the large number of apparent inconsistencies at the most fundamental level of doctrine found in them. Did Plato believe that the soul was single or tripartite? Was it his doctrine that knowledge alone is sufficient for being virtuous? Did the theory of Forms, as commonly reconstructed from the middle books of the *Republic*, represent his essential teaching? Or are the broadside in the *Parmenides* and the apparent absence of such a fully-fledged theory of Forms from the *Theaetetus* and arguably from other ‘late’ dialogues evidence that Plato’s mature thought distanced him from his own theory of Forms? Does his theory of Forms, whether in the end he endorses it or not, entail a Two World ontology of eternal insensible reals *qua* universals on the one hand, and evanescent unreal sensibles *qua* particulars on the other? Did he really mean for Socrates, whether or not we think of the character as representing the historical figure, to disavow *all* knowledge, or does Plato claim on his behalf such ethical knowledge as it always being wrong to disobey one’s superiors (*Apology* 29b) and it always being worse to commit injustice than to suffer it (*Gorgias* 509a)? And perhaps most disconcerting from an overall point of view, if Plato does endorse

Socrates' characteristic disavowal of knowledge and the method that is grounded in this epistemic agnosticism, however we are supposed to qualify them, how legitimate is it for us to read Plato as avowing doctrine at all, where doctrine is construed as amounting to the assertion of claims about the truth of how things are?

Various strategies have been used by individual commentators and by whole schools of scholars to give an account of such inconsistencies in order to discern in Plato a coherent philosophical position. In our attempt to find some explanation, and possibly even reconciliation, for the problem of Socratic wisdom, it behoves us to examine these strategies to see whether they can offer valuable assistance towards a solution. What follows in this chapter is a survey of approaches to Plato over the centuries, and an assessment of their utility in providing a strategy for resolving apparent inconsistencies in his thought. As will become clear, one aim of this survey is to demonstrate that a central feature of Platonism throughout the ages has always been the robust contest between competing interpretations of what Plato thought. This overview of Platonic debate will show how controversial any approach towards reading Plato will be, given such vigorously defended alternatives. But a further aim of this survey is to identify shortcomings in these interpretative methodologies, and thereby to provide motivation for employing a strategy that has recently been developed in various ways by a number of Platonic scholars. These scholars are not in entire agreement in respect of all the details of this approach, but the core of their

consensus constitutes a coherent strategy that I shall call the ‘double dialogue’ reading of Plato, as coined in the 1970s by E. N. Tigerstedt.<sup>51</sup>

## Section 2. The Platonism of the Academies

After Plato’s death successive phases of the Academy, which he had founded, promulgated their own brand of Platonism, claiming that theirs was the correct understanding of Plato. Ancient historians postulated the existence of no less than five Academies prior to Neoplatonism.<sup>52</sup> The modern consensus, however, follows Cicero’s simpler picture that reduces these five to three.<sup>53</sup> The first is the Old Academy, unified by its collegiate struggle to investigate key philosophical issues such as the nature of the good, the role of mathematics in the cosmos, and the theory of Forms.<sup>54</sup> The second is the New Academy, unified by the view that the true Platonic tradition is one of non-dogmatic scepticism.<sup>55</sup> The third is Middle Platonism, which sought to restore the Academy to a Platonism defined by a particular

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<sup>51</sup> Tigerstedt (1977): 96-101.

<sup>52</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*: I. 220.

<sup>53</sup> Cicero, *Academica*: I.iv.13-18, I.xii.43-46, II.xxii.70 & II.xxxv.113.

<sup>54</sup> For an account of the activities of the Academy in the later years of Plato’s life and after his death see Guthrie (2001): 446-492.

<sup>55</sup> The thoroughgoing scepticism of the New Academy is evidenced by Antiochus’ attack upon it, documented in Cicero’s *Academica*: II.xiii-xviii.40-60. For Cicero’s defence of it see II.xx.64-105, especially II.xxxi-xxxii.99-104.



dogma that was characterised by Antiochus of Ascalon's attempt to integrate the principles propounded by Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics.<sup>56</sup>

During this period of six hundred years after Plato's death, before the rise of Neoplatonism, successive generations of Platonists not only disagreed over what Plato's doctrines were, but even argued vigorously over whether Plato in fact held any doctrines at all.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the single most unifying factor throughout the history of the Academy was not any of Plato's purported doctrines, but a methodology of 'argument on either side' that is regularly portrayed in the dialogues.<sup>58</sup> It is this method that the members of the New Academy, who were called the Academics or Sceptics, cultivated on the grounds that Plato's way of philosophising was not the building of systems and the conveying of dogma, but the engagement through dialectic in the activity of *philosophia*, i.e., the love of wisdom, as a way of life and truth. Cicero records in his *Academica* the four arguments which the Academics employed in order to justify this interpretation of Plato: nothing is affirmed in the dialogues, there is much exploration of both sides of an issue, everything is up for question, and nothing is declared as certain.<sup>59</sup>

Nevertheless, so persistent was the conviction that Plato must have had a dogma that the search for his doctrines resumed in due course in the

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<sup>56</sup> For the tenets of Antiochus' dogmatism, which he attributes to the Old Academy, see Cicero's *Academica*: I.v-xiii.19-33. His account, in fact, is heavily laced with Stoic, let alone Aristotelian doctrines, as Cicero himself later points out (II.xxii.69).

<sup>57</sup> For an example of the passion and vigour of this debate see Ibid. II.vi.16-18.

<sup>58</sup> Brittain (2001): 221. See especially chapters 4 and 5 for a detailed account of one period of debate by Platonists over what constituted the correct 'unity thesis' of Academic thought.

<sup>59</sup> Cicero, *Academica*: I.xii.46.

Academy, and later Platonists would even defend this conviction by publishing such ‘patent fiction’ as the conspiracy-theory claim that

...the Academics were esoteric Platonists, who handed down the secret doctrines of Platonism (which later appeared openly in the work of Plotinus), but assumed a ‘front’ of universal scepticism to combat the threat of Stoic materialism.<sup>60</sup>

This verdict by Augustine, who was a Neoplatonist before his conversion to Christianity, exudes the confidence of the ‘new Platonism’ founded by Plotinus in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE.

Plotinus had become deeply disillusioned with the interpretation of Plato that prevailed in the Alexandrian school, and went on to promulgate a ‘novel’ reading of Plato, after submitting himself to ten years of discipleship under an Egyptian teacher, Ammonius Saccas. We know little of this sage, who wrote nothing, but whose teachings we can vaguely discern in Plotinus’ monistic interpretation of Plato’s thought. However, Plotinus did not consider his ‘novel’ reading novel to Plato, for he viewed his interpretation as ‘a restoration of Plato’s own doctrine, which previous interpreters had distorted’.<sup>61</sup> So inspiring was Plotinus’ ‘restoration’ that, by the time of the Neoplatonists Iamblichus and Proclus (fourth and fifth centuries CE), these interpreters of Plato had come to use the dialogues primarily as the support on which to drape their Plotinian visions of what Plato ‘meant to say.’<sup>62</sup> And

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<sup>60</sup> Brittain (2001): 222-223.

<sup>61</sup> Wallis (1995): 17.

<sup>62</sup> A thorough examination of the early history of Platonic interpretation is undertaken in Tarrant (2000). See Chapters 5-7 and especially pp. 213-215.

in the Academy under the scholarship of the Neoplatonists (fifth and sixth centuries CE),

... the lecturer's authority lay in the claim that the vision that inspired Pythagoras, Plato, and others had been recreated within his own spirit. The interpretation was an interpretation of a vision rather than a text.<sup>63</sup>

The Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato attracted much ancient support. It was not only Plotinus who believed that his was the true understanding of Plato's thought. From the early 400s CE until its dissolution by the Emperor Justinian in 529 CE, the Platonic Academy was headed by Neoplatonists.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, throughout the Middle Ages 'Platonism, whether in the East or in the West, was actually Neoplatonism', and continued largely to be so throughout the Renaissance.<sup>65</sup> And even today, there are modern commentators who defend the Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato, notably Lloyd Gerson, whose *Aristotle and Other Platonists* argues in great detail for the validity of understanding not only Plato, but also Aristotle 'through the prism' of Neoplatonism.<sup>66</sup>

Gerson elsewhere notes that Neoplatonists 'did not regard themselves as innovators in any way', and yet they were

... not so much interested in getting Plato 'right' as they were in the philosophical position whose greatest exponent happened to be Plato.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.: 95-96.

<sup>64</sup> Wallis (1995): 138.

<sup>65</sup> Tigerstedt (1974): 7 & 38.

<sup>66</sup> Gerson (2004): 22.

<sup>67</sup> For this and the other quotations in this paragraph see Gerson (2002): 1.

For this reason, where there are gaps or inconsistencies in the dialogues, the Neoplatonists gave much thought to what Plato could or would have said about them. Gerson cites as a case in point the ‘single unambiguous reference to the Idea of the Good in the *Republic*’. He argues that one can ‘choose to ignore’ its implications, or one can do as the Neoplatonists did, and try to harmonise it with the *Philebus*, the *Parmenides* and Aristotle’s testimony into a doctrine that ultimately posits a single first principle, a doctrine that is ‘implied by’ Plato’s thought. Gerson urges a decision upon us by citing Proclus’ observation that ignoring gaps and inconsistencies in the dialogues constitutes our adopting a philosophical position no less than the attempt to fill and harmonise them. But apart from ignoring and harmonising, Gerson does not offer us other strategies for resolving inconsistencies, and appears to hold the view that in the absence of our spending ‘quality time with the Neoplatonists’, the gaps and inconsistencies in Plato will condemn us to ‘an impossibly narrow view of Platonism’.

This brief survey of the history of the Academy through to its endorsement of Neoplatonism demonstrates three things: that an essential element of the Platonic tradition has always been the debate over what Plato thought or must have thought, that many of Plato’s heirs who lived closer to his lifetime than we do attributed a variety of doctrines to him that extrapolate from the gaps and inconsistencies in the dialogues, and that a significant portion of this commentarial tradition denied that he promulgated any doctrine at all.

### Section 3. Aristotle's Plato

One of the difficulties in finding a definitive interpretation of Plato that we can use to resolve inconsistencies in the dialogues is that each interpreter is inevitably influenced by his own ideas and philosophical interests, as he seeks to arrive at an understanding of what Plato thought. A case in point is Plato's most famous student, Aristotle. For example, let us examine the way in which he handles the controversy over how many first principles Plato thought there were, for it demonstrates how careful we must be in elucidating the presuppositions within a commentator's strategy of interpretation. This cursory examination will merely aim to show how the strategic tools that Aristotle uses to analyse the evidence of Plato's thought and synthesise out of this a Platonic doctrine are, in part, responsible for the outcome. Hence, to assess fully Aristotle's formulation of Platonic doctrine, we must be cognisant of his tools and evaluate the validity of their use.

In his *Metaphysics* 987<sup>b</sup>14-988<sup>a</sup>15 Aristotle is setting out what his predecessors postulated as the fundamental first principles (ἀρχαί) of the universe, and in particular, how many first principles each philosopher postulated. He clearly states that he views Plato's thought as entailing more than one fundamental first principle.

As matter, the great and the small were principles; as substance, the One (987<sup>b</sup>20-1).<sup>68</sup>

Aristotle then argues that Plato distanced himself from Pythagorean doctrine by

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<sup>68</sup> W. D. Ross' translation in Barnes (1995): 1561.

...positing a dyad and constructing the infinite out of great and small, instead of treating the infinite as one (987<sup>b</sup>25-6).<sup>69</sup>

Aristotle then sums up his analysis of what he takes to be Plato's thought, classifying Plato as a dualist, for whom the universe is founded upon two first principles or causes: the One and the Dyad of the great and small.

Plato, then, declared himself thus on the points in question; it is evident from what has been said that he has used only two causes, that of the essence and the material cause (for the Forms are the cause of the essence of all other things, and the One is the cause of the essence of the Forms); and it is evident what the underlying matter is, of which the Forms are predicated in the case of sensible things, and the One in the case of Forms, viz., that this is a dyad, the great and the small (988<sup>a</sup>7-14).<sup>70</sup>

I quote this passage at length for two reasons. The first is to highlight the contrast between Aristotle's representation of what Plato thought as a dualism, and that of the Neoplatonist Plotinus, which is a kind of monism.<sup>71</sup> According

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.: 1561-1562.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.: 1562.

<sup>71</sup> Aristotle's famous commentator, Alexander of Aphrodisias, in his commentary on the *Metaphysics* confirms that Aristotle considered Plato to be a dualist: 'Plato made the One and the dyad principles of numbers and of all the things that are, as Aristotle says in his treatise *On the Good*'. (The translation is from Dooley (1989): 85.) Unfortunately, we do not have Aristotle's treatise *On the Good* to verify this. Furthermore, when Alexander considers a variant reading of Aristotle's text at *Metaphysics* 988<sup>a</sup>10-11 that would support a monist interpretation of Plato, he regards it as without authority, being an emendation by the Middle Platonist Eudorus. William Dooley reviews the scholarship on this passage and concludes: '...in his commentary on the variant reading, Alexander finds nothing in the altered text that goes counter to the orthodox interpretation of Platonism presented in the text of Aristotle on which he is commenting (*Metaphy.* 988<sup>a</sup>14), according to which Plato used *two* causes, the One and matter.' (Author's italics in Dooley (1989): 88-89, n. 187.) For a discussion of Simplicius' claim that Alexander, typically of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, attributes *three* principles to Plato (the matter, the maker and the paradigm, corresponding to the Receptacle, the Demiurge and the Forms), see

to Plotinus' reading of Plato, 'the One is "all things and none of them"', and out of itself it emanates all things, including matter.<sup>72</sup> Matter is not 'an independently existing principle'.<sup>73</sup> It is clear that Plotinus, *pace* Aristotle, does not read Plato as postulating the One as a principle that informs matter *qua* a separate, independent principle. And again, it is clear that if we are to assess these opposing representations of Plato's thought, we need to know what tools Aristotle and Plotinus used and to evaluate how validly they employed them.

We also need to be sensitive to any particular aims that philosophers may have had in working up their commentaries on Plato. We shall look at the question of Aristotle's motives presently. As for Plotinus, he and the other early Neoplatonists

... regarded themselves as Platonists pure and simple, in the sense of expounding nothing not already present, at least by implication, in Plato's own teaching.<sup>74</sup>

By contrast, however, the later Neoplatonists make our assessment of their commentaries more difficult by having the determined aim

... to show the presence of the same truths not merely in Aristotle and the earlier Greek philosophers, but in Homer, Hesiod and Greek mythology in general.<sup>75</sup>

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Sharples (1995): 69 & 73-75. I shall argue only that Alexander took Plato to be *at least* a dualist; clearly, if Simplicius is right, and Alexander attributed three principles to Plato, *a fortiori* he attributed two principles to him.

<sup>72</sup> Wallis (1995): 60-65.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*: 50.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*: 3.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

Plotinus, then, appears not to be disinclined to offer an account of Plato's principles that contradict Aristotle's, although there is evidence that he did in fact endeavour to reconcile Aristotelian with Platonic doctrine.<sup>76</sup>

It does, of course, seem bizarre in the extreme to use Plotinus' understanding of Plato, 600 years after Plato's death, to challenge the word of Plato's very able student, who attended the Academy for the last twenty years of Plato's life. We need to have good reason if we are to question the veridicality of his representation of Plato's thought. And this is the second reason for quoting Aristotle above at length, for the passage shows how his account of Plato is embedded in terms of hylomorphism and the language of Aristotle's four causes. This provides us with a clue to Aristotle's strategy of interpretation and the degree of its value as an accurate account of Plato's thought.

Aristotle is notorious for characterising the views of other philosophers somewhat uncharitably, motivated as he is by his own project of sifting through what his predecessors thought in order to formulate his own theories as improvements upon theirs.<sup>77</sup> His methodology at the beginning of some of his inquiries is to collect 'reputable opinions' (ἐνδοξα) attributed to his predecessors, not in order to establish the historical accuracy of such

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<sup>76</sup> Frank De Haas argues, *pace* Wallis, that Plotinus' *On the genera of being* (*Enneads* VI.1-3 [41-3]) is an exploration of the *Categories* that results in a 'decisive contribution to Plotinus' Platonic ontology'. He concludes that Porphyry's commentaries on the *Categories* were intended to complement Plotinus' 'project of integrating Aristotle's philosophy into Platonism'. De Haas (2001): 502 & 523.

<sup>77</sup> For a study of the degree to which Aristotle's philosophical style and his dialectical strategy render him vulnerable to charges of misinterpretation of Plato see Fine (1995).



attributions, but in order to chart his own dialectical progress towards the true account.<sup>78</sup> Owing to his use of the reported views of his predecessors primarily as landmarks on his own philosophical journey, many scholars agree that his account of Plato ‘is often biased and misleading’; some believe that he actually misunderstands Plato in places.<sup>79</sup>

This is not to say, of course, that Aristotle did not read his Plato very carefully and with brilliant acuity. It would be quite wrong to suggest that he did not ‘know his Plato’, whatever that might mean, as is attested by the explicit and implicit references to the dialogues in his works. But at the same time he was a true philosopher, for whom ‘while both are dear, it is right to honour truth before [one’s friends]’ (*Nicomachean Ethics* I 1096<sup>a</sup>16-7). We can expect from Aristotle, and indeed do get, an acutely critical view of Plato. It is also not a valid criticism of Aristotle to fault his strategy of using his principles of hylomorphism and the four causes to compare, contrast and classify the doctrines of other philosophers. Danger does loom, however, when these techniques of analysis are used to reconstruct what an author says according to a conceptual framework that he did not propose.

Since historical accuracy was not Aristotle’s primary aim in recording what his predecessors thought, the use of his own interpretative strategies to identify and assess what they thought requires that we exercise great caution in reading his accounts of them.<sup>80</sup> This brief examination of Aristotle’s account of Plato’s

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<sup>78</sup> The first books of the *De Anima* and of the *Nicomachean Ethics* afford classic demonstrations of Aristotle’s methodology.

<sup>79</sup> Tigerstedt (1977): 82-83. See also Shorey (1968): 82.

<sup>80</sup> Tarrant examines how it was in Aristotle’s interests to attribute definite and unequivocal doctrines to his predecessors. ‘Everything points to Aristotle’s

first principles not only demonstrates that interpreters ought to try to make their strategies transparent and accountable for any distorting tendencies, but also warns the readers of these interpreters to be mindful of the interpreters' strategies when assessing their results. Fortunately, in the interpretation of Plato's doctrine, we appear to be ideally placed for the evaluation of competing interpretations in the light of the evidence, since all that he wrote for publication is extant; we lack no texts as we set out to verify or dispute Aristotle's or anyone else's account of what Plato thought.<sup>81</sup>

#### Section 4. The demise of Neoplatonism

It was just this issue regarding the authoritative status of Plato's own written work vis-à-vis his commentators that came to play the major role in the demise in the eighteenth century of the Neoplatonist interpretation that had prevailed since Plotinus' day. The elevation of the dialogues to the position of highest authority constituted the hermeneutic principle with which Protestant theologians in the seventeenth century began to shake the foundations of Neoplatonism, which had defined what Plato thought for over a thousand years. They vigorously condemned core doctrines of Neoplatonism as anti-Christian, and by resorting to Plato's dialogues, the entire corpus of which had become

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having avoided in depth exegesis of his predecessors, and to his need to understand all of them within his own, often unsympathetic, conceptual framework, a framework that could only take account of firmly fixed doctrine.' Tarrant (2000): 44.

<sup>81</sup> Cherniss (1980): 4.

available in Europe only in the Renaissance, they argued that the anti-Christian elements in Platonism had been imported through the eclecticism of centuries of Neoplatonists, from the apostate Ammonius Saccas, Plotinus' teacher, to Marsilio Ficino, the High Priest of the Renaissance.<sup>82</sup> In corroboration of this Protestant thesis R. T. Wallis points out that Plotinus himself regarded his work 'not as a totally fresh departure, but as a restoration of Plato's own doctrine', and that much of what was 'restored' was in fact alien to Plato.

That many Neoplatonic doctrines had not been explicitly propounded in the Platonic dialogues, but were drawn from Aristotle and the Stoics, the Neoplatonists themselves were well aware.<sup>83</sup>

Indeed, Porphyry, Plotinus' student and compiler, praises him for being an independent thinker who, while a Platonist, subtly mingles Stoic and Aristotelian doctrines in his writings; for example, he claims that the *Enneads* 'incorporate a condensation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*'.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, the Neopythagoreans anticipated Plotinus's doctrine in some of its most crucial areas,<sup>85</sup> and it will always remain a mystery just how much of Plotinus' monistic thought was inspired by his Egyptian teacher.<sup>86</sup>

The Protestant movement to liberate Plato from Neoplatonism and let him, as it were, speak for himself culminated in the early eighteenth century in Jacob

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<sup>82</sup> Krämer (1990): 16. See also the assessment of the seminal work of the French Calvinist Ioannes Serranus and of 'the father of modern ecclesiastical historiography' Johan Lorenz von Mosheim in Tigerstedt (1974): 39-42 & 55-57. Ammonius had abjured his Christian faith when he came of age.

<sup>83</sup> Wallis (1995): 17.

<sup>84</sup> Porphyry, *Vita Plotoni*: 14.1-8. The translation is Wallis', *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> For the possible influence of Moderatus and Numenius on Plotinus see *Ibid.*: 32-36.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*: 38 & 48.

Brucker's scholarly demolition of the Neoplatonists as 'pseudo-Platonists' and 'vain and foolish forgers of a most detestable and false philosophy' that was 'essentially un-Platonic'.<sup>87</sup> His rejection of the Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato was so cogent that this became the orthodoxy in the monumental encyclopaedias of the German and French Enlightenments.<sup>88</sup> Brucker set himself the task of constructing Plato's doctrine from the dialogues alone. However, he found it impossible to find a system in them, and gave eight reasons why he thought it could not be done.<sup>89</sup> One of these reasons is the fact that Plato never appears in the dialogues *in propria persona* to state *his* views; another reason is that he weaves ambiguities and inconsistent subtleties throughout the discussions; yet another is that these discussions often generate contradictions by incorporating mutually incompatible ideas. These reasons, however, did not deter the vast majority of Platonic scholars who insisted that Plato, in as much as he was a philosopher of worth, must have had a system.<sup>90</sup> But when they tried to find it within the dialogues, the obscurities, ambiguities, gaps, contradictions and inconclusiveness subverted their attempts to identify a unified doctrine, just as they had done for Brucker.<sup>91</sup>

In spite of such difficulties, Platonic scholars persevered with their conviction that Plato simply *had* to have a systematic doctrine, and having failed to find it in his written work, they devised a strategy by which they might refer inconsistencies to an authority higher than the dialogues themselves. They

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<sup>87</sup> Tigerstedt (1974): 58. See pp. 57-61 for an account of Brucker's *Critical History of Philosophy from the First Beginnings of the World to our Times*.

<sup>88</sup> In particular those published by Zedler and Diderot. Ibid.: 61-62.

<sup>89</sup> For the full list of these causes of Plato's 'obscurity' see Ibid.: 59-60.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.: 38, 60, 65, 67 & 69.

<sup>91</sup> Tigerstedt (1977): 15.

pursued the hypothesis that the doctrines of Plato's 'real' teaching lay 'behind' his dialogues in the form of 'unwritten doctrines' that Plato never committed to writing.

### Section 5. Plato's 'unwritten doctrines'

The hypothesis of the 'unwritten doctrines', first advanced in modern times by Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann in the 1790s, proposes that Plato had a system, but that he reserved it only for oral instruction within the Academy, while the written word, in the form of the dialogues, was intended for the wider public as protreptic and preparation for philosophy proper.<sup>92</sup> Tennemann justified his hypothesis by citing the *Phaedrus* and *Second* and *Seventh Letters*, where Plato speaks of the limitations of the written word.<sup>93</sup> Despite his deprecation of the philosophical value of the dialogues as evidence of what Plato really thought, Tennemann sought, with little success, to extrapolate Plato's 'oral teaching' from them.

Other scholars since then have tried to make the hypothesis of the 'unwritten doctrines' more successful by enlisting passages in Aristotle and later commentators on Plato that attribute to him certain metaphysical tenets

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<sup>92</sup> Tigerstedt (1974): 66. The passage from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* examined above is one such example, where a doctrine of first principles, which appears nowhere explicitly in the dialogues, might be attributed to Plato.

<sup>93</sup> See the next section for an examination of the claim that the *Phaedrus* and the *Epistles* are evidence for a Platonic 'oral teaching'.

that do not appear to be propounded in his dialogues.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, since 1959, following the work of Hans Joachim Krämer and Konrad Gaiser, the Tübingen School of Platonic interpretation has defended this hypothesis and seeks to define the content of what its members believe was Plato's esoteric system of metaphysics.<sup>95</sup> For this reason they have been called 'Esotericists'.<sup>96</sup> The Tübingen School claims that the core of these 'unwritten doctrines' is a theory of principles that 'serves as the ultimate foundation that is beyond the theory of Ideas and includes them', and thereby 'guarantees a higher degree of unity to Platonic philosophy' than can be found from reading the dialogues alone.<sup>97</sup> These principles are the One and Indefinite Duality, and as evidence for this theory of principles, the School cites the mention of a public lecture 'On the Good' that Plato once delivered in Athens,<sup>98</sup> passages in Plato's dialogues that may suggest such a doctrine of principles, brief expositions in Aristotle (as we saw above), and later commentators on how Plato viewed these principles in relation to the

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<sup>94</sup> For a brief and balanced survey of this controversial issue see Guthrie (2001): 418-442. There is an extensive collection of translations of ancient texts that some modern commentators have used to reconstruct what the 'unwritten doctrines' might have been in Appendix I of Findlay (1974): 413-454. Note, however, Findlay's unreserved reception of them as authoritative in establishing 'what Plato taught and thought' (p. 415).

<sup>95</sup> The initial impulse for the Tübingen School was provided by Krämer (1959). For a statement of the interpretative principles of the School, an account of its progress, and a chronological bibliography of the first three decades of the School's work see Krämer (1990).

<sup>96</sup> E. N. Tigerstedt introduces the term 'Esotericists' in Tigerstedt (1977): 63. His review of attempts in modern times to formulate Plato's philosophy receives the praise it deserves in Guthrie (2001): 418.

<sup>97</sup> Krämer (1990): 77. For a summary of the 'unwritten doctrines' see Guthrie (2001): 426-442.

<sup>98</sup> Aristoxenus, *Harmonics*: II.30-31. For an assessment of the contribution that the lecture 'On the Good' makes towards the Tübingen project see Gaiser (1980).

Ideas, numbers and the sensible world.<sup>99</sup> In this way a purported ‘oral teaching’ is elevated to the position of a final court of appeal, and what Plato wrote is denied ultimate authority as testimony for what Plato himself believed to be the most fundamental truths. Whatever is taken from later writers as reports of the purported ‘oral teaching’ achieves supremacy as the key to understanding what the dialogues ‘only adumbrate’.<sup>100</sup>

The vulnerability of such a method is that it goes about determining the meaning ‘behind’ what an author wrote not by what *he* wrote, but by what *others* thought and wrote about what he said. This vulnerability is especially threatening in regard to the ‘unwritten doctrines’ of Plato, for an examination of the written evidence for them soon shows how little there is to go on.<sup>101</sup> The latitude that the Esotericist method affords its proponents for attributing doctrine to Plato, that may not have been his doctrine at all, has been the principal objection from the method’s many critics.

In the 1940s, even before the arrival of the Tübingen School, the project of locating Plato’s thought outside his dialogues was dealt a devastating broadside through the consummate scholarship of Harold Cherniss, who argues that the evidence outside Plato’s dialogues for his doctrine depends primarily upon only two passages in Aristotle. He concludes that the discrepancy between what Aristotle attributes to Plato’s thought and what we find in the dialogues is due to Aristotle’s critical interpretation of Plato’s theory of Ideas, and that the

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<sup>99</sup> For a collection of these passages, see Appendices II & III in Krämer (1990).

<sup>100</sup> For a statement of the methodology that guides the Tübingen School see *Ibid.*: 41-42.

<sup>101</sup> W. K. C. Guthrie’s glance at the evidence for these ‘unwritten doctrines’ shows how tenuous any claims in favour of their existence and content must be. Guthrie (2001): 423-426.

tendency in Aristotle to recast the thought of other philosophers according to his own interpretative system is noticeable not only to the readers of Aristotle today, but was a complaint levelled against him by Platonists even in his own day.<sup>102</sup> So, when Aristotle and later commentators ascribe metaphysical tenets to Plato which do not appear in the dialogues, it is wrong to account for this discrepancy by hypothesising ‘unwritten doctrines’, and right to explain it by acknowledging the influence upon Aristotle’s interpretation of Plato that results from his preferred way of doing philosophy, viz., of imputing fixed doctrines to his predecessors according to the structure of his own analysis, so that he can then argue dialectically towards his systematic solutions.<sup>103</sup>

Cherniss concludes that the dialogues are the only expression Plato ever gave to his doctrine, and he also draws upon evidence of what Plato thought ‘doing philosophy’ really was. He argues that the uncertainties in Aristotle and in Plato’s successors, Speusippus and Xenocrates, as to the content of any official line of thought in the Academy, and the accounts we have of the deliberately unstructured procedure of mathematical studies under Plato’s leadership, prove that Plato did not proclaim a fixed doctrine of metaphysics and natural philosophy, but led the Academy by encouraging, challenging and guiding the enquiries of its members.<sup>104</sup>

Cherniss’ demolition of the Esotericist hypothesis, like Brucker’s toppling of the Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato two centuries earlier, turned the focus of the attention of commentators onto the dialogues alone for the purpose of

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<sup>102</sup> Cherniss (1980): 14, 29 & 33. For his thorough examination of the evidence see Cherniss (1962).

<sup>103</sup> Cherniss (1980): 51.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.: 66-72.



reconstructing Plato's doctrine.<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, many scholars thought that Cherniss had overstated his case. W. K. C. Guthrie believed that Cherniss was too harsh in accusing Aristotle of deliberately misrepresenting Plato's thought.<sup>106</sup> Sir David Ross compared the dialogues with what Aristotle says about Plato's thought, and argued that such a comparison proves that Plato must at least have given voice in the Academy to *some* ideas that were never committed to writing.<sup>107</sup> Others agreed with this, but argued that it was wrong to view such voiced ideas as tantamount to fixed doctrines, and that it is far more likely that he discussed with his students views that were never, or perhaps could never be, resolved.<sup>108</sup>

However, the stubborn recalcitrance of the dialogues alone to yield up a single, coherent doctrine reinvigorated the search for a key to unlock their defiant inconclusiveness and divulge a systematic doctrine, presumed to be

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<sup>105</sup> The priority of the dialogues in Platonic interpretation even came to be summoned to account for the source of those passages in Aristotle that had been used to suggest the existence of 'unwritten doctrines'. Kenneth Sayre provides an analysis of the *Philebus* that seeks to locate in this dialogue all that Aristotle will have needed as evidence for the metaphysical doctrines he ascribes to Plato, thereby dispensing with any need for a hypothesis such as that of the 'unwritten doctrines'. See Sayre (1983).

<sup>106</sup> E.g., Guthrie (1957). He argues that any representation by one philosopher of another's thoughts will necessarily entail some measure of interpretation. This fact, of course, goes a long way in accounting for the history of vigorous debate in the tradition of Platonism.

<sup>107</sup> Ross (1971): 149-151.

<sup>108</sup> E.g., Solmsen (1947): 167. He warns against our underestimating the 'characteristic elasticity of Plato's thought'. J. N. Findlay suggests 'that the Unwritten Dogmas referred to may have been mere opinions that Plato expressed in conversation' in Findlay (1974): 467. Gregory Vlastos reduces the so-called 'oral doctrine' to theories that Plato 'found attractive enough to merit exposition and defense in oral argument but which he did not succeed in working out fully and confidently enough to think them worthy of publication' in Vlastos (1981): 398.

there in Plato's mind and encrypted in his writings.<sup>109</sup> In 1959, a decade and a half after Cherniss' assault on Esotericism, Hans Joachim Krämer came to its rescue by appealing to passages that Plato himself had written, which 'by reason of their explicitness, have an absolute pre-eminence' in determining whether or not Plato had 'unwritten doctrines'.<sup>110</sup> The most explicit of these passages are the *Phaedrus* 274b6-278e3 and the *Seventh Letter* 340b1-345c3, which discuss the limits of writing in respect of expressing the truth. He claims that Plato's own writings, let alone the writings of later commentators, prove that he had a secret 'oral teaching' of a system of doctrine that was 'rather elastic and flexible' and 'open to amplification'.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> For an account of these attempts at reconciliation of doctrine see Tigerstedt (1977): 14-16 & 52-62.

<sup>110</sup> Krämer (1990): 55.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*: 91.

## Section 6. The *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Epistle*

If the Esotericists are right, then we cannot resolve all the inconsistencies in Plato, such as the problem of Socratic wisdom, merely by studying his dialogues. We must go beyond them in some way. But are they right to use Plato's own words, viz., in the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*, to validate their strategy as the one that is consonant with the author's intention? A brief examination of the evidence in these two works will show that they do not support the Esotericist strategy.

First of all, Platonic scholars are fairly equally divided over the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter*,<sup>112</sup> although the most thorough examination of this letter concludes, albeit hesitantly, on historical and philosophical grounds that it cannot have been authored by Plato.<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, a large consensus has emerged that accepts the *Seventh Letter* as either by Plato or by one of his students who knew him very well.<sup>114</sup>

The *Seventh Letter* claims at 341c that Plato has never written about what he is most interested in. What he is most interested in is described at 342a-b as the fifth element in knowing anything, viz., the thing itself which is known and truly is. The other four elements involve names, definitions, instances and the knowledge that one has of the object. The author argues that one must grasp the

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<sup>112</sup> Guthrie (2001): 401.

<sup>113</sup> Edelstein (1966). See pp. 166-9 for his admission of the elusiveness of any answer regarding the Letter's authenticity. In the end 'the divergent opinions held concerning the genuineness of the *Seventh Letter* have had a decisive bearing on the image one has had of Plato' (p. 169), and one might add that the converse is also true, a point which Solmsen develops in his dissenting review in Solmsen (1969): 29 & 31.

<sup>114</sup> Guthrie (2001): 399.

first four elements, before he can ever have knowledge of the fifth,<sup>115</sup> which alone is what the mind seeks, for it is the true being of the thing, whereas the other four elements are only its qualities.<sup>116</sup>

[A]nd it is by means of the examination of each of these objects [of philosophical inquiry], comparing one with another — names and definitions, visions and sense-perceptions, — proving them by kindly proofs and employing questionings and answerings that are void of envy — it is by such means, and hardly so, that there bursts out the light of intelligence and reason regarding each object in the mind of him who uses every effort of which mankind is capable.<sup>117</sup>

The author points out that the examination and cross-examination of the first four elements involve the use of language and the senses, and therefore the knowledge of them is unstable, owing to the possibility for ambiguity and distortion in the use of language and the senses. However, the knowledge of the fifth element, the thing itself, being perfect and beyond variation, cannot be expressed by writing, which uses the imperfect and variable instrument of language.<sup>118</sup>

What we must not fail to notice here is that the author clearly points out that the limitations in writing for expressing the truth apply equally to the written word *and to the spoken word*. For he says that if someone truly knows something, viz., the fifth element, the thing itself, and tries to explain it either orally or in written form, ‘expounding his view by speech or writing or

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<sup>115</sup> Plato, *Epistle VII*, 342d8-e2.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 343b6-c5.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 344b3-c1. Bury’s translation in Plato (1966).

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*: 343b6-c5 & 344c1-8.

answers’,<sup>119</sup> he will easily be refuted by someone clever at arguing, and that this is due not to any deficiency in the mind of the knower, but to the defectiveness in the nature of the other four elements. As Kenneth Sayre puts it, the author is asserting that ‘neither oral nor written language is capable of expressing the grasp of being that stands at the end of philosophic inquiry’.<sup>120</sup> Far from the *Seventh Letter* proving that Plato orally taught truths that he did not put in writing, its evidence, as far as it is trustworthy, denies that he did.

Let us turn to the *Phaedrus* and see whether it proves the existence of ‘unwritten doctrines’. Toward the end of this dialogue Socrates remarks that what is written can only remind one of what one already knows; it cannot convey the knowledge itself with any clarity or certitude.<sup>121</sup> The reason he gives is that written words are fixed and incapable of responding to inquiry into their meaning, just as the portraits of real people *resemble* living beings, but in fact are dead.<sup>122</sup> Written words are the bastard brothers of their legitimate siblings, where the latter are written not on paper, but in the soul, and are alive and can defend themselves.<sup>123</sup> He concludes that the really important work in philosophy resembles husbandry, where words with knowledge are planted like seeds in the soul, but that this can happen only by means of the art of dialogue; reading the written word cannot accomplish this.<sup>124</sup> His point is that knowledge does not come by reading one’s teacher’s words; it is planted, germinates,

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<sup>119</sup> τὸν ἐξηγούμενον ἐν λόγοις ἢ γράμμασιν ἢ ἀποκρίσεσιν, *Ibid.*, 343d4-5.

<sup>120</sup> Sayre (1988): 97. See his essay for an examination of the import of the *Seventh Letter* in respect of the authority of the dialogues.

<sup>121</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275c5-d2.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 275d4-6.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 276a1-9.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 276e4-7.

blossoms and bears fruit only in the give and take of dialogue with one's teacher.

But by the same token, Socrates is saying that knowledge does not come by *hearing* one's teacher's words, either. Indeed in Plato's day, 'reading' just meant listening to what was read out, whether in one's own voice or in someone else's, and so Socrates' point applies equally to reading written doctrines and hearing oral doctrines.<sup>125</sup> His point is that neither of these activities produces knowledge. His remarks from 276d to the end of the dialogue make clear that the target of his condemnation is not just written words, but also spoken words that constitute a fixed doctrine and that, like Lysias' speech about love with which the *Phaedrus* opens and closes, and which Phaedrus is trying to learn by heart, do not offer the opportunity for responding to questions and real teaching.<sup>126</sup>

Therefore, the criticism of the written word in the *Phaedrus* is not proof that Plato taught 'unwritten doctrines' that do not appear explicitly in his dialogues. The point Socrates makes here is that true understanding cannot be conveyed through books *or lectures*; it is only the process of question and answer in dialogue with others that can bring about knowledge in the soul. Knowledge of the truth of things cannot be fixed and then conveyed either orally or in writing.

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<sup>125</sup> Tigerstedt (1969): 10. See also Gilbert Ryle's colourful reconstruction of the use of Plato's written work in the Academy during his lifetime: 'Plato normally composed his dialogues for oral delivery to audiences', rather than for reading. Ryle (1966): 32. Ryle's inferences regarding Plato's biographical details, however, are highly speculative and elaborate a particular developmentalist interpretation of the dialogues that is not widely endorsed.

<sup>126</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 277e5-9.

The conclusion of the *Phaedrus* accords with the conclusion of the *Seventh Letter*.

There does not exist, nor will there ever exist, any treatise of mine dealing [with the subjects which I seriously study]. For it does not at all admit of verbal expression like other studies, but, as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter it nourishes itself.<sup>127</sup>

The author of the *Seventh Letter* does not say that this ‘light’ consists in doctrines that can be spoken and conveyed from one person to another; indeed he uses the image of light in denying that the truth that Plato ‘seriously studies’ can be spoken at all. Knowledge of truth is an ignition that bursts forth in the souls of those who have associated for many years in the right way with others, and there is even no requirement that these others, whether Plato or anyone else, are *already aflame* with this knowledge.

Furthermore, as Christopher Gill points out, when Plato speaks elsewhere in his dialogues about a more advanced analysis than that given in them, he characterises this as

... taking place through a further exercise of the methods displayed, and not through a dialectical exercise of a substantively different kind.<sup>128</sup>

That is to say, any ‘unwritten teachings’ would have been simply ‘*another* expression of the dialectical “shared search”... rather than as *the* definitive expression of this’, which explains why Aristotle cites the ‘unwritten doctrines’

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<sup>127</sup> Plato, *Epistle VII*, 341c4-d2. Bury’s translation in Plato (1966).

<sup>128</sup> Gill (1993): 68.

and the dialogues without any discrimination between them as to the relative status of their authority.<sup>129</sup> It also explains why Aristotle, who for twenty years would have had access to any ‘unwritten doctrines’, nevertheless writes that he cannot be sure exactly what Plato meant at one point in the *Timaeus*.<sup>130</sup> If there really existed ‘unwritten doctrines’ that expressed what Plato ‘really thought’, why did his most illustrious pupil not just ask Plato himself for clarification of what he thought?

But knowledge of the truth, as Socrates characterises it in the *Phaedrus*, is simply not like this. It cannot be fixed and conveyed either in books or speech. And if the author of the *Seventh Letter* is to be believed, Plato did not believe that knowledge about the subjects that he ‘seriously studied’ could be captured and bound in this way. John Cooper offers a good rendition of this account of the limitations of doctrine that is fixed either in speech or in writing.

Actual knowledge of the truth on any of these matters requires a constant capacity to express and re-express it in relation to varying circumstances and needs and in response to new questions or challenges that may arise. Knowledge is a limitless ability to interpret and reinterpret itself—it cannot be set down exhaustively in any single set of formulas, for universal, once-for-all use.<sup>131</sup>

It is clear, then, that the *Seventh Letter* and the *Phaedrus* do not support the Esotericists’ portrayal of Plato in the Academy as saying, but not writing, what he *really* thought was the truth of the philosophical issues he studied. What Plato himself says does not, *pace* the Esotericists, justify their strategy of

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.: 66 & 69.

<sup>130</sup> For comment on Aristotle’s remarkable assertion in *De Generatione et Corruptione* 329<sup>a</sup>8-24 see Cherniss (1980): 71-72.

<sup>131</sup> Cooper (1997): xx.



seeking to formulate ‘unwritten doctrines’ and then using them to resolve inconsistencies in the dialogues. We are left with only the dialogues as the arbiter of what Plato thought, and this leads us back to them, and to them alone, to continue our search to devise some strategy or other for resolving inconsistencies in them. We are barred from speculating about what Plato ‘really thought’ about Socratic wisdom by referring to any suppositions we may gather about ‘unwritten doctrines’. Any resolutions of inconsistency must be found in the texts themselves.

#### Section 7. Stylometry and the chronological order of the dialogues

We saw earlier that ever since the Protestant onslaught upon Neoplatonism in the mid-eighteenth century, interpreters of Plato turned to his written work alone in search for his doctrine, except of course for those in the Esotericist movement, which we just considered. But the identification of what Plato really thought proved to be elusive. A major difficulty, as Brucker pointed out, is that Plato does not appear *in propria persona* to proclaim his beliefs in his dialogues, and unlike the dialogues of Berkeley, it is not clear that any of the characters in Plato’s dialogues speaks on behalf of the author. Even if we choose to view the character of Socrates as his mouthpiece in the dialogues and seek for a doctrine, we find that the collection of his affirmations does not yield a coherent philosophical position at all. Instead, we find that, as Gregory Vlastos so aptly puts it,

... in different sets of dialogues [Socrates] pursues philosophies so different that they could not have been depicted as cohabiting the same brain throughout unless it had been the brain of a schizophrenic.<sup>132</sup>

Attempts to extract from the dialogues alone a single, consistent doctrine, since the efforts of Brucker, Tenneman and Schleiermacher in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, foundered upon the ‘ambiguities, obscurities, gaps, and contradictions that... could easily have been avoided by Plato, if only he had chosen to do so’.<sup>133</sup> It became increasingly clear that Plato does not appear to have been particularly concerned to render his dialogues amenable to doctrinal systematisation. Brucker failed to unify Plato’s thought, managing only to collect ‘a heap of disparate and contradictory *sententiae*, without any fundamental unity’; Tenneman ‘succeeded’ in systematising Plato’s thought only by forcing it into a Kantian mould; Schleiermacher postulated a unity of Plato’s thought and then exonerated the inconsistencies in the dialogues on the grounds that

... Plato was from the very beginning in full possession of his philosophy, though for pedagogical and dialectical reasons, he expounded it gradually in the Dialogues, starting with the *Phaedrus*.<sup>134</sup>

Schleiermacher’s reconciliation of inconsistencies in the dialogues on pedagogical grounds, if valid, could have the felicitous effect of spiking them as weapons impugning the unity of Plato’s thought. But the fallacy in

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<sup>132</sup> Vlastos (1991b): 46.

<sup>133</sup> For the vivid description by a 19<sup>th</sup> century German scholar, Heinrich von Stein, of the perplexity of the dialogues, which appear to have been crafted with ‘a malicious pleasure’ in flouting ‘our legitimate claim for clarity and coherence’ see Tigerstedt (1977): 15.

<sup>134</sup> Tigerstedt (1974): 60 & 67. Also Tigerstedt (1977): 25.

Schleiermacher's proposed solution lay in its circularity. He maintained that the successful resolution of the discrepancies in the dialogues was achieved by arranging them in the 'good' pedagogical order that Plato had intended, but Schleiermacher secured this 'good' pedagogical order by determining how the discrepancies could best be resolved.

Schleiermacher's proposed solution, which involved his ordering of the dialogues according to what made best sense to him, came under attack in the late nineteenth century. Lewis Campbell introduced stylometric analysis of the texts in order to classify the dialogues in groups according to a pattern of development in Plato's language and style, and thereby to assign a chronological order of composition of the dialogues corresponding to this linguistic development. A. E. Taylor states the principle of the stylometric method as follows.

If we start with two works which are known [from external sources] to be separated by a considerable interval and exhibit a marked difference in style, it may be possible to trace the transition from the writer's earlier to his later manner in detail, to see the later manner steadily more and more replacing the earlier, and this should enable us to arrive at some definite conclusions about the order of the works which occupy the interval.<sup>135</sup>

This was not the first time that scholars tried to arrange the dialogues in a chronological sequence of composition. But prior to the advent of stylometry, the criterion had been the degree to which each dialogue's arguments might

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<sup>135</sup> Taylor (1986): 18. See pp. 16-22 for a good account of the rationale of this method.

best develop Plato's ideas, and after a century of such attempts the subjective nature of this approach consigned it to disuse.<sup>136</sup>

The stylometric method, however, has led to a widespread agreement of scholars in dividing up the dialogues into three successive groups, viz., 'early', 'middle' and 'late', although there is some disagreement about which dialogues belong to each group.<sup>137</sup> Nevertheless, there is enough agreement to establish the dialogues in an order of composition that is orthogonal to Schleiermacher's pedagogical arrangement. One might object, of course, that his pedagogical order need not also constitute the chronological order of composition. That is, one might argue that Schleiermacher's pedagogical order is not necessarily inconsistent with the results of stylometry, for Plato might have written 'pedagogically later' dialogues before he wrote some 'pedagogically early' ones. But in fact Schleiermacher himself holds, for example, that the *Phaedrus*, which belongs to the 'middle' group of dialogues according to stylometry, was the first dialogue that Plato wrote, and he does not appear to have considered the possibility that Plato might have written some of the 'pedagogically early' dialogues later in his life, after he had written some of the 'pedagogically later'

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<sup>136</sup> See Brandwood (1992): 90-91. This essay is a critical survey of the most influential stylometric studies.

<sup>137</sup> For statements of this consensus, prevailing since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, that divides the dialogues not just into two groups, viz., the six 'late' ones (resembling and including the *Laws*) and the rest, but into three groups, see *Ibid.*: 100, 109 & 114, Penner (1992): 124. For a collation of results of stylometry see Brandwood (1992): 112-115. But see also Guthrie (1998): 49-50. Guthrie's grouping is condemned for being only loosely related to the stylistic divisions and reflecting a theory of Plato's philosophical development. See Kahn (2002a): 97. We should note, however, that there is considerable reluctance among some scholars to apply the results of stylometry to the question of the chronology of composition in a way that is insensitive to other reasons Plato may have had for varying his style.

ones. Indeed it is entirely plausible that an author would write some of his more philosophically advanced works first, and then later compose works that would prepare the reader gradually to tackle them. Schleiermacher's ordering of the dialogues, however, does not allow for this possibility, and stylometric analysis persuaded scholars to discard Schleiermacher's proposed resolution of the discrepancies in the dialogues.<sup>138</sup>

In recent times Charles Kahn has revived Schleiermacher's strategy for reconciling discrepancies in the dialogues, viewing them as evidence of pedagogical design on the part of the author. He avoids the threat of stylometry by confining his attention to the dialogues of the 'early' and 'middle' groups alone, where the sequence of the dialogues in the 'middle' group is uncertain and any ordering of the dialogues in the 'early' group is 'out of the question'.<sup>139</sup> His 'proleptic' reading of the dialogues seeks to illustrate an 'ingressive' presentation of a single view that does not undergo 'any fundamental shift of philosophical position'.<sup>140</sup> He argues that Plato had an 'acute sense of the psychological distance that separates his world view from that of his audience', and therefore prepares his readers gradually by leading them through the

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<sup>138</sup> I shall employ the terms 'early', 'middle' and 'late' in dividing the dialogues into the three groupings that have come to be widely recognised today as a result of stylometry. My use of these terms with inverted commas means that I do not intend them to imply chronology of composition, but rather a classification of the dialogues according to linguistic style, similarity of themes and methodologies, dramatic and conversational vigour, the role of Socrates, extensiveness of the examination of philosophical positions, and apparent doctrinal conclusiveness. With regard to the chronology of composition, my view is that it is possible that Plato wrote some 'early' dialogues later than some 'middle' or 'late' ones, but that even if he did not, he was still able to rework 'early' dialogues in the light of 'later' ones. I agree with Dorothea Frede's conjecture noted below, Frede, D. (2002): 31.

<sup>139</sup> Brandwood (1992): 115.

<sup>140</sup> Kahn (1996): 38-42.

dialogues of the ‘early’ group as ‘a single complex literary enterprise culminating in the *Republic*’.<sup>141</sup>

Kahn’s theory of interpretation will gain in plausibility if he can show that what is inconsistent between the ‘early’ and the ‘middle’ dialogues constitutes good preparation by the former for the latter. But as he himself has pointed out since publishing his book, there are two claims here. One is the unitarian claim that ‘Plato always knew where he wanted to go’, and that ‘all the dialogues’ ought therefore to be interpreted ‘from the philosophical position defined by the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*’, which express his world-view.<sup>142</sup> And to support this claim, Kahn must resolve any real, as opposed to apparent, inconsistency in doctrine between dialogues. The strategy he uses to support this first claim brings in his second claim that any apparent inconsistencies with the doctrine of the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* can be explained as preparation for the communication to the reader of his fully worked out world view. This proleptic strategy of interpretation is the stronger claim of the two, in as much as it ‘presupposes some assumptions about relative chronology and about authorial intent’.<sup>143</sup>

In another article Kahn illustrates this strategy by applying it to the *Charmides*, and it is worth our scutinising his application of the theory of prolepsis to a particular dialogue as a test case for the validity of his

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.: 65-70.

<sup>142</sup> Kahn (2002b): 1.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

interpretative methodology.<sup>144</sup> He takes the conception of self-knowledge formulated at *Charmides* 169d-171c to

... refer unmistakably to Socrates's own practice of testing the knowledge claims of his interlocutors, as reported in the *Apology*.<sup>145</sup>

When this conception of self-knowledge is rejected as incoherent, Kahn interprets the critique (*Charm.* 170a-171c) as asserting Plato's own view that it is possible to examine someone else for knowledge only in a field in which the examiner himself is an expert: one cannot successfully judge what other people know 'unless he knows the first-order subject matter'.<sup>146</sup> Kahn uses his own example of quantum mechanics, and maintains that Plato here endorses the claim that the possibility of second-order knowledge, e.g., my knowledge that either you or I possess the knowledge of quantum mechanics, is impossible without the possession also of first-order knowledge, in this case, the knowledge of quantum mechanics. Kahn holds that this critique is meant not to refute the historical Socrates' claim to knowledge, but to raise questions proleptically that will be addressed in the *Republic*, where the metaphysics and epistemology

... can be thought of as Plato's answer to the question: What kind of knowledge is required for the success of the Socratic elenchus?<sup>147</sup>

Kahn takes Socrates' knowledge to be the knowledge of good and bad that Socrates briefly discusses at the end of the *Charmides*. It is the possession of

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<sup>144</sup> Kahn (1988).

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*: 546.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*: 547.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*: 549.

this knowledge that enabled Socrates throughout his life successfully to examine and refute the ethical claims of others.

Insofar as the elenchus succeeds in revealing genuine ignorance in the interlocutors, Socrates must himself possess the relevant sort of first-order knowledge; or so the argument of *Charmides* 170a-171c clearly implies.<sup>148</sup>

And when the knowledge of the good becomes the focus in the *Republic*, Kahn concludes that Plato must have viewed his theory as

... providing the necessary foundation for the moral and intellectual stance of the historical Socrates.<sup>149</sup>

Such is Kahn's proleptic reading of the *Charmides*, but it is not, of course, the only possible reading, and it comes at a high price. The attribution to Plato of the doctrine that Socrates must have possessed the knowledge of good and bad is not the only way to read the critique of self-knowledge in the *Charmides*. In the next chapter I shall show a way of understanding this passage that does not involve so many unsubstantiated claims. For the moment, however, we need only note the weakness of Kahn's evidence. The only evidence he has for Plato believing the proposition that a competent examiner had to be an expert is that *Socrates* says so. But even Socrates' saying so does not prove that *Socrates himself* held this conviction, for as we shall see in some detail, he asserts this proposition as part of an argument that he himself condemns as flawed and derisory in its inefficacy to determine the truth (*Charm.* 175b-d).

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.: 548.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.: 549.



Kahn's proleptic reading of the dialogues also comes under attack for the predominance it gives to the theory of Forms in all of Plato's thought. Christopher Rowe cites this as a major flaw in Kahn's thesis, which portrays Plato as a 'metaphysical visionary', for whom the Forms constitute a 'grandiose metaphysical theory' that is 'there in the background' of all the pre-*Phaedo* and pre-*Republic* dialogues.<sup>150</sup> Rowe argues that Kahn 'mistake[s] the medium, or the metaphors, for the message', and reads into the language of Forms much more than what is 'essentially a way of expressing an objectivist, or (if you like) platonist, view of things'.<sup>151</sup> The result is a considerable overstatement of the role of Forms throughout Plato's thought. M. M. McCabe also notes this sort of weakness in Kahn's proleptic reading of Plato, in as much as

... it promotes an unduly expensive view of Plato's deliberate intentions, not to mention his developed theory, when he set about writing all the works up to and including the *Republic*.<sup>152</sup>

We can see here that, rather as the Neoplatonists did when they categorised Plato as a kind of monist, Kahn selects what he deems Plato 'really thought', and then sets about interpreting the rest of the dialogues in the light of this. For Kahn, any inconsistencies are to be explained as pedagogically expedient stages in the preparation of the reader for the communication of the core doctrine that Plato held from the beginning. But the case for this being Plato's core doctrine, or even for him having one and only one throughout his life, is not established.

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<sup>150</sup> Rowe (2002): 4.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> McCabe (2002): 1.

Even more pertinent to this dissertation, however, is Kahn's treatment, or should I say non-treatment, of the problem of Socratic wisdom. Since Kahn attributes to Plato and Socrates the view that second-order knowledge is impossible without first-order knowledge, the problems of whether it exists or not, and whether it is beneficial or not, never arise as real questions. All of Socrates' claims to possess it in the *Apology*, and the pretence of examining it for possibility and utility in the *Charmides*, are all sham.

So [Socrates'] claim here and elsewhere to have only second-order wisdom, the knowledge of his own ignorance, is not to be taken at face value. Insofar as Socrates undertakes to expose the ignorance of others in a matter where he disavows knowledge, either the elenchus must be fraudulent or the disavowal must be ironical and ultimately insincere.<sup>153</sup>

Kahn urges us not to take seriously the great care with which Plato portrays and promotes the Socratic wisdom of the *Apology*, nor to take seriously Socrates' struggles to make sense of it in the *Charmides*. His reason for not taking Socratic wisdom seriously is its inconsistency with what Kahn chooses to take seriously, viz., the passages in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* on the Forms. Hence, Kahn's proleptic strategy for resolving problem of Socratic wisdom is simply to deny that there is a problem to resolve. Plato never meant us to take the Socratic wisdom of the *Apology* seriously. Nor are we to take Socrates seriously when he perpetuates the charade at *Charmides* 165b5-c1, 166c7-d6 & 175c8-d5. What we 'are meant' to take seriously is a complex and problematical metaphysical theory that we 'are meant' to derive from the discussion of Forms in other dialogues.

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<sup>153</sup> Kahn (1988): 548.

The problem of Socratic wisdom, so carefully crafted between the *Apology* and the *Charmides* to arouse so much tension in the reader to resolve the blatantly apparent contradiction, ought not to be eliminated so summarily. It is an unwarranted extravagance to pick and choose which passages ought to be taken seriously as expressions of authorial doctrine, and which are to be dismissed as ‘fraudulent’, ‘ironic’ or ‘insincere’. The Neoplatonists faced a similar criticism for having a ‘blind spot’ for some of Plato’s texts. When Plotinus inaugurates Neoplatonism in the third century CE, his Plato ‘ignores the early Socratic dialogues’ inconclusive search for ethical definitions’.<sup>154</sup> For Neoplatonists, Platonism is basically a ‘Plato without Socrates’, in that they consider the aporetic character of the elenchus in these dialogues ‘not directly relevant to anything like a systematic representation of Platonism’.<sup>155</sup> We do well to question, however, whether a representation of Plato’s thought, and any conclusions based upon it, can warrant our confidence, when not all that Plato wrote has been taken into account.

Certainly, Kahn is right to recognise that Socratic irony is an issue that must receive some account in any interpretation of Plato, and much very good scholarship has rightly been devoted to trying to understand its place in Plato’s work.<sup>156</sup> But we ought not to resort to so easy an elimination of the problem of Socratic wisdom if there is another way of resolving the inconsistency that preserves the integrity of the texts as a whole. And in the next chapter, we shall see that there is another way. In the meantime, it is very detrimental indeed to

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<sup>154</sup> Wallis (1995): 18.

<sup>155</sup> For Walter Bröcker’s ‘neat’ analysis of Neoplatonic preferential treatment of certain dialogues see Gerson (2004): 29 & n. 23.

<sup>156</sup> Especially noteworthy are Nehamas (1998), Vlastos (1991c).

Kahn's interpretative strategy that he dismisses Socratic wisdom as entirely ironical in the *Charmides*, but then fails to offer any account of Socratic wisdom in the *Apology* and concedes, 'I do not venture to say how the *Apology* is to be interpreted'.<sup>157</sup> For it is just this sort of inconsistency between dialogues in the same group that his interpretative methodology fails to resolve, or even address.

Kahn's attempt to revive Schleiermacher's thesis of a pedagogical explanation for the inconsistencies in the dialogues, while surviving the stylometric criticisms that faulted Schleiermacher's endeavours, comes under considerable criticism akin to that aimed at the Neoplatonists. Amongst texts that are inconsistent, it prefers some as enjoying authorial sincerity and doctrinal priority, and then demotes those that conflict as being insincere or insignificant.

## Section 8. The developmentalist thesis

The difficulties that the unitarian approach encountered as a result of stylometric analysis of the dialogues into three groups led some scholars to propose an alternative interpretative methodology that has become 'a longstanding assumption, especially in English-language scholarship'.<sup>158</sup> If it could be shown that the dialogues within each of the three groups were broadly consistent, then the troublesome inconsistencies in doctrine might be explained

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<sup>157</sup> Kahn (1988): 548, n. 7.

<sup>158</sup> Gill (2002b): 1.

by postulating a journey of philosophical development for Plato over his sixty years of life practising philosophy, traceable in the philosophical progression through these three chronological groups. Such a hypothesis, of course, contradicts the unitarian premise that had motivated Schleiermacher's pedagogical explanation for these inconsistencies. In this way developmentalism deposed from its sole suzerainty the unitarian thesis, viz., 'the thesis that Plato's *oeuvre* in its entirety forms a self-consciously unified body of doctrine', which from ancient times 'was an almost unquestioned assumption'.<sup>159</sup> In the future any credible unitarian exegesis of the dialogues alone could at best garner a 'homogeneous body of opinion' from them, and doomed was the quest for the Holy Grail of confining Plato's 'peculiar mixture of rhetoric and logic, of edification and science' and his 'infinite variety and suggestiveness' into

... a complete system of philosophy with principles subordinate, derivative, and interdependent, and a fixed technical terminology.<sup>160</sup>

The German scholars in the late nineteenth century who subscribed to the developmentalist interpretation had attributed the evolution of Plato's thought to political, social, psychological or cultural influences upon him in the Greek world of his day, rather than to any autonomous development of his own thought.<sup>161</sup> This approach soon ran its course, however, owing to its reliance on speculation to compensate for the lack of evidence from external sources, for

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<sup>159</sup> Sedley (1996): 80.

<sup>160</sup> Shorey (1968): 5 & 8.

<sup>161</sup> Tigerstedt (1977): 27-36. He uses the term 'geneticism' instead of 'developmentalism'.

too little is known of Plato's life to construct the development of his thoughts. Then, from the late 1930s, some scholars used the developmentalist thesis to investigate how the three groupings of the dialogues might illustrate a change of direction in Plato's thought. Gilbert Ryle argued that Plato's purpose in writing the *Parmenides* was to reveal that there was a 'radical logical flaw' in the theory of Forms,<sup>162</sup> and to explore what this might tell us about the difference between types of concepts, and in particular, between 'formal' concepts, e.g., 'not', 'exists', 'some' and 'other', and 'non-formal' concepts, e.g., 'triangle' or 'catapult'.<sup>163</sup> Ryle viewed this as a part of a general philosophical shift to which Plato gave expression with 'second thoughts' that

... overtly demonstrate the untenability of the very principles of the system from which his whole influence upon subsequent thinking derives.<sup>164</sup>

To those who might recoil at so 'shocking a supposition', Ryle points to the dialogues in the 'late' group and famously says:

Kant is felicitated for being capable of being awoken from dogmatic slumbers; Aristotle is permitted to be fonder of truth than of Platonism; those of Russell's contributions to logical theory are considered important which belong to the periods after his affiliation to Kant, Bradley, and Bosanquet. Why must Plato alone be forbidden the illuminations of self-criticism?<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Ryle (1971): 52.

<sup>163</sup> Ryle defines his terms thus: 'A formal concept is one which may have a place in a proposition about any subject-matter you please, and some formal concepts or other will be present in any proposition. But non-formal concepts will only occur in propositions with this as opposed to that special topic.' Ryle (1965): 120.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.: 133-134.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.: 134.

Ryle's work gave new direction to developmentalism and inspired many scholars to try to chart Plato's philosophical development in fuller detail in relation to the doctrines within the dialogues themselves.<sup>166</sup> Some sought to identify changes in Plato's doctrine between the three groups of dialogues.<sup>167</sup> Others postulated a more fundamental change in Plato, by which the author of the 'early' dialogues, dominated by the 'father image' of his teacher, Socrates, initially 'remains convinced of the substantial truth of Socrates' teaching and of the soundness of its method', but then after years of his own research and teaching, feels compelled to 'strike out along new paths' on his own philosophical quest that led him 'to new, unSocratic and antiSocratic conclusions' in the 'middle' and 'late' dialogues.<sup>168</sup>

The developmentalist thesis has generated vigorous debate over how closely the character 'Socrates' that we find in Plato's dialogues resembles the historical Socrates, and how much the Platonic Socrates tells us about the historical Socrates' philosophical views and methods.<sup>169</sup> The issue that has

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<sup>166</sup> For a testimonial to the remarkable impact of Ryle's work on subsequent Platonic study see Owen (1971): 341 & 370-371.

<sup>167</sup> E.g., Owen (1965): especially 322, 330 & 337. Owen even uses his observed changes in the treatment of 'being' and 'becoming' and in the requirements of 'the true ruler' as evidence for contesting stylometric conclusions regarding the proper place of the *Timaeus* in the order of the dialogues.

<sup>168</sup> Vlastos (1991b): 53. See also Guthrie (1998): 67 & n. 1. Guthrie 'wholeheartedly accept[s]' that in the 'early' group 'Plato is imaginatively recalling, in form and substance, the conversations of his master without as yet adding to them any distinctive doctrines of his own', and traces this view back to K. F. Hermann in 1839. For a brief statement of the conventional view of Plato's development see Annas (2002): 2. For a more positive statement see Frede, D. (2002): 27-28.

<sup>169</sup> For two recent attempts to identify and assess Socrates' wisdom and philosophical method see Benson (2000), Brickhouse and Smith (2000). In recent times discussions of developmentalism have tended to focus on Vlastos' assertions regarding the waning intellectual proximity of Plato to Socrates. We

attracted a great deal of attention recently has been whether Socrates (either the historical one or the character we find in Plato) had a philosophical method, called the elenchus,<sup>170</sup> and if so, what he *claimed* it could accomplish, and what in fact it *could* accomplish.<sup>171</sup>

Some scholars argue that the cross-examination by question and answer that Socrates conducts in the ‘early’ dialogues illustrates an elenctic method that Socrates believed could secure true definitions of the moral virtues.<sup>172</sup> Others, while accepting that Socrates employed this dialectical process as a method, deny that he claimed it could do any more than point out the inconsistencies in the system of beliefs of his interlocutors.<sup>173</sup> Still others hold that the aim of the Socratic method was not primarily to dispute propositions, but to challenge and

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should remember, however, as mentioned above, that developmentalism also importantly figures in respect of the views of Ryle and Owen over whether in the ‘late’ dialogues Plato abjured the theory of Forms, if indeed he ever ‘held’ it as ‘his doctrine’.

<sup>170</sup> Elenchus (ἐλεγχος) is what Socrates sometimes says he is doing in the ‘early’ dialogues. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE the word had come to mean a ‘cross-examination’, ‘test’ or ‘refutation’. For a study of the history of the meaning of this word see Lesher (2002).

<sup>171</sup> The debate over ‘the problem of the elenchus’ was started by Gregory Vlastos’ article in 1983, Vlastos (1994b).

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.: 3-4. Here he argues that Socrates claims that the ‘standard elenchus’ is able to ‘prove that the refutand is false, when all he has established is its inconsistency with [the other] premises’.

<sup>173</sup> E.g., Benson (1995): 46-48 & 112. He argues that Plato’s deployment of the elenchus ‘requires only that Socrates understands each of these elenchi as establishing the inconsistency of the interlocutor’s beliefs’, and not also the truth of his own ‘positive moral doctrines’. See also Frede, M. (1992 Supplement): 210-211. Frede argues against the assumption that the task of the Socratic elenchus is to provide ‘an argument for, or proof of, the truth of the contradictory of [the respondent’s] claim’. For this would not amount to *aporia*, and the aim in the aporetic dialogues is to reduce the respondent to *aporia*.



improve the way people lived their lives.<sup>174</sup> And yet others deny that Socrates conceived of his interrogations as constituting a particular method at all.<sup>175</sup>

All these various viewpoints about what Socrates is meant to be doing in the ‘early’ dialogues carry with them varying inferences about their importance as cumulative contributions to a consistent body of philosophical methodology and doctrine. For example, the controversy over the ‘Socratic elenchus’ assumes especial importance for some developmentalists, like Vlastos, as one of the features of his teacher’s influence in which Plato ‘lost faith... as the right method to search for the truth’, and therefore discarded in the ‘middle’ and ‘late’ dialogues.<sup>176</sup> Richard Robinson also sees Plato distancing himself in his later years from the elenchus as an instrument that cannot provide positive knowledge, and incorporating it ‘into the larger whole of dialectic’.

Thus elenchus changes into dialectic, the negative into the positive, pedagogy into discovery, morality into science.<sup>177</sup>

On the other hand, Gail Fine argues that the elenctic method is not *replaced* in the later dialogues by, e.g., Plato’s interest in mathematics and his theories of learning as recollection and of the Forms, but is found, in fact, to be *vindicated*

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<sup>174</sup> E.g., Brickhouse and Smith (1991): 136. They cite several passages in the *Apology* to support their claim that ‘Socrates does not say that he examines what people say, or even what they believe; he says he examines *people*’. (Authors’ italics)

<sup>175</sup> For a wide ranging debate about the correct characterisation of what Socrates is doing and attempting to do in the dialogues see Scott (2002).

<sup>176</sup> Vlastos (1991a): 117. He argues that this ‘profound change’ occurred after Plato’s writing of the *Gorgias*. See also Vlastos (1994b): 31. ‘[The character] Socrates ditches the elenchus’ prior to Plato’s writing of the *Meno*.

<sup>177</sup> Robinson (1980): 92-93.

by these, as Plato develops his epistemology.<sup>178</sup> Still other scholars consider whether so many ‘early’ dialogues fail to reach a positive conclusion for their arguments because the elenctic method is intrinsically flawed by committing the ‘Socratic fallacy’, which renders inquiry self-defeating for the reason that, e.g., we cannot inquire into what justice is unless we can offer examples of justice for examination, and yet we cannot identify any examples of justice unless we know what justice is.<sup>179</sup> The suggestion here is that Plato attempted to address this conundrum in his ‘later’ works.

While the developmentalist approach to the dialogues has brought greater depth to our understanding of their richness in philosophical content and method, it has itself been accused of reasoning in a vicious circle. The charge was made early in the twentieth century by the non-Neoplatonist unitarian, Paul Shorey. He argues that, because there is almost no evidence from sources external to the dialogues either for the dates of their composition or for Plato’s philosophical development, and because the mechanical application of stylometry ignores other reasons for variation of style, e.g., ‘literary or psychological’ explanations in light of the context of the subject matter of a given dialogue, our attempt to trace in detail Plato’s development of doctrine will ‘beg the question’.<sup>180</sup> For any detailed chronological order we give to his dialogues will depend on how we think his thought changed, and how we think

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<sup>178</sup> Fine (1999): 214. She concludes that the theory of recollection in the *Meno*, far from subverting, actually proves the validity of the Socratic method. See also Cherniss (1965): 347-348. He denies that Plato abjures the theory of Forms after his criticism of it in the *Parmenides*, *pace* Owen (1965): 321-322 & 338.

<sup>179</sup> For a formulation of the problem see Geach (1966): 371. For an opposing view claiming that the existence of true beliefs in us renders the Socratic method effective see Burnyeat (1977): 390-391.

<sup>180</sup> Shorey (1968): 3-5.

his thought changed will depend on the sequence we assign to his dialogues. As Cooper points out, to arrange the dialogues on this principle is

... to announce in advance the results of a certain interpretation of the dialogues and to canonize that interpretation under the guise of a presumably objective order of composition—when in fact no such order *is* objectively known.<sup>181</sup>

Wincenty Lutoslawski admitted as much at the end of his monumental analysis of the dialogues, in which he traced a path of development in Plato's logic from the 'induction and experience' of the 'Socratic mode' in the 'early' dialogues to the 'logical necessity' and 'dialectical period during which the classification of [the highest kinds of] notions is his chief aim' of the 'late' dialogues.<sup>182</sup> At the end of his work, with admirable candour, he draws our attention to the high degree of speculation that such a developmentalist interpretation, albeit based on stylometry, entails.

We have been obliged to include many psychological and metaphysical theories in our account of the origin and growth of Plato's logic, in order to illustrate the stages of his development and to confirm by every possible hint the conclusions about the chronology of his works built upon the study of his style.<sup>183</sup>

For this reason, developmentalism can be criticised as an 'easy option', by which inconsistencies in the dialogues are resolved simply by re-dating them, within the parameters required by stylometry, according to a joint presupposition of how Plato's literary style and his thought must have changed over his lifetime, whether as a 'Roman road' of evolution or as a more complex

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<sup>181</sup> Cooper (1997): xiv. (Author's italics.)

<sup>182</sup> Lutoslawski (1897): 518-523.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*: 517.

mountain path of involution, criss-crossed by trial and retraction. Timothy Chappell points out that the main focus of developmentalism in recent times has been the thesis that Plato promulgated positive doctrines in the ‘middle’ dialogues, above all the theory of Forms, which he used the ‘late’ dialogues to ‘criticise, reject, or simply bypass’.<sup>184</sup> For example, the Third Man Argument in the *Parmenides* has received much attention as evidence, or not, of Plato’s changing his mind. The question is whether, with this argument, Plato distances himself from the theory of Forms.

This is not, of course, the question whether or not the Third Man Argument in the *Parmenides* succeeds in vitiating Plato’s theory of Forms; it is the rather different question of whether or not Plato *thought* that it did. Vlastos claims that the *Parmenides*’ Third Man Argument is ‘an exact diagnosis of Plato’s mind’ and records his ‘honest perplexity’.<sup>185</sup> We have noted that Owen viewed it as evidence of Plato’s repudiation of his own theory of Forms. But this interpretative methodology of resolving apparent inconsistency over the Forms in the dialogues requires us, as does the unitarian approach, to go beyond the texts in attributing to the author conviction in some of his texts, but not in others. A primary difference between the unitarian and the developmentalist is that the former attributes one doctrine only once, whereas the latter attributes more than one doctrine at more than one time in Plato’s life.

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<sup>184</sup> Chappell (2004): 17. Chappell’s observation about the main focus of developmentalism in recent times should be tempered with what is noted above about the wealth of interest aroused in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Vlastos’ thesis that Plato developed away from the intellectual domination of his teacher and grew to forge his own ‘unSocratic and antiSocratic’ philosophy.

<sup>185</sup> Vlastos (1965): 254-255.

However, Chappell makes two points against this developmentalist ‘resolution’ of the inconsistency over Forms in the ‘middle’ and ‘late’ dialogues.

Plato explicitly says [*Parmenides* 135a-d]—using Parmenides as his mouthpiece—that these arguments *will* be refuted by anyone of the adequate philosophical training... [and] there are quite a number of apparently Late dialogues (or at least passages in dialogues) in which Plato seems sympathetic to the theory of Forms; e.g., *Philebus* 61e and *Laws* 965c.<sup>186</sup>

Whether Plato uses the character of Parmenides, or any other character, as his ‘mouthpiece’ is, of course, a moot point that will be addressed below. However, at least we can say that Plato places before us, in the very words of the antagonist of Forms, a declaration of diffidence in the veridicality his own position. Chappell argues that these passages show that what Plato thought about the Forms in the ‘late’ dialogues is by no means as certain as the developmentalists, who see Plato abjuring the Forms, would wish us to believe. The ‘late’ dialogues do indeed raise problems for the Forms, and the Forms do not play the central role in them we would expect if Plato had wished to be doctrinaire about Forms in writing those works. But he may well have had other purposes in writing them.

‘Developmentalism’ is an approach that varies considerably in its detail from one scholar to another. Not all developmentalists view Plato as a dogmatist, ascribing to him the promotion of inconsistent doctrine at various stages in his life in the way that Vlastos and Ryle do. Rather, the ascription of a personal philosophical development to Plato may derive for some scholars from

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<sup>186</sup> Chappell (2004): 19. (Author’s italics.)

observations about how arguments are put together and how they may be connected *across* the dialogues.<sup>187</sup> However, where inconsistency of doctrine is viewed as a problem in Plato, developmentalism offers a strategy for resolving inconsistencies that looks for the elimination of inconsistency by tracing out the stream of Plato's purported intellectual growth. To their credit, unlike the unitarians, developmentalists do not ignore some texts in favour of others that are in conflict. Instead, conflicting texts are equally accredited as Plato's doctrine, but at different times in his life. The result is that all the texts are preserved, and yet the inconsistency is claimed to be eliminated. But this strategy runs the risk of succeeding at too high a cost, for it 'purges' the Platonic corpus of complexities in the form of inconsistent texts that Plato may very well have *intended* to be 'consciously and avowedly paradoxical'.<sup>188</sup> This, of course, is a third option that the unitarians and developmentalists do not pursue, where inconsistency in texts does not in itself imply contradiction of doctrine.

For example, the *Parmenides* may not at all mark Plato's disillusionment with the theory of Forms; instead, it may be intended to serve for the theory of Forms the very purpose that the 'early' dialogues serve for the various claims to knowledge proposed in them.<sup>189</sup> That is to say, Plato's critique of his own

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<sup>187</sup> For this sort of a developmental assessment of Plato's philosophical project, particularly in respect of four of his 'late' dialogues, see McCabe (2000): 288-9.

<sup>188</sup> Cherniss (1965): 347-349. See also p. 361 for the claim that there is 'no suggestion or rumour of such a change [in Plato's thinking, whereby he abjured earlier doctrines] in the relevant ancient literature'.

<sup>189</sup> For a defence of this Middle Platonist, anti-developmental reading of the Platonic corpus, which views the aporetic dialogues as complementary 'in

theory of Forms need not be viewed as one stage in his personal development towards a final doctrine that ‘must have taken some time to come by—as all good things take a certain time’.<sup>190</sup> We need not view him as first working up his theory of Forms, then presenting it over several years to critical examination in postgraduate seminars in the Academy, and using this sort of consultative exercise, familiar to academics today, to modify his stance, apparently quite significantly. The problem of universals may well have occurred to him right from the beginning, and his recognition of these problems in the ‘late’ dialogues may represent not a new position for him to occupy, but exploration of the territory that any such theory of universals inhabits and seeks to map. Indeed, there is good reason to think that Plato intends his critique of the Forms in the ‘late’ dialogues to play a role in regard to the reader’s understanding of the theory of Forms, viz.,

... the role of pointing out inadequacies of argument and the precipitate nature of premature vigorous commitment to a position.<sup>191</sup>

Annas points out that we need not assume that ‘negative *ad hominem* argument is earlier than confident positive pronouncements’, for indeed ‘the ancients generally saw’ it in the role of ‘giving arguments that help to clear away wrong views and may establish correct views’.<sup>192</sup> The inconsistencies in the dialogues may not, after all, be embarrassments that require some strategy for the reconstruction of Plato’s doctrine to preserve coherence, and many scholars in

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showing us how the more dogmatic-seeming dialogues should be read’, see Annas (2002): 6-7 & 13-16.

<sup>190</sup> Frede, D. (2002): 33.

<sup>191</sup> Annas (2002): 16.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

recent times have turned to the texts for a fresh look to see whether the anomalies may in fact have been intended by Plato to perform an important philosophical purpose.

For example, Cooper notes how Plato's use of the dialogue form sometimes carries out critical examination of Socrates' own positions and arguments in the 'early' dialogues.

[A] Socratic dialogue, when read fully and properly, may actually indicate some criticisms and point to some shortcomings of positions or methods of argument that it attributes to Socrates.<sup>193</sup>

And even the so-called nexus of 'Plato's theories' in the 'middle' dialogues are

... always in a spirit of open-ended exploration, and sometimes there are contextual clues indicating that Socrates exaggerates or goes beyond what the argument truly justifies, and so on.<sup>194</sup>

Furthermore, with regard to the question of the dating of the composition of the *Apology* and the *Charmides*, which form the focus of this dissertation, even a developmentalist may consistently concede that *developmentally* 'early' dialogues may *not* have been written earlier than *developmentally* 'later' ones, as Dorothea Frede points out.

For all we know, [Plato] may have written some of [the 'early' dialogues] at the same time [as some of the 'middle' or 'late' ones], or let them sit for years and then worked on them again.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Cooper (1997): xxiii.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*: xxii-xxiii.

<sup>195</sup> Frede, D. (2002): 31.



Plato's use of the dialogue to subject philosophical views to examination, even those that Socrates may appear to hold, brings into question the importance traditionally given to the identification of consistent doctrine that can be attributed to Plato, whether over all his life or at various stages in it. Consistency in doctrine may not, after all, be what Plato intends the dialogues to deliver. Rather than pursuing a unitarian, a developmentalist or any other kind of strategy to explain away inconsistencies in doctrine across Plato's dialogues, it may behove us as interpreters to consider whether Plato might *not* have intended such discrepancies to be viewed as aberrations in doctrine that somehow need to be homogenised.

## Section 9. Philosophy and the dialogue form

The failure in the past two and a half millennia to extract from the dialogues alone a coherent pattern of 'what Plato thought', coupled with the uneasy sense that the developmentalist thesis is compromised by circularity, inclined some scholars recently to take a step back, as it were, and inquire whether the search itself has been somewhat misguided. The developmentalists, like the unitarians, assumed that Plato had worked out a *Lehre*, i.e., a body of systematic doctrine; he had a 'message to get across' and 'views to explain'.<sup>196</sup> In this they were like the unitarians, although unlike them they were motivated to 'take up the

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<sup>196</sup> For a defence of developmentalism and an expression of its view of what Plato was attempting to do in his writings see *Ibid.*: 28-31.

challenge of understanding the origin and development of Plato's ideas'.<sup>197</sup> But if Plato really had intended to use his writings to convey the results of his inquiries, why did he choose the genre of dialogues in which to do so, rather than treatises, as did Aristotle and later philosophers?

It is known that the genre of the dialogue was a popular medium for philosophical writing in Plato's day,<sup>198</sup> but there was ample precedent of monographs by philosophers as well.<sup>199</sup> Scholars began to investigate what Plato's *use* of this particular genre for expressing his thoughts might tell us about *what* he thought, and perhaps why it is so difficult to pin him down to a single coherent doctrine. A closer study of the dialogue form led many interpreters to suspect that '[i]f we insist on looking for Plato's views, we may be missing what is most significant about the dialogues'.<sup>200</sup> This question is not the same as the one we earlier saw championed by the sceptics of the New Academy, viz., whether Plato had any systematic doctrine at all. Rather, discussion now turns to the nature of the dialogue form, and whether Plato's choice of this medium, and the way in which he deploys it, reveals a Plato who occupies neither the extreme of scepticism nor that of doctrinal dogmatism.

Aristotle tells us that *Sokratikoi logoi* ('Conversations with Socrates') were part of an established literary genre, and a study of authors of this genre besides Plato shows 'the imaginative and essentially fictional nature of Socratic

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid.: 35.

<sup>198</sup> Kahn (1996): 1-29.

<sup>199</sup> See the references in the dialogues themselves, e.g., to books by Anaxagoras (*Phaedo* 97b8-c1) and Protagoras (*Theaetetus* 161c4).

<sup>200</sup> Klagge and Smith (1992 Supplement): 3.

literature'.<sup>201</sup> Plato's dialogues are literary fictions. And just as we cannot assume that any one of Shakespeare's characters speaks on behalf of him, so Plato, except in his *Letters*, remains hidden behind a dialogical form that is genuinely many-sided, and not merely a treatise masquerading as a dialogue.<sup>202</sup> Not only can we *not* assume that Socrates speaks as Plato's mouthpiece;<sup>203</sup> we cannot even be certain what the character Socrates *himself* truly believes, except perhaps on very rare occasions, so complex is his famous 'Socratic irony', one form of which is his disavowal of the very knowledge that he appears to exemplify in his words and actions.<sup>204</sup> A recent contribution to the debate argues that when Plato makes Socrates 'succumb to aporia' in the 'early' dialogues, it is wrong for us to assume that Plato himself is perplexed in the same way.<sup>205</sup> Indeed, quite contrary to the developmentalist project, David Wolfsdorf infers that

... [i]nconsistencies in Socrates' beliefs among the texts (intertextually) and within individual texts (intratextually) provide the most significant and decisive evidence that these beliefs should not always be identified with views Plato intended to advance.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Kahn (1996): 2.

<sup>202</sup> We have already noted how very different from Plato's in this regard are the dialogues of Berkeley. For the comparison with Shakespeare see Grote (1867): 210-211. This is quoted in Taylor (2002): 79.

<sup>203</sup> Guthrie (1971). See pp. 30-35 for the repudiation of the 'Burnet-Taylor thesis', viz., 'that whatever in a Platonic dialogue is put into the mouth of Socrates must be assumed to be substantially what Socrates said in his lifetime'.

<sup>204</sup> For an interpretation of this complex feature of Plato's literary style see Vlastos (1991d). For an even more thorough examination of role of Socratic irony in Platonic philosophy, that contests Vlastos' view, see Nehamas (1998): especially Chapters 2 & 3.

<sup>205</sup> Wolfsdorf (2004): 33.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

There is not, then, the imperative to interpret the dialogues so as to eliminate inconsistencies in a doctrine that is then assigned to their author. What we enjoy, in fact, is the hermeneutic opportunity to explore other possible explanations for these inconsistencies, other than as instances of the author's doctrinal inconsistency.

The study of the dialogical framework in which Plato reduces his characters to *aporia* suggests now to many scholars not that Plato himself suffered from an honest perplexity at these points, but that 'even in the ultimate stage of his philosophy, whatever it was', Plato may quite deliberately have

... enunciated 'paradoxes' in the sense of propositions which in their logical consequences are or seem to us to be self-contradictory or inconsistent with one another.<sup>207</sup>

Why would he do this? One answer, of course, is that although he could perceive the paradoxes, he could not resolve them, and yet believed that it was worthwhile at least flagging them.

David Sedley, however, provides a more sophisticated answer by reviving the Middle Platonist conception of 'purgative' dialectic. The paradoxes are part of a campaign to 'clear away false beliefs'.

Following the lead of the *Phaedo*, ancient Platonism sees purgation (*katharsis*) as the restoration of the soul to its natural state of wisdom. The soul already has the knowledge in it. Purge the obstacles which incarnation imposes, and the knowledge will surface of its own accord.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Cherniss (1965): 349.

<sup>208</sup> Sedley (1996): 102.

Such an explanation, however, goes rather far, committing Plato throughout his corpus to the fixed doctrine of pre-natal knowledge, which only the staunchest of unitarians would endorse today. But it does at least give inconsistency a more philosophically robust role to play in the genre of dialogue: rather than mistakes in the results of Plato's philosophy, they are the instruments of his doing philosophy with us, the readers.

By examining the genre of the dialogue scholars began to explore how there is more than one level of conversation in a Platonic dialogue. In the 1970s E. N. Tigerstedt pointed out that Plato's dialogues are in fact 'double dialogues', in that, over and above the conversation among the interlocutors, there is another conversation that Plato invites the reader to enter with him, the author.<sup>209</sup> Plato uses what might be called 'metaconversational hints' in the cut and thrust of the various characters' reactions to each other's arguments, questions and responses; the reader is forced to use philology, as he would for example in interpreting a play by Euripides, as well as philosophy to assess for himself the meaning of a dialogue.<sup>210</sup> Tigerstedt argues that irony is one such metaconversational hint, and today, no less than in the time of Proclus, the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE Head of the Academy at Athens, the struggle to understand the 'subtext' of Socrates' irony 'encourages the reader actively to seek Platonic currents of thought below the surface of the text', and yet at the same time perilously 'invites readers to impose their own philosophical prejudices on the

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<sup>209</sup> Tigerstedt (1977): 98-101.

<sup>210</sup> Bowen (1988): 60-63.

text of Plato'.<sup>211</sup> It is not enough to be a good philosopher to understand Plato; one needs to be a good literary critic as well.

The dialogues are not non-fictional expositions; they are fictional 'dramatic imitations of the practice of philosophizing'.<sup>212</sup> It is this feature that Charles Griswold highlights when he argues that

[t]he obsession with chronology may have blinded us to the possibility that Plato is quite a different sort of philosopher from that to which we are accustomed.<sup>213</sup>

That is to say, Plato may not have been the sort of philosopher who primarily seeks to formulate a systematic 'theory of everything'.

Griswold argues that Plato 'made a determined effort' that his dialogues be taken as a whole, and yet 'gives us no encouragement' to think that a correct interpretation of his work depends on the order in which we read them.<sup>214</sup> If we have recourse to chronology at all, Griswold suggests that we heed instead the *dramatic* chronology that Plato wrote into the introductions of many of his dialogues, which place them at some point in the life of the character Socrates between his youth and his execution. This, of course, would not generate a comprehensive arrangement of all the dialogues, since the frame in many of the dialogues does not give us enough information to place them in a dramatic chronology. The organisation of the dialogues according to their 'fictive chronology', however, is not intended to reconcile the inconsistencies in Plato's works.

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<sup>211</sup> Sedley (2002): 51-53.

<sup>212</sup> Griswold (1988): 160.

<sup>213</sup> Griswold (2002): 137.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*: 138.

Indeed, Griswold does not view the inconsistencies as vitiating Plato's dialogues at all, but as augmenting their power, for by withholding from the text an exposition of his own answers, if indeed he had any, Plato 'draw[s] the reader into philosophizing' and 'seduces [him] into finding an answer for himself'.<sup>215</sup> In a similar vein Cooper remarks

... although everything any speaker says is Plato's creation, he also stands before it all as the reader does... for all of us to examine carefully, reflect on, follow out the implications of—in sum, to use as a springboard for our own further philosophical thought.<sup>216</sup>

The suggestion that the inconsistencies in the dialogues may be deliberate challenges by their author to force his readers to do some philosophical work themselves is currently generating a great deal of discussion, for it calls into question not only the reason why Plato writes in dialogue form, but also what Plato thinks 'doing philosophy' is, and what he thinks 'wisdom' is, at which the pursuit of philosophy aims. Christopher Gill closely examines Plato's use of dialectical argument throughout his entire corpus and argues that it exhibits two features that explain why we can never find doctrinal closure in it. First, the arguments in the dialogues proceed on the principle that objective knowledge can be attained only through a shared dialectical search in which the participants possess appropriate qualities of character and intellect and engage in conversation in the right way; second, each dialectical encounter, e.g., a dialogue, unfolds within a localised and particularised context, while its aim is a universalised understanding that situates the problem correctly in relation to

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<sup>215</sup> Griswold (1988): 160-161.

<sup>216</sup> Cooper (1997): xxii.

the fundamental principles of reality and dialectical method.<sup>217</sup> For Plato, the dialogues are the essence of what doing philosophy is, and the achievement of the understanding at which they aim

... seems to require not only a secure grasp of concepts and logical relationships, but also the state of ethical character that is correlated with this synoptic understanding.<sup>218</sup>

Furthermore, to the extent that Plato characterises our human nature as preventing us from ever actually achieving the ‘divine’ wisdom that is omnisciently synoptic and fully grounded in all principles, his philosophy involves a ‘fallibilism’ that ‘seems to rule out the possibility of a *final*, definitive formulation of these principles’.<sup>219</sup> Gill contrasts this with the ‘increasingly systematic, structured way of doing philosophy’ from Aristotle onwards, since for Plato, doing philosophy is not possible unless it is a search shared with others that aspires towards ‘an architectonic framework’ of knowledge, thereby incurring ‘the necessary limitations of any one dialectical encounter’.<sup>220</sup> The attempt to systematise Plato’s writings is not doing philosophy in Plato’s way, and any system we derive is not wisdom according to him.

In his analysis of what Plato does with his chosen literary genre Gill seeks to outline what the dialogues set out to accomplish. He attacks Vlastos’ interpretation of Socrates’ practice of the elenchus as implying that he already

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<sup>217</sup> Gill (1996): 285.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.: 305.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.: 309-310.

<sup>220</sup> Gill (2002a): 162-163.



has knowledge of moral truths. He faults Vlastos for not giving sufficient attention to

... ways in which considerations of the dialogue form may be of substantive importance for understanding the objectives and status of the arguments contained in the dialogues.<sup>221</sup>

A close study of the dialogue form reveals that what Plato depicts is not ‘exposition of knowledge of the truth’, but rather

... a more or less incomplete or limited search for truth as conducted through varying forms of dialectical enquiry.<sup>222</sup>

The point Gill brings out is that the kind of philosophy we find in the dialogues, when we attend carefully to their dialogical form, instantiates principles that Vlastos’ interpretative methodology misses. And in overlooking these principles, Vlastos mistakenly treats the dialogues as expositors of doctrine.

Philosophy [in the Platonic dialogues] is understood as, ineluctably, shared dialectical search... Since philosophy is *necessarily embedded in dialectical contexts*, its success and failure—however these are to be understood—depend on the capacities and engagement of those participating in dialectic. More radically, the course of an argument *and its conclusions* arise out of a specific dialectical context and, in principle at least, *only hold good in that context*.<sup>223</sup>

By this close scrutiny of the *genre* of Plato’s writing and his exploitation of it, Gill highlights the hermeneutic fallacy of an interpreter setting out primarily to mine the dialogues for doctrine that is meant to express a single coherent

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<sup>221</sup> Gill (2004): 257.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.: 256.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.: 257-258. (My italics.)

philosophical position propounded by Plato, whether throughout his life or during a particular period of his life.

Kenneth Sayre also examines closely the dialogical style of all Plato's works in order to gauge what Plato thinks 'doing philosophy' is and what he thinks constitutes wisdom. Like the Esotericists, Sayre hearkens to the indictments of the written word in the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*, but unlike the Esotericists, he reads the condemnation as also covering 'any attempt to express true philosophic understanding in language', even an unwritten, oral attempt.<sup>224</sup> He argues that for Plato wisdom, or philosophic knowledge, is 'a state of mind...that shines forth in the soul, and that cannot be captured in linguistic form'.<sup>225</sup> He maintains that all the dialogues, even the 'late' ones that lack the vigorous exchanges of the 'early' dialogues, are 'an essential part of the regimen by which that wisdom is generated', in which Socrates usually plays the role of the philosophic midwife, as depicted in the *Theaetetus* 149a1 ff. Hence, Sayre calls this the 'maieutic view' of the dialogues. The correct 'interpretation' of the dialogues is therefore not the extraction of a systematic doctrine from them, but rather '[a]ctive participation as readers in conversations artfully constructed by the master dialogician', which generates 'mental discernment' with regard to the problem under discussion, manifesting as 'a state of awareness within the mind of the true lover of wisdom', rather than as a system of propositions and arguments.<sup>226</sup>

Cooper agrees with Sayre to the extent that

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<sup>224</sup> Sayre (1992 Supplement): 231.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.: 232-234.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.: 234 & 242-243.

... only a mind can [embody the knowledge of anything of philosophical importance], since only a mind can have this capacity to interpret and reinterpret its own understandings.<sup>227</sup>

While we may judge that Sayre's definition of wisdom as 'a state of mind...that shines forth in the soul' goes too far beyond what the dialogues warrant, his characterisation of the reader of dialogues as an active participant in his own philosophical development acknowledges the validity of the attempt to account for inconsistencies and gaps as deliberate design on the part of the author.

Michael Frede also recognises the importance of our taking into account the dialogical form when we seek to interpret inconsistencies in Plato's texts. He approaches the question of what Plato thought by focusing on the influence that the literary aspects exert on the philosophical aspects, in as much as both are 'so firmly wedded and intertwined throughout Plato's writings'.<sup>228</sup> Of the various types of dialectic that Aristotle describes in his *Topics*, Frede identifies the one that Plato primarily employs as 'elenctic dialectic', and faults those who look for a system in Plato for mistaking the dialogues for 'didactic dialectic' that seeks to spell out doctrine.<sup>229</sup> Furthermore, by closely studying the formal features of the elenctic dialectic that Plato uses in the questions and answers throughout his dialogues, Frede shows how neither the questioner nor the respondent can be held responsible for the arguments as a whole. Because it is

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<sup>227</sup> Cooper (1997): xx.

<sup>228</sup> Frede, M. (1992 Supplement): 201.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.: 208-209. Frede does note that the non-aporetic dialogues 'seem to represent a spectrum of forms of dialectic falling between purely gymnastic dialectic, on the one hand, and didactic dialectic, on the other', and he remarks that their formal features may have consequences for the status of the arguments. (p. 213)

the questioner, usually Socrates, that directs the arguments, we cannot say that the arguments are the respondent's, and yet since it is the respondent that affirms or denies each step, we cannot assume that the questioner endorses the arguments that he proposes; nor *a fortiori* can we assume that Plato endorses them.<sup>230</sup> Moreover, Socrates' insistence that the respondents say what they truly believe shows that the arguments are designed primarily not to prove or disprove particular propositions, but to test the respondents' claims to be an authority, and to demonstrate just how difficult it is genuinely to have knowledge, because

... for any given proposition concerning a certain subject-matter one must know all the other propositions which, however indirectly, are logically related to it.<sup>231</sup>

Why, Frede asks, does Plato write so that he puts himself 'at least two removes from the argument of the dialogue' by making it unclear whether he or Socrates endorses it, and at the same time uses the dialogues to expose the ignorance of so-called authorities and to insist on how crucial it is that 'one arrive at the right view by one's own thought, rather than on the authority of somebody else'?'<sup>232</sup> Frede's answer is characteristic of the recent scholarship that takes the literary factors of the dialogues into account. He replies that the best explanation of why Plato wrote dialogues the way he did is that it is the expression of what Plato thought doing philosophy is. Plato, characteristic of one whose concern is for the reader's progress in knowledge and understanding, writes the way he does to 'thwart the reader's temptation to

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid.: 212.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.: 214-215.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.: 217.

adopt the author's views for the wrong reasons, e.g., because they are Plato's':  
*in defiance* of the project of trying to mine a doctrine from the Platonic corpus,  
Plato contrives it that

...the reader is forced to sort out his own beliefs by pursuing the different kinds of argumentative lines which connect these beliefs in all directions, e.g., by considering the arguments of the dialogues, by trying to figure out which premiss of the elenchus the respondent should have abandoned, by working out how an appealing argument in the dialogues might be made consistent with his own beliefs, or the other way round.<sup>233</sup>

If indeed Plato himself deliberately sets out to frustrate such a project, this will go a long way in explaining why centuries of scholars have failed to derive a uniform, consistent doctrine from Plato's dialogues.

McCabe focuses especially on the play between the dramatic frame and the framed arguments in her analysis of Plato's use of the genre of dialogue. She argues that Plato's complex use of the dialogue form demands a 'full dialectical engagement with its readers'.

All their [viz., the dialogues'] peculiar features and ostentatious inconcinnities, then, are to be explained as weapons in Plato's armoury to force reflection on the person who seems entirely outside the dialogue's action: the person who reads it.<sup>234</sup>

Plato's absence as one of the interlocutors and his introduction of the conversations as second or even third-hand reports generate a reflective distance between us and the arguments.

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> McCabe (2006a): 10 & 18 (draft copy).

We stand outside the action even where we may agree with what is said; and in that way we can think *about* just how the arguments work. And so a dialogue may reflect on the principles of argument itself.<sup>235</sup>

This view of what Plato is doing in his dialogues, like those of Gill, Cooper, Michael Frede and Sayre, implies that if Plato did have a conception of what his philosophy was, a fundamental feature of it was that it was not to present to his readers a fixed body of consistent doctrine. The challenge for such an interpretative stance, then, is to identify what philosophical work Plato is inviting his readers to undertake. If each reader's encounter with the dialogues is not to reduce to a free-for-all grappling with the dialogical form that issues in a 'meaning' relative to what he subjectively 'gets out of it', then some objective account must be given of what Plato intends the reader to gain. If it is not to be a body of doctrine, then what is it to be?

#### Section 10. Attempts in recent secondary literature to resolve the apparent inconsistency in Plato regarding Socratic wisdom

A middle path of interpretation, which views Plato neither primarily as a purveyor of doctrine nor as a sceptic, is the one that the rest of this dissertation will explore. Certainly, the need to find a new approach to the resolution of inconsistencies in Plato will now be apparent, but this need will become even more apparent if we turn to look more closely at the way in which the

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid.: 19-20 (draft copy). (Author's italics)

secondary literature has tried to resolve the particular inconsistency regarding the problem of Socratic wisdom. When we examine these attempts to address the problem, we see more specifically the shortcomings of the interpretative strategies described and assessed above.

The rest of this chapter will assess the treatment in recent secondary literature of the problem of Socratic wisdom as it appears in the *Apology* and the *Charmides*. By limiting our study of interpretative methodologies to this particular problem and these two dialogues, we shall see in greater detail the unsatisfactory results of previous attempts to tackle the general problem of reconciling apparent inconsistencies in Plato, and shall appreciate even more what we need to look for in conceiving a new interpretative approach. To this extent, then, the resolution of the problem of Socratic wisdom in the *Apology* and the *Charmides* will be our test case for the value of alternative strategies for reading Plato's dialogues.

We have seen how both dialogues discuss self-knowledge, and yet their treatments are contradictory in that it is praised as the highest of human virtues in the *Apology* and condemned as neither possible nor beneficial in the *Charmides*. The following critical survey of previous attempts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to resolve this particular inconsistency will further motivate the application in the next chapter of the double dialogue method of interpretation to the *Charmides* in anticipation of achieving a satisfactory resolution for our test case of inconsistency in Plato.

T. G. Tuckey, after reviewing the German and English scholarship on this question, concludes that the *Charmides* is an advance on the *Apology* in understanding by what faculty the historical Socrates was able to examine others successfully for knowledge that he himself did not have. Tuckey argues that at *Charmides* 172b Plato changes the meaning of τὸ ἐπιστήμην ἐπίστασθαι καὶ ἀνεπιστημοσύνην.

A new meaning of ‘knowledge of knowledge’ is therefore suggested by this paragraph; it would mean not ‘knowledge that one knows’, or ‘knowledge of what knowledge is’, but ‘knowledge of how to acquire knowledge’, that is, knowledge how to learn, reason, calculate..., to think clearly and consistently... [T]he possession of this ability was the sole basis of Socrates’ peculiar faculty, if not of his whole character as well.<sup>236</sup>

In this way Tuckey endeavours to resolve the problem of Socratic wisdom by interpreting *Charmides* 172b1-8 as a summary dismissal of all the difficulties raised against the possibility and utility of the knowledge of knowledge in the second half of the dialogue. He sees this vindication of the Socratic wisdom of the *Apology* being effected by a sudden change in the meaning of the words ‘knowledge of knowledge and the lack of knowledge’. Furthermore, he sees in this new meaning not only Plato’s explanation of what Socratic wisdom is, but also Plato’s suggestion that such wisdom was the expedient to

... facilitate the acquisition of that knowledge of the Good... or... self-knowledge, which in its deepest sense is the same thing.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Tuckey (1951): 72.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*: 102-103.



Tuckey seeks not only to eliminate any discrepancy between the *Charmides* and the *Apology*, but also to effect a consonance of doctrine between the *Charmides* and the *Republic*, where the former foreshadows the doctrine of the latter in furthering ‘Plato’s chief concern, the discovery of the secret of statesmanship’.<sup>238</sup> But one must fault Tuckey’s proposed uniformity of doctrine for its downplaying the long tracts of text in which Plato generates tension between Socrates’ arguments and their apparent target, viz., the ability to know what one does and does not know. Also, it seems too much of an *ad hoc* expedient for Tuckey to grant so pivotal a role to a section of eight lines (*Charm.* 172b1-9), where Plato is meant to change the meaning of his terms without notice, and in such a way that attributes to Socrates knowledge of a new and unexplained kind, viz., Tuckey’s ‘science of knowing’, which he later seems to identify, in its mature form, with the ‘knowledge of the Good’.<sup>239</sup>

Richard McKim, on the other hand, criticises Tuckey and other commentators for identifying Socrates’ self-knowledge as the knowledge of good and bad, rather than confining it to the knowledge of knowledge. He maintains that

... the lesson of the *Charmides* for its readers is that if philosophy is ever to reach its imperative goal the limitations of Socratic self-knowledge, and of the method based upon it, must be overcome.<sup>240</sup>

McKim claims that Plato uses the arguments and the dramatisation of the *Charmides* to demonstrate the impotence of the Socratic elenchus to achieve

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid.: 103.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> McKim (1985): 65.

philosophy's imperative goal of the knowledge of good and bad, for it is capable only of informing Socrates 'that he lacks a sort of knowledge about which he does not know *what* it is', viz., the knowledge that is virtue, the knowledge of what good and bad are.<sup>241</sup> Hence, McKim argues, Socrates' frustration at the end of the dialogue is genuine, not feigned, and is meant to be felt by the reader as the constriction of methodological limitation, by which Plato

... tries to instil in us a share of his own felt need for a different method of dialectic with the power to succeed where Socrates had failed.<sup>242</sup>

McKim acknowledges the inconsistency between the *Apology* and the *Charmides* and he seeks to resolve it by attributing to Plato the repudiation of his portrayal of Socratic wisdom in the *Apology* as what makes a man most wise. We are to understand that Plato came to view Socrates' self-knowledge of the *Apology* as different from and inferior to the knowledge of the good, and his elenctic method as incapable of bridging the gap between the two. McKim proposes that as Plato grew older and developed philosophically, he distanced himself from 'Socratic dialectic' as being 'an ultimately inadequate mode of philosophy'.<sup>243</sup>

McKim's proposed resolution generates biographical claims about the personal development of Plato as a philosopher, and uses these claims as a hypothesis on which to ground an explanation of the apparent inconsistency in

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid.: 73.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.: 76.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.: 60.

views between the *Apology* and the *Charmides*. His proposal, therefore, suffers from the developmentalist extravagance we saw earlier, viz., of going beyond the texts in attributing to Plato a conviction in various philosophical views, at various periods in his life, that we have no way of verifying. It would be better, however, if we can find a way of solving the problem that does not rely upon biographical suppositions that cannot be substantiated.

W. K. C. Guthrie also sees in the *Charmides* a progression by its author away from the limitations that Plato is supposed to have discerned in the philosophical method of the historical Socrates.

It is reasonable to conclude that Plato..., having under the personal influence of Socrates enthusiastically embraced the Socratic code, is beginning to subject it to a more dispassionate examination and to find its philosophical implications genuinely puzzling. The work reflects his own perplexity and some early attempt to resolve it.<sup>244</sup>

He remarks on the unmistakable echo of the *Apology* (21d) with the discussion of the knowledge of knowledge and ignorance in the second half of the *Charmides*, and he interprets Socrates' wrestling with this notion as Plato's restless questing for a coherent account of it. Guthrie finds it 'fascinating to see the first dawning in Plato's mind' of such problems as:

How was such a phenomenon as Socrates possible?  
What does it mean to speak of a knowledge of  
knowledge and ignorance?<sup>245</sup>

And so Guthrie, too, sees Plato in the *Charmides* developing away from the Socrates that is depicted in the *Apology*, as he experiences

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<sup>244</sup> Guthrie (1998): 163-164.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.: 170.

... these first stirrings of intellectual curiosity which led him later on, in the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*, to look for the essence of knowledge itself.<sup>246</sup>

Guthrie's resolution of the problem of Socratic wisdom, then, does not view Plato as repudiating the epistemic condition of the Socrates of the *Apology*, as McKim suggests. Instead, he views the inconsistency between the *Apology* and the *Charmides* as the dissatisfaction of an ever more philosophically astute pupil, who demonstrates in the *Charmides* his determination to advance beyond his teacher's pre-reflective grasp of what knowledge is, and in particular, of what Socrates' peculiar 'human knowledge' might be. For such a story to be plausible, however, Guthrie requires a familiarity with the intellectual life of Plato, the man, that we simply do not have, and that the results of stylometry cannot responsibly be stretched to furnish. What we do have are the intellectual fruits of Plato, the author. To this degree, then, Guthrie's interpretative methodology is flawed, for it requires us to go well beyond the guidelines of responsible commentary in making extravagant biographical claims about Plato's motives, intentions and procedures in writing what he did.

Gregory Vlastos does not directly address the problem of Socratic wisdom, as defined in this dissertation. However, his arguments that aim to resolve the problem of Socrates' disavowal of knowledge do suggest a way in which the problem of Socratic wisdom might be tackled. Vlastos claims that there are two conceptions of knowledge at play in Socrates' avowals and disavowals of knowledge. One conception has the hallmark of 'infallible certainty', which Vlastos designates as 'knowledge<sub>c</sub>'; the other conception is only 'elenctically

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid.: 174.

justified', having survived frequent elenctic examination, and he calls this 'knowledge<sub>e</sub>'.<sup>247</sup> Vlastos insists that

Socrates could not have expected his knowledge<sub>e</sub> to meet the fantastically strong standards of knowledge<sub>c</sub>.<sup>248</sup>

Knowledge<sub>e</sub> falls short of the certainty of knowledge<sub>c</sub> because the failure to prove it false does not amount to the success in proving it true. Furthermore, Socrates was well aware of this.

Suppose [a proposition] had turned out true in a thousand elenchi; it might still turn out false in the thousand-and-first... Socrates could not have been unaware of this uncertainty, built into his instrument of research, which infects all its findings.<sup>249</sup>

Vlastos cites Socrates' explanation to Critias in the *Charmides* (166c7-d4) of how his meticulous cross-examination of his interlocutors is motivated by his fear lest he unwittingly think he knows something when he does not know it.

In saying that this fear fuels his elenctic searching he reveals his haunting sense of the insecurity of knowledge<sub>e</sub>—his awareness that in respect of certainty it is the diametrical opposite of knowledge<sub>c</sub>.<sup>250</sup>

By disambiguating Socrates', and hence Plato's, use of the word 'knowledge', Vlastos claims to have resolved the paradox of Socrates' disavowal of knowledge in the following way.

Socrates will never be contradicting himself by saying, or implying, that he both has and hasn't knowledge, for

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<sup>247</sup> Vlastos (1994a): 55-56.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.: 56.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.: 57.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

he will... [be saying] only that he does have knowledge<sub>c</sub>  
and does not have knowledge<sub>c</sub>.<sup>251</sup>

Using this same tactic, then, Vlastos might argue that the problem of Socratic wisdom can be resolved by recognising that when Socrates says he knows that he does or does not know, he is only claiming to have knowledge<sub>c</sub> of the presence or absence of knowledge<sub>c</sub>. In this one move all the problems generated by the inscrutability of self-knowledge and the apparent irreflexivity of knowledge, which exercise Socrates in the second half of the *Charmides*, are eliminated. Socrates' self-knowledge is no more paradoxical or impossible than his disavowal of knowledge.

There are major drawbacks in such an interpretative strategy, however. While Vlastos' disambiguation of 'Plato's use' of the word 'knowledge' offers a resolution to apparent inconsistencies and contradictions, he cannot show that it does actually respond to an ambiguity of the word that either Socrates, the character, or Plato, the author, recognised or would have endorsed. Furthermore, if the solution to the problem of Socratic wisdom is such a simple one, there seems little point in Socrates' agonising over it for half a dialogue. Vlastos' hermeneutic strategy sweeps aside any reasonable motivation for the considerable amount of epistemological inquiry that occupies the second half of the *Charmides*, and so fails to be a good account of it.

Voula Tsouna views the problem of Socratic wisdom in the *Charmides* as a device by Plato to contrast two opposing kinds of self-knowledge. She regards

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid.: 60.

Socrates' self-knowledge as portrayed in the *Apology* to be unproblematical, since she takes him as only claiming that he

... realises *what* he knows and *what* he does not know, and is able to find out *what* other people know and *what* they do not.<sup>252</sup>

The contrast she sees Plato making is with the intellectualism that Critias defends, which is a self-knowledge 'totally unconnected with the moral life' and amounting 'primarily to the possession of a criterion by which we can accurately identify cognitive states'.<sup>253</sup> That is to say, Critias' kind of knowledge of knowledge is 'ethically neutral' and 'the type of knowledge that politicians, technocrats and theorists of sorts may aspire to'.<sup>254</sup> The *Charmides* ends with the refutation of Critias' knowledge of knowledge and ignorance when Socrates uses his dream of the utopian society (*Charm.* 173a7-d5) to show that it would not obtain the welfare Critias claims for it. In the end, it turns out to be both useless and impossible. But since, according to Tsouna, it is Critias' intellectualism rather than Socratic wisdom that is being refuted in this dialogue, the apparent inconsistency between the *Apology* and the *Charmides* vanishes.

While Tsouna's close attention to the persona of Critias and to Plato's manipulation of it in the dramatic frame of the dialogue elucidates moral and psychological points that Plato may very well have intended to make in the *Charmides*, her resolution of the problem of Socratic wisdom requires us to

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<sup>252</sup> Tsouna (1997): 73-74. (Author's italics.)

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*: 72 & 74.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*: 75.

disambiguate two senses of ‘self-knowledge’ that Plato is meant to have exploited. But as in Vlastos’ case, we have no clear evidence that Plato intended to employ ambiguity in the way Tsouna envisages here in the *Charmides*. And if we were to adopt Tsouna’s strategy for interpretation, again, the motivation for large sections of Socrates’ ‘flood of dizzying arguments’ in the second half of the dialogue remains inexplicable, e.g., for the protracted argument over the apparent irreflexivity of knowledge, and for how one can possibly know what one does and does not know.<sup>255</sup>

Gerasimos Santas does not argue in favour of the *Charmides* providing evidence of Plato’s own philosophical development, but he does view the *Charmides* as ‘an excellent prolegomenon to the *Republic* as well as the *Theaetetus*’.<sup>256</sup> Unlike Kahn, Santas does not impute proleptic authorial design to Plato, but he does regard the discussion of the knowledge of knowledge in the *Charmides* as an advance upon the Socratic wisdom of the *Apology* in terms of Plato’s inquiry into epistemology. Santas cites *Charmides* 166d, where Socrates admits his fear of mistakenly thinking that he knows and his motive of ‘examining the argument mainly for my own sake’, as evidence that the ensuing discussion of the knowledge of knowledge expands to include also the problem of knowing what others know.

This covers a lot more cases than the states presupposed and aimed at by the Socratic method, and so much more is at stake. (For example, some of the presuppositions of the ideal state in the *Republic*; knowledge of knowledge, it would appear, would be *the* thing for the

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<sup>255</sup> Santas (1973): 122.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*: 129.



philosopher king to have, and perhaps for a few others too in the hierarchy.)<sup>257</sup>

Santas also remarks on the comparison between Socrates' dream of the community governed by knowledge of knowledge (*Charm.* 173a7-d5) and the 'dream of the ideal state of the *Republic*', where some version of the rule of the knowledge of knowledge 'does become a fullblown idea, difficult but not impossible'.<sup>258</sup>

Santas does not see the Socratic wisdom of the *Apology* as being in conflict with the arguments of the *Charmides* against its possibility and utility. Instead, he sees Socratic wisdom as one staging post, and the *Charmides* as another, on Plato's journey to a fuller exposition of the nature of knowledge in other dialogues.

One major aim of the theory of knowledge is to discover the knowledge of knowledge that Socrates is talking about...: to discover what knowledge is and what it is not, and to formulate if possible a correct and informative definition of knowledge.<sup>259</sup>

He regards Plato not as arguing against the possibility of such knowledge in the *Charmides*, but rather as going on in the *Theaetetus* to try to discover it. However, Santas' proposed overall schema of Plato's epistemological project throughout his dialogues blurs the finely crafted detail of the controversies that remain within the *Charmides* itself. We cannot get away from the fact that Plato is allowing Socrates to subject his own peculiar wisdom to a ferocious attack that leaves the alleged owner of the knowledge in despair over how it could

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid.: 120-121. (Author's italics.)

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.: 129 & 131.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.: 128.

possibly exist or be of any use. Santas is right to see Plato as keenly interested in the full range of epistemological inquiry, but wrong to move quite so dismissively through the arguments of the *Charmides*.

Like Santas, Drew Hyland does not see a conflict between the Socratic wisdom of the *Apology* and the arguments in the second half of the *Charmides*. Hence, there is no inconsistency to resolve, as far as he is concerned. Instead, Hyland regards the *Charmides* as a vindication of Socrates' self-knowledge, but only after Plato makes it clear through Socrates' arguments that his self-knowledge is not, *pace* Critias at *Charmides* 165c7, an ἐπιστήμη.

[T]he word 'science' does carry with it the sense of rigorous, demonstrable knowledge, that of which a *logos* can be given, which I believe *is* the force of *episteme*.<sup>260</sup>

Hyland faults Critias for agreeing that all knowledge must be of this kind, and he regards the second half of the *Charmides* as a protracted argument for there being 'a mode of self-knowledge which is possible, but is other than *episteme*'. He regards this as

... the most fundamental question raised by the *Charmides*, and the rest of the dialogue may well be considered a response to it.<sup>261</sup>

Hyland construes the *Charmides* as an assault on the misconception of what self-knowledge really is, which is the knowledge that Socrates embodies. The correct way of conceiving of Socrates' self-knowledge is not as an ἐπιστήμη, but as

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<sup>260</sup> Hyland (1981): 95. (Author's italics.)

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*: 99.

... a way of being, a way which is a questioning or questing both in speech and in deed, toward being the exhibition of what it means to be a good person. This way of life I have called the interrogative stance, the stance of wonder or *aporia*, responsive openness, and philosophy. In this dialogue, it is called *sophrosyne*.<sup>262</sup>

Hyland admits that his project is to attempt an interpretation of σοφροσύνη as Socratic philosophy ‘with the help of the *Charmides* itself’, and in pursuit of this he prefers to bring to the dialogue his reflections gained from his reading of modern philosophers more than to engage in a close exegesis of the text.<sup>263</sup> The result is that he does not address the problem of Socratic wisdom, for he does not view the Socrates of the *Charmides* as attacking the Socratic wisdom of the *Apology*. Nor does he address the philosophical issues about epistemic warrant that the problem of Socratic wisdom generates in the *Charmides*.

In a very much closer reading of the dialogue Thomas Schmid fully acknowledges and tackles head on the ‘interpretative dilemma’ of the problem of Socratic wisdom. Indeed, he maintains that it constitutes ‘the most important problem regarding [the dialogue’s] overall interpretation’, for

[if the definition of *sophrosune* at 167a1-7] is not meant to be Socratic, why is it so clearly analogous to the classic Socratic self-description at *Apology* 21a-23b? But if it is Socratic, why is it refuted?<sup>264</sup>

He does not employ the interpretative methodology of developmentalism, however, and instead faults the ‘analytic-doctrinal’ method of reading Plato for not managing to resolve this dilemma, owing to its failure

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid.: 139.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.: 143.

<sup>264</sup> Schmid (1998): 40.

... to appreciate the role of the drama—of action—in clarifying the ambiguities of the arguments.<sup>265</sup>

Plato's characterisation of Socrates portrays him as living 'in the dimension of rational self-examination', which illustrates Plato's concern

... not only with the object of knowledge, but with what is involved in becoming and being a *knowing subject*—what kinds of moral/intellectual virtues must be appropriated and made part of the personal value system for philosophical self-knowledge.<sup>266</sup>

Schmid interprets Plato's portrayal of Socrates in the *Apology* and his self-description at *Charmides* 167a1-7 as indicating a 'knowledge of knowledge and nonknowledge' that constitutes 'the Socratic ideal of rationality', which Plato then uses the rest of the *Charmides* to contrast with the conception of a 'knowledge of knowledge and nonknowledge' that amounts to a 'would-be Critian science of rulership and unbridled self-certainty'.<sup>267</sup> He argues that Plato intends the reader to see that the refutations in the second half of the dialogue, despite their appearances, do not condemn the self-knowledge that Socrates embodies for being 'epistemologically confused', but rather condemn the kind of self-knowledge that Critias envisages for being 'morally disastrous'.<sup>268</sup> Plato is contrasting two conceptions of self-knowledge that correspond to two epistemological models: the Critian, sophistic conception that corresponds to knowledge 'as direct perception or recognition of its object', and Socrates' ideal of rationality that corresponds to an epistemological model

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid.: 41.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.: 76.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.: 77.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.: 86.

... in which the act of knowing is mediated by a testing process that focuses on the *reasons* the knowledge-claimant has for holding or rejecting the judgment or performing or refraining from the action.<sup>269</sup>

The issue of models of knowledge in the background of the dialogue is one that will play a large role in the close analysis of the arguments of the *Charmides* in the next chapter. Schmid, however, draws his conclusions from the dramatic frame of the dialogue and Plato's characterisation of Critias and Socrates, rather than from the arguments themselves. As we saw earlier, he does not believe that the arguments can be clarified in any other way so as to allow a resolution to the problem of Socratic wisdom.<sup>270</sup> We shall see, however, that although Schmid is entirely right to advise us to acknowledge the philosophical contribution made by the drama and characterisation in which the arguments are embedded, we *can* find a resolution to the problem of Socratic wisdom from a close analysis of the arguments themselves.

Schmid concludes from Plato's portrayal of Critias and the manner of his participation in the discussion with Socrates that

... there is no room in Critias' conception for the knowledge of nonknowledge, since there is no role for

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid.: 107-108. (Author's italics.)

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.: 41. Schmid's claim is that '[t]hese interpretative controversies [such as the problem of Socratic wisdom] cannot be resolved, I suggest, unless we bring a different approach to the reading of the dialogue than the "analytic-doctrinal" method that still dominates Plato scholarship'. While I fully support Schmid's point that the appreciation of the dramatic frame is a vital element in understanding the arguments, I am not as pessimistic as he is that the arguments themselves cannot also provide a resolution to the controversy of Socratic wisdom, as I shall show in the next chapter.

the critical and open-minded *testing* of one's own claim to knowledge.<sup>271</sup>

On the other hand, in Socrates, we see another conception of self-knowledge operating, which enables the reader

...to realize that *the knowledge of what you know and do not know is possible on a different, self-relational model of knowledge*—on a model that sees it as a self-critical enterprise driven by concern for the truth of its own moral findings.<sup>272</sup>

From this Schmid concludes that the second half of the *Charmides* refutes not Socrates' knowledge of what he does and does not know, but 'the Critian ideal of such a knowledge', thereby leaving the reader reassured that the exercise of dialectic in the area of moral values, by which we examine our reasons for thinking we know, is possible and confers great benefit.<sup>273</sup>

Schmid's interpretation is excellent for focusing our minds on Plato's preoccupation in the *Charmides* with different conceptions of knowledge, but while it 'situates the argument in the dramatic context of the contrast between Socrates and Critias', it does not demonstrate how the argument itself focuses our minds in the same way.<sup>274</sup> We shall see, however, how the argument in fact does just this, and thereby provides an unexpected way of resolving the problem of Socratic wisdom.

Gabriela Carone's treatment of the problem of Socratic wisdom, like Schmid's, does not participate in the developmentalist project. Rather than

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid.: 111. (Author's italics.)

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.: 119. (Author's italics.)

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.: 120 & 122.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.: 122.

viewing the *Charmides* as a contribution in the story of Plato's philosophical growth, she focuses sharply on the dialogue itself and exercises great care in tracking the progress of the arguments that appear to refute Socratic wisdom. She regards the problem of Socratic wisdom, particularly in its appearance of being reflexive knowledge, as Plato's ploy to invite the reader to 'reflect on the nature of reflection' and of self-knowledge in an explicit way.

The *Charmides* undertakes such a huge enterprise, by making us reflect on what an extraordinary thing it is to have self-awareness, or second-order knowledge.<sup>275</sup>

Her strategy to resolve the apparent paradox of self-knowledge is similar to Vlastos' solution for Socrates' disavowal of knowledge. Like him, she distinguishes equivocal uses of the word 'knowledge', although she offers different senses from those of Vlastos, and she extends the senses from two to three: knowledge by acquaintance, first-order knowledge and second-order knowledge.<sup>276</sup> To Socrates she attributes second-order knowledge, or the knowledge of

... the formal conditions for knowledge, such as the principle of non-contradiction, systematicity, and more generally the rules of logic.<sup>277</sup>

First-order knowledge is the science of medicine, house-building etc., and knowledge by acquaintance is mere familiarity with the objects that the various first-order 'knowledges' are about. She argues that the *Charmides* shows Socrates can indeed know *that* someone does or does not know something,

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<sup>275</sup> Carone (1998): 276.

<sup>276</sup> Carone notes the 'congeniality' of her account with Vlastos' at Ibid.: 279, n. 19.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.: 283.

because his second-order knowledge enables him to confirm or deny whether the account he receives from his interlocutor about medicine, house-building, justice etc. is ‘a consistent and systematic story’.<sup>278</sup> And he can know *what* it is that his interlocutor does or does not know without having to know the first-order knowledge under examination, for he will, no doubt, have knowledge by acquaintance of the objects and rudimentary subject-matter involved.

Carone’s disambiguation of these three senses of ‘knowledge’ does at least follow from her close reading of the text of the *Charmides*, and we can see how it brings us to one way of resolving the conflict with the *Apology* over Socratic wisdom. Indeed, it is with the same tactic that she solves the puzzle of the apparent impossibility of the reflexivity of knowledge, for she argues that self-knowledge is not really reflexive, for Socrates’ ‘self-knowledge’ is really knowledge of first-order knowledge by second-order knowledge.<sup>279</sup> But again, as with Vlastos, there are worries that it is merely this unwitting equivocation over senses of ‘knowledge’ that defeats Socrates and forces him to look longingly for ‘some very great man’ who might be sufficient to the task of examining successfully the nature of reflexivity and its relation to activity, and in particular to knowledge (*Charm.* 169a1-7). Plato certainly drops hints, e.g., at *Charmides* 172b1-8, which suggest something like the sort of second-order

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<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*: 278.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*: 275. In this way she elaborates more fully Santas’ distinction between (1) ‘knowing the same knowledge’ and (2) ‘knowing what the subject is about’. Santas argues that ‘Socrates seems to be using the expression “know what one knows”... primarily in sense (1)’, and thereby generates the paradox of how we can know whether someone knows what we ourselves do not know, and of how it is possible that ‘a man can know what (those things which) he does not know’. Santas (1973): 124-125 & n. 15.



knowledge that Carone discusses. But it would be wrong to insist that there is conclusive evidence in the text that Plato composed the second half of the *Charmides* in order to propose them to his readers as the explication of Socratic wisdom. Furthermore, as I shall show in the next chapter, we have good reason to credit the elaborate care with which Plato orchestrates the puzzles in the second half of the *Charmides* with a more fundamental epistemological campaign to investigate not only Socratic wisdom, but the very structure of knowledge itself.

#### Section 11. The double dialogue reading

The various interpretative strategies we examined above fail to provide a resolution to the problem of Socratic wisdom that takes into account the full force of the arguments in the *Charmides*, where Plato painstakingly constructs an apparent refutation of the very epistemic condition that he lauds in the *Apology*. We, therefore, turn for help to the alternative interpretative methodology that has received much support recently. For the sake of convenience, I shall refer to it as the ‘double dialogue’ interpretation, adopting Tigerstedt’s term, but understanding this approach in a broad way that, in a word, examines the dialogues from a ‘reader-centred’ perspective, rather than from a ‘doctrine-centred’ one. This last section of the chapter explains the principles that will guide the double dialogue reading of the second half of the

*Charmides* in the next chapter. As was mentioned earlier, we need to have a clear account of objective principles if the double dialogue method of reading a dialogue is not to reduce to a free-for-all of subjective ‘interpretation’.

In the double dialogue reading of Plato’s works, the dialogue is not treated principally as a means by which Plato seeks to transmit his doctrines to his readers.<sup>280</sup> Whilst recognising the importance of identifying and evaluating any doctrines that can be rightly attributed to Plato’s own beliefs, the double dialogue method does not view the dialogues as vehicles for the conveying of systematic exposition. It acknowledges that they would be particularly unsuited as means to such an end. As Michael Stokes points out, our approach to reading Plato should match his reasons for choosing to write in the dialogue form.

More likely to have been decisive are considerations based on what can be done with the dialogue form that cannot, or can only with difficulty, be done in other forms... The protreptic and educational value of the dialogues may be high, but their communicative value [of the author’s views] low.<sup>281</sup>

None of this, however, denies that Plato composed his dialogues in such a way that they deliberately presented the reader with clear and definite doctrines and methodologies to think about and evaluate. For example, the theory of learning as recollection is clearly a doctrine that we are meant to think about, and even evaluate as a position that we may or may not adopt; Plato writes the *Meno* in such a way that we are forced to consider the merits of this doctrine. But the introduction into the discussion by Socrates of a concept or theory does

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<sup>280</sup> The account I give here draws heavily upon Tigerstedt (1977): 96-101.

<sup>281</sup> Stokes (1986): 26-27.

not imply that the author introduces it as his conviction, especially when it is introduced as the word of priests and priestesses (*Meno* 81a10). And Socrates' irony, self-deprecation and frequent unwillingness to conclude decisively one way or another undermine our attempts to identify fixed views to which he ascribed. Similarly, the theory of Forms in the *Republic* is a philosophical position that we are invited to weigh up. But the fact that Socrates elaborates it is not sufficient evidence for our discerning Plato's views, nor does it allow us to construct a body of dogma that we can safely ascribe to Socrates as his own, whether we are talking about the character or the man.

The double dialogue methodology of interpretation does not credit with special importance the search for the identification either of 'Plato's philosophy' or of 'Socrates' philosophy'. While these may be very interesting projects and have philosophical value, the double dialogue method of interpretation does not consider them to be the central feature in our search to expound the meaning of the dialogues. Plato's choice of genre helps guide us in finding the right approach to his works, and this steers us away from treating them as either explicit or implicit proclamations and defences of established philosophical positions.

The double dialogue reading recognises that although the discussion amongst the interlocutors in the dialogues is not addressed directly to the reader, and the reader is not a participant in it, he does have a part to play in the cut and thrust of the dialogue. The reader's part consists in the philosophical analysis and critical evaluation of the concepts, theories and methodologies that Socrates and his respondents introduce. Furthermore, Plato also gives the reader

the task of tracking thoughtfully the application of these methodologies to the concepts and theories in hand. Plato puts the reader in a position to carry out this work through the questions, answers, misunderstandings, confusions, arguments, objections, rejoinders and even the emotional responses and types of behaviour that the characters present.

In this way, a reading of the dialogues is the meeting of two minds, viz., those of Plato and the reader. As Cooper explains, in writing his dialogues

... Plato is being faithful to Socrates' example: the truth must be arrived at by each of us for ourselves, in a cooperative search, and Plato is only inviting others to do their own intellectual work, in cooperation with him, in thinking through the issues that he is addressing.<sup>282</sup>

The reader's part is not passively to register the challenges Plato foists upon him, nor is it just to follow his treatment of the issues in a noncommittal way. Reading Plato is not a spectator sport. The double dialogue method of reading Plato is best understood through the account it gives of the part that any reader of Plato's dialogues is constrained to play. His part is actively and vigorously to question and probe the drift of the argument towards the successful meeting of the challenges set as problems to be solved. It is not merely to observe passively the *aporiai* that either generate the debate or constitute its dead-end, but to suffer the full force of *impasse* and to struggle towards their satisfactory resolution.

Just as Socrates contrives ways of drawing his interlocutors into philosophical inquiry and the examination of their lives, so Plato engages the reader in a dialogue that supervenes upon the dialogue, in which the characters

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<sup>282</sup> Cooper (1997): xx.

struggle to understand what the reader himself does not understand. And rather than providing answers, Plato offers problems, arguments and speculation, and invites the reader to reflect and seek the answers himself. A double dialogue reading notes in particular those points in the dialogue where Plato is challenging the reader to respond critically to what Plato is placing before him for consideration. Since the author engages the reader in a discussion, if only an imaginary discussion, that tracks the discussion between the interlocutors in the dialogue, the name of 'double dialogue' is given to this way of reading Plato.

The double dialogue method of interpretation justifies this view of Plato's intention in writing philosophy on the grounds that he chose to write dialogues in the way he did, i.e., in a way that seems almost determined to frustrate the reader who is seeking to extract from them a single, systematic and coherent body of doctrine. In interpreting what a dialogues means, therefore, the double dialogue reading takes account not only of the arguments and the dramatic frame, but also of the agenda of critical evaluation that Plato thereby challenges the reader to undertake to resolve the apparent inconsistencies, gaps, and dead-ends.

While the double dialogue reading tends to focus on single dialogues, rather than groups of dialogues or the whole corpus, it does recognise that Plato was able to exploit intertextuality between dialogues to promote his project of making the reader subject his own views to critical evaluation. Intertextuality, i.e., the repetition or close verbal resemblance of one text by another, gives the reader good grounds for relating the two passages. Someone searching for Platonic doctrine might join such passages together to construct a composite

statement of dogma. Alternatively, Kahn might choose to view one such passage as preparation for its corresponding passage or passages in ‘later’ dialogues. On the other hand, particularly where passages with intertextual similarity apparently conflict in sense, there is much scope for a double dialogue reading to reflect on what it is that Plato is trying to get the reader to examine. In this approach, the ‘direction’ of intertextuality is not fixed, as it is for Kahn’s proleptic reading where ‘early’ passages ‘look forward’ to ‘later’ ones. In a double dialogue reading, the question is open whether the passages are, in fact, ‘looking at’ each other. And a passage in an ‘earlier’ dialogue may even be inviting the reader to subject to scrutiny a passage in an ‘later’ dialogue.

In a critique of Kahn’s proleptic reading of Plato as promoting ‘an unduly expensive view of Plato’s deliberate intentions’, M. M. McCabe identifies intertextuality between the *Euthydemus* and the *Republic* that is better accounted for as being ‘metaleptic’, or retrogressive.<sup>283</sup> Whereas the proleptic view is committed to defending Plato’s possession of a ‘grand plan’ that must be ‘relatively stable and free of inconsistencies’, according to the metaleptic view,

... Plato is a self-critical theorist, who uses intertextual reference not merely to allude to, but to provoke reflection in one text on another.<sup>284</sup>

She demonstrates how there is much more dialectical activity going on between the dialogues than Kahn’s proleptic authorial design allows for.

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<sup>283</sup> McCabe (2002): 1.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*: 2.

McCabe's may still be a developmentalist's story about the order of Plato's compositions and his personal philosophical development. McCabe, however, gives us reason to raise doubts about any clear-cut account of this sort. She points out how the discrepancy between the *Euthydemus* and the *Republic*, regarding whether wisdom or the Form of the good is the ultimate source of value, is highlighted by intertextuality in the two dialogues. She argues that this inconsistency has very good reason for being viewed, *pace* Kahn, not as a correction by the 'later' dialogue of the doctrine of the 'earlier' one, but a critical reflection by the 'earlier' upon the 'later' in order to encourage the reader to consider more deeply the question of the source of value. Freed in this way from the single direction of the proleptic approach, we can see how Plato may have used intertextuality for 'earlier' works to motivate metaleptic reflections upon 'later' works. But then it becomes clear how the whole issue of a fixed order of composition of the dialogues comes into question, where, for example, arguments for the *Euthydemus* being written before the *Republic* become equally poised with those for its being written after.<sup>285</sup>

When we turn to the *Apology* and the *Charmides*, we see that in Kahn's story of prolepsis in Plato's writing of his dialogues the inconsistency in the matter of Socratic wisdom gets neglected, as an apparently unimportant issue. We saw that Kahn has no account to give of the discrepancy between the two dialogues. However, McCabe's metaleptic direction for intertextuality makes very good sense of Plato's construction of the problem of Socratic wisdom: the intertextuality between the two dialogues is thereby left free to compel us to

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<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*: 4.

reflect critically in both directions on what we think about each dialogue in the light of the other.

McCabe says that the metaleptic view ‘might imply’ developmentalism, and Kahn’s proleptic view is clearly a unitarian account of what Plato thought. By way of contrast, however, the double dialogue strategy of interpreting Plato need not choose between metalepsis and prolepsis, or between developmentalism and unitarianism. The double dialogue reading is able to make a case for Plato’s composition of the dialogues that exploits both proleptic and metaleptic intertextuality, or rather, that examines intertextuality between dialogues without any commitment to or implication of direction in the chronology and the intentionality, as it were, of the dialogues.

Indeed, the double dialogue reading allows the possibility that Plato may not have published each of the dialogues as and when he wrote them. It also allows, as Dorothea Frede has remarked, that he may have worked on several dialogues at the same time, with even more undergoing revision over many years.<sup>286</sup> Since there appear never to have existed alternative editions of Plato, he was more careful about preserving his drafts from the light of day, and his students more respectful, than were Zeno and the colleague who stole and published his work.<sup>287</sup> So careful an author, as Plato surely was, may have drafted and re-drafted his dialogues, working intertextuality to his purposes before he thought fit to give birth and a fixed, independent existence to them in the world at large. At least we could see him doing so with the *Apology* and

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<sup>286</sup> Frede, D. (2002): 31.

<sup>287</sup> See *Parmenides* 128d-e.



*Charmides*, which are generally thought to have been composed near in time to each other.<sup>288</sup>

In the next chapter, the second half of the *Charmides* will be the subject of a double dialogue reading that explains how Plato uses intertextuality between the *Charmides* and the *Apology* to orchestrate a critical cross-referencing that compels the reader to confront a jarring inconsistency, viz., the problem of Socratic wisdom. Furthermore, the analysis of the arguments of the *Charmides* by this hermeneutic method will provide the resolution of the problem. As a broad guide of the double dialogue strategy, each section will be examined and interpreted according to the following questions.

- What is the structure and methodology of Socrates' arguments?
- What is the overall strategy of his arguments?
- What contribution do Critias' responses make to the direction of the arguments?
- What does Plato intend the reader to think about the disagreements between Socrates and Critias?
- What does Plato intend the reader to think about those points of agreement where the reader may have good reason to disagree, or at least to hesitate?
- What does the dramatic frame of the dialogue force the reader to think about in respect of the arguments themselves?

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<sup>288</sup> Brandwood (1992): 115.

- Where the arguments fail to deliver solutions to problems or appear to prove absurdities, what premises or methodologies have contributed to this failure in dialectic?
- What further research does Plato invite the reader to undertake in order to finish the business that the dialogue fails to complete?

These questions will be our guidelines in the double dialogue reading of the arguments in the *Charmides*, so as to make explicit the critical evaluation that Plato expects us to exercise upon the arguments in their context of the dramatic frame in furtherance of the philosophical inquiry that the dialogue leaves unfinished.

## Chapter 4. The Apparent Refutation of Socratic Wisdom in the *Charmides*

### Section 1. *Charmides* 164a-165c

In this chapter I shall offer a double dialogue reading of the second half of the *Charmides*. I shall show how Plato brings the discussion about σωφροσύνη to focus on the kind of ‘human knowledge’, or Socratic wisdom, that Socrates claims to have in the *Apology*, and in particular, how Plato conducts the examination of σωφροσύνη so that it constitutes an examination of knowledge *per se*. This examination of what knowledge is will be seen to structure the elenchus by which Socrates appears to refute the possibility of the very Socratic wisdom that he himself exhibits throughout his refutation. Socrates’ apparent self-refutation by means of the examination of knowledge accomplishes three things. First, it forces the reader to challenge his own pre-reflective understanding of Socratic wisdom, as it is presented in the *Apology*. Second, this challenge invites the reader to question the arguments and observe closely the methodology by which this apparent refutation takes place, especially since Plato leaves hints in what Socrates says and does, both in the arguments and in the frame of the dialogue, suggesting that the inquiry into Socratic wisdom has by no means been conducted satisfactorily. Third, Plato’s examination of knowledge demonstrates how Socrates’ failure in the *Charmides* to provide a coherent account of Socratic wisdom derives from the inadequacies of the model of knowledge with which he and Critias are working, and how the model of knowledge needs to be refined in order to accommodate Socratic wisdom.

## The inquiry into σωφροσύνη as an inquiry into Socratic wisdom

From 164c7 Critias abruptly announces a fresh start in the *Charmides*, abandoning any claims that he and Socrates have made so far about σωφροσύνη (τὰ μὲν ἔμπροσθέν σοι πάντα ἀφίημι, 165a8-b1),<sup>289</sup> and expressing his desire to explain (διδόναι λόγον) to Socrates how σωφροσύνη is knowing oneself, if Socrates does not agree that it is. Socrates forestalls Critias' speech by issuing a disavowal of knowledge, reminiscent of his disavowals in the *Apology* at 19a8-23c1, 28b3-30c1, & 37e3-38b9. There in the *Apology* he describes his acknowledgement of his ignorance as a precondition for having led the examined life, and here in the *Charmides* he puts the avowal of his ignorance to work to deprive Critias of a simple 'yes/no' answer and to guide the conversation to an analysis of Critias' *definiens* for σωφροσύνη.

Socrates protests that Critias is treating him as if he thinks he has knowledge about the things they are discussing (ὡς φάσκοντος ἑμοῦ εἰδέναι, 165b5-6), when in fact he is genuinely inquiring with Critias into each thing as it is put before them, since he himself does not know (διὰ τὸ μὴ αὐτὸς εἰδέναι, 165b8-c1). He does not want to say whether or not he agrees with Critias until he has examined (σκεψάμενος) what Critias is saying. Furthermore, in a later passage in the *Charmides* (166c7-d2) Socrates supplies the same sort of reason he gives in the *Apology* for being reluctant either to agree or disagree. For to do either would amount to his thinking he knows that σωφροσύνη and knowing

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<sup>289</sup> In this chapter all references that do not mention the name of a dialogue are to the *Charmides*.

oneself are the same or are not the same. He prefers a third option, viz., of not thinking that he knows one way or the other, for he realises that in fact he does not know (*Apol.* 21d4-7 & 23b2-4).

In this way Socrates' disavowal of knowledge, in his response to Critias' request for agreement, both directs the arguments of the second half of the *Charmides* towards the examination of what 'knowing oneself' means, and appears in the frame as a dramatic representation of what will be analysed in those arguments. Within the fiction of the dialogue Socrates is a living example of one who is aware of what he knows and does not know, which is the epistemic condition that he and Critias are about to examine. He repudiates Critias' claim that he has knowledge,

... for on the contrary, I examine the subject of our inquiry with you on each occasion because I myself do not know. (165b7-8)

Plato so arranges the dramatic setting of the arguments that it is Socrates' exemplification of his Socratic wisdom that initiates the ensuing discussion and apparent refutation of Socratic wisdom. Plato not only uses intertextuality between the *Apology* and the *Charmides* to juxtapose in the reader's mind the two opposing conclusions that are reached in the two dialogues, as was demonstrated in chapter 2. He also constructs the problem of Socratic wisdom within the *Charmides* alone, by depicting Socrates at 165b5-c1 as someone whose speech and behaviour are informed by the very Socratic wisdom that Socrates appears to refute in the same dialogue.

What Socrates means by ‘knowing oneself’ when he introduces it  
in the *Charmides*

Before we consider Socrates’ examination of Critias’ definition of σωφροσύνη as knowing oneself, we ought first to clarify what Socrates means by ‘knowing oneself’ in the passage leading up to Critias’ Delphic speech. For although it is Critias who offers ‘knowing oneself’ as a definition of σωφροσύνη at 164c7 ff., it is Socrates himself who introduces the concept into the dialogue at 164c1. Socrates does so toward the end of his refutation of the definition of σωφροσύνη as ‘doing one’s own’, a definition that Charmides had offered at 161b5-6, and that Critias took over from him at 161e6. Under Socrates’ cross-examination Critias glosses this definition at 163e10-11 as ‘the doing of good things’. Then at 164c1 Socrates introduces the concept of self-knowledge, using the example of doctors and craftsmen to illustrate that we cannot know whether our well-intentioned actions may not cause harm instead of good. He has just pointed out at 164b11-c2 that it is possible to act for good or for ill (ὠφελίμως πράξας ἢ βλαβερώς), and yet at the same time ‘be unaware of oneself, as to *how* one acted [i.e., whether for good or for ill]’. Given Critias’ identification of σωφροσύνη with ‘the doing of good things’, Socrates is then able to infer from the possibility of doing good, and yet not knowing that one is doing good, that it is possible to be σώφρων, and yet ‘not know oneself, that one is σώφρων’ (164c5-6). This inference is entailed by Critias’ definition, but Critias repudiates it, saying, ‘This would never happen’ (164c7).

What exactly is Critias saying ‘would never happen’? Note that Socrates’ expression, viz., ‘but he does not know himself, that he is σώφρων’ (ἀγνοεῖ δ’ ἐαυτὸν ὅτι σωφρονεῖ, 164c6), which Critias sharply rejects, consists of a verb of ‘not knowing’ and a ὅτι clause that specifies the domain of that ignorance. That is to say, according to Socrates’ use of the expression ‘knowing oneself’, the ὅτι clause supplies what it is that is known. So, ‘does not know himself’, in the absence of any further information provided by a ὅτι clause, just means ‘does not know something in respect of himself’. Indeed, if we strictly adhere to Socrates’ sense of the expression up to 164c6, it is misleading to translate γινώσκει ἐαυτὸν as ‘knows himself’, for this suggests that the object that is known is oneself, and not whatever is to be denoted by a ὅτι clause. It would be more accurate to translate γινώσκει ἐαυτὸν as ‘knows in respect of himself...’, leaving our translation as incomplete in sense as it would be according to Socrates’ usage.

In this way we can see that when Socrates uses the expression ‘does not know himself’ at 164c6, what is not known is that one is σώφρων, and the ἐαυτὸν merely delimits the scope of what is known by specifying that it is *one’s own* possession of σωφροσύνη that is not known. To this extent Socrates’ use of Greek makes ἀγνοεῖ δ’ ἐαυτὸν ὅτι σωφρονεῖ (164c6) equivalent in sense to ἀγνοεῖ δ’ (αὐτός) σωφρονῶν. In the latter statement any explicit reference to ‘oneself’ (αὐτός) can be omitted, and indeed is justified only if the speaker wishes to add special emphasis to the distinction between his ignorance of his own and his ignorance of some else’s σωφροσύνη.

So in Critias' Delphic speech that begins on the next line (164c7), if he is following Socrates' sense of 'knowing oneself', and is not misconstruing it or altering it, he merely denies the possibility of a person being σάφρων and yet 'not knowing himself, that he is σάφρων'. But this is only to say, 'not knowing that he is σάφρων'. In other words, as long as Critias conforms to Socrates' locution, the ignorance that he insists the σάφρων person cannot have is limited to the ignorance of his being σάφρων. Critias' objection, therefore, raises no opposition to the σάφρων person being ignorant of all sorts of other things about himself, just so long as he is not ignorant of the fact that he is σάφρων.

If one factors in Critias' equating being σάφρων with doing good things, then the ignorance that he denies is of the σάφρων person not knowing that he is doing good things, rather than bad things. And so, according to Socrates' usage of 'knowing oneself' with a subordinate ὅτι clause, the knowledge that Critias here claims on behalf of the σάφρων person is the knowledge *that he is doing a good thing*. But Critias does not spell out this limit on the knowledge he is attributing to the σάφρων person, and when he embarks on his Delphic speech, he appears to depart from this practice of supplying a subordinate ὅτι clause, thereby altering the sense of the expression 'knows oneself'. He uses the expression in a syntactically different way from Socrates' use, when he asserts a few lines later that he would prefer to renounce everything he has said so far about σωφροσύνη 'rather than agree that a person who does not know himself is σάφρων' (164d2-3). Here, Critias does not qualify the ignorance of oneself by a ὅτι clause specifying the domain of the ignorance. And when Critias gives his



redefinition of σωφροσύνη at 164d3-4, again, no specification is placed on the domain of the knowledge that he claims is equivalent to σωφροσύνη; he merely says that it is knowledge of oneself *simpliciter*.<sup>290</sup>

Critias' sense of 'knowing oneself' when he redefines σωφροσύνη  
at 164c7-165b4

We have seen that Socrates' use of the expression 'does not know himself' at 164c5-6 really means 'does not know something about himself', and is semantically incomplete without a complementary ὅτι clause. And yet, when Critias explicates his new definition of σωφροσύνη as 'knowing oneself' in his Delphic speech (164c7-165b4), he abandons this locution, and instead uses the expression 'knows oneself' in a way that appears to be semantically independent of a ὅτι clause.

To mark this difference in locution more clearly, we might wonder exactly what it is that Critias thinks the knower of himself knows. Since he has not specified this, we are left to speculate. Does Critias simply mean to say that σωφροσύνη is knowing *something* about oneself? If so, then we are all σώφρονες, for everyone in some sense or other knows *something* about himself.

Or, does he mean that σωφροσύνη is knowing *everything* about oneself? If so,

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<sup>290</sup> Tuckey notices this and points out that Critias' equation of σωφροσύνη with self-knowledge 'merely states a condition of σωφροσύνη but brings us no nearer to a definition, unless the conception 'self-knowledge' be given a much deeper and more precise content than the formal argument allows'. Tuckey (1951): 25-26.

then this is clearly impossible, for there will always be some fact or other about ourselves that we do not know. The point of these questions is simply to illustrate that if we are to make any sense of Critias' definition, we must ascertain what sense he is attributing to the expression 'knows oneself' at 164d3-4 and 165b3-4, since he abandons the sense Socrates employed when he introduced the expression at 164c1. And indeed, this is exactly what Socrates will set out to do at 165b5 ff.

Plato constructs Critias' Delphic speech in such a way that Critias severs the expression 'knows oneself' from its dependence upon a ὅτι clause for semantic completeness. By the end of his Delphic speech, Critias is using the expression 'knows himself' without the use of a subordinate clause. If his definition is not to be inane (for everyone knows something about himself) or impossible (for no one knows everything about himself), then he must be giving new meaning to 'knows himself'. And this is exactly what Plato directs us to notice in the exchange between Critias and Socrates that follows Critias' Delphic speech. Critias ends his Delphic speech by demanding affirmation or dissent from Socrates, and Socrates refuses to give either (165b5-c2). His reason is that he cannot agree or not agree to Critias' equating σωφροσύνη and knowing oneself unless he first understands what Critias means by 'knowing oneself'. In this way Plato uses Critias' Delphic speech to render the expression 'knowing oneself' problematical in that its sense is no longer transparent, and this in turn motivates the examination by Socrates into what exactly 'knowing oneself' means.

Critias' change of the use of the expression 'knowing oneself' is a likely move for an arrogant aristocrat to make, for in making this change he assimilates it to the famous inscription at Delphi, thereby conferring upon his new definition the mantle of so august an authority. The inscription "Know thyself" (164e7) does not give any indication that it is incomplete, i.e., that a subordinate ὅτι clause is needed in order to complete its meaning. The expression stands independently, offering only "thyself" as the direct object of the knowledge that the visitor is enjoined to know. To this extent the inscription is characteristically enigmatic, and like other riddles, lends itself to various interpretations. In this way Plato manages to secure for Critias a divine pedigree for his definition, and he also manages to cut the phrase 'knowing oneself' loose from the sense in which Socrates uses it prior to Critias' Delphic speech.

But Critias' appeal to the god of Delphi also offers Plato the opportunity to remind us of the *Apology*, and the 'human knowledge' that the god attributed to Socrates. At the very point where we are reminded of Socrates' attribute of recognising that in truth he is worthless with regard to knowledge—itsself a kind of 'knowing oneself'—Critias unleashes the expression from the traces of its prior use by Socrates, and forces upon Socrates, and us, the need for close scrutiny into its meaning. Plato wipes the slate clean by ensuring that we have no idea what Critias means by 'knowing oneself', for although he identifies σωφροσύνη as 'knowing oneself', he has just distanced himself from all he has said so far about σωφροσύνη, and his syntactically truncated use of the expression 'knowing oneself', independently of a ὅτι clause, distances the expression from the sense it has enjoyed so far in the dialogue. Plato clears the

decks for the examination of what ‘knowing oneself’ is, with nothing to go on but a resonance with the sort of ‘human knowledge’ that the god of Delphi attributes to Socrates in the *Apology*.

### The analysis of ‘knowing oneself’ as a kind of knowledge

At 165c4-6 Socrates begins his examination of Critias’ definition of σωφροσύνη as knowing oneself by inferring that if it is a knowing (γινώσκειν τι), it must be a knowledge (ἐπιστήμη τις). Since Critias raises no objections to Socrates’ proposed equivalence, we can assume that Plato’s use of Attic Greek here is uncontroversial, and therefore that in common fourth century parlance it was valid to conceive of the kind of knowing that was denoted by the verb γινώσκειν as identical with, or at least implying, the kind of knowledge that was denoted by the noun ἐπιστήμη. If, in fact, this implication would have been controversial and Socrates is meant to be carrying out substantial philosophical moves by means of it, Plato is careful not to intimate as much here. While he may have been well aware of and deeply interested in questions about the nuances of ἐπιστήμη and γινώσκειν relative to each other, the economy with which Socrates expresses this implication and the readiness of Critias’ agreement exemplify the interchangeability of epistemic terms in Plato, which was discussed in chapter 2.

This first step of Socrates’ inquiry into ‘knowing oneself’ classifies it as a kind of knowledge. In this way, he equates the action that is ‘knowing’, denoted

by the verb γιγνώσκειν, with the thing that is ‘knowledge’, denoted by the noun ἐπιστήμη. Then, in the same sentence in which he equates knowing (γιγνώσκειν) and knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), he invites Critias’ agreement to the principle that all kinds of knowledge are ‘of something’ (καὶ τινός, 165c5-6).<sup>291</sup> Critias agrees and replies that knowing oneself is knowledge ‘of oneself’ (ἑαυτοῦ). And so, ‘knowing oneself’, which parses as a verb and its direct object in the accusative case, becomes analysed as ‘knowledge of oneself’, which parses as two substantives, a noun and a pronoun, connected by a relation that is denoted by the genitive case.

In this brief exchange at the start of Socrates’ examination of ‘knowing oneself’, he and Critias agree to the principle that the act of knowing is a thing (i.e., whatever is denoted by the substantive ‘ἐπιστήμη’), and in particular a thing that exists in relation to something, which relation is denoted by the genitive case (τινός, 165c6). In this way Socrates and Critias set in place a model of knowledge according to which knowledge always exists within a relational structure. The structure is comprised of two *relata* and a relation. One *relatum* is the particular knowledge, e.g., medicine, the other *relatum* is whatever constitutes what is known, e.g., health, and the relation is a binary relation that is denoted by the genitive case in Greek, translated here by the preposition ‘of’ in English. So, for the example of medicine that Socrates

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<sup>291</sup> Rosamond Sprague points out, “‘Knowledge’ (or ‘science’) is in fact a *tinós*-word. To use it is to raise the question “knowledge of what?” I shall argue that this feature of being ‘of’ something is not only a linguistic feature, but also an aspect of the very structure of knowledge, which Plato intends us to examine as the key piece in solving the enigma of how Socratic wisdom can exist. Sprague (ed.) (1973): 53.

furnishes at 165c8, the binary relation will be expressed as, ‘Medicine is (the knowledge) of health’ or ‘Medical knowledge is of health’. As we shall see, the nature of this relation denoted by the genitive case will become the central focus of Socrates’ arguments against the possibility of self-knowledge.

This model of knowledge will underlie the attempts by Socrates and Critias throughout the rest of the *Charmides* to discover a coherent account of ‘knowing oneself’. It will provide structure for Socrates’ method of inquiry into self-knowledge, and we shall see how the failure to find a coherent account derives from the inadequacies of this model. Furthermore, Plato’s highlighting of methodology, both in the arguments and in the dramatic frame, demonstrates the role that this model of knowledge plays in the abortive attempt to discover what ‘knowing oneself’ is, and hence in the apparently successful elenchus of Socratic wisdom. Finally, Socrates’ remarks towards the end of the inquiry will indicate how this model of knowledge might be amended so that Socratic wisdom can be vindicated. For all these reasons, it is important at the beginning of Socrates’ examination of ‘knowing oneself’ (165c4 ff.) that we explicate as thoroughly as possible this model of knowledge, whose shortcomings are shown by Plato to preclude any success in making sense of Socratic wisdom in the second half of the *Charmides*.

## Explication of the Critian model of knowledge

The model of knowledge that Socrates suggests and Critias accepts will be called the ‘Critian model’ of knowledge. Although it is Socrates that suggests it through his questioning of Critias, it is Critias who endorses it through his affirmative answers. Furthermore, Socrates’ ensuing examination of knowledge will suggest ways in which this model of knowledge is inadequate to account for all kinds of knowledge, although Critias never presses for any refinement of it.

At 165c4-7, then, a model of knowledge is set in place that defines knowledge as a relational entity, in particular, as necessarily engaged in a binary relation.<sup>292</sup> This binary relation may be expressed by the predicate ‘ $R_G(K, A)$ ’, where ‘ $K$ ’ stands for any kind of knowledge, ‘ $A$ ’ for what is known by that knowledge, and ‘ $R_G$ ’ for the genitive relation. So,  $R_G(K, A)$  translates as ‘knowledge is genitive-related to what is known’, e.g., ‘medical knowledge is genitive-related to health’ or ‘medical knowledge is of health’.

Socrates’ strategy will be to examine this genitive relation and admit that he cannot see how it can be instantiated by a knowledge that is ‘knowing oneself’. He will therefore argue that since all kinds of knowledge are relational entities and, in particular, are genitive-related to their *relata*, i.e., to their objects of knowledge, ‘knowing oneself’ cannot be knowledge. And since ‘knowing oneself’ must be a kind of knowledge, if it is to exist at all, it follows that ‘knowing oneself’ does not exist. Very high stakes are riding on this model of

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<sup>292</sup> For an account of binary relations see Hodges (1977): 174-181.

knowledge, for if all kinds of knowledge do indeed conform to it, and yet self-knowledge does not, then self-knowledge will fail to materialise and Socratic wisdom, being a form of self-knowledge, will be impossible. By way of conducting this apparent refutation of Socratic wisdom, Socrates devotes the rest of the arguments in the *Charmides* to the examination of the genitive relation in this model of knowledge.

Given that it is Socrates' strategy to examine what this genitive relation exactly is, and to see whether knowledge of oneself can be an instance of it, we must resist translating the genitive relation as 'of'. For the referents of 'of' (as a preposition in English that expresses a variety of different relations) are not identical with the referents of the genitive case in Greek. This becomes obvious, for example, in the analogy of comparatives that Socrates supplies at 168b2 ff., where we are forced to translate the genitive case as 'than'. Indeed, the genitive case denotes a wide variety of relations that would be translated in English by 'from', 'at', 'within', 'for' and 'in'.<sup>293</sup> The preposition 'of' is not coextensive in meaning with the genitive case in Greek, and we shall misconstrue Socrates' inquiry if we think that he is analysing the 'of' relation, rather than the genitive case relation.

Therefore, rebarbative though it will appear to avoid translating the genitive case, the model of knowledge that grounds Socrates' inquiry can be formulated as follows: in the domain of all kinds of knowledge and things known, there is a binary relation expressed by the predicate ' $x_1$  is genitive-related to  $x_2$ '. At 165c10 Socrates begins his refutation of Critias' definition of σοφροσύνη as

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<sup>293</sup> Goodwin (1968): 229-245.



‘knowing oneself’ by analysing knowledge according to its genitive relation, and goes on to demonstrate, by means of an inductive argument from analogy, that the genitive relation in cases of knowledge is irreflexive.

The fundamental difference between Socrates’ ‘knowledge as *relatum*’ and the  
‘knowledge as relation’ of modern epistemology

Before we see how Socrates conducts his refutation, we should first be aware of the fundamental difference between this Critian model of knowledge, which underlies Socrates’ apparent refutation of self-knowledge, and the way in which modern epistemology tends to analyse knowledge. This clarification will help us avoid misconstruing the Critian model by reading into it features of the modern conceptual structure.

We have seen that the Critian model treats knowledge as a *relatum*, i.e., as the referent of a substantive that can stand as a subject to which we can apply the predicate ‘is genitive-related to *A*’, e.g., medical knowledge is ‘of’ health (where we are careful to remember that ‘of’ merely stands for the genitive case relation). Modern epistemology, however, treats knowledge not as a *relatum*, but as a relation that exists between two *relata*, viz., a knowing subject and an object known. In her brief survey of the approach in modern epistemology to the question ‘What is knowledge?’, Linda Zagzebski offers the following as the schema that enjoys broad consensus.

Knowledge is a highly valued state in which a person is in cognitive contact with reality. It is, therefore, a relation. On the one side of the relation is a conscious subject, and on the other side is a portion of reality to which the knower is directly or indirectly related.<sup>294</sup>

For example, medical knowledge relates the doctor to what is healthy.

The reason Zagzebski gives for modern epistemology adopting this approach is a kind of division of philosophical labour.

The nature of truth, propositions, and reality are all metaphysical questions. For this reason epistemologists generally do not direct their major effort to these questions when writing as epistemologists... Accounts of knowledge, then, direct their attention to the knowing relation and focus more on the subject side of the relation than on the object side.<sup>295</sup>

The emphasis in modern epistemology has been the attempt to understand and formulate a particular relation that exists between the conscious agent and some truth about the world, for example the existence of a particular object or fact. This relation in some way or other constitutes a correspondence between our cognitive state and the way the world is.<sup>296</sup> In particular, interest has focused on what it is about the knowing subject that grounds the knowing relation.

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<sup>294</sup> Zagzebski (1999): 92.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*: 93.

<sup>296</sup> Such is the correspondence theory of truth. Attempts in the past have been made to defend a coherentist theory of truth, in support of the less demanding project of constructing a coherentist theory of epistemic justification. But the possibility of infinitely many internally coherent systems of beliefs and the absence from empirical knowledge of ‘any *input* from or contact with the nonconceptual world’ are objections that have render the coherentist theory of truth unsatisfactory. See BonJour (1985): 24-25 (Author's italics.). Donald Davidson points out that Tarski’s Convention T, e.g., “‘Grass is green’ spoken by an English speaker is true if and only if grass is green’, demonstrates that truth is correspondence with the way things are. ‘[T]he truth of an utterance depends on just two things: what the words as spoken mean, and how the world is arranged.’ Davidson is right to conclude that ‘if a coherence theory of truth is

Over the past half century this relation has been analysed as consisting in true belief that is somehow justified. Standard accounts of knowledge hold that for person *a*,

- ... *a* knows that *p* if and only if
- 1 *p*,
  - 2 *a* believes that *p*,
  - 3 *a*'s belief that *p* is justified.<sup>297</sup>

Such theories of epistemic justification, however, struggle to cope with Gettier-type counter-examples that introduce 'accidental knowledge', where the cognitive state of an agent satisfies the requirements of a theory of justified true belief, and yet we are loathe to grant it the status of knowledge, since that which justifies the belief that *p* is not what establishes or guarantees its truth.<sup>298</sup>

With this strategy Gettier-type counter-examples undermine the various theories of epistemic justification, showing that the conditions stipulated as sufficient for establishing the knowing relation between an agent and an object or fact known are really not sufficient after all. In response to this onslaught defenders of theories of knowledge as justified true belief have sought to secure for epistemic justification the entailment of truth, in the form of necessary and sufficient conditions, without thereby generating circularity in the definition of knowledge.<sup>299</sup>

Recently Timothy Williamson has challenged the whole project of knowledge as justified true belief on the grounds that it presumes a 'conceptual

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acceptable, it must be consistent with a correspondence theory [of truth]'. Davidson (2000): 155.

<sup>297</sup> Dancy (2001): 23.

<sup>298</sup> Decades of literature to bolster theories of justified true belief were initiated by the two counter-examples in Gettier (2000).

<sup>299</sup> Zagzebski (1999): 102-104.

priority of belief over knowledge', by which knowledge is to be analysed in terms of belief with certain necessary and sufficient conditions.<sup>300</sup> He seeks to conduct the epistemological project by treating knowledge not as belief with something added, but as 'semantically unanalysable'.<sup>301</sup> Nevertheless, like the defenders of knowledge as justified true belief, Williamson treats knowledge as a mental state, a 'propositional attitude [that] is factive', in that if one has it, one has it 'only to truths'.<sup>302</sup> As a 'factive stative attitude' knowledge is a condition, state or property of the knowing agent that places him in the knowing relation with the world.

Accordingly, we see that current epistemology tends to schematise 'the knowledge of  $A$ ', where  $A$  is anything known, as an action or a state expressed as  $K_c A$ , where a knowing agent is stipulated and which reads: 'agent  $c$  knows  $A$ '.<sup>303</sup> Various attempts are then made to formulate the necessary and sufficient conditions for this state that secure the knowing relation between an agent and the object or fact known.

From this brief consideration of the modern approach to the analysis of knowledge we can see how different is the approach to its analysis in the *Charmides*. Socrates does not examine knowledge as a relation between a knowing agent and truths that are known, according to the schema  $K_c A$ . Instead, he treats knowledge itself as a *relatum* in the binary relation between it and truths that are known, schematised as  $R_G (K, A)$ . Socrates leaves out of

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<sup>300</sup> Williamson (2000): 4-5.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.: 36.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.: 34.

<sup>303</sup> I follow the notation of Jaakko Hintikka's pioneering work in epistemic logic, Hintikka (1962): 10-12.

consideration the knowing agent, and focuses instead on knowledge as a thing that is related to its object, viz., the thing known.

Having noted this major difference between these two approaches to the analysis of knowledge in relation to its agents, objects and the action of knowing, let us turn to Socrates' inquiry into 'knowing oneself' as an instance of knowledge. In English, just as in Greek, the various kinds of knowledge are denoted by means of substantives that imply a relational existence vis-à-vis whatever is known, e.g., the knowledge *of* medicine. In Greek this relation is denoted by the genitive case, and Socrates will explore this linguistic relation in order to shed light on the nature of knowledge, and in particular, of self-knowledge.

## Section 2. *Charmides* 165c-167a

The first stage of Socrates' analysis of the genitive relation (165c10-e2)

At 165c10 ff. Socrates uses the examples of medicine and building construction to point out that the *relata* to which such kinds of knowledge are related by the genitive relation are good and useful products (ἔργα). For example, medicine produces health, as it is 'of' health, and building construction produces houses, as it is 'of' houses. And so, Socrates characterises the genitive relation in these two cases of knowledge as relating the particular knowledge to the particular benefit it produces. He then extends

this analysis to apply to the genitive relation in all cases of knowledge (ὡσαύτως δὲ καὶ τῶν ἄλλων τεχνῶν, 165d6). Although Socrates uses the word τέχνη when he extends his analysis to all cases of knowledge, he intends his argument by analogy to apply to the subject of his inquiry, namely, the knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) of oneself. While it will become clear as the dialogue proceeds that Plato wishes us to begin to doubt that all kinds of knowledge are exactly the same in structure, we would be wrong to assume that Socrates is using different epistemic substantives here as specialised technical terms in order to signify different kinds of knowledge.<sup>304</sup>

Socrates' strategy is clear. His argument is structured as follows:

1. 'Knowing oneself', if it exists at all, is a kind of knowledge.
2. Every kind of knowledge is genitive-related to/'of' a *relatum*.
3. The *relatum* to which each knowledge is related is a useful product.
4. 'Knowing oneself' is not related to/'of' a useful product, like health or houses.
5. Therefore, 'knowing oneself' is not knowledge.
6. Therefore 'knowing oneself' does not exist.
7. Therefore, Critias' definition of σωφροσύνη as knowing oneself is vacuous.

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<sup>304</sup> Socrates here treats all τέχναι as ἐπιστήμαι, just as he treats all kinds of knowing (γινώσκειν) as kinds of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) at 165c4-5. This once again demonstrates the fact that Plato is not carrying out any philosophical work solely by dint of the nuances of technical meanings that he attributes to epistemic terms.

If Critias is to refute this argument, he must repudiate one of the four premises. He chooses to challenge the third premise, namely, that the *relatum* to which each knowledge is related is a useful product.

While Critias is happy with Socrates' analysis of the work that the genitive relation does in the case of medicine, he objects violently when Socrates extends this analysis, after his example of the knowledge of house-building, to all kinds of knowledge. Critias denies that the genitive relation relates every kind of knowledge to a useful product that it produces. Furthermore, Plato formulates Critias' objection in a way that forces the reader to reflect critically upon the methodology that Socrates is using to drive his analysis of knowledge.

Critias' critique of Socrates' methodology: metaphilosophy as  
philosophy knowing itself

In keeping with this double dialogue reading of the *Charmides*, we should note here how Plato uses Critias' vehement criticism of Socrates to challenge the reader to respond critically to what Plato is placing before him as Socrates' methodology. This indictment of Socrates' method is all the more marked because Plato has Socrates candidly admit that Critias is entirely right (166a3).<sup>305</sup> Critias begins with an abrupt attack, accusing Socrates of faulty methodology: 'But, Socrates, you are not inquiring in the right way' (οὐκ ὀρθῶς

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<sup>305</sup> Plato shows here that, contrary to Tuckey's criticism of Critias as being 'incapable of consistent logical reasoning', Critias plays a significant part in the cut and thrust of this dialectical analysis of what knowledge is. Tuckey (1951): 22.

ζητεῖς, 165e3). Critias protests that Socrates is making the mistake of treating things that are different as if they were similar.

For [σωφροσύνη] is not like the other kinds of knowledge, nor are they like each other, but you are conducting the inquiry on the assumption that they are all similar. (165e3-5)

The word Critias uses for ‘similar’ and ‘like’ (ὅμοιος) means ‘of the same kind’, rather as ποῖος and οἶος imply kinds. It indicates sameness between two or more things in some respect. Critias objects that Socrates’ methodology assumes that all kinds of knowledge are ‘of the same kind’, when in fact they are all different.

The particular respect in which Critias denies that all kinds of knowledge are ‘of the same kind’ is the character of the genitive relation that they have. He has admitted that for medical knowledge the genitive relation relates it to a useful product, viz., health. But from 165e5 onward Critias gives examples of kinds of knowledge that do not produce useful products, but which are nevertheless valid kinds of knowledge, viz., the knowledge of calculation and geometry (τῆς λογιστικῆς τέχνης ἢ τῆς γεωμετρικῆς, 165e6). He is illustrating the fact that there are examples that Socrates himself would count as knowledge, although he would not agree that they share with other cases of knowledge the property of being genitive-related to a useful product (ἔργον). In this way, Critias demonstrates that calculation and geometry are examples of valid forms of knowledge that are not ‘of the same kind’ (ὁμοία) as other kinds of knowledge in respect of the nature of their genitive relation.



With this exchange Plato is forcing us to reflect that there may be important differences between various kinds of knowledge. In particular, he makes us examine how various cases of knowledge may differ from each other with regard to the way in which they are ‘of’ their respective objects of knowledge, i.e., what exactly constitutes their genitive relation. Recall the high stakes involved in Socrates’ methodology. He and Critias have agreed that ‘knowing oneself’ is a kind of knowledge, and that all knowledge is ‘of something’, i.e., exists in a genitive relation with something. Socrates then goes on to define the nature of this genitive relation in a way that is appropriate for some kinds of knowledge, but not for others, when he stipulates that knowledge is of a useful product. This incomplete characterisation of the genitive relation amounts to only a partial account of this relation in cases of knowledge. But if this partial account is then fed back into the requirement that all knowledge must instantiate this particular genitive relation, then some valid kinds of knowledge will be dismissed as not being instances of knowledge at all, namely, those kinds that do not instantiate this particular genitive relation.

Critias’ abrupt rebuttal of Socrates at 165e3-6a2 places in high profile the issue of methodology. After listing the knowledge of calculation and geometry as counter-examples of Socrates’ characterisation of the genitive relation that knowledge instantiates, Critias challenges him.

So, are even you able to show that these [kinds of knowledge] have this sort of useful product? But you can’t! (166a1-2)

Socrates’ simple, rather bleak, capitulation to Critias at 166a3 carries all the force of a laconic response: ‘You are right’ (‘Αληθῆ λέγεις). Socrates admits that

Critias is right to fault his analysis of the genitive relation in cases of knowledge, for it had consigned genuine cases of knowledge to non-existence. And just as Critias has spotted how not all kinds of knowledge are the same, so Plato ensures by his dramatic skill that we, too, register this fact. While we may agree that all knowledge stands in a genitive relation with something, we must exercise great care in determining the nature, or natures, both of this relation and of the *relata* that the genitive relation incorporates.

Indeed, Plato's highlighting of methodology here in the *Charmides* is itself an example of philosophy seeking to know itself. He shows how part of doing philosophy is inquiring into the way in which philosophy should conduct itself, by subjecting philosophical inquiry itself, as carried out by Socrates and Critias, to its own self-scrutiny, with a view to verifying which methodology, *qua* normative activity, manages to secure the truth. Throughout this section from 165c4-166e9 Plato uses Critias' objections to Socrates' procedure to focus the reader's attention on the question of how philosophy should proceed. At 165b7-c2 Socrates professes that he wishes to inquire into the truth of Critias' definition of σωφροσύνη, and at 165e3ff. and 166b7ff. Critias objects to the very method by which Socrates is going about discovering the truth. He charges Socrates with philosophising wrongly (οὐκ ὀρθῶς ζητεῖς, 165e3).

To the extent that such self-conscious philosophical inquiry seeks to discover its valid form, it is seeking to know itself. Plato brings into the focus of the *Charmides*, in addition to the inquiry into what knowledge and 'knowing oneself' are, a 'metaphilosophical' inquiry into the valid forms of philosophical inquiry. Through dramatic vigour and the self-conscious exchanges about

methodology between Socrates and Critias, Plato highlights metaphilosophy as a crucial part of philosophy, the part where philosophy reflects upon itself and seeks to know or understand itself. In this clash between Critias and Socrates over correct philosophical methodology, Plato puts the reader in the position of having to reflect on what doing philosophy properly and truly is, or at least ought to be. The second half of the *Charmides* is about knowing oneself, and in this section Plato illustrates philosophy seeking to know itself.

The second stage of Socrates' analysis of knowledge according to the  
genitive relation (166a3-b6)

Socrates suffers no *aporia* at Critias' refutation, for he immediately resumes his analysis of knowledge by offering a new account of the genitive relation in cases of knowledge. He now defines it as relating each kind of knowledge to something that 'happens to be other than the knowledge itself' (ὁ τυγχάνει ὄν ἄλλο αὐτῆς τῆς ἐπιστήμης, 166a5). Socrates justifies his new formulation of this common property of knowledge by showing how it now includes one of Critias' counter-examples, calculation, as a kind of knowledge. Calculation is 'of' the odd and the even and of how quantities are disposed both in relation to themselves and to each other. He does not show how this new formulation includes geometry, but he does for the knowledge of weighing: it is 'of' the heavier and the lighter weight. For both kinds of knowledge, they are 'of' something other than themselves.

Socrates then asks Critias what σωφροσύνη, as ‘knowing oneself’, is knowledge ‘of’, that is other than itself. In effect, he demands that Critias indicate the *relatum* with which ‘knowing oneself’ instantiates the genitive relation, where that *relatum* is other than the knowledge that ‘knowing oneself’ is. Notably, Critias does not reply ‘oneself’, as he might have done on the grounds that the agent of knowing is ‘other than’ the knowledge which he possesses and of which he himself is the object. Recall that Plato is not analysing knowledge with respect to the agent and the object of knowledge, as is customary in modern epistemology. A modern epistemologist could answer that ‘knowing oneself’ is the knowledge that has the knowing agent as its domain, and from Descartes onwards attempts have been made to know and define the knowing self. That Critias does not give this answer invites us to supply a reason, and as the dialogue ensues, the reason becomes clear. Plato is primarily interested in examining Socratic wisdom in the second half of the *Charmides*, and this will be construed not as knowledge ‘of’ the agent of knowing, but knowledge ‘of’ what is knowledge and what is false belief, i.e., the absence of knowledge (167a1 ff.).

Plato intends us to view Socrates’ request for what ‘knowing oneself’ is ‘of, that is other than itself’, as a threat to the possibility of ‘knowing oneself’, since for Critias, the object of ‘knowing oneself’ is not the knowing agent, but the knowledge itself. Again, the argument that looms has the following structure.

1. ‘Knowing oneself’, if it exists at all, is a kind of knowledge.
2. Every kind of knowledge is genitive-related to/‘of’ a *relatum*.

3. The *relatum* to which each knowledge is related is other than that knowledge.
4. ‘Knowing oneself’ is not related to/‘of’ something other than itself.
5. Therefore, ‘knowing oneself’ is not knowledge.
6. Therefore ‘knowing oneself’ does not exist.
7. Therefore, Critias’ definition of σωφροσύνη as ‘knowing oneself’ is vacuous.

Once again, Critias chooses to deny the third premise in order to avoid refutation. And once again, Plato expresses his denial as another outburst of exasperation at Socrates’ method. He cries, ‘That’s just the point, Socrates!’ (166b7). He asserts that Socrates’ inquiry (ἔρευνῶν) has brought him to the very way in which ‘knowing oneself’ differs from other kinds of knowledge (ἐπ’ αὐτὸ... τὸ ἕ διαφέρει, 166b7-8). He is pointing out that the genitive relation in the case of ‘knowing oneself’ relates that knowledge to itself and to the other forms of knowledge. Critias objects that, far from ‘knowing oneself’ being non-existent, it is Socrates’ account of the genitive relation in cases of knowledge that is at fault. For his account fails to accommodate all kinds of knowledge, just as his earlier account of the genitive relation did, where all knowledge was presumed to be ‘of’ useful products (ἔργα). Indeed, Critias insists that *not* being related to something other than itself is the *very way* in which ‘knowing oneself’ instantiates the genitive relation, thereby distinguishing it from all other kinds of knowledge.

At 166b9 Plato once again draws the reader's attention to metaphilosophy, for Critias complains that Socrates is committing the methodological error of seeking for 'some similarity' (ὁμοιότητά τινα) that 'knowing oneself' has with the other forms of knowledge, rather than focusing on what it is that makes 'knowing itself' what it distinctly is. He acknowledges that knowing oneself is 'of' something, i.e., is genitive-related to something, but not in the way that knowledge is genitive-related in the case of other kinds of knowledge. In effect, he is complaining that Socrates has reformulated his account of the genitive relation in such a way that it now constitutes a similarity (ὁμοιότης) that all the kinds of knowledge *other than 'knowing oneself'* share, but which fails to account for the nature of the relation in the case of 'knowing oneself'.

For the second time, then, we can see that the analysis of knowledge according to its genitive relation is problematical, for if it is being used to determine what is and what is not knowledge, we must be sure to understand it completely. A partial account of the relation may explain the structure of some kinds of knowledge, but it will mislead our inquiries into other kinds of knowledge, possibly even denying them the existence that they do in fact have. And in the case of 'knowing oneself', a coherent account of the genitive relation appears to be especially difficult to achieve.

Socrates' 'pre-trial hearing' in the *Charmides* and Plato's tabling  
of Socratic wisdom

Socrates is not given an opportunity to respond to Critias' criticism of his second account of the genitive relation, for Critias launches himself in a most aggressive way into a bitter attack upon Socrates' honesty and integrity. At 166c3-6 he accuses Socrates of hypocrisy and deliberate deceit, charging him with being very well aware of what he, Critias, has been talking about (ταῦτά σε πολλοῦ δεῖ λεληθέναι), and adds that Socrates is doing precisely what he claims he does not do. Instead of genuinely searching with Critias into what he claims neither to know nor not know (165b5-c2), Socrates is charged with deliberately ignoring what the discussion is about and just trying to refute. In effect, Critias' charge of hypocrisy denies that Socrates' behaviour since 165b5 is a demonstration of what Socrates says it is and of what the inquiry goes on to examine, viz., Socratic wisdom, the working knowledge of what one does and does not know.

These are exactly the sorts of charges that Socrates defends himself against in the *Apology*. At this juncture in the *Charmides*, where Plato has yet again brought the issue of methodology to the fore of the dialogue, he uses a scathing attack by Critias to place Socrates in the dock, as it were, vilifying his character and impugning his purported Socratic wisdom. Critias not only makes allegations about Socrates' epistemic condition, but also about his moral condition, just as Socrates' 'first accusers' do in the *Apology*. The dramatic date of the *Charmides* precedes that of the *Apology* by about 33 years, and we

readily recognise in Critias' accusation the charges of Socrates' 'first accusers' (τοὺς πρώτους κατηγοροῦς, *Apol.* 18a9) who constituted the 'more dangerous' elements (δεινότεροι, *Apol.* 18b4) in the prosecution's case against Socrates at his trial, as depicted in the *Apology*. These first accusers were more dangerous because they persuaded the members of the jury when they were young and easily convinced, for some were children or striplings (μειράκια, *Apol.* 18b4-c1 & c6-8). If we reckon the average age of the jurors to be in the fifties, then some of them will be in their forties, and Critias' charges in the *Charmides* 33 years earlier coincide with the period of activity that Socrates identifies for his first accusers. In the *Charmides* at 166c3-6 Plato depicts what Socrates 'later' alludes to in the *Apology* at 18b7-24b4.

By this vibrant resonance with the *Apology*, Plato motivates much of what is to come in the rest of the *Charmides*, which constitutes the philosophical prosecution by Socrates of Socratic wisdom that he rhetorically, albeit unsuccessfully, defends in the *Apology*. That Socratic wisdom loses its case on both occasions is Plato's challenge that we explain away its apparent culpability. By this glance forward, in terms of the dramatic dating of the dialogues, to Socrates' plight in the *Apology*, Plato motivates for us what is to come in the arguments of the *Charmides*.

At this point in the *Charmides* (166c3 ff.) Plato forces us to consider what it is that 'does not escape' (πολλοῦ δεῖ λεληθέναι) Socrates, i.e., what it is that Socrates knows, when he engages in cross-examination and the refutation of others. Critias here accuses Socrates of knowing full well what he, Critias, has been trying to formulate under Socrates' interrogation, and of pretending not to



know so that he can win the argument, rather than find the truth. Socrates, on the other hand, vigorously denies this accusation, insisting that his search with Critias is a genuine inquiry into whether there is any truth in what he, Socrates, thinks.

What are you doing, thinking that, if ever I do refute you, I refute you for any reason other than that for which I also thoroughly examine (διερεινώμην) myself for what I say, fearing that I may at any time unwittingly think that I know something, when in fact I do not know it! (166c7-d2)

Socrates repudiates Critias' condemnation that he deliberately conceals the fact that he does indeed possess the very knowledge in respect of which he conducts his refutations (166c3-6). Similarly, in the *Apology* his defence centres on his denial of having the sort of knowledge that bystanders attribute to him, i.e., knowledge in respect of what he refutes in others (σοφὸν ἅ ἄν ἄλλον ἐξελέγξω, *Apol.* 23a3-5). In both the *Charmides* and the *Apology*, Socrates categorically denies that he possesses the knowledge that he shows others lack. What, then, does Socrates know when he inquires and refutes? His answer in the *Apology* is 'a human knowledge' (*Apol.* 20d8), the knowledge of what he does and does not know (*Apol.* 221b4-5 & 23b2-4). And this is the Socratic wisdom that the rest of the *Charmides* will apparently refute.

Plato intensifies the *Charmides*' glance at the *Apology* through the use of intertextuality. In the passage above (166c7-d2), Plato makes use of the verb ἐρεινᾶν and its cognate διερεινᾶν twice in the space of eleven lines. Critias uses ἐρεινῶν at 166b8 in describing Socrates' progress in his examination of Critias' definition of σωφροσύνη, and Socrates uses διερεινώμην at 166d1 in describing

his own characteristic procedure in philosophical inquiry. The verb means to examine, search or investigate, with the added sense of tracking something down, and Plato generally uses it as a synonym for σκοπεῖν and its cognates ἐπισκοπεῖν and διασκοπεῖν, and for ἐξετάζειν and ζητεῖν. However, whereas Plato uses σκοπεῖν and its cognates over 650 times in his literary corpus, ἐξετάζειν 45 times, and ζητεῖν over 300 times, he uses ἐρευνᾶν and its cognate only 24 times.<sup>306</sup> Even ἐλέγχειν, which conveys the more specific sense of inquiry as cross-examination, appears over 100 times. Furthermore, half of Plato's uses of ἐρευνᾶν and διερευνᾶν occurs in the *Sophist* and the *Laws*. When we look for the remaining twelve uses, three of them occur in these two passages: *Apology* 23b and *Charmides* 166b-d. That is to say, 25% of Plato's uses of ἐρευνᾶν and διερευνᾶν throughout all his literary works appear in these two passages alone, if we set aside the *Sophist* and the *Laws*. This high degree of coincidence in occurrences of a verb of inquiry that Plato rarely uses does not, on its own, establish significant intertextuality between these two passages, but together with what Socrates goes on to say in the *Charmides*, it certainly does.

Socrates' *apologia* in the *Charmides* against Critias' accusations cites his fear that he might inadvertently think that he knows, when he does not know (φοβούμενος μή ποτε λάθω οἰόμενος μὲν τι εἰδέναι, εἰδῶς δὲ μή, 166d1-2). The words he uses are virtually identical with the words that Socrates uses at *Apology* 21d4-6 in identifying this cognitive mistake that others generally make (οὗτος μὲν οἶεταί τι εἰδέναι οὐκ εἰδῶς), and that distinguishes him from others, as revealed by the examination that he says he is still conducting at 70 years of age

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<sup>306</sup> Brandwood (1976).

(περιῶν ζητῶ καὶ ἐρευνῶ, *Apol.* 23b5). By this close intertextuality between this part of the *Charmides* and the *Apology*, Plato places what is to follow in the *Charmides* in the context of the defence of Socrates' examined life and of his claims in the *Apology* regarding his epistemic condition. As in the *Apology*, so here in the *Charmides* Socrates claims that he does not know, despite the accusations to the contrary made by Critias in harmony with the many other spectators of Socrates' refutations throughout his life. Plato brings into sharp focus the question of what Socrates does, in fact, know. How *does* he know whether he knows or not? What exactly is his 'human knowledge' by which he examines both himself and others?

Socrates further justifies his motives at 166d2 ff. by saying that he conducts his cross-examinations primarily for his own sake, but also for the sake of his friends. Just as in the *Apology* his motive was to be a benefactor (εὐεργέτη, *Apol.* 36d4), so here he wishes to do good to others by trying to clarify the truth of each thing (166d2-6). Socrates' answer mollifies Critias, so that the conversation can continue, but it also leaves vividly in our minds the memory of Socrates on trial, and the image of the ideal lover of knowledge, whose one claim to knowledge is that of knowing that he does not know. The image remains of the paradigm of Socratic wisdom, which failed to gain sanction in the Athenian law courts, but which, here in the *Charmides*, is both being exemplified by Socrates and about to be subjected to examination by him.

This interchange between Critias and Socrates marks another watershed in the *Charmides*, though smaller than the one at 164c7. At 164c7 Critias abruptly places 'knowing oneself' at the centre of the discussion; here at 166e4 ff.

Socrates will gloss ‘knowing oneself’ in such a way that its resemblance to Socratic wisdom is unavoidable. Through Socrates’ gloss Plato tables Socratic wisdom for discussion. He has managed to calm Critias down and asks him to restate his definition of σωφροσύνη, as last formulated at 166c2-3. Critias correctly reiterates his definition of σωφροσύνη as

... the only knowledge that is of the other knowledges  
and of itself. (166e5-6)

Socrates then asks whether it is also the knowledge of the lack of knowledge, and Critias concurs. In this further move by Socrates Plato succeeds in guiding Critias’ definition of σωφροσύνη as ‘knowing oneself’ towards a formulation that brings it directly in line with Socrates’ description of his ‘human knowledge’ in the *Apology*. And to ensure that we spot this resemblance, Plato spells it out in the following speech, where Socrates uses words that, once again, resonate with the *Apology* 21a-23c.

Then the σώφρων person alone will himself know himself (αὐτός τε ἑαυτὸν γινώσεται) and be able to test to find out (ἐξετάσαι) what he happens to know and what he does not, and in the same way will be able to examine everyone else (τοὺς ἄλλους),<sup>307</sup> as to what a person knows and thinks he knows, if indeed he does know, and in turn what a person thinks he knows, but does not know; and no one else will be able to do this. (167a1-5)

With this gloss on σωφροσύνη as ‘knowing oneself’ Plato has given to Critias a conception of self-knowledge that mirrors Socrates’ formulation in the

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<sup>307</sup> For the use of ἄλλος with the definite article see Liddell and Scott (1940): ad loc. II. 6.

*Apology* of the unique knowledge that marks him out as the wisest of all human beings.

This man [i.e., the well-known politician] thinks he knows something when he does not know, but I, in as much as I do not know, do not think I know; I seem, then, to be more knowledgeable than him only in this one small way (σ μικρῶ τινι αὐτῶ τούτῳ), namely, that I do not think I know what I do not know. (*Apol.* 21d4-7)

In this way Plato guides the *Charmides* into an examination of what exactly Socrates' 'human knowledge' is. Plato shifts the focus of the *Charmides* from being primarily about the nature of σωφροσύνη to being about the nature of Socrates' peculiar knowledge, by means of which he lives the life that all human beings should emulate, as depicted but not explicated in the *Apology*. Indeed, Socrates indicates this fresh start in the dialogue by initiating this new examination with a fanfare that calls upon Zeus to bless this third attempt, which he views as another beginning (ὥσπερ ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἐπισκεψώμεθα, 167a9-b1). The scene is set for Socrates himself to examine the possibility and the benefit of

... knowing that one knows what one does know and that one does not know what one does not know (τὸ ἄ οἶδεν καὶ ἃ μὴ οἶδεν εἰδέναι <ὅτι οἶδε καὶ> ὅτι οὐκ οἶδεν, 167b2-3).

So, following immediately upon Critias' virulent attack on Socrates' character, Plato tables the topic of Socratic wisdom at 167a1 ff. with Socrates' self-descriptive glossing of Critias' definition of σωφροσύνη. This is particularly crafty of Plato, since Socrates will later on (169e6-8) set out to refute the validity of the gloss he makes here. But his gloss and his subsequent challenge

of the gloss, nevertheless, achieve their effect of offering the occasion for the examination of Socratic wisdom.

To support this, Plato also tables Socratic wisdom for the reader's consideration at the dramatic level of the dialogue, by depicting Socrates as exhibiting it at 167b6 ff., when he begins his examination of Socratic wisdom. He starts by avowing his own ignorance and confessing that he is in *aporia* (167b7). Plato places before us a Socrates who knows himself, in as much as he recognises his own ignorance of the possibility or benefit of the knowledge of one's knowledge and lack of knowledge. This disavowal of knowledge is not only a challenge to Critias to make sense of Socratic wisdom, but also to the reader. It places under scrutiny our own understanding of what Socrates' self-knowledge is. Whatever conception of Socrates' 'human knowledge' we may have acquired from the *Apology* as the knowledge most highly to be emulated and practised in order to live the examined life, this very phenomenon is now manifested by Socrates in the *Charmides* and forms the subject of the inquiry. The likelihood is that the reader of the *Charmides*, at least when he first reads it, understands the nature of Socratic wisdom no better than the character Socrates does, and that his understanding is largely the product of what he has read in the *Apology*. For this reason Plato manoeuvres the dialogue between Socrates and Critias so as to make the rest of the *Charmides* a critical examination of our pre-reflective grasp of the knowledge to which we should aspire in order best to care for our souls. While Socrates interrogates Critias, so Plato interrogates us, his readers.

### Section 3. *Charmides* 167a-170a

The third stage (167a9 ff.) of Socrates' analysis of knowledge according to the genitive relation: the impossibility of self-knowledge on the grounds that the genitive relation is irreflexive

The third stage of Socrates' examination of Critias' definition of *σωφροσύνη* as 'knowing oneself' begins at 167a9 in the form of an explanation he gives to Critias of his *aporia*. 'Knowing oneself' has just been glossed (166e5-167a7) as

- a) the knowledge of itself, of other knowledges and of the lack of knowledge, and
- b) the knowledge of what one does and does not know, and the ability to discern this in others.

Socrates focuses on the first of these glosses, leaving his scrutiny of the second to 169e6 ff.

Socrates' strategy between 167a9 and 169a1 is to examine the genitive relation as it appears in various locutions, and to conclude by an inductive argument from analogy that it is irreflexive. This, of course, would banish 'knowing oneself' as 'the knowledge of itself' to the realm of impossibility, thereby refuting Critias' definition of *σωφροσύνη*. Before we turn to Socrates' analogies, let us sketch out the argument that these analogies are meant to support.

- 1) If 'knowing oneself' as 'the knowledge of itself' exists at all, it is knowledge.

- 2) All knowledge instantiates a relational structure denoted by the genitive case.
- 3) If the genitive relation exists at all, it is irreflexive.
- 4) But ‘knowing oneself’ as ‘the knowledge of itself’, if it exists at all, instantiates a *reflexive* relational structure denoted by the genitive case.
- 5) Therefore, if ‘knowing oneself’ as ‘the knowledge of itself’ exists at all, it does not instantiate a relational structure denoted by the genitive case.
- 6) Therefore, ‘knowing oneself’ as ‘the knowledge of itself’ is not knowledge.
- 7) Therefore, ‘knowing oneself’ as ‘the knowledge of itself’ does not exist.

Socrates uses three analogies from 167c8 to 169a1 to establish premise (3), the irreflexivity of the genitive relation. That is to say, by way of explanation of his *aporia*, he sets out to prove that  $R_G(K, A)$ , read as ‘knowledge is genitive-related to what is known’, is an irreflexive relation. As was mentioned above in the analysis of Socrates’ strategy of analysing knowledge according to the genitive relation, we must be careful to retain this rebarbative reading of  $R_G(K, A)$ , and not give it its natural rendering in English of ‘knowledge is of what is known’. For Socrates now seeks to demonstrate that in cases other than knowledge, the genitive relation (which is only *sometimes* correctly translated as ‘of’) cannot be reflexive, and uses this exercise to infer by induction that the genitive relation is irreflexive.



In fact, Socrates' conclusion that the genitive relation appears to be irreflexive would leave us with two alternatives. Either 'knowing oneself' and the knowledge of itself does not exist, or knowledge is different from other things that instantiate the genitive relation, in that the genitive relation of knowledge is not irreflexive, but rather non-reflexive. A non-reflexive relation is one in which neither all nor none of the instances of the relation are reflexive.<sup>308</sup> If knowledge instantiates a non-reflexive relation, then in some cases it is of something other than itself and in some cases it is of itself.

In the event, Socrates' suggests the first alternative, on the grounds that it would be, literally, 'out of place' (ἄτοπον, 167c4) for the genitive relation in the case of knowledge not to be irreflexive, since it appears to be impossible for the genitive relation to be reflexive in cases other than knowledge. And it is this potential anomaly that constitutes his *aporia* (167b7). But by Socrates' reluctance to endorse this alternative wholeheartedly when he concludes his argument at 169a1-8, Plato encourages us to reflect on the second alternative, viz., that knowledge may instantiate a genitive relation that is non-reflexive. Furthermore, a close scrutiny of each of Socrates' three analogies in his inductive argument gives us additional reasons for favouring the second alternative, thereby salvaging knowledge, and in particular self-knowledge, for further examination beyond the text of the dialogue. Let us examine each of the three analogies in turn.

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<sup>308</sup> For the definition of these terms see Hodges (1977): 176.

The argument for the irreflexivity of the genitive relation  
from the analogy of perception (167c-d)

At 167c4-6 Socrates expresses his *aporia* by saying that Critias' attempt to speak of 'knowing oneself', glossed as the knowledge of itself, is very strange (ιδε̄ δὴ ὡς ἄτοπον), for 'this same thing', i.e., reflexive activity, seems to be impossible (ἀδύνατον), when one looks for it in cases other than knowledge. His first example is perception. Seeing cannot see either itself or other instances of seeing, for seeing can only see colours, and seeing is not coloured. Hearing cannot hear itself or other cases of hearing, nor can any perception (αἴσθησις) perceive itself or other 'perceivings' (αἰσθήσεις). Rather, perception is 'of', i.e., instantiates a relational structure denoted by the genitive case with, that which perceptions perceive, viz., the objects of perception (ὧν δὲ δὴ αἰ ἄλλαι αἰσθήσεις αἰσθάνονται, 167d8-9).

Socrates' strategy is to argue from the analogy of perception to the claim that the genitive relation is irreflexive in the case of knowledge, too. But this argument from analogy will go through only if the relational structure that perception instantiates, as denoted by the genitive case, is the same as that which knowledge instantiates. If perception and knowledge are different from each other in this respect, then Socrates is working with a disanalogy that will vitiate his argument. Socrates' use of perception as an analogy for knowledge in respect of their genitive relations implies that, in this respect at least, the relational structures that perception and knowledge instantiate are identical. But

is it correct that knowledge and of perception are identical in respect of their instantiation of the genitive relation?

It is important to note that Critias does not object to Socrates' analogy of perception and knowledge. To this extent, then, Critias accepts the model of knowledge that Socrates puts before him, in virtue of which knowledge and perception are the same in respect of the nature of their genitive relation. Since it is also a model that grounds Socrates' *aporia*, as militating against the possibility of the existence of the knowledge of itself and other kinds of knowledge, we ought to be careful to clarify how this model works, and why it precludes reflexive activity. For it is yet to be established, let alone argued for, that knowledge is like perception in this respect. In as much as Critias accepts Socrates' analogy of perception and knowledge, we call the model of knowledge that underlies Socrates' argument the Critian model.

Whether Plato himself believes that knowledge resembles perception in the way in which it instantiates the genitive relation is, of course, a different matter altogether. His use of the dialogue *genre* preserves a 'critical distance' not only towards all the other interlocutors, but even towards Socrates himself, which allows for 'the possibility that the dialogues reflect some criticism of Socrates'.<sup>309</sup> When Socrates suggests that perception and knowledge instantiate the genitive relation in the same way, i.e., in respect of their irreflexivity, we must not assume that the model of knowledge that underpins this analogy is one that Plato himself believes is correct. Indeed, later on we shall see indications, through Socrates' arguments and uncertainty, of Plato intimating that this

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<sup>309</sup> Frede, M. (1992 Supplement): 205.

model does not serve knowledge well, and that there may be another model by which we can understand better what knowledge, and hence self-knowledge or Socratic wisdom, is.

For the time being Socrates likens knowledge to perception, and he intends this similarity to help explain to Critias why he, Socrates, is in *aporia* regarding what the knowledge of what one knows and does not know might be. Socrates is pointing out that the principal impediment to the possibility of such a knowledge is its reflexivity, if one conceives of the activity of knowledge as identical in structure to the activity of perception. In perception the genitive relation obtains between an activity, e.g., seeing, and a sense object that constitutes the object of that activity, e.g., colour. The activity of seeing is the active principle and the object seen, the colour, is the passive principle. Plato gives no indication that the debate is entertaining anything other than common sense direct realism, and so Socrates claims that in perception the activity and its object are never the same thing, in as much as seeing is an internal agency that the seeing agent exercises in order to cognise a sense object that is external to him, viz., colour.

Socrates very quickly dismisses the possibility of perception of itself at 167c8-d2, and Critias emphatically agrees. They spare not a moment's hesitation for the problem of providing some sort of account of how we perceive that we perceive. And yet, Socrates asks Critias again at 168d9-e1 whether seeing is able to be reflexive, and Critias denies that it can. Furthermore, Socrates himself refuses to conclude that perception cannot be reflexive at 168e3-7. Plato makes it clear to the reader that the structure of

perception that Socrates uses to explicate for Critias his *aporia* about self-knowledge is a structure that Socrates himself does not endorse, while Critias does.

Socrates' question at 167c8-d2 shows that the structure of perception they are using as an analogy for knowledge consists in three elements: the activity, its object, and the genitive relation. Socrates asks Critias whether he thinks that seeing is ever of itself and other 'seeings', rather than of colour. Critias' unequivocal reply indicates that for him, at least, seeing is always 'of' colour. That is to say, the concept of perception that is at work here in Socrates' analogy with knowledge is such that the perceptual sense always instantiates a genitive relation with the object of that sense. Socrates confirms this concept of perception at 167d4-5 when he secures Critias' agreement to the assertion that all hearing is always of sound (φωσῆ).

If this is indeed the structure of perception, which we have noted is a moot point as far as Socrates is concerned, and if the model of knowledge has this structure in respect of its genitive relation, then Socrates' *aporia* seems entirely justified, and knowledge of itself is impossible. For knowledge, like perception, will consist in three elements: the activity of knowing, the object known and the genitive relation. And like perception, the genitive relation in the case of knowledge will be conceived as connecting knowing, *qua* an internal agency that the knowing agent exercises in order to cognise an object that is external to him, viz., something known.

The direct realist credentials of the concept of perception at work here help us to flesh out the way in which Socrates uses this analogy to threaten the

possibility of self-knowledge. If indeed perception, thus conceived, is analogous to knowledge, such a fact will preclude knowledge from knowing anything internal to the agent, e.g., itself, by virtue of the putative similarity in operation of the genitive relation in both knowledge and perception. The object of knowledge must always be ‘out there’. And by the same constraints on its operation, this proposed structure of perception also precludes perception from ever perceiving anything internal to oneself, e.g., perception that one is perceiving.

This proposed structure of perception, however, begs the very question under discussion, viz., the possibility of reflexive activity. This structure rules out reflexive activity from the very start, viz., perception of perception, and then it is used as the template for knowledge in order to prove that knowledge, like perception, is irreflexive. It is certainly not an anachronism to suppose that the problem of the perception of perception was likely to be familiar to Plato. It was to his most famous pupil. In *De Anima* Γ.2, where Aristotle clearly has both sections (167c8-d2 & 168d9-e1) of the *Charmides* in mind in his endeavour to give a coherent account of the perception of perception, he argues that perception sometimes is indeed ‘of itself’ (αὐτῆ αὐτῆς), if we are to avoid an infinite regress of perceptions of perceptions (*De An.*, 425<sup>b</sup>15-17). He points out that the fact that we perceive that we see generates an *aporia*,

... for if perception by means of sight is seeing, and colour or that which has colour is what is seen, then if one sees seeing, the first seeing, too, will have colour.  
(*De An.* 425<sup>b</sup>17-20)

Aristotle, in effect, concludes that the *aporia* is solved if we contradict Socrates on two points. First, we must realise that perception is not just a single thing (οὐχ ἓν τὸ τῆ ὄψει αἰσθάνεσθαι, *De An.* 425<sup>b</sup>20), and second, seeing must in some way or other be coloured, for seeing sees itself, as we can see from the retention of visual impressions of sense objects once they are removed from our sight (*De An.* 425<sup>b</sup>22-25).<sup>310</sup> Aristotle's treatment of the conundrum of our perceiving that we perceive is problematical in itself, but at the very least it shows that one of Plato's younger contemporaries recognised the phenomenon of perceiving that we perceive and was interested in understanding it. McCabe goes even further and argues that the frame of the *Charmides* offers evidence that Plato himself was flagging this very issue in the dialogue, e.g., where Socrates enjoins Charmides to look into himself and see what σωφροσύνη is (160d6).<sup>311</sup>

While Critias has been so obstreperous an objector to Socrates' likening self-knowledge to other kinds of knowledge (165c4-166c6), he meekly concurs as Socrates uses perception as an instance of activity that cannot be reflexive and that is analogous to knowledge. Of course, if perception instantiates a non-reflexive relation, i.e., a relation that sometimes is and sometimes is not reflexive, then the support provided by this first analogy for Socrates' inductive argument against 'knowing oneself' collapses. Critias' vociferous complaints

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<sup>310</sup> I agree with McCabe that Aristotle's explanation of self-perception by means of denying that perception is a single thing (ἓν) does not, in fact, resolve the *aporia* of how perception is reflexive (αὐτῆ αὐτῆς), for the division of perception, in effect, is a denial of reflexivity. Departmental Seminar on Aristotle, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2006.

<sup>311</sup> McCabe (2006b): 13-17 (draft copy).

about Socrates' methodology (165c4-166c6) have alerted us to the problematical nature of introducing likenesses in argument, so Plato has primed the reader to follow Critias' earlier lead and to challenge the appropriateness of perception as an example of irreflexive activity that is like knowledge in this respect.

Critias, however, fails even to raise an eyebrow at Socrates' likening knowledge to perception conceived as an irreflexive relation between the sense and the sense object, such that perception itself can never be perceived. This indicates to us that, while he does not explicitly say so, he implicitly believes in a model of knowledge that matches the irreflexive structure of perception that Socrates sketches at 167c8-d2. It is important for us to acknowledge this, for it is such a conception of knowledge that will undergird both his responses to Socrates and, consequently, the direction of the conversation that ends in apparent refutation of self-knowledge. Critias misses the *aporia* that Aristotle spots, viz., the inability of this conception of perception to account for perception that is anything more sophisticated than the capacity, internal to a perceiving agent, to grasp something external to him, thereby precluding perception of itself. And Critias' failure to appreciate the paucity of this grasper-grasped conception of perception indicates that his model of knowledge is equally incapable of representing anything more sophisticated than a grasping of objects known that are external to the knowing itself, as irreflexive



as sight's grasping of an object that is external to and independent of the seeing itself.<sup>312</sup>

For the time being, however, at the conclusion of the first analogy that he draws with knowledge (167d9), Socrates does not explicitly infer the impossibility of self-knowledge. He will do this later at 168e3 ff. In the meantime, we are struck by Critias' missed opportunity to object to Socrates' use of perception as an analogy for the way the genitive relation works in the case of knowledge. Critias agrees at 167d10 that the genitive relation in cases of perception is irreflexive, and does not reiterate the objections he raised at 165e3 ff. and 166b7 ff., where he accused Socrates of wrongly likening self-knowledge to other sorts of knowledge. Instead, he allows Socrates to develop his argument from analogy to illustrate that if knowledge is 'of' something in the same way that perception is 'of' something, then self-knowledge is simply not possible. Again, because Critias accepts this crude model of perception as an analogy for knowledge, the model of knowledge that is implied by Critias' acceptance of this analogy is called the Critian model of knowledge.

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<sup>312</sup> McCabe captures the rudimentary nature of Critias' conception of perception when she describes it as 'brutish perception', in that it instantiates a 'non-psychological relation' that has 'no room for mediation or indirection'. I agree with her that the *Charmides* 'invite[s] us to reject the brutish view of perception'. Ibid.: 10 & 17 (draft copy). However, I shall show that Plato intends this rejection to be part and parcel of a rejection of an inadequate conception of knowledge that Critias brings to the inquiry.

The argument for the irreflexivity of the genitive relation  
from the analogy of desire etc. (167d-168a).

The second analogy in Socrates' inductive argument for the irreflexivity of the genitive relation likens knowledge to desire, will, love, fear and belief (δόξα, 167e1-168a6). He argues that all these, conceived of as activities, are similar to perception in each having the genitive relation with (i.e., being 'of') things that cannot be the respective activity itself. So, Socrates asserts that we cannot desire the activity of desiring, or will our willing, or love our loving, or fear our fearing or believe our believing. This being so, Socrates argues, it would be strange indeed (οὐκοῦν ἄτοπον, 168a10) if there exists a kind of knowledge that is the knowledge not of what has been learnt (μαθήματος, 168a7), but of itself and other kinds of knowledge. In other words, if knowledge is like desire etc., and if desire etc. are as Socrates describes them, then it would indeed be something extraordinary or 'out of place' (ἄτοπον) for it to be possible to know knowing. Critias agrees with Socrates' conclusion, thereby making no objection to the two premises in the previous sentence.<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> And yet, one might have good reason to object. For example, with regard to the first premise, viz., that is knowledge like desire etc., the difference between knowledge and other cognitive conditions has spawned much philosophical activity in the field of epistemic logic. Jaakko Hintikka maintains that in the primary sense of 'know', where knowing that *p* does not imply actually 'being aware of' or 'paying attention to' *p*, knowledge is very *unlike* desire etc. precisely in the respect that Socrates is here considering. He argues that a person's knowing that *p* entails his knowing that he knows that *p*, for no further information about the world is required to demonstrate to him that he knows that he knows: 'exactly the same circumstances would justify one's saying "I know that I know" as would justify one's saying "I know" *simpliciter*'. This is clearly a controversial claim, and requires considerable qualification of the sort

But again, in light of the high profile given to methodology since 164c7, Plato invites us to ask ourselves whether Critias ought to have objected to at least one, if not both, of these premises. And when we do, it strikes us as odd that Critias does not obviate Socrates, as he is wont to do wherever he can see a way of doing so. In effect, we can treat both premises as one, viz., that knowledge is like desire etc., all of which instantiate an irreflexive binary relation. But is knowledge like desire etc. in the relevant way?

Gabriela Carone has pointed out, in comment on this passage in the *Charmides*, that it is entirely possible to fear fear itself.<sup>314</sup> And indeed, we all can acknowledge what President Roosevelt warned the Americans against during the Great Depression, when he said in his 1933 Inaugural Address that ‘the only thing we have to fear is fear itself’. Gerasimos Santas also notes the inappropriateness of some of the examples.

Can’t one wish, for example, that all one’s wishes come true including this wish? In any case, it is clear that the point does *not* hold for belief and opinion. One can have a belief about all beliefs including that belief itself; for example, one can believe that all beliefs are true, or, less problematically, that all beliefs are either true or false including this belief itself.<sup>315</sup>

Indeed, Harry Frankfurt argues that it is ‘peculiarly characteristic of humans’ that they can form ‘second-order desires’; they can want to be different from

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that Hintikka elaborates. However, such a thing as this entailment is in no way the case with ‘I wish’, for ‘I wish that *p*’ clearly does not entail ‘I wish that I wish that *p*’. To establish the latter from the former, something more about the world is required both to be known and *a fortiori* to be the case. Hintikka (1962): 28.

<sup>314</sup> Carone (1998): 273.

<sup>315</sup> Santas (1973): 123.

the way they are in respect of their preferences and purposes.<sup>316</sup> He regards it as essential for being a person that one not only have second-order desires, but that one takes these desires on board as volitions, i.e., as being not just desired, but willed.<sup>317</sup> He illustrates his point with the hypothetical case of a wanton drug addict whose cognitive life operates only at the level of his first-order desires and is devoid of any reflection upon what he might choose to will. Such a life would be 'no different from an animal'.<sup>318</sup> Reflexivity in the activity of desire, then, appears to be not only possible, but necessary, in the case of the human being.

Socrates' inductive argument against the possibility of self-knowledge can be seen to come apart if we reject Critias' affirmation that desire etc. instantiate an irreflexive relation, on the grounds that the genitive relation between the activity and the object of the activity in cases of desire etc. is more problematical than Critias is willing to accept. Like perception, there does seem to be an *aporia* about reflexivity in desire etc. Even Socrates suggests that the issue of the irreflexivity of the genitive relation warrants rather more sophisticated consideration than the rapid agreement Critias offers in reply to Socrates' questions. At no point does Socrates himself conclude that these activities are irreflexive. As we shall see, Socrates refuses to draw a conclusion about the irreflexivity of the genitive relation, except for cases of comparative magnitudes and quantities (168e5-6). And since he only puts questions to

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<sup>316</sup> Frankfurt (1982): 82-83.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid.: 86.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.: 88.

Critias for him to answer, we have reason to refrain from inferring that Socrates agrees with all the answers Critias gives.

Indeed, there are grounds for thinking that Plato was fully aware that the genitive relation in cases of desire etc. is even more complex than is suggested by its alliance with perception against the possibility of reflexive activity. We saw that the direct realist structure of perception that Socrates outlines (167c8-d2) presents perception as a cognitive activity that grasps objects that are external to the perceiving agent. This requirement that the object of perception be external to the perception itself, then, entails the irreflexivity of perception. As we saw, Critias readily accepts not only this account of perception, but also—and fatally to his defence of self-knowledge—its similarity to the way that knowledge works. Now, Socrates introduces desire etc. as analogous to perception and knowledge, but we find that his likening desire etc. to perception in respect of their operation itself has an *aporia*. For unlike perception, desire etc. do not seem to be ‘of’ something that is external and independent of the agent, in the way that perception is ‘of’ colour, sound etc. Unlike perception as Critias conceives it, desire etc. do not have the exclusively external operation of the genitive relation that thereby entails irreflexivity.

Terry Penner helps us to understand this difference when he discusses Plato’s account of desire in the *Republic*. There Plato endorses the view that desires are intentional, in that the appetitive part of the soul thinks, at least at the minimal level of forming a conception of the object of desire.<sup>319</sup> Hence, it is possible for one’s desire to be deceived, e.g., when it is for something that is

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<sup>319</sup> Penner (1971): 96 & 101.

not, in fact, desirable. Leaving the question of Plato's tripartite division of the soul to one side, we can at least see that such a claim is supported by our experience where, for example, one may desire a cup of coffee, see a cup of dark liquid and hastily sip, only to discover that it is cold broth. The cup of liquid was desirable because of what it was thought to be, but it turns out not to be desirable in fact. Or a cup of coffee may be an object of desire in the morning, and yet not just before bedtime. Both experiences show that an object of desire is not objectively desirable, in the way that an object of sight is objectively coloured or shaped. Certainly, desire is genitive-related to (or 'of') pleasure, as Socrates says (167e1), but desire has 'some say' in what is pleasurable, in a way that seeing does not in cases of what is coloured or shaped.

Cases of fear also illustrate how differently it operates from Critias' simple grasping-by-perception of an external object. The distinction between the activity of fear and the object of fear is difficult to separate, particularly where the fear is caused in part by misperception. For example, whilst walking along a path at twilight we might mistake a rope lying on the path ahead for a snake. To the onlooker, we are fearing the rope, but we would assure the onlooker that it is certainly not a rope that we fear. Ropes do not frighten us, although snakes do. But then where is the snake that is causing us to tremble and perspire? Clearly, we are misperceiving, and the fear is caused by our belief that there is a snake before us on the path. And yet, we cannot be said to fear the belief, for though we may fear having wrong beliefs, we do not fear beliefs. Our beliefs do not frighten us in the way that the present 'object' of our fear, viz., the snake

that is not there, has frozen us in fear. So, just how distinct is the fear from the object of fear?

It certainly does not appear, then, that fear operates like Critias' perception of externally and independently existing qualities. Even the widely held 'fearful thing' of death is not *per se* an object of fear, as Socrates himself points out in the *Apology* (29a4 ff.). Our fear is 'of' what we endow with fear, in a way very different from seeing, which is not 'of' what we endow with colour. The binary relation between activity and object in cases of perception on the one hand, and desire etc. on the other, work quite differently. Therefore, the implication of irreflexivity for perception, which follows from the fact that perception operates only on objects that are external and independent of the activity of perceiving, does not threaten the possibility of reflexivity for desire etc. For desire etc. do not operate only on objects that are external and independent of the activity of desiring etc.<sup>320</sup>

We are therefore once again surprised that Critias does not object to desire etc. as being disanalogous in Socrates' refutation of reflexivity in the case of knowledge. And the reason for Critias' compliance appears to be the same as before, when he failed to object to the analogy with perception. The model of

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<sup>320</sup> Some scholars may argue that this is precisely what Plato has in mind for the knowledge of the Forms, i.e., the cognitive grasp of what is 'out there'. But two extended texts provide Plato with ample distance from Critias' conception of knowledge as a grasping of something 'out there', viz., the rigorous educational programme of the guardians in the *Republic* (521c10-540c9) and the depiction in Diotima's speech in the *Symposium* (201d1-212c3) of the extraordinary intellectual demands of reflection and abstraction required if one is to make progress towards the apprehension of the beautiful itself. The Forms may well be 'out there', in that they exist independently of our minds, but our grasping of them clearly requires the sort of reflection that the Critian conception of knowledge does not afford.

knowledge that Critias entertains is one that corresponds to the crude simplicity of his conception of perception and desire etc. that Socrates is putting before him, as activities that are necessarily directed towards things other than the activities themselves. Critias sees no disparity between knowledge, perception and desire etc. in respect of the way their genitive relation operates. As we have seen, however, even if we agree with Critias' conception of perception as a grasping of what is 'out there', desire etc. are not just graspings of what is external to and independent of themselves.<sup>321</sup> Critias seems unable to see this, and he expresses no concern that knowledge may not be just the same sort of thing, viz., a grasping of what is external to and independent of itself.

It is this conceptual poverty in Critias' understanding of what knowledge is, let alone what perception and desire etc. are, that renders him defenceless against Socrates' refutation. But at the same time, Plato intends us to notice this, and to reflect that it is Critias' uncharacteristic compliance with Socrates' analogies with knowledge that betrays his inadequate conception of knowledge. It is this conception of knowledge that ensures the refutation of self-knowledge. Self-knowledge can never receive a coherent account as long as the Critian model of knowledge grounds our attempts.

Socrates' later diffidence in regard to his own arguments (168a7 ff. & 175a9 ff.) distances him from these analogies and their implied irreflexivity that refute Critias' definition of *σωφροσύνη* as 'knowing oneself'. We shall see later how Plato effects this disassociation of Socrates from his own apparent refutation of

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<sup>321</sup> This point is especially acute in cases of desires for objects that have not yet appeared. Plato addresses this feature of desire and pleasure at *Philebus* 32b-c, where Socrates identifies a class of pleasures arising from our desire and anticipation for what has not yet even come into existence.



self-knowledge. For now, however, we should note that Critias' endorsement of Socrates' analogies of perception and desire etc. betray his adherence to a model of knowledge that Plato wishes us to recognise as being inadequate to the task of accounting for all kinds of knowledge. It is this crude model of knowledge that is the real casualty of Socrates' apparent refutation of self-knowledge in the second half of the *Charmides*.

By 168b1 Critias has vehemently asserted that there is something unique about self-knowledge, in respect of the other kinds of knowledge, in that it instantiates a reflexive binary relation with its object (166b7-c3), but then he has also allowed knowledge to be characterised so crudely that his claim will soon collapse. His conceptions of perception, desire etc. and even knowledge itself *entail* the very irreflexivity that he wishes to deny in the case of knowledge. However, he has not noticed this. He does not see that the beliefs he holds about perception, desire etc. and knowledge itself are inconsistent with his belief in self-knowledge. Like so many other interlocutors whom Socrates refutes in this and other dialogues, he is on the way towards refutation by means of Socrates' elenchus, for what he believes will prove to entail something inconsistent with something else he believes.

On the basis of his argument from the two analogies of perception and desire etc., Socrates cautions Critias from concluding prematurely that 'knowing oneself' does not exist, for despite all that Critias has endorsed so far under cross-examination, they have not proved this (168a10-11). Socrates presses on with a third analogy along with a schematic analysis of the genitive relation, that ostensibly is designed to demonstrate how the genitive relation works so as

to be irreflexive, and why it appears very doubtful that ‘knowing oneself’ exists. In the event, however, Plato’s choice of Socrates’ third analogy will suggest otherwise.

The argument for the irreflexivity of the genitive relation  
from the analogy of comparatives (168b-d)

At 168b2 Socrates turns to examine the genitive relation in cases of comparative terms, like ‘greater’ and ‘lesser’, in order to show that here, too, the genitive relation is irreflexive. He begins, however, by offering a schematic analysis of the genitive relation in terms of power or faculty (δύναμις) and nature or essential property (οὐσία). He attributes to knowledge the sort of power (τινὰ τοιαύτην δύναμιν) that enables the knowledge to be ‘of’ something (ὥστε τινὸς εἶναι, 168b2-3). That is to say, the power that knowledge possesses endows it with a certain relation vis-à-vis something, and this relation is expressed by the genitive case. In this way Socrates provides a simple schema to help elucidate the model of knowledge with which he and Critias are working. In this model the binary relation, signified by the genitive case, between knowledge and what is known is considered to be an effect or consequence (ὥστε) of the power (δύναμις) that knowledge possesses.

What exactly Socrates means here is not clear, for he does not give any further explanation of these terms. Perhaps the term ‘power’ (δύναμις) is drawn from Plato’s mathematical discussions in the Academy about the powers of

numbers, for Socrates does go on to speak in terms of quantitative values in the analogy of comparatives that he is about to present. In *Republic* V Socrates uses δύναμις to contrast knowledge, belief and ignorance, and defines the δύναμις of knowledge as ‘knowledge that that which is is’ (γνῶναι ὡς ἔστι τὸ ὄν, *Republic* 477b10-11). There he goes into greater explanatory detail, defining δυνάμεις as ‘that by which we are able [to do] what we can’ and distinguishing each δύναμις in terms of ‘what it is set over and what it accomplishes (ἐφ’ ᾧ τε ἔστι καὶ ὃ ἀπεργάζεται, *Republic* 477d1).<sup>322</sup> In the *Parmenides*, too, at 133b4-135b2, Plato makes use of the terminology of δύναμις and οὐσία to explore the relation of knowledge to its object, when Parmenides rehearses with the young Socrates the ‘greatest difficulty’ for the theory of Forms.<sup>323</sup> But here in the *Charmides*, rather than define the term in any detail, Socrates treats it as obvious that the term ‘δύναμις’ denotes the feature of knowledge by which knowledge instantiates a genitive relation to something. Furthermore, Critias’ absolute and

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<sup>322</sup> Vlastos’ explanation for Plato’s greater interest in mathematics in the *Republic* postulates a ‘profound change in Plato himself’, that resulted from his loss of faith in the elenchus as ‘the right method to search for the truth’. His advanced studies in mathematics, inspired by his contacts in Syracuse, were to transfer his allegiance from Socrates to the brilliant mathematician, Archytas, as the ‘new model philosopher for Plato’, a transference that Vlastos sees in the dialogues written ‘after’ the *Gorgias*. Vlastos (1991a): 117 & 128-9. As chapter 3 above points out, however, developmentalism is an expensive hermeneutic theory that is open to the charge of circularity. While Vlastos is right to recognise the importance of mathematics in Plato’s writings and his work in the Academy, the presence of the mathematical example here in the *Charmides*, which Vlastos takes to be written before Plato’s purported conversion to mathematics, argues against Vlastos’ abrupt developmentalist picture of Plato’s intellectual life and composition of the dialogues.

<sup>323</sup> Plato’s use of this analytical device in the *Charmides* and the *Parmenides*, and his investigation in the latter of the genitive relation between knowledge and what it knows (*Parm.* 134a3-c1), is further evidence against the developmentalist view that these two dialogues represent chronologically and philosophically divergent stages in Plato’s career.

uncomplicated agreement confirms that Plato intends this terminology to be unproblematical for the layman (πάνυ γε, 168b4).

Socrates introduces the term ‘δύναμις’ when talking about knowledge at 168b3, but he introduces its complementary term, ‘ουσία’, later on in his discussion about comparatives (168d2). Ουσία is that property of a thing that makes the thing the object of the δύναμις of something else. For example, sound has the ουσία that makes it the other *relatum* in the genitive relation with hearing (168d3-4). Socrates does not give any further explanation of what ουσία is, and Critias readily agrees to the use of the term. The term, of course, receives much attention as a fundamental concept in the metaphysics of Plato, Aristotle and their successors, and its meaning is, accordingly, difficult to capture. It is a term full of potential for resonance with passages in other works. Within the context of the *Charmides* alone, however, Plato intends this term to denote something about what an object is that places it in a relation to something else. We are to understand that ουσία is what makes something a *relatum* in relation with another *relatum* that possesses the corresponding δύναμις. So the ουσία of sound and the δύναμις of hearing make sound and hearing corresponding *relata*.

It is interesting that Plato chooses the term ουσία to denote the property that the corresponding object of a δύναμις possesses, as sound is the object of hearing. At *Euthyphro* 11a7-8 ουσία denotes an essential property of something, as opposed to an accidental property (πάθος). At this point Socrates is explaining to Euthyphro that when the latter defines holiness as what is loved

by the gods, he is speaking about an accidental property of holiness, and not indicating its essence or nature, whereas what Socrates is asking him for is, as Marc Cohen expresses it, ‘the characteristic in virtue of which a thing is pious’.<sup>324</sup> Here in the *Charmides*, Socrates uses the term ‘οὐσία’ in a similar way, but this time in respect of the relation between comparatives. It denotes the essential property of a thing that makes it the corresponding object of what has a particular δύναμις. For example, the less will have the οὐσία by virtue of which the greater enjoys its δύναμις of being greater than the less. In the *Euthyphro* and the *Charmides*, then, Socrates uses ‘οὐσία’ as a general term to denote whatever essential property a thing has.

When, however, Plato comes to apply this schema to knowledge, it becomes clear just how entirely apposite is Plato’s choice of οὐσία to denote the property that warrants the exercise of a δύναμις. For as is the case in other things that have δυνάμεις, so in the case of knowledge, what it is ‘of’ is that which has οὐσία. But in addition to denoting an essential property or the nature of a thing, we also find ‘οὐσία’ used to mean ‘being’ in the sense of that which is real and true, i.e., reality, being or truth. Accordingly, in another dialogue Socrates says that knowledge is the δύναμις over ‘what is’ (ἐπιστήμη μὲν γέ που ἐπὶ τῷ ὄντι, *Republic* 478a6), making οὐσία the object of the δύναμις of knowledge (*Republic* 479c6-d1). So, Plato’s choice of this word in his schema in the *Charmides* is most apposite to denote what a thing must possess in order to be on the receiving end of the δύναμις of knowledge: such a thing must possess

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<sup>324</sup> Cohen (1980): 171.

οὐσία, i.e., reality, being or truth. Tuckey remarks that Plato does not say what the οὐσία corresponding to the δύναμις of knowledge is, other than Socrates' suggestion of μάθημα at 168a7, whereas he does say so for seeing etc.<sup>325</sup> But we can see that Plato, in fact, does tell us what it is, though arguably in a punning fashion and without explanation. The οὐσία corresponding to the δύναμις of knowledge is οὐσία, i.e., reality, being or truth, a notion that is further explicated at *Republic* 509b in relation to knowledge and the good itself.

Having introduced the term 'δύναμις' as a property of knowledge, at 168b5 Socrates begins his presentation of the third analogy in his inductive argument to prove the irreflexivity of the genitive relation. He considers the genitive relation between the two correlates of a comparison, and his first example is 'greater', with which he uses the definite article to mean 'that which is greater' (τὸ μείζον, 168b5). He argues that that which is greater has a δύναμις by virtue of which it instantiates the genitive relation with something else, viz., the less (168b5-8). That is to say, the greater has the δύναμις by virtue of which the greater is 'than' the less.

The apparent disanalogy of Socrates' analogy of comparatives  
makes Plato's methodology more noticeable.

Plato's inclusion of the class of comparatives in Socrates' examination of the genitive relation appears to the English reader *prima facie* to be disanalogous.

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<sup>325</sup> Tuckey (1951): 41.

For while it is easy for us to see how the genitive relation in ‘the knowledge of something’ is similar to the relation in ‘the perception of’ or ‘the desire of or for’ something, it is not at all clear that the genitive relation in ‘greater than something’ is similar, and hence appropriate as an analogy. It appears that Plato has been misled into confounding two distinct relations because they are denoted in Greek in the same way, viz., by the genitive case. And we might explain such an error by pointing out that the similarity between, on the one hand, the relation that knowledge, perception and desire etc. enjoy with their object, and on the other hand the relation that exists between the two correlates of a comparison, is suggested more in the Greek language than it is in English, since Greek uses the same case to express all these relations, whereas English uses different prepositions.<sup>326</sup>

But it would be a mistake to fault Plato here on the grounds that he is confounding distinct uses of the genitive case, and thereby confounding two distinct kinds of relation. Plato has been concerned with exploring the nature of the genitive relation since 165c4. Indeed, his strategy is to discover whether it is possible for this relation to tolerate reflexivity. Socrates and Critias agree at 165c4-7 that all knowledge is ‘of’ something, i.e., that all knowledge instantiates the genitive relation. If this genitive relation cannot exist as a reflexive relation, then no knowledge can be reflexive, and self-knowledge, as defined by Critias, and as exemplified by Socrates in the *Apology* and the *Charmides*, cannot exist.

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<sup>326</sup> Santas writes off this entire analogy as something that ‘we need not take very seriously’, for the examples of ‘greater’, ‘double’ etc. ‘rely on nothing more than a grammatical similarity’. Santas (1973): 123.

It is we, Plato's readers, who are at fault if we presume that he makes a mistake in conflating distinct kinds of relations in his analysis of the genitive relation, for we thereby unwittingly pre-empt his enquiry. The jury is still out regarding the question whether the genitive relation that knowledge instantiates is like the relation instantiated by perception and desire etc., or like the one instantiated by the referents of comparative adjectives, or indeed by any other relation denoted by the genitive case in Greek. Plato makes Socrates' methodology clear and deliberate in order to demonstrate how an inquiry into what self-knowledge is, if indeed it exists, needs to focus on the examination of the genitive relation, to see whether this relation can exist in a reflexive way, and if it can, whether and in what way it so exists in the case of knowledge.

Socrates treats knowledge and comparison as analogous *qua* instantiations of the genitive relation, and at 168b10 Socrates begins his demonstration that the genitive relation in comparisons is irreflexive. The speech that Plato gives him to say is surprisingly awkward and difficult to follow. He says,

So, if we were to find something greater, which is greater than the things that are greater and itself, but is greater than none of the things than which the other greater things are greater, then I suppose it could not but be the case that, if indeed it were to be greater than itself, it is also lesser than itself. (168b10-c2)

The point Socrates wishes to make is that something greater than itself must also be less than itself, for the one will be greater and the other will be less, and yet 'both' are the same thing. The use of μέν and δέ would easily have made this simplified locution possible. But he introduces another layer of complexity by



speaking of ‘the other greater things’ and ‘the things than which they are greater’.

His example is structured as follows. He first posits the genitive relation that ‘something greater’ instantiates with other ‘things that are greater and itself’. We are to imagine that the other ‘things that are greater’ are less than this ‘something greater’, and the ‘something greater’ is also less than the self-same ‘something greater’. Let us call this ‘something greater’  $G_G$  for the ‘greater greater’, and each of the other ‘things that are greater’  $G_L$ , for the ‘less greater’. So, ‘something greater, which is greater than the things that are greater and itself’ will be written as

$$(1) G_G > G_L^1, G_L^2, G_L^3 \dots \& G_G.$$

Next, he postulates that this ‘something greater’ is ‘greater than none of the things than which the other greater things are greater’. Let us call each of the things that are ‘less than the less greater’ things  $L_{GL}^1, L_{GL}^2, L_{GL}^3$  etc. for ‘less than the less greater’. So, ‘but [the something greater] is greater than none of the things than which the other greater things are greater’ will be written as

$$(2) \neg(G_G > L_{GL}^1, L_{GL}^2, L_{GL}^3 \dots).$$

Since ‘is not greater than’ is equivalent to ‘is less than or equal to’, this formulation can be converted to ‘but [the something greater] is less than or equal to all of the things than which the other greater things are greater’, or

$$(3) G_G \leq L_{GL}^1, L_{GL}^2, L_{GL}^3 \dots$$

But (1) and (3) generate the paradox of the original ‘something greater’ being both greater and less than itself. This is clear if we bear in mind that the ‘less

greater' ( $G_L^1, G_L^2, G_L^3 \dots$ ) are greater than the 'less than the less greater' ( $L_{GL}^1, L_{GL}^2, L_{GL}^3 \dots$ ), or

$$(4) (G_L^1, G_L^2, G_L^3 \dots) > (L_{GL}^1, L_{GL}^2, L_{GL}^3 \dots).$$

Since by (1) the original 'something greater' is greater than the 'less greater', by transitivity through (1) and (4), it is greater than the 'less than the less greater', or

$$(5) G_G > (G_L^1, G_L^2, G_L^3 \dots) > (L_{GL}^1, L_{GL}^2, L_{GL}^3 \dots).$$

The paradox is seen in the inconsistency of (3) and (5). But Socrates expresses the paradox in reflexive terms by making a further step. In (1) the 'something greater' is stipulated to be greater than itself. In (3), however, the original 'something greater' is stipulated as being less than or equal to the 'less than the less greater', and yet it is greater than these by transitivity through (1) and (4). This transitivity, expressed in (5), makes the original 'something greater' greater than that which it is less than or equal to, as expressed in (3). It is therefore less than or equal to what it is greater than, and *a fortiori* less than itself, in contradiction to its being greater than itself in (1).

This seemingly unnecessary complexity appears to be inexplicable, until we realise that Plato is deliberately matching Socrates' locution at 167d7-9, where he concludes that the genitive relation between perception and its object is never found to be reflexive.

In sum, examine all cases of perception and see whether you think there is a perception [that is] of perceptions and of itself (αἰσθήσεων μὲν αἴσθησις καὶ ἑαυτῆς), but that perceives (δὲ... αἰσθανομένη) nothing of what the other perceptions perceive. (167d7-9)

Both 167d7-9 and 168b10-c2 are mirror images of each other in respect of their syntactical structure. At 167d7-9 Socrates speaks of the impossibility of the perception ‘of’ other perceptions and ‘of’ itself; so at 168b10-c2, he speaks of something greater ‘than’ other greater and ‘than’ itself. In both cases he is trying to replicate the same circumstances in order to track the operation of the genitive relation and test it for reflexivity. At 167d7-9 Socrates speaks of perception not being ‘of what the other perceptions are of’ (ὣν δὲ δὴ αἰ ἄλλαι αἰσθήσεις αἰσθάνονται, μηδενὸς αἰσθανομένη, 167d8-9); at 168b10-c2 he speaks of greater not being ‘(greater) than what the other greater are (greater) than’ (ὣν δὲ τᾶλλα μείζω ἐστὶν μηδενὸς μείζον, 168b11).<sup>327</sup> The speech at 168b10-c2, though challenging to read, is not unnecessarily complicated after all, given Plato’s purposes.

The reason why Plato gives Socrates so awkward and difficult a speech is clear. The ongoing project of analysing the genitive relation is the reason, for Plato intends to illustrate in bold terms the deliberate methodology Socrates is

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<sup>327</sup> In 167d7-9 note in particular Socrates’ elliptical use of μέν and δέ. In order for μέν to balance δέ, we must understand the participle οὔσα with αἰσθησις in the μέν clause, which will then correspond with the αἰσθανομένη of the δέ clause. Socrates is asking Critias whether he thinks there is a perception, ‘on the one hand being a perception of perceptions and of itself’, but ‘on the other hand perceiving nothing of what the other perceptions perceive’. At 168b10-11 Socrates reconstructs the same sentence structure as at 167d7-9 and employs the same elliptical use of μέν and δέ. This time, he simply substitutes the terms of perception for the terms of comparison, and whereas in the earlier passage we had to understand οὔσα with αἰσθησις in the μέν clause, here we need to understand ἐστὶν with μηδενὸς μείζον in the δέ clause. In the second passage Plato simply substitutes μείζον and its forms in place of αἰσθησις and its forms in the earlier passage, and we see that the same argument about the genitive relation is operating upon both perception and comparison, to show that reflexivity is impossible.

employing throughout his investigation of *σωφροσύνη* as ‘knowing oneself’. For this reason we also find that Socrates’ complicated formulation involving ‘greater than’ at 168b10-c2 also matches, though in a less perfect way, each of his rhetorical questions regarding the possibility of desire etc. to be reflexive (167e1-168a4). And, of course, his point about the greater being ‘than’ other greater, but not ‘than’ what they are greater ‘than’, tracks the target of this whole section of the *Charmides*, viz., knowledge that is ‘of’ other knowledges, but not ‘of’ what the other knowledges are ‘of’.

The awkwardness of Socrates’ examination of the genitive relation in his analogy of comparatives demonstrates how the nature of this relation, if indeed it is one and only one relation, has important differences in different cases. Socrates’ aim is to identify and define the relation denoted by the genitive case, in order to see whether it is ever reflexive. For if it is never found to be reflexive, then it is irreflexive, and ‘knowing oneself’ is an impossibility. So far, Socrates’ examination of the genitive relation in other cases claims to show that there are no cases in which it is reflexive. And yet, Plato’s making Socrates’ methodology so conspicuous provides a high profile not only to the methodology itself, but also to the important tensions that this inquiry is stumbling upon. Plato intends us to worry about the apparent impossibility of perception perceiving itself, the apparent impossibility of fearing fears or having beliefs about beliefs, and the unlikely bedfellows that perception, desire etc. and comparison make in their instantiation of the genitive relation. As Socrates works up to the conclusion of his inductive argument from analogy for the irreflexivity of the genitive relation, Plato expects us to have accumulated a

philosophically rich array of doubts and questions regarding the analysis of the genitive relation and the simplistic model of its instantiations that is implied by Critias' responses. Although Critias allows himself to be led meekly since 167b6, Plato ensures that we are not.

Socrates goes on from his 'greater' example to make the same point about the irreflexivity of the genitive relation by citing the impossibility of what is double being the double of itself, for then it would be both double and half of the same thing, viz., itself. After mentioning the further examples of 'heavier', 'lighter', 'older' and 'younger', he concludes,

... and everything else is like this: whatever possesses its own power (δύναμιν) towards itself, will it not also possess that essential property or nature (οὐσίαν) in respect of which it possesses its power? (168c10-d3)

Socrates' introduction of the word οὐσία at this point further develops the analysis of the genitive relation in terms of δύναμις. We can now read the analysis backwards, as it were. Anything that possesses a δύναμις in respect of something does so by virtue of the οὐσία possessed by the object of that δύναμις. For example, we can hear something only if it has sound. Using this analysis of the genitive relation, Socrates argues that if hearing hears itself, then it is by virtue of its possessing sound (φωνῆν ἐχούσης) that it will hear itself. Likewise, for seeing to see itself, seeing must be coloured. But, *pace* Aristotle, Socrates implies that seeing is not coloured, and so cannot see itself.

As is pointed out above, Plato uses these remarks of Socrates to motivate for the reader the *aporia* about perception of perception, which he intimated at 167c8-d2. The *aporia* is intensified by the introduction of the δύναμις schema

for the genitive relation. For the activity of perception to be genitive-related to itself, i.e., ‘of’ itself, it must possess the οὐσία in respect of which it possesses its own δύναμις. Critias affirms without qualification that this is impossible, and so it is left to Plato’s readers, and indeed his students, to search, as Aristotle does in *De Anima* Γ. 2, for what Critias fails to understand here about perception and knowledge.

There is, however, another payoff that Plato provides for us through his rather complicated exposition of the analogy of comparatives. As Socrates breezes through the analogy, it does indeed appear that the genitive relation in comparisons fails to be reflexive. And yet, this particular example does, nevertheless, provide some room for advance in the reader’s search to find a way to accommodate self-knowledge. Plato’s awkward locution of greater things being less and lesser things being greater reveals a special feature about the way in which the genitive relation operates in comparison. Whatever can be found that is greater will always also prove to be less, and vice versa, because for anything either great or small, there will always be a greater and a smaller. This is our ordinary experience of relative sizes in the world, and Plato does not suggest here that there is a greater, than which nothing is greater, and a less or small, than which nothing is less or smaller. He gives us no reason in the *Charmides* to think that such absolute magnitudes or quantities exist in the sensible realm of ordinary phenomena that we experience.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> Plato does, of course, elsewhere invite his readers to reflect on the possibility of absolutes in the guise of his Forms, so that, for example, the Form of the greater (or the great) would be such that nothing is greater. There are, of course, difficulties with interpreting the self-predication of Forms, well

In the context of our ordinary experience, then, comparatives instantiate a binary relation in which whatever is more *F* will always be less *F*. By means of this analogy for knowledge and the operation of its genitive relation, Plato sets before us an example of the genitive relation that offers scope for further inquiry into how it is possible for knowledge at the same time also to be the known. That is to say, the greater is always ‘than’ the less, and yet at the same time it is also less (than some greater thing). Since Plato offers comparatives as an analogy for knowledge, we can wonder whether this feature applies to knowledge, too. Is it the case that knowledge is always ‘of’ the known, and yet at the same time it is also known (‘of’ or by some other knowledge)? This would give us what we are looking for, or one form of it, viz., knowledge that is known.

In the event, of course, Plato does not have Socrates press the analogy this far, and in any case there remains the problem that, while the greater may also be the less, it will not be the less in respect of the same *comparandum*. It will be greater than one thing, while being less than another. So, although the analogy of comparatives may provide us with an analogy for conceiving how knowledge might also be known, it may bring with it further difficulties, such as the threat of an infinite regress of verification. Knowledge may at the same time be known, but it will entail another knowledge that knows it, which in turn

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rehearsed in Fine (2003b), Nehamas (1975), Vlastos (1954). But there is no indication here in the *Charmides* that Plato intends his readers to be thinking in this way about comparatives of absolute value. And as for the stand that Plato might take on the issue of absolute value amongst particulars, a good indication would be Socrates’ observation in the *Philebus* that comparatives, like the hotter and the colder, cannot admit of a πέρας or τέλος, a limit or end, and yet continue to exist as comparatives (*Philebus* 24a7-b2).

will be known by another knowledge *ad infinitum*. But while there may be considerable further work required of us to explain how knowledge is also known, at least the analogy of comparatives differs enough from the other analogies to offer possible direction for our further research.

At 168e3-7 Socrates reflects upon the examples he has used in the three analogies of his inductive argument, and concludes that some of them appear to be entirely incapable of possessing their δύναμις with regard to themselves. He formulates in terms of δύναμις and οὐσία a principle of irreflexivity in respect of the genitive relation. He is confident that his analysis of this relation reveals circumstances where the genitive relation cannot be reflexive, e.g., magnitudes and quantities. However in the case of other examples, he now hesitates and is by no means certain about the impossibility of a reflexive genitive relation. At 168e9-169a1 he says only that it is very doubtful (τὰ δ' ἀπιστεῖται σφόδρα) that instances of perception, movement and heat possess their δυνάμεις in a reflexive way. He is clearly reluctant to deny that they may be reflexive. Indeed, although he says that the prospect of such reflexive activities will produce disbelief in some people, he admits that perhaps it will not in other people (ἴσως δέ τισιν οὐ, 169a1).

Socrates has argued for the irreflexivity of the genitive relation for one and a half pages (167a9-169a1). He has not addressed the possibility of reflexive knowledge directly, but he has considered many other activities and their genitive relations. And yet now at 168e3-7 Socrates expresses reticence about some of the examples he has cited. He is not willing to conclude that the genitive relation is irreflexive, and forestalls his inductive argument from



inferring irreflexivity in the case of knowledge. He has spelled out for Critias his *aporia* at the definition of σωφροσύνη as ‘knowledge of itself’, as he set out to do at 167b10, but he does not consider his explanation a satisfactory argument against the possibility of knowledge of itself. To this extent, we are vindicated for the caution with which we resisted, or at least queried, the progress of the argument from analogy, for Socrates shares our dubiety. Furthermore, in the derogatory remarks that Socrates goes on to make about the way in which he has conducted the inquiry since 167a9, Plato makes it clear that there remains much philosophical work for us, the readers, to do, if the inquiry into self-knowledge is ever to come to a satisfactory conclusion.

For a start, we observe that the relations instantiated in the three analogies of perception, desire etc. and comparisons work rather differently, suggesting that the genitive relation is not, in fact, a single relation at all, but a group of relations that are quite different from each other. Their denotation by the genitive case in Greek appear not to indicate a similarity in nature, as a One over Many argument might suggest. It appears simply to be an accident of linguistic history that the genitive case comes to express the wide range of disparate relations, as classified for us in a book of Greek grammar and syntax.<sup>329</sup>

The stresses and strains in Socrates’ argument from analogy not only incline him to demur from drawing a conclusion about the irreflexivity of the genitive relation at 169a1-8. They also illustrate for the reader how relations that are denoted by the genitive case are not, after all, instances of the same relation,

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<sup>329</sup> For example, as cited above, see Goodwin (1968): 229-245.

viz., ‘*the* genitive relation’. In as much as these various relations are not identical, they are therefore not necessarily indiscernible in respect of their properties. Hence, the vulnerability of Socrates’ argument from analogy. For even if all the genitive relations, except the one that knowledge instantiates, were to be established beyond any doubt as being irreflexive, this would not prove that the genitive relation in the case of knowledge is irreflexive. And Plato directs us to be circumspect in our critical evaluation of the argument from analogy through Socrates’ refusal to credit the arguments and methodology of his inquiry with enough validity to warrant any definite view about the reflexivity of the genitive relation.

Plato’s guidance to the reader for further research into the relational structure  
instantiated by knowledge

At 169a1 Socrates says that there are perhaps some people who would not find it impossible to believe that things like perception, motion and heat can be reflexive. In the next sentence he confesses that there is a need for a very great man (μεγάλου δή τινος) who will satisfactorily decide (διαιρήσεται) this question in all cases (κατὰ πάντων), viz., whether anything that exists is so constituted as to possess its own power in relation to itself (169a1-4). Plato shows Socrates considering the possibility that someone else might succeed where he has failed, that someone else might be able to conduct the inquiry into the genitive relation to its satisfactory conclusion. This is Plato’s invitation to us to take up

the challenge to pursue the inquiry further than Socrates has, and is not, as one might hastily conclude, evidence that Plato himself ‘was genuinely baffled by the question whether knowledge could be its own object, since he leaves it to “some great man”’.<sup>330</sup>

Socrates’ careful examination of the various manifestations of the genitive relation and his analysis of it in terms of δύναμις and οὐσία have already, by way of demonstration, instructed the reader in methodology. With Socrates’ capitulation in the inquiry into the reflexivity of the genitive relation, Plato reviews what the structure of Socrates’ method has been, and indicates exactly what is left to be done. In 169a1-c2 Socrates describes what he has failed to do and what the ‘very great man’ needs to do by way of the application of a method of διαίρεσις. At 169a3 Socrates uses the word διαιρήσεται to characterise the method of inquiry that the ‘very great man’ needs to carry out. Plato’s characterisation of Socrates’ method as being a διαίρεσις appears again at 169a8 and 169c8, where Socrates affirms both his and Critias’ inability to discriminate or discern (διελέσθαι) adequately the many forms of the genitive relation. Furthermore at 170a7, Socrates speaks of knowledge in terms of its power to divide (διαίρειν) things into groups, viz., into that which is knowledge and that which is not, and this is the power that he is endeavouring to exercise by his method of inquiry.

The method of collection and division is generally associated with what is considered Plato’s ‘later’ works, and its employment there is often viewed as a novel departure for him from his ‘previous’ methodology. Certainly, we do not

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<sup>330</sup> Tuckey (1951): 112.

have in the *Charmides* anything like the long train of divisions in pursuit of definition that we see in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*. But the principle of seeking something out and hunting it down, by means of divisions of entities within a collection or class, does in a rudimentary way take place in the *Charmides*. For self-knowledge plays the part of the quarry in pursuit of which Socrates gathers together all the various activities that possess the genitive relation. First, having established the principle that self-knowledge is knowledge, and that all knowledge instantiates the genitive relation, Socrates' method of division sets out, and fails, to isolate the knowledge that is 'of' itself. He then examines other activities and conditions in respect of the genitive relation, and fails to find a division that instantiates reflexivity in this relation. Finally, he confesses at 169a3-7 that further work remains to be done to determine the class of those things that can have their *δυνάμεις* in relation to themselves, the class of those that cannot, and which class contains the kind of knowledge that Critias says is *σωφροσύνη*.

Plato's highlighting of methodology in this part of the *Charmides* shows that he is inviting the reader to think about the nature and the legitimacy of Socrates' method, and to carry it further than Socrates does. The search is for self-knowledge of the kind that Critias agrees at 167a9 is knowing what you do and do not know. Both Socrates and Critias agree that knowledge belongs to those activities that instantiate a relation denoted by the genitive case in Greek. However, Socrates has not been able to find within this collection of activities either a group or even a single instance that can possess this relation in a reflexive way. Plato, however, all the while has been instructing the reader in

how to advance such an inquiry, as a response to Socrates' admission of the incompleteness of his own inquiry.

The question over the validity of Schleiermacher's deletion of πλὴν ἐπιστήμης at 169a4 raises this very issue of the high profile that Plato gives to Socrates' methodology. Recall that Socrates' strategy has been to establish that no activity that instantiates the relation denoted by the genitive case can be reflexive, i.e., that no activity can possess the οὐσία of its own δύναμις. We have noted the weakness in Socrates' inductive method, viz., that if one manages to prove that all other activities—omitting knowledge for the moment—that instantiate the genitive relation cannot tolerate reflexivity, this does not prove that knowledge cannot tolerate it. Until the irreflexivity of the genitive relation is either proved of knowledge itself or proved in some *a priori* way *tout court*, self-knowledge is not vitiated. Socrates' method has been to try to prove the latter by an inductive argument that, at most, can only establish that if reflexive knowledge does indeed exist, it does not possess the genitive relation *in the same way* in which the other activities do, for they defy reflexivity.

Schleiermacher advises the seclusion of πλὴν ἐπιστήμης at 169a4, and *prima facie* his advice seems to be entirely reasonable. In order to review the case in favour of his seclusion, we need to consider two things: why Plato ought not to have written this and why a scribe would have inserted it. At this point Socrates is admitting his inability to complete his inquiry adequately. Instead, some very great man is needed who will be able to determine

... whether none of the things that exist [except for knowledge] is so constituted by nature (πέφυκεν) as to have its power in relation to itself, but has its power

only in relation to another, or some can and others cannot. (169a3-5)

The expression ‘except for knowledge’ would indeed be odd if Socrates envisages his very great man leaving knowledge out of his διαίρεσις κατὰ πάντων (169a2-3). That is to say, it would be hard to understand why Plato wrote πλὴν ἐπιστήμης if this construes Socrates as saying that the aim of the inquiry is to ascertain the non-existence of reflexivity in all cases *other than* knowledge, on the grounds that this would entail irreflexivity in the single, unexamined case of knowledge. If this is what the inclusion of πλὴν ἐπιστήμης amounts to, then Socrates will be committing *petitio principii*, for his inductive argument cannot prove that knowledge is not an exception. It is unlikely that Plato will have scripted Socrates to make such a blunder. Why, then, would a scribe have inserted πλὴν ἐπιστήμης? Perhaps the scribe did so because the analysis of the genitive relation in cases other than knowledge is, in fact, exactly what Socrates has been doing, and the scribe did not realise that the addition of πλὴν ἐπιστήμης can make Socrates look like he is committing the fallacy of *petitio principii*. If we are to read πλὴν ἐπιστήμης as expressing Socrates’ intention to omit knowledge from the examination of the genitive relation that a very great man needs to do, then Schleiermacher is surely right to seclude it.

However, πλὴν ἐπιστήμης does not have to be read this way, and by considering an alternative reading of it, we can see why there is good reason for Plato to have written it. We can read πλὴν ἐπιστήμης as constitutive of Socrates’ candid review of his own procedure so far, and his acknowledgement that up to

this point his consideration of activities other than knowledge has failed to establish that the genitive relation is ever reflexive. In this regard he admits that even the complete examination of the genitive relation in cases other than knowledge must remain the job for someone greater than he. The addition of πλὴν ἐπιστήμης, far from condemning Socrates to *petitio principii*, may be seen as expressing Plato's intention to highlight methodology in this part of the *Charmides*, in order to give guidance for the further research that needs to be done by the reader. So far, the genitive relation has been examined in some cases other than knowledge. For a full examination, this needs to proceed through all possibilities of the genitive relation, except knowledge (πλὴν ἐπιστήμης), and then proceed to see in which of the two divisions knowledge falls, whether in the irreflexive group or in the group that accommodates reflexivity.

That this is Socrates' strategy is clear from what he goes on to say. After he has prescribed the need for a division to be carried out by the very great man on all activities with respect to their possible reflexivity, he says that his next step is to inquire,

... furthermore (καὶ... αὖ...), if there are any things that do themselves possess their power in relation to themselves, whether knowledge, which is what we say σωφροσύνη is, is among them. (169a5-7)

If we were to excise πλὴν ἐπιστήμης from the earlier part of this sentence, then this last step would be redundant, since the question of the reflexivity of knowledge would already have been determined in the διαίρεσις κατὰ πάντων: this latter colon of Socrates' sentence (169a5-7) would have been entirely

superfluous. If on the other hand we allow πλὴν ἐπιστήμης to stay, then Socrates can be seen setting out the procedure for the further research that needs to be done. Once the very great man has divided the collection of all activities that possess the genitive relation into those that are and those that are not reflexive, if indeed he does find that there is a class of activities that can be reflexive, he must then (αὖ) determine whether knowledge, which is what Critias defines σωφροσύνη to be, is in this class.

If we do retain πλὴν ἐπιστήμης, *pace* Schleiermacher, it is important to heed what I take to be Schleiermacher's warning not to construe it as committing Socrates to the fallacy of *petitio principii*. And there is good reason to retain it, for consistent with Plato's highlighting of the issue of methodology since 165b5, it accords with Plato's intention to render Socrates' methodology transparent for us at the very point where he accosts us with a challenge to reflect on the nature of philosophical inquiry and on the particular route of premises and arguments that account for Socrates' *aporia*.

Socrates' self-conscious *aporia* exemplifies the Socratic wisdom  
that his methodology fails to find.

This challenge to the reader is made even more compelling by Plato's implementation of dramatic irony, for he depicts Socrates exhibiting in this part of the *Charmides* the very self-knowledge that Socrates' argumentative strategy is failing to discover. It is the Socratic wisdom of the *Apology* that now appears



in the dramatic frame of the *Charmides*, just where Socrates admits his *aporia* and Plato issues us with the challenge to be the ‘very great man’ who will complete the inquiry.

At 169c3-6 Socrates’ description of the effect he has on Critias resembles Meno’s comparison of Socrates to the torpedo fish (*Meno* 80a4-8). There, Meno remarks on Socrates’ reputation for being in *aporia* and having the tendency to reduce others to *aporia*, and Socrates retorts that if the latter is true, it is true because he reduces others to *aporia* by being in it himself (*Meno* 80c6-8). Here in the *Charmides*, Socrates describes his *aporia* as having the sort of power a yawn has to compel others to do the same. And when we bear in mind that we, the readers, also are in the presence of Socrates’ *aporia*, we can see that Plato is challenging us to defy our own infection from Socrates’ *aporia* by finding a way forward ourselves.

Plato intends us to be no less in *aporia* than Socrates and Critias, and he highlights this important part of the process of philosophical inquiry by embellishing the frame of the dialogue. Like Critias, we have been brought to the point at which real inquiry can begin through the same aporetic procedure that Socrates first demonstrates upon Meno, and then explains to him (*Meno* 77b6-79e6 & 84a3-c9). Whatever we thought we knew about Socrates’ ‘human knowledge’ after reading the *Apology* is now seen not to be knowledge at all. And unless we are the likes of Socrates’ ‘very great man’, who is needed to determine whether knowledge can ever be ‘of’ itself, we, like Socrates and Critias, will have found ourselves ‘catching’ *aporia*, like a yawn, from Socrates. And so, the Socratic wisdom that the arguments fail to find not only

appears in the guise of Socrates himself, but also exerts its causal efficacy upon us, the readers.

This double dialogue reading of the *Charmides* explains what might otherwise appear to be a contradiction in Platonic doctrine. So long as the reader thinks he knows what Socrates' peculiar 'human wisdom' is, he cannot inquire, anymore than the slave could in the *Meno*, before he was reduced to *aporia* (νῦν μὲν γὰρ καὶ ζητήσκειν ἂν ἠδέως οὐκ εἰδώς, *Meno* 84b11-12). Like the slave, who was made to realise that he did not in fact know, and therefore could begin to inquire, so the reader is empowered by his own *aporia* to initiate inquiry into what he had assumed he knew. The *aporia* is uncomfortable for the reader, of course, not just because awareness of one's ignorance is uncomfortable, but especially because the ignorance that the reader's *aporia* betrays concerns the very epistemic condition that he must cultivate in order to lead the only life worth living for a human being, viz., the examined life. This epistemic condition is knowing that, in truth, one does not know.

At 169c8 Socrates uses the verb 'διαίρεσθαι' for a third time within half a page to describe what he is trying to do and what he is exhorting Critias to do. And Socrates' invitation to Critias, of course, constitutes Plato's invitation to us. If we are to salvage Socratic wisdom and come to understand what it is, we must first of all realise that we do not know what it is, and indeed admit it. Then we shall need to do further work with διαίρεσις in order to determine exactly what things can and what things cannot possess their powers reflexively, and how knowledge of what one does and does not know is amongst the former.

At 169c6-d1 Plato further aggravates the *aporia* we are suffering by means of his contrapuntal characterisation of Critias in the frame. In utter contrast to Socrates' transparent awareness of his own epistemic condition, Plato portrays the proud Critias in a state of denial, viz., the denial of his own ignorance. He is reduced to inarticulate humbug as he attempts to save face, since he does not possess the intellectual integrity to admit his ignorance. Here is a man who throws the Socratic wisdom of Socrates into bold relief by exemplifying its antithesis: the stubborn insistence that one does know when one does not. And we apprehend the nobility of Socrates' peculiar wisdom all the more so because of the juxtaposition of its ugly opposite. Critias refuses to admit his incompetence for conducting a successful διαίρεσις on the activities that possess the genitive relation. He is unable to find a way forward to defend his definition of σωφροσύνη, but he does not have the honesty to admit it.

In this way Plato keeps the quarry of the second half of the *Charmides* before the mind of the reader. The Socratic wisdom of the *Apology* is what Socrates exemplifies throughout the *Charmides*, and yet through his arguments Socrates infects the reader with *aporia* about what Socratic wisdom is and how it can exist at all. Indeed, this is exactly what one would expect Socratic wisdom to do to us who think we know what we do not know. And so, in a dialogue that fails to find the possibility and benefit of Socratic wisdom, we find the character Socrates embodying it and benefiting us, the readers, by rousing us out of any complacency in a mere partial knowledge of what Socratic wisdom is.

However, it is not just the dramatic frame that ensures that Socratic wisdom remains the focus of the dialogue, for the resumption of the arguments also homes in on it. At 169d5-7 Socrates revives the inquiry by accepting for the sake of argument that the knowledge of knowledge can exist. He then asks how the possession of such a self-knowledge either is or enables us to have the knowledge of what we do and do not know (169d5-7). Furthermore, he reminds Critias that this is what Critias says ‘knowing oneself’ and being σώφρων are.

Critias entirely misunderstands the import of Socrates’ question, and responds by asserting the principle that a person is ‘like the very thing that he possesses’ (τοιοῦτος... οἷόνπερ ἐστὶν ὃ ἔχει, 169e1-2). One who has swiftness is swift; one who has beauty is beautiful. Likewise, one who has knowledge (γνώσιν) knows (γιγνώσκων). Critias then ‘answers’ Socrates’ question by saying that one who has knowledge of itself (γνώσιν αὐτὴν αὐτῆς) will know himself (γιγνώσκων που αὐτὸς ἑαυτὸν τότε ἔσται).

This is not, of course, an answer to Socrates’ question, for Critias fails to advert to his own claim that the knowledge of knowledge entails that its possessor will know what he does and does not know. However, Socrates chooses not to dispute the reply that Critias does give. That is to say, he does not disagree with the principle that

... when one has that which knows itself (τὸ αὐτὸ γιγνώσκόν), one will know oneself (αὐτὸς αὐτὸν γνώσεται). (169e6-7)

Socrates chooses not to dispute the claim that a person has self-knowledge *qua* knowledge of himself, if he has self-knowledge *qua* knowledge of itself.

Clearly there is room for dispute here, for there is at least the question to consider whether the agent of knowledge, i.e., the knower, is identical with his knowledge, for if not, then it remains to be shown that knowledge of it entails knowledge of him. But Plato does not have Socrates go down this route (οὐ τοῦτο... ἀμφισβητῶ, 169e6), and in checking this turn in the discussion, Plato ensures that the dialogue remains centred upon the problem of knowledge of itself *qua* knowledge of what is and is not known.

Socrates returns to his original question at 169d5-7. Critias has defined σωφροσύνη as ‘knowing oneself’, and he agreed with Socrates’ gloss of ‘knowing oneself’ as knowing what one does and does not know (εἰδέναι ἃ τε οἶδεν καὶ ἃ μὴ οἶδεν, 169e7-8). It is the *definiens* of ‘knowing oneself’ as the knowledge of what one does and does not know that Socrates now wishes to explore, a *definiens* which ensures that the Socratic wisdom of the *Apology* remains at the centre of this latter half of the *Charmides*. The words εἰδέναι ἃ τε οἶδεν καὶ ἃ μὴ οἶδεν immediately recall Socrates’ self-description in the *Apology* 21d3-7 & 29a4-b7, and are echoed strongly in the frame at *Charmides* 166d1-2.

We see that Socrates’ behaviour throughout the *Charmides* has exemplified this epistemic condition, and Plato further illustrates Socrates’ embodiment of what the argument is in search of by Socrates’ drawing attention to his own characteristic epistemic condition. In this way Plato keeps alive the possibility of Socratic wisdom by means of Socrates’ behaviour, in spite of the failure of the λόγος to validate it. Its possibility is further drawn to our attention by Socrates’ direct reference to it as his *modus operandi*, and indeed his very nature. At 170a2 Socrates offers Critias something of an apology, saying that he

just cannot help being himself: ‘... but I am probably always the same sort of person’ (ἀλλ’ ἐγὼ κινδυνεύω ἀεὶ ὁμοίος εἶναι, 170a2). What sort of person is this? It is the sort of person who is aware of what he does not know:

... for once again I do not understand how they are the same thing, viz., [the knowledge of knowledge and] knowing what one knows and knowing what one does not know. (170a2-4)

Plato holds up before the reader the paradigm of the human being who recognises what he does and does not know. On this occasion what Socrates realises he does not know (οὐ γὰρ αὖ μανθάνω, 170a3) is how the knowledge of knowledge and the knowledge of what one does and does not know are the same thing, as Critias affirms they are. And so by means of the arguments, too, Plato ensures that pride of place in this part of the dialogue is reserved for Socratic wisdom, as Socrates begins to consider with Critias whether knowing what one does and does not know really is the same thing as knowledge of knowledge.

#### Section 4. *Charmides* 170a-172c

Further examination of the genitive relation of knowledge (170a6-171c10) reveals the inadequacy of the Critian model of knowledge and the need for a model that accommodates a second-order kind of knowledge.

At 170a5 Critias requests that Socrates explain why he does not understand how the knowledge of knowledge is the same thing as knowing what one does and does not know. Socrates' overall strategy from 170a6-c10 is to give an account of his *aporia* that demonstrates how Critias' definition of σωφροσύνη as 'knowing oneself' and his equating this with 'knowing what one does and does not know' renders σωφροσύνη a useless thing, good for nothing, which Socrates 'divines' (μαντεύομαι) σωφροσύνη cannot be (169b4-5). Indeed, one could argue that it is a logical necessity that σωφροσύνη is a good thing, in as much as it is an excellence (ἀρετή). Socrates' arguments for the apparent uselessness of σωφροσύνη as 'knowing oneself' occupy the rest of the dialogue, and just as the earlier arguments for the impossibility of self-knowledge relied for their foundation upon a model of knowledge that Plato intends us to reject and seek to improve, so now do the arguments for its uselessness.

Socrates' arguments for the inutility of self-knowledge begin at 170a6 and share the common theme that there is nothing for self-knowledge to be 'of' that is both proper to itself and useful.<sup>331</sup> In other words, he further examines the

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<sup>331</sup> However, see Socrates' qualification of this at 172b1-8, which I shall discuss later.

genitive relation in the case of knowledge, seeking to show that, even if it were possible for self-knowledge to exist, there is nothing worthwhile that could enter into the genitive relation with it, in the absence of which self-knowledge fails to instantiate the genitive relation with anything that can benefit us.

Socrates' first criticism of Critias' equating 'knowledge of knowledge' and 'knowing what one does and does not know' continues the language of division by using the verb διαίρειν again (170a7). The subject of the verb is knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) and knowledge is construed as distinguishing what is from what is not. He makes the point that in distinguishing things from each other, the knowledge of knowledge can do nothing more than divide them into two groups, viz., that which is knowledge and that which is not knowledge (170a6-8).<sup>332</sup> Knowledge of knowledge, therefore, is only 'of' whether something is knowledge or the lack of knowledge.

Socrates then contrasts the knowledge of knowledge and the lack of knowledge generally with the knowledge of health and of justice. He first asks,

Then is the knowledge and the lack of knowledge of health the same as the knowledge and lack of knowledge of justice? (170a10-b1)

Critias says that it is not, and Socrates agrees with him by expressing his view (οἶμαι) that one of these is medicine, another political science, whereas the knowledge of knowledge and the lack of knowledge is 'nothing but knowledge'

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<sup>332</sup> Of course, if we adopt the alternative reading of διευρεῖν in the B T and W manuscripts, then Socrates will be characterising knowledge not as dividing into two groups, but as discovering two groups, viz., what is and what is not knowledge. In either case, Socrates is seen to resume his method of analysing kinds of knowledge according to what they are 'of', i.e., their genitive relation.



(οὐδὲν ἄλλο ἢ ἐπιστήμη, 170b3-4). They both agree that medicine, political science and the knowledge of knowledge and the lack of knowledge, if indeed the third one exists, are three different kinds of knowledge, distinguished according to what that they are ‘of’, i.e., that with which they instantiate the genitive relation.

Socrates and Critias find no difficulty identifying how the genitive relation works for medicine, political science and other kinds of knowledge, like house-building, weaving, calculation, geometry and weighing, all of which appear to Socrates to be non-problematical in respect of how their genitive relation works. However, he does have great difficulty understanding how the genitive relation might work for reflexive knowledge, i.e., knowledge of itself. Earlier at 165b5-169a1 Socrates examined the genitive relation in all its forms in relation to the possibility of its possessing reflexivity. Now at 170a6 ff., in considering what utility self-knowledge might have if it did exist, he continues to examine the genitive relation, but focuses instead on an analysis of the content of what exactly the *relatum* would be, with which self-knowledge might (i.e., if it is possible) instantiate the genitive relation.

Socrates now introduces a distinction: on the one hand non-problematical kinds of knowledge, like medicine, political science etc., whose objects of knowledge are health, justice etc., and on the other hand the knowledge of knowledge, which is just ‘of’ knowledge. At 170b6-10 he secures Critias’ agreement that even in the absence of the knowledge of health or justice, one who possesses the knowledge of knowledge could discern not only that he himself did or did not have knowledge, but likewise in the case of other people.

Surely, if one does not also know about health and justice, but only knows knowledge (ἀλλ' ἐπιστήμην μόνον γινώσκῃ), in as much as he only has knowledge of the fact that (τούτου... ὅτι) he knows something and has some knowledge, it is likely that he would know both about himself and other people (καὶ περὶ τῶν ἄλλων). Is this right? (170b6-10)

Here, then, we have the hypothetical case where a person can know *that* he or someone else has knowledge of a particular domain, like medicine, without knowing *what* he or the other person knows. That is to say, by virtue of this knowledge of knowledge alone, he can know that, for example, he or someone else has medical knowledge without himself having any access to that medical knowledge. But then, at 170b11-c4, Socrates argues against this hypothetical case by saying that is not even by the knowledge of knowledge that we know *that* we know, but by these other non-problematical knowledges, like medicine, music and house-building. It is these knowledges, and not the knowledge of knowledge, that tell us *what* we know, and so without them, how can we possibly tell what it is *that* we know?

But if indeed σωφροσύνη is only the knowledge of knowledges, how will it enable a person to know that he knows health or that he knows house-building [sc., or that he possesses any other *particular* form of knowledge]? (170c6-7)

Critias denies that the knowledge of knowledge enables a person to know that he knows something in particular, and Socrates concludes,

Therefore, the person who does not know [medicine or house-building] will not know what he knows, but only that he knows [sc., something or other]. (170c9-10)

The knowledge of knowledge cannot tell us what it is we do or do not know; it can only tell us that we do or do not know something or other. Therefore, *pace* Critias' claim at 170a1, self-knowledge is not 'of' what we do and do not know, for it is the other non-problematical knowledges that are about this. Such being the case, then, is there anything of any real benefit to mankind that remains for the knowledge of knowledge to be 'of'? What actual, practical use will such knowledge have?

In this way Socrates completes the first broadside against the utility of self-knowledge by denying that it has for its *relatum* what we do and do not know. And since 'what one does and does not know' has now been shown not to feature as the *relatum* with which self-knowledge instantiates the genitive relation, Critias is left in the invidious position of struggling to discover what exactly does feature there.

In distinguishing the knowledge of knowledge from other non-problematical kinds of knowledge, Socrates generates a class of what we might call 'first-order' knowledges. By 'first-order' I mean these 'non-problematical knowledges' that are knowledge about the world, its objects, properties and relations. First-order knowledge instantiates the genitive relation with the referents of our veridical cognitions about the world. Second-order knowledge, on the other hand, is knowledge about our first-order knowledge, in as much as it is first-order knowledge that constitutes the *relatum* with which second-order knowledge instantiates the genitive relation. Given these terms, Socrates is clearly investigating, evidently without success, the possibility of second-order knowledge.

Let us then construe Socrates as introducing a distinction between first-order and second-order knowledge. The objects of the first-order knowledges, i.e., the non-problematical knowledges, are things like health, justice etc., and the objects of second-order knowledge, i.e., the knowledge of knowledge, are the non-problematical, first-order knowledges themselves.<sup>333</sup> First-order knowledge is ‘of’ the various domains of objects, facts and explanations that are known by us, and second-order knowledge is ‘of’ the knowledges that know them. Socrates’ point is that *what* we know, *qua* a definite form of epistemic content about reality, is not known by virtue of the knowledge of knowledge, but by the first-order knowledges of medicine etc.

Certainly, we might protest that the knowledge of knowledge can, surely, exist *alongside* first-order knowledge, so that in harness with each other they can together provide us with the knowledge of what we do and do not know. But Socrates’ point at 170a6-d9 is that the knowledge of knowledge cannot deliver this on its own. Socrates argues, it cannot be true to say that knowledge of knowledge is the knowledge by which one knows *what* one knows; it is not ‘of’ what one does and does not know. And by Critias’ proposed parity of the knowledge of knowledge and σωφροσύνη, Socrates concludes that therefore

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<sup>333</sup> Rosamond Sprague notes the distinction between first and second-order knowledge in the *Charmides*. She defines a first-order art as ‘an art that possesses a recognizable scope or product, such as carpentry, medicine, or geometry’ and second-order art as ‘an art the scope of which comprises arts of the first order, such as rhetoric, sophistry, or statesmanship’. However, while she uses this distinction to draw parallels with the *Laches* and the *Republic* as part of Plato’s political concerns, I shall focus on its use in the *Charmides* as a division of knowledge according to what it is ‘of’, as part of his strategy to examine knowledge, and particularly Socratic wisdom, according to its genitive relation. Sprague (ed.) (1973): viii, 53 & 78-79.

σωφροσύνη cannot be the knowledge of what one does and does not know (170d1-3).

We see Socrates here whittling away from the knowledge of knowledge the content of the *relatum* with which self-knowledge, according to Critias, instantiates the genitive relation. The threat is that there will be little or nothing of use to feature as self-knowledge's *relatum* after Socrates' examination. The danger is that even if self-knowledge can be shown to be possible, by Socrates' finding for it at least *something* useful to be specifically 'of', this something may prove not to be worthwhile enough to make the knowledge of knowledge a likely candidate for σωφροσύνη. Socrates concludes at 170d1-3 that what remains after his analysis for the knowledge of knowledge to be 'of' is not *what* we know, which would have been a useful domain. And yet Socrates does, for the moment at least, leave *something* for this knowledge to be 'of': it is able to determine *that* we do or do not know *something or other we know not what*.

However, Socrates further erodes even this modicum of utility of the knowledge of knowledge, for at 170e1-171c2 he argues that this knowledge alone does not give us the ability to examine others and determine whether they know what they claim to know, as Critias claims on behalf of self-knowledge at 167a1-8 and again at 170b6-10. It can only tell us whether someone knows something or other. The most it can tell us is that the person possesses the same knowledge of knowledge that we do (171c8).

Socrates' argument is as follows (170e1-7). If we are to examine a person who claims to be a doctor, and to distinguish whether he really has the knowledge of medicine or not (τὸν ὡς ἀληθῶς ἰατρὸν διαγνώσσεσθαι καὶ τὸν μὴ),

we must converse with him not about medical knowledge, for it is not knowledge of (medical) knowledge that he claims to have. Instead, he is claiming to have knowledge about health and disease. Socrates is being very careful here to distinguish between knowledge of a knowledge, whether that be medicine or anything else, and knowledge of the content or domain of a knowledge. Socrates reserves the knowledge of any form of knowledge as something that σωφροσύνη alone, as the knowledge of knowledge, provides us with. According to Socrates' careful arguing, medical knowledge tells us about health and disease, but not about medical knowledge. In as much as medical knowledge is knowledge, only σωφροσύνη, as the knowledge of knowledge, can tell us that.

Hence, we ought not to agree with Malcolm Schofield's claim that the text here is corrupt and needs amending. His claim is that

... the first stages of this proof are barely intelligible unless we emend the text by striking out οὐ at 170e6 and by deleting the exchange between Socrates and Critias at 170e12-171a2.<sup>334</sup>

He gives three reasons to support his claim. First, despite Socrates' 'positive preamble' that the examiner 'surely will proceed like this' (ἄρ' οὐχ ᾧδε ποιήσῃ, 170e5),

... he proceeds to tell us of two topics of conversation (ιατρική, 170e6; ἐπιστήμη, 170e9) which we had better avoid, but none that we *should* introduce.<sup>335</sup>

Second, Schofield argues that this prohibition by Socrates is

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<sup>334</sup> Schofield (1973): 122.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid. (Author's italics.)

... in the form of a rather muddling alternative question (... οὐ διαλέξεταί... ἢ οὐ; 170e5-7), which is met by the rather inappropriate answer: Ναί, οὕτως. (170e8).<sup>336</sup>

Third, when Socrates gives the reason for not talking with a doctor about ἰατρική, it ‘sounds very oddly’.

[The reason] is that the doctor understands nothing *qua* doctor except health and disease (170e6-7). But is not that just what ἰατρική is about?<sup>337</sup>

Schofield, then, proposes to solve these ‘disturbing features of the text’ by emending the text.

Schofield is right to raise an eyebrow over this passage, for it is elliptical. But it does not have to be read in the way he recommends. And when we bear in mind the overall drift of Socrates’ argument here, the passage, albeit elliptical in a typically Socratic way, quite naturally reads in a way that is free from the three ‘disturbing features’. I shall use W. R. M. Lamb’s translation for this passage in order to avoid the event of my translation unduly influencing my case.

But let us consider it another way: if the temperate man or anybody else would discriminate between the true doctor and the false, he will go to work thus, will he not? He will surely not talk to him about medicine; for, as we were saying, the doctor understands nothing else but health and disease. Is not that so?

Yes, it is.

But about science he knows nothing, for that, you know, we assigned to temperance alone. (170e3-10)<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

Schofield's first problem is that Socrates does not tell us what the examiner ought to discuss with the putative doctor. But surely, Socrates does tell us. He says that the examiner will not talk to him about medicine, for 'the doctor understands nothing else but health and disease'. Clearly, then, this is what the examiner *will* talk to him about, for the whole point of the conversation is to ascertain whether he really knows what he says he knows. The point that Socrates is making, of course, is that the examiner cannot do this by virtue of his possession of the knowledge of knowledge alone.

Schofield's second problem is that Critias' response is inappropriate when he says 'Yes, it is'. But his response is not inappropriate, for he is agreeing with Socrates that the examiner ought not to talk about medicine, i.e., medical *knowledge*, since it is not *knowledge* that the putative doctor claims to know, but health and disease. Again, knowledge *ex hypothesi* is the domain of the knowledge of knowledge; it is not the domain of the knowledge of medicine. Socrates is being very careful to isolate the respective domains of knowledge in his whittling away of any significant utility for the knowledge of knowledge.

We can now see how Schofield's third problem vanishes. He says it 'sounds very oddly' for Socrates to say that the examiner will not talk with the doctor about ιατρική, since the latter only knows about health and disease. 'But is not that just what ιατρική is about?', Schofield rhetorically asks. 'Yes', we would answer, 'ιατρική is indeed about health and disease, and the examiner will certainly talk with the putative doctor about what ιατρική *is about*. But he will not talk with him about ιατρική *itself*. For them to converse about medicine

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<sup>338</sup> W. R. M. Lamb's translation in Plato (1979).



(ιατρική) itself would be for them to talk about (medical) *knowledge*.’ The term ιατρική is itself elliptical, in that it is an adjective qualifying the noun ἐπιστήμη, which is to be understood by the reader.

Socrates’ point is that medical knowledge, *qua* first-order knowledge, is ‘of’ health and disease, and to ascertain whether someone has this knowledge, one must converse about these. One would not, however, converse with him about ἐπιστήμη, whether ιατρική or any other kind. Critias understands the drift of Socrates’ argument at this point, and the passage reads without Schofield’s ‘disturbing features’ and fits perfectly within its context. Socrates is progressively limiting the scope of conversation that the knowledge of knowledge commands. It can talk only about knowledge, not about what any form of knowledge is ‘of’ or about. Having concluded at 170d1-3 that the knowledge of knowledge can only tell that someone knows something or other, Socrates proceeds to delimit this boon even further. Presently at 171c4-9, he will claim that the most the possessor of the knowledge of knowledge can discern *by this knowledge alone* is that someone else possesses the same knowledge that he does (πλὴν γε τὸν αὐτοῦ ὁμότεχνον, 171c8).

One may object that Socrates’ whittling away of the domain of the knowledge of knowledge is unreasonable. One might say, ‘Surely, if self-knowledge, *qua* the second-order knowledge of knowledge, tells us a person has knowledge, then the knowledge it tells us they have tells us what the knowledge is?’ But Socrates’ point is that it does not tell us *the* knowledge he has, but only that he has *some* knowledge. For us to know *which* knowledge a person really has, we need to examine his words and deeds, and see whether

they exhibit this or that knowledge, as Socrates asserts at 171b4-9. It is not by virtue of the knowledge of knowledge that we know *which* knowledge the person has, for we can only know that by virtue of the first-order knowledge itself.

In support of this distinction Socrates states at 171a5-9 the principle that knowledge is defined (ὁρισταί) by what it is ‘of’, a principle that Socrates has applied already at 165c4-6 and 168b2-3. For example, medicine is defined as the knowledge that is ‘of health and illness’. This principle of definition occurs in the middle of his demonstration that self-knowledge can tell us whether a person has knowledge, but not what that knowledge is. By means of our knowledge of medicine we can tell whether someone else has medical knowledge, but since the knowledge of knowledge is only ‘of’ knowledge, and is defined (ὁρισταί) by this, it can only tell us whether *x* is knowledge, not what kind it is.

If indeed this is what self-knowledge is ‘of’, as 171c4-9 asserts, then the *relatum* of self-knowledge is beginning to look very ‘thin’ and negligible indeed. Socrates’ principle of defining knowledge by what it is ‘of’, i.e., by the *relatum* of its genitive relation, appears to force a crisis upon any knowledge that is not just first-order knowledge. Once the domain of objects, facts and explanations that are known by the many kinds of first-order knowledge have been appropriated as the defining features of their respective knowledges, what is left remaining for the knowledge of knowledge to lay claim to? What is it left to be ‘of’ that makes this particular form of knowledge useful to us? This is Socrates’ point at 171c4-9. As a possessor of the knowledge of knowledge, I

can know that someone else knows *something*, but the most that I can know about *what* he knows is if he is a ὁμότεχνος with me, i.e., a possessor of the same knowledge of knowledge that I possess. For just as craftsmen can generally recognise some who is knowledgeable in their own particular skill, so my possession of the knowledge of knowledge will tell me whether someone else has knowledge ‘of’ the same thing I do, viz., knowledge.

On this view of first-order knowledge, each knowledge enjoys a kind of propriety over the domain that defines it. In this sense knowledge is defined by what it grasps as its *relatum* in the genitive relation. According to this view, once we see that all of *what* we know is grasped by the various first-order knowledges, we realise that there remains nothing at the practical level for second-order knowledge to know in this proprietary sense. Unlike medicine, it cannot save lives. Nor can it build houses. It knows nothing about health and shelter. In its favour, it does at least know the first-order knowledges, but not what they are about. Unless Critias can suggest a use for this kind of knowledge, then his definition of σωφροσύνη will falter and fail, for σωφροσύνη is agreed to be something useful.

It is signally important for us to notice that Critias does not offer any utility for second-order knowledge. Socrates has shown that the knowledge of knowledge cannot deliver the benefits associated with the various first-order knowledges, and once the known world has been carved up into the various domains of their respective first-order knowledges, Critias finds no use for second-order knowledge, the domain of which is only knowledge itself. This betrays an absence of any interest in Critias for understanding what knowledge

is, for his only interest appears to be in knowing what health, building etc. are. There seems to be no provision in Critias' conception of knowledge for reflection upon our epistemic condition and what this thing, knowledge, is whose presence or absence makes us knowers or not-knowers of reality.

Although Critias has not explicitly spelled out this conception of knowledge, we can see it implicitly in his failure to defend his definition of σωφροσύνη as self-knowledge. He appears to require the knowledge of knowledge, or second-order knowledge, to compete for usefulness on the level with the first-order knowledges. Since it does not have the useful domain that they have, since it is not 'of' useful things like health and houses, Critias cannot conceive how it can be useful. It is true, he will come up with a suggestion at 174d8-e2 after Socrates prompts him with the two images of communities governed by the knowledge of knowledge. But even here he proposes for it the domain of supervising and commanding the other knowledges and their practitioners. There is no room for philosophical reflection upon oneself or one's epistemic condition, but only for the supervision of skills. And as Socrates points out, such supervision is the domain of the knowledge of good and bad, not of the knowledge of knowledge.

The poverty of Critias' conception of knowledge imposes constraints on the examination of the knowledge of knowledge that are similar to those we saw placed by his grasper-grasped, internal-external model of knowledge on the examination of the reflexivity of the genitive relation at 167b10-169a1. There, we saw Critias agreeing to analogies of knowledge that preclude it from being reflexive, and therefore precluding self-knowledge. Now, we see all forms of

knowledge being defined by their domains, or what they are 'of'. Without their distinct domains, they will collapse into each other. But once all the other knowledges have laid claim to their property, as it were, Critias can find nothing worthwhile for self-knowledge, or knowledge of knowledge, to be 'of'. Hence, just as earlier Critias' model of knowledge left no room for the existence of self-knowledge, so now his conception of knowledge leaves no room for its usefulness.

At no point do we see Critias calling into question his model or conception of knowledge. And so Plato forces Socrates' arguments to work within this framework of Critias' limitations on what knowledge is. While this model may (or may not) serve us well in analysing some instances of knowledge, like the perception of physical objects, and while this conception may have some use in differentiating first-order knowledge, they clip the wings of the conversation and prevent it from soaring upward into the consideration of reflexive or reflective knowledge. Since Critias' answers accord with this model and this conception of knowledge, and he offers no alternative as he slips slowly into elenctic defeat, we can group the model and conception loosely together and call them collectively the Critian conception of knowledge.

Plato intends us to view Socrates' *aporia* about self-knowledge as generated largely because of the inadequacy of the Critian conception of knowledge to give a satisfactory account of second-order knowledge. In due course, as we shall see at 172b, Socrates will suggest a way to expand the Critian conception of knowledge. But as Critias is brought to aporetic silence at 171c10, we can recognise how Critias' treatment of knowledge generally, and of the knowledge

of knowledge in particular, has failed to find any possibility or use for self-knowledge, glossed as the knowledge of knowledge and the lack of knowledge. And as the only conception of knowledge available so far in the dialogue, Critias' account is now seen to be especially problematical, in that it conflicts with the possibility of the Socratic wisdom that Socrates has exhibited and described up to this point in the *Charmides*. At 167a1-7 Socrates glossed Critias' definition of σωφροσύνη as the 'knowledge of knowledge and the lack of knowledge', depicting the possessor of such knowledge in a way that resembles the Socrates of the *Apology*. He said that such a person would be able, better than anyone else, to examine and distinguish what others really know from what they do not know, but think they know. But now from 170d5 to 171c9, on the grounds that all knowledge is of the first-order kind, we find Socrates concluding from Critias' conception of knowledge that no one can know whether someone else possesses a particular kind of knowledge unless one possesses that very knowledge oneself.

According to Critias, one can examine whether someone else knows or not only if one already possesses the knowledge oneself. Socrates establishes this by asking him,

Is it then [the case that a person will examine rightly] by examining... whether what is said [by him] is true and whether what is done [by him] is right? (171b7-9)

Critias answers in most positive terms, saying that this cannot be otherwise: it must be so (Ἀνάγκη, 171b10). And in order to determine how Critias envisages such an examination, Socrates asks,

Then would one be able to follow either of these [inquiries into what the claimant of medical knowledge both says and does] without [oneself possessing the knowledge of] medicine? (171b11-12)

Critias answers forcefully in the negative, ‘Certainly not’ (Οὐ δῆτα, 171b13).

And with his agreement, he denies the possibility of what Plato depicts Socrates doing in the *Apology*. There, Socrates denies having any of the knowledge that others have, and claims only to have the knowledge attributed to him by the god of Delphi, which he interprets as the knowledge that he is worthless as far as knowledge is concerned. He is the only person in Athens who lives the examined life, and he receives the divine accolade of being the most knowledgeable of men. And yet, if we are to believe what he continually avows, it is *without* the possession of knowledge that he is able to discern what others do and do not know. And we see this figure set before us again at *Charmides* 166c7-d2.

By contrast, Critias denies that Socrates could have ascertained that the politician, poets and craftsmen did not know what they said they knew, unless he was lying when he said that he did not have their knowledge. According to Critias, Socrates’ disavowals of knowledge, if true, disqualify him from examining successfully others’ epistemic claims. For the examination of others’ knowledge is a matter of acquiring that knowledge first, and then gauging whether their words and actions conform to the knowledge they claim to have. Therefore, on the basis of Critias’ answers, Socrates puts to him the conclusion that only a doctor can determine whether or not others know medicine when they claim they do, and Critias entirely agrees. In this way Socrates presents a

mode of inquiry at 171c4-9 that derives from Critias' conception of knowledge and reserves the inquiry into others' knowledge for experts alone. Since for Critias first-order knowledge is the only knowledge that is of any use in examining others for what they know, only first-order knowledge can serve as the means by which the examination of others in respect of their claims to knowledge can be successfully conducted.

The mode of inquiry that Critias endorses directly contradicts the mode of inquiry that Socrates insists his discussions with Critias conform to, when he claims not to know in advance the answers to the questions he asks (165b5-c1). According to Critias' mode of inquiry, since knowledge is a kind of grasping of things, the grasp of a purported knower is tested by its consonance with the grasp of an expert. And so the expert tests another's grasp on what his knowledge is 'of' by gauging his words and deeds to see whether they are true and right. And only he, the expert, can tell. This Critian mode of inquiry is itself entailed by the Critian conception of knowledge, which demands that all knowledge be of the first-order kind. By means of Socrates' words and behaviour in the *Charmides*, Plato shows us how Critias' denial of Socratic inquiry derives from his unwitting denial of Socratic wisdom. For while Critias never explicitly discloses his limited conception of knowledge, his answers implicitly do so.

Socratic examination, as Plato presents it, does not conform to the Critian mode of examination. It resembles what Socrates has described in glossing Critias' definition of the knowledge of knowledge and the lack of knowledge, but it is diametrically opposed to the way that Critias understands how the



examination of oneself and others works. Whereas the Critian mode requires the prior possession of the knowledge under examination, the Socratic mode has no need of it whatsoever. Socrates is rightly perplexed in not being able to find a place for a knowledge of knowledge and the lack of knowledge in Critias' mode of examination, since first-order knowledge does all the work. However, in the mode of examination that Plato depicts for his readers as characteristic of Socratic inquiry, we have yet to see what part the knowledge of knowledge and the lack of knowledge plays in a procedure in which it is *not* first-order knowledge that guides and evaluates each stage of the inquiry.

At 169a1 Plato left Socrates in *aporia* in regard to the possibility of reflexivity in the genitive relation, and this was an indication to the reader of further research that he might undertake. So now at 171c10 Critias' conception of the genitive relation between knowledge and its objects, which admits only first-order knowledge, results in the contradiction of the Socratic wisdom with which Socrates has conducted the present inquiry. Here, too, is an *aporia*, and Plato invites the reader to undertake further research to discover what Critias may have failed to understand about knowledge, such that his conception of it precludes the possibility of any knowledge that is 'of' knowledge and the lack of knowledge in any way that is important or useful. The transparent examination of the genitive relation since 165b5 points the way for this further research, and the rest of the *Charmides* offers suggestions for how our understanding of knowledge might go beyond the Critian conception of knowledge, and develop in order to make possible an account of the nature and utility of Socratic wisdom.

Socrates introduces a second-order concept of knowledge.

At 171d1 ff. Socrates further elaborates the inadequacy of Critias' conception of knowledge by his illustration of the city governed by the knowledge of what one does and does not know. Ostensibly, Socrates is trying to glean some benefit that is intrinsic to the knowledge of knowledge as Critias understands it, but in the end he argues that such efforts must ultimately collapse. At 171d1-172a5 Socrates imagines a community in which everyone either is σώφρων in the way that Critias construes σωφροσύνη or is ruled by someone who is (αὐτοί τε [καί] οἱ τὴν σωφροσύνην ἔχοντες καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι πάντες ὅσοι ὑφ' ἡμῶν ἤρχοντο, 171d7-8). That is to say, the rulers in this hypothetical community know what they do and do not know, and also know this in regard to everyone else in the community. However, Critias has conceded that the knowledge of knowledge cannot by itself tell us what knowledge someone else has. Only if we ourselves possess a particular first-order knowledge can we tell whether someone else possesses it or not.

According to Critias' conception of knowledge, the only way a ruler in such a community could know what everyone else does and does not know would be if he, rather like a Renaissance man, were to possess all first-order knowledges himself. Only with such omniscience could a ruler test the subjects in his community in respect of their possession or lack of possession of each kind of knowledge.

And yet, Socrates, despite having made this point to Critias at 171c4-9, perseveres in constructing this hypothetical community, in which the very

knowledge that Critias' conception of knowledge denies actually materialises.<sup>339</sup> Socrates shows that he is not considering the possibility that this community might be inhabited by people who possess all knowledge and direct those who do not, for at 171d6-e1 he envisages that the rulers, who have this knowledge, will delegate certain actions to others because *they know that the others have knowledge that they lack*. On Critias' first-order only model of knowledge such knowledge is impossible, for in order to ascertain which knowledge another person has, one must have all the knowledges oneself, and if one has all knowledge oneself, then one would never be in the position of entrusting actions to others *because* (γάρ, 171e1) one did not have the relevant knowledge oneself.

Nevertheless, Socrates perseveres in constructing this hypothetical community, anyway. At 171d1 ff., even though he has failed to discover how the knowledge of knowledge, given Critias' limited conception of knowledge, might be equivalent to 'knowing what one does and does not know', as Critias claims at 170a1, he insists on probing it for what possible benefit it might confer. Plato is able to press this question and weave the ensuing discussion of the good of such knowledge seamlessly into the *Charmides* because Socrates is examining this knowledge as the definition of σωφροσύνη. Since σωφροσύνη is an excellence (ἀρετή), it must, if only by definition as an excellence, be

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<sup>339</sup> Tuckey acknowledges this incongruence in Socrates' allowing to the rulers of this community what he has just denied, viz., to know *that* someone else knows without also knowing *what* he knows, Tuckey (1951): 113. But whereas Tuckey gives no reason for Socrates' describing the rulers thus, I shall argue that Plato allows Socrates this liberty in order to introduce into the dialogue the relation between knowledge and the good.

something good. Hence, as early as 167a9-b4, where knowledge of what one does and does not know constitutes another fresh start, the ‘third for Zeus the saviour’, Socrates has insisted that such a definition must be tested for its usefulness (ὠφελία), if it is to prove valid for σωφροσύνη.

This gives Socrates the opportunity to ask what good the knowledge of what one does and does not know secures. Even though it cannot exist on Critias’ understanding of knowledge, Socrates imagines what good it might have secured if it did exist. He imagines that all actions are done only by those who know how to do them successfully, and he concludes that everyone in such a community would do well (εὖ πράττειν, 172a2), since everyone would do what is right (ὀρθῶς ἔμελλον πράξειν, 171e4) in whatever he was entrusted to do. That is to say, since only experts carry out the jobs to be done, no mistakes are made, and the citizens live their lives free from flaw (ἀναμάρτητοι, 171d6), for knowledge ensures that whatever is done is done right and well. That the citizens live without error (ἀναμάρτητοι) might itself be thought to be enough to establish the goodness of the knowledge of knowledge, if it could secure this. Socrates, however, goes on to argue that freedom from error in action will not be enough to secure our well-being.

Socrates introduces the equivalence of ‘doing well’ and ‘faring well’, for

... those who do well are necessarily happy  
(ἀναγκαῖον... τοὺς δὲ εὖ πράττοντας εὐδαίμονας εἶναι,  
172a2-3).

This equivalence is easily made in Greek, given the capacity of εὖ πράττειν to mean ‘doing well’ in the sense of executing an action well and ‘doing well’ in

the sense of thriving. In this way Plato juxtaposes the two notions of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) and thriving or happiness (εὐδαιμονία), and in Socrates' hypothetical community, the knowledge of knowledge is assigned the role of guarantor of happiness. For the first time in the *Charmides*, Socrates presents the knowledge of what one does and does not know as conferring a benefit that is no less than εὐδαιμονία itself.

Socrates will soon rescind this high accolade from the knowledge of knowledge, and the achievement of our highest welfare (εὐδαιμονία) will be afforded to another kind of knowledge, viz., the knowledge of good and bad (174b10 ff.). But for the moment at least, Plato invites us to consider this inquiry into 'knowing oneself', glossed as Socratic wisdom, in the light of the capacity of knowledge to produce the good life, the life of well-being and happiness. The relation between happiness and knowledge, and in particular, the 'human knowledge' that Socrates claims to have, receives attention in the *Apology*, where Plato characterises it both as necessary for living the only life worth living for a human being, i.e., 'doing well' as a human, and as the distinguishing mark of the wisest of men. So, the fact that Socrates here in the *Charmides* raises the question of the relation between happiness and the knowledge of what one does and does not know focuses the mind of the reader on the question whether there is indeed a kind of knowledge that ensures happiness, and if there is, whether this is Socrates' 'human knowledge'.

At 172a7-8 Socrates denies that knowledge of knowledge, both as Critias conceives of it and as something that produces such felicitous results in the community, exists anywhere. However, although he has failed to discover how

it could exist, he has proposed that, if ever there could be such a knowledge, it would produce εὐδαιμονία. Notice that Socrates does not deny that a knowledge that ensures well-being and happiness exists. Rather, he denies that the knowledge of knowledge and the lack of knowledge, as he and Critias have so far defined it, is seen to play such a role in any community.

Having introduced the notion of a knowledge that secures happiness, from 172b1 to 172b8 Socrates sets it aside and proposes instead another good (ἀγαθόν) that he *is* willing to attribute to Critias' σωφροσύνη, defined as the knowledge of knowledge and the lack of knowledge. He now looks not at the level of the community, but at the level of the individual inquirer. He remarks that anyone who possesses this knowledge will learn more easily anything else he learns, and whatever he learns will appear more clearly to him. The reason he gives is

... since, in addition to each thing he learns, he beholds in addition (προσκαθορῶντι) the knowledge (τὴν ἐπιστήμην). (172b5-6)

The verb 'προσκαθορᾶν' appears to have been used very rarely in Greek literature. Plato's use of it here is the only citation for the word in Liddell and Scott.<sup>340</sup> Therefore, our understanding of its sense must rely on our examination of the components of the word and of the context in which it appears here. Both these considerations indicate that Socrates' use of the word προσκαθορᾶν suggests a second-order role for the knowledge of knowledge.

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<sup>340</sup> Liddell and Scott (1940): ad loc. The meaning given to the word here is 'behold besides'.

First, the preposition ‘προς’ conveys the sense that the ‘perception’ of this knowledge is somehow over and above the ‘seeing’ that the first-order knowledges have. It is a seeing ‘in addition’ to whatever else is seen. The knowledge of knowledge is, therefore, something with which one sees *more than* what the first-order knowledge sees, despite the fact that Socrates has shown that Critias’ conception of such a knowledge of knowledge cannot accommodate knowledge being something more than first-order knowledge. In identifying what good such a knowledge might confer, Socrates presents the notion that such a knowledge, if it exists, is a kind of knowledge that shows us that which is somehow in addition to what all first-order knowledges show.

Second, the verb ‘προσκαθορᾶν’ has ὁρᾶν for its stem. Up to now, Socrates has spoken of ‘having’ or ‘possessing’ (ἔχειν) knowledge. Here, he speaks of the person ‘seeing’ knowledge itself, in addition to each particular thing that he knows by means of the learning that the other knowledges provide. The knowledge of knowledge is a matter of enabling the knower to ‘see in addition’, rather than grasp, hold or have something. If we are to understand perception crudely as the grasping of something ‘out there’, then ‘seeing in addition’ does not offer much help in conceiving how second-order knowledge might work. But whereas the metaphor of ‘*grasping* things in addition’ may prove problematical, where objects compete for our limited grasp, there appears to be much more scope for the metaphor of ‘*seeing* things in addition’, where many aspects of an object’s surroundings, qualities and nature can be seen at once.

Socrates does not dwell further on this brief change from speaking of knowledge as held to speaking of it as seen, and it would be wrong for us to

read too much into it. Nevertheless, the brief description of the value of the knowledge of knowledge at 172b1-8 suggests a way of expanding the Critian conception of knowledge beyond first-order only knowledge. Second-order knowledge, as a knowledge of knowledge, need not be seen as competing with the first-order knowledges in trying to grasp what they grasp as their domains, i.e., their special objects of knowledge. Its function, according to Socrates, is to give the knower the power to ‘see in addition’. Clearly, in order for the knowledge of knowledge to grant us the power to ‘see in addition’, its functioning requires that the things known by means of our first-order knowledge are somehow present to our cognition and known to us, in addition to which we may see our first-order knowledge itself.<sup>341</sup> This ‘being present to our cognition’ has already appeared as a principle that Socrates exploits earlier in the dialogue, when he asks Charmides to say what sort of thing σωφροσύνη is, on the grounds that he can do so since the virtue is present to/in him (παρούσα, 160d7).<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> I deliberately leave open for the time being how the objects of first-order knowledge may be ‘somehow present to our cognition’. McCabe views Socrates’ analogy of comparatives as suggesting a transitive relation, whereby the second-order knowledge of a first-order knowledge entails the knowledge of what the first-order knowledge knows. McCabe (2006b): 6 (draft copy). While I grant that some form of transitivity is at work here, I shall later suggest that Socrates’ clues toward the end of the *Charmides* guide us in the direction of a conception of second-order knowledge that is synoptic and holistic. Such a second-order knowledge, or knowledge of knowledge, is the knowledge of the things that first-order knowledge knows *as embedded in* the systematic structure or pattern of explanation that the first-order knowledge provides.

<sup>342</sup> I am grateful to McCabe for noting this earlier allusion to Socrates’ claim about something’s being present and its being known. She, however, goes on to discuss the distinction between being ‘present to’ us and being ‘presented to’ us. In doing so, she argues in favour of an account of ‘civilised’, rather than ‘brutish’, perception in the *Charmides* that allows Socrates’ argument from



Third, Plato has Socrates also use the preposition κατά with the stem ὁρᾶν. This conveys more than just seeing, for καθορᾶν carries the sense of ‘looking down upon’ or ‘beholding’.<sup>343</sup> He uses it in the *Sophist* to describe what ‘true philosophers’ do, who visit cities unrecognised, ‘looking down from above upon the life of those below’ (καθορῶντες ὑπόθεν τὸν τῶν κάτω βίον, *Sophist* 216c6-7). And in *Republic* VII, it appears when Plato reaches the climax of the Analogy of the Cave, where his cave dweller finally emerges and needs to accustom his sight to the things above ground, for ‘at first he most easily beholds shadows’ (καὶ πρῶτον μὲν τὰς σκιὰς ἂν ῥᾶστα καθορῶ, *Republic* 516a6), and then again down in the cave, where dwellers are honoured for ‘observing most keenly the passing shadows’ (τῷ ὀξύτατα καθορῶντι τὰ παριόντα, 516c9). These uses signify the possession of a kind of seeing that beholds or observes a whole range or class of things, viz., ‘the life of those below’, shadows cast on the wall of the cave, and the shadows outside the cave. In the context of *Charmides* 172b5, the range, group or class of things that one beholds through προσκαθορᾶν is everything that one learns and knowledge itself (ἅτε πρὸς ἑκάστῳ ᾧ ἂν μανθάνῃ προσκαθορῶντι τὴν ἐπιστήμην, 172b5-6).

Socrates’ use of προσκαθορᾶν characterises the knowledge of knowledge as a kind of second-order knowledge in the following sense. Its function is to give the knower the power to ‘behold in addition’ his knowledge and the things that

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analogy (which she calls the ‘Relations Argument’) to fail to refute self-knowledge. Ibid.: 14 & 17-8 (draft copy). While I agree in her account of what Plato wants us to think about perception, I shall locate the defeasibility of the argument from analogy in the Critian conception of knowledge that underpins it.

<sup>343</sup> Liddell and Scott (1940): ad loc.

his knowledge knows. To the extent that it grants us the power to know knowledge itself in addition to all that knowledge knows, it is second-order knowledge. Note, however, that this characterisation of the knowledge of knowledge is still incompatible with Socratic wisdom, in that Socrates claims his knowledge of knowledge does not entail his having knowledge of first-order knowledge. Nevertheless, with his use of προσκαθορᾶν as the description of what the knowledge of knowledge does, Socrates at least extends the concept of knowledge from Critias' first-order only conception in order to accommodate the possibility of some kind of second-order knowledge.

Socrates suggests a holistic function for the knowledge of knowledge.

Socrates explains that the knowledge of knowledge will enable one to acquire knowledge more easily (ῥᾶόν... μαθήσεται), and each thing that is learned will be known more clearly (ἐναργέστερα πάντα αὐτῷ φανεῖται, 172b3-4). He does not say exactly how it will do this, but as we saw earlier he adds

... since, in addition to each thing he learns (πρὸς ἐκάστῳ ᾧ ἂν μαθήσεται), he beholds in addition (προσκαθορῶντι) the knowledge (τὴν ἐπιστήμην).  
(172b5-6)

In as much as each thing that one learns forms a part of the knowledge one possesses, and so far as the knowledge itself constitutes the explanatory context of each thing that one learns, we can view the knowledge of knowledge as having a comprehensive scope that operates in a holistic way vis-à-vis

knowledge and its constituent parts.<sup>344</sup> Although Socrates' description does not give us much to go on, it does suggest for the knowledge of knowledge a function directed towards the cognition of the whole and its structure, rather than of the parts in themselves. As first-order knowledge is concerned with 'each thing that is learned' and its explanatory relation to other items of knowledge, second-order knowledge concerns itself with the comprehensive pattern of the whole of first-order knowledge and its constituent parts.

Socrates says that with the knowledge of knowledge we behold all that we come to know and our knowledge itself, and by means of this comprehensive vision the knowledge of knowledge will make any particular piece of knowledge more easily acquired and more clearly known. Again, Socrates does not explain how the comprehensive character of the knowledge of knowledge causes greater ease in learning and the greater clarity of what is known. However, Socrates' tantalisingly brief description suggests that it is the comprehensive vantage point of the knowledge of knowledge that confers this boon, by means of its capacity to contextualise everything that is learnt or known within the pattern, structure or system of the first-order knowledge itself, which this second-order knowledge of knowledge 'beholds in addition'.

Socrates also says that such a knowledge will make one better at examining others about what they understand (περὶ ὧν ἄν καὶ αὐτὸς μάθῃ), and without this

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<sup>344</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following as a definition of 'holism': 'the tendency in nature to produce wholes (i.e., bodies or organisms) from the ordered grouping of unit structures' (*The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*: Supplement ad loc.). By 'holistic' I mean something that is directed towards the whole and its parts, and the structure that orders the parts to compose the whole.

knowledge, the job will be rather feebly and shabbily done (ἀσθενέστερον καὶ φαυλότερον, 172b6-8). Again, he does not say how, but the fact that it enables one to behold both what is known and the knowledge itself suggests that its holistic perspective offers a greater understanding of how things are the way they are, and why they are so. This understanding of the interconnectedness of things, their causes and explanations, would place the interrogator in a stronger position to assess the knowledge of others.

Such a holistic factor in the knowledge of knowledge conforms to what Gail Fine calls Plato's 'interrelation model of knowledge', according to which 'he conceives of knowledge holistically'.<sup>345</sup> According to this model knowledge is a correct understanding of the explanation of things.

One can't know a single entity or proposition; knowing any given entity or proposition requires knowing related ones as well... One knows more as one can explain more; the best sort of knowledge, which only the dialectician has, involves a synoptic grasp of reality as a whole.<sup>346</sup>

Fine's 'synoptic grasp of reality as a whole' expresses the holistic feature of second-order knowledge mentioned above, in that such a knowledge apprehends the interrelationship of the parts within the whole, thereby disclosing the pattern, structure or system that makes a whole out of the sum of the parts.

Fine uses this analysis of Plato's conception of knowledge to defend her thesis that, on the issue of epistemic justification, he is a coherentist, and she claims that his interrelational model of knowledge 'is present at least as early as

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<sup>345</sup> Fine (2003d): 14.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid.

the *Republic*'.<sup>347</sup> She argues that Plato uses the *Theaetetus* to demonstrate the inadequacies of the model of knowledge as a sort of grasping, or acquaintance, by showing how it fails to account for false belief.<sup>348</sup> Instead, Plato endorses an interrelational model of knowledge, according to which 'knowledge involves mastery of a field, an ability systematically to interrelate the elements of a particular discipline'.<sup>349</sup>

Julia Annas also points out that knowledge for Plato, as evidenced in the *Republic*, requires understanding, and that understanding 'is *systematic* because it involves explanation', as distinct from mere true belief, in which truths 'hang together for arbitrary reasons', rather than forming 'an explanatory whole'.<sup>350</sup> Like Fine, she maintains that Plato's goal for knowledge is

... being able to say why things are the way they are...  
[and being] able to relate them systematically and show  
what is basic and what dependent, and how they are  
interrelated.<sup>351</sup>

I agree with Annas' and Fine's analysis of Plato's conception of knowledge as a systematic understanding that interrelates truths in an explanatory whole. I also agree with Fine's view that Plato intends the *Theaetetus* to demonstrate the inadequacy of the grasping or acquaintance model of knowledge and that his interrelational model of knowledge appears as early as the *Republic*. What I wish to point out, however, is that central elements of the interrelational model are in evidence even here in the *Charmides*.

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<sup>347</sup> Ibid.: 15.

<sup>348</sup> Fine (2003a): 223.

<sup>349</sup> Fine (2003c): 228.

<sup>350</sup> Annas (1997): 143. (Author's italics.)

<sup>351</sup> Ibid.: 144.

For here in the *Charmides*, Plato sets before the reader the requirement that an adequate conception of knowledge, if it is to account for all kinds of knowledge, must incorporate holistic and synoptic features that comprehensively explain how ‘each thing one learns’ interrelates with the other things one learns so as to constitute a system, pattern or structure, thereby forming a coherent domain of knowledge. The Critian model of knowledge as a simple combination of grasping and grasped, e.g., of medicine and health, fails to do this, for it focuses principally on the proprietary claim that the various kinds of knowledge make upon features of the world, like health, houses etc. Critias’ conception of knowledge appears to go no further than the classification of different kinds of knowledge according to what each kind is ‘of’, i.e., according to the *relatum* with which each knowledge instantiates the genitive relation. This very simple conception of knowledge leaves knowledge only at a first-order stage, in that there is no provision for knowledge to reflect upon itself and to be cognisant of its own structure. With Socrates’ praise of the knowledge of knowledge at 172b1-c2, however, Plato indicates to us where the Critian conception of knowledge needs to be revised: it needs to expand to accommodate the synoptic and holistic features of second-order knowledge.

Socrates offers no further explanation of how the knowledge of knowledge will go about acquiring what it knows. Having articulated the conception of such a second-order knowledge, he leaves it to one side, as something that goes beyond the subject of their inquiry into *σωφροσύνη*. He asks Critias,

... but are we not looking at something greater and requiring it [αὐτό, i.e., σωφροσύνη] to be something greater than it really is? (172c1-2)<sup>352</sup>

Here at *Charmides* 172c1-2 Socrates says that σωφροσύνη, as the knowledge that guarantees happiness in those communities in which it governs, appears to be something rather grand, but perhaps grander than what σωφροσύνη really is.

Critias replies that perhaps this is so, and so ends Socrates' two-stage assessment of the benefit of the knowledge of knowledge at 171d1-172a5 and 172b1-c1. However, Plato does not intend us to view this assessment as conclusive, but rather as problematical and indicative of further issues about knowledge that must be addressed before a satisfactory account can be found. From 171d1 to 172c1 Socrates has made two attempts to identify the benefit conferred by σωφροσύνη, as the knowledge of what one does and does not know. The first attempt (171d1-172a5) characterises this knowledge as that which would secure happiness and well-being in a community. The second attempt attributes to this knowledge, by virtue of its possessing a second-order capacity of a holistic or synoptic kind, the power to facilitate our learning, to improve the clarity of our knowledge and to fortify our examination of others.

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<sup>352</sup> There is a difficulty in ascertaining exactly what Socrates' question means. The difficulty centres on what Plato intends the antecedent of αὐτό to be. I take it to refer to σωφροσύνη, rather as the pronouns τοιοῦτόν and ὃ do a few lines later (172c6 & 8). One might object that the pronouns are in the neuter gender, whereas σωφροσύνη is a feminine noun. However, σωφροσύνη is still a thing that is not yet known and is under investigation, and it is customary for Plato to refer to such unknowns with the neuter gender. For example, he does so when Socrates confesses to Meno that any Athenian would tell him that he happens not to know what ἀρετή is (οὐδὲ αὐτὸ ὅτι ποτ' ἐστὶ τὸ παράπαν ἀρετή τυγχάνω εἰδώς, *Meno* 71a6-7). Tuckey (86) and Sprague (89) agree with my reading.

However, at 172a7-8 Socrates dismisses the first benefit, on the grounds that we do not find such a knowledge anywhere operating this way. And he leaves to one side the second benefit at 172b8-c2, because it seems to involve something greater than what σωφροσύνη is. Both parts of Socrates' assessment of the knowledge of knowledge end inconclusively, but through them Plato has introduced into the discussion two important concepts. The first is the notion that there is a knowledge that secures happiness and well-being. The second is the refinement upon Critias' conception of knowledge that envisages a second-order knowledge of a holistic or synoptic kind, by which one beholds not only what other knowledges reveal, but also the knowledges themselves (ἅτε πρὸς ἑκάστῳ ᾧ ἂν μανθάνῃ προσκαθορῶντι τὴν ἐπιστήμην, 172b5-6). Both concepts will provide direction for us in the further research into Socratic wisdom that beckons at the end of the dialogue, for they will offer ways to think about knowledge that are not confined to the first-order only model that Critias' answers have delineated throughout the dialogue.

Before Socrates develops these two concepts any further, however, Plato once again shows him expressing doubts about the way in which he and Critias have conducted the inquiry, as a clear message to us that we must seek for answers not in the dialogue itself, but in our critical reflections upon Socrates' and Critias' conduct of the inquiry and in our own further pursuit of the inquiry.



Plato highlights methodology through Socrates' worries over improper agreements that he and Critias have made.

Socrates will return to his illustration of the community governed by the knowledge of knowledge at 173a7-d5, where he will withdraw claims that he made on behalf of the knowledge of knowledge in respect of its capacity to produce happiness and well-being. But before he does so, he once again alerts the reader to questions of methodology by casting doubt on his inquiry. These doubts form a methodological interlude (172b8-173a6) between his two reflections on his hypothetical community.

Socrates worries that he and Critias have agreed to things they ought not to have (172d5, d7 & e2), and he explains his worry as being the fear that they have not rightly considered the matter (ὅτι φοβοίμην μὴ οὐκ ὀρθῶς σκοποῖμεν, 172e6). Plato alerts us to the great care required to avoid concessions that Socrates and Critias, and indeed, even we ourselves, may wrongly have made in the course of the inquiry. Again, as at 166c7-d2 and in the *Apology*, Socrates fears that he may think he knows what he in fact does not know, and in this way Plato advises us to discover what has gone wrong in the path that the conversation has followed. There is something that Socrates and Critias are missing, that is wrong-footing their inquiry into Socratic wisdom, and that we are invited to detect and remedy.

Socrates' worries put the reader in mind of the lesson in methodology that Plato is providing. After this interlude, Socrates will return to his analysis of knowledge according to its genitive relation (173d8 ff.). He will give both an

illustration, in the form of his hypothetical community, and an argument showing why the knowledge of knowledge is not ‘of’ happiness and well-being. Before this happens, however, Plato uses this interlude to alert us to the importance of methodology, and to remind us of Socrates’ strategy of examining knowledge according to its genitive relation. Socrates suspects that he and Critias took a wrong turn in thinking that σωφροσύνη, as Critias conceives it, would be a great good if it governed the hypothetical community in the way he described (172d3-5). He has denied that anything like the knowledge of knowledge is found to be ‘of’ such a good as the happiness and well-being of a community (172a7-8), but at 172c4 ff. he begins to doubt that it ever *could* do so. The examination of things according to their genitive relation is the self-conscious methodology that Socrates has been using throughout his inquiry into σωφροσύνη and self-knowledge, and his worries in this interlude over his conduct of the inquiry not only set the scene for his oneiric revisit of the hypothetical community at 173a7 ff., but also guide us as to where to continue to look in our search for a satisfactory account of Socratic wisdom.

At 172e4-6 Socrates reiterates his worry that he is not inquiring rightly (μὴ οὐκ ὀρθῶς σκοποῖμεν), and he condemns and now contradicts the agreement he and Critias made earlier, when Socrates described his hypothetical community that is governed by the knowledge of what one does and does not know (171d1-172a5). He says,

For in truth, however much σωφροσύνη is like this [viz., the knowledge of what one does and does not know], it is not at all clear to me that it produces (ἀπεργάζεται) any good for us. (172e6-8)

Socrates' use of the word ἀπεργάζεται recalls his discussion with Critias at 165c10-166a2. There he uses the same word in pointing out that medicine produces a fine ἔργον, as does the knowledge of house-building etc. We saw how Critias objected by saying that not all knowledges produce ἔργα, and how Socrates agreed. Nevertheless, Socrates returns to this idea in his consideration of what is the benefit or good of the knowledge of knowledge. And at this point Critias has no room for manoeuvre in which to object, for the knowledge of knowledge, if it really is σωφροσύνη, as he insists it is, must be seen to be productive of good. Having suggested at 171d1-172a5 that the ἔργον of the knowledge of knowledge is happiness and well-being, at 172e6-8 Socrates asserts that he no longer thinks that this can be so.

#### Section 5. *Charmides* 172c-176d

Two kinds of 'doing well' imply a synoptic knowledge of 'faring well': the  
knowledge of good and bad.

In order to explain his change of mind to Critias, Socrates recounts what he calls his dream, in which he once again envisages a community where all that is done is done only with knowledge. This is a fuller description of what Socrates envisaged at 171d1-172a5, but whereas in his first description of such a community he depicts Critias' knowledge of knowledge as the cause of happiness and well-being, now he argues that such a knowledge cannot do this.

This *volte-face* occurs immediately after the interlude, in which Socrates raises the notion of a knowledge that is of a second order, and in which he invites us to detect the shortcomings that are frustrating his arguments. Again, the method he has been following is the examination of the genitive relation, and his change of mind results from his finding fault with his conclusion at 171e7-172a3 that the knowledge of knowledge is ‘of’, i.e., has for its *ἔργον*, happiness and well-being.

At 173a7 Socrates begins the description of his dream, which depicts the community, this time the human race (173c7), in which actions are done only with knowledge. He concedes that in such a community, which is entirely governed by knowledge in this way, everything will be done knowledgeably (*ἐπιστημόνως*, 173d1). So, he concedes that the benefit or good that the knowledge of knowledge would produce is that all action will be done knowledgeably. But what he is not certain about now is that doing things knowledgeably is the same thing as doing things well (*εὖ*, 173d4). This question of the equivalence of ‘acting knowledgeably’ and ‘acting well’ did not bother him in his first assessment of such a community at 171e7-172a3, but now it does.

Socrates here is exploiting the ambiguity in Greek between doing well (*εὖ πράττειν*) in the sense of performing an action well, like making good shoes, and doing well (*εὖ πράττειν*) in the sense of faring well and being happy (*εὐδαιμονεῖν*).<sup>353</sup> In his first description of his hypothetical community he

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<sup>353</sup> Tuckey also notes this verbal ambiguity, and infers that Plato was aware of it because it ‘affect[s] the argument closely and help[s] towards finding a

expresses the equivalence of both kinds of doing well, or at least he expresses the implication of the second by the first (172a2-3).

For, with error expunged and correctness in charge, those who live in these circumstances will, of necessity, in every undertaking act nobly and well (καλῶς καὶ εὖ πράττειν), and those who do well are happy (τοὺς δὲ εὖ πράττοντας εὐδαίμονας εἶναι). (171e7-172a3)

But this equivalence or implication is what he questions at 173d3-4. In both reveries Socrates speaks of a community where actions are entrusted only to those who know how to do them well (εὖ πράττειν), and he now questions whether such a community, *just because of this*, will fare well (εὖ πράττειν).

But that, if we act knowledgeably (ἐπιστημόνως ἂν πράττοντες), we would fare well (εὖ ἂν πράττοιμεν) and be happy (εὐδαίμονοῖμεν), this is what we are no longer able to understand, Critias. (173d3-5)

Here Socrates flags a distinction between the kind of doing well that, for example, a doctor achieves when he cures a patient efficiently, and the doing well that materialises when the doctor fares well, enjoys well-being, is thriving and happy (εὐδαίμονεῖν). The first kind of doing well concerns the efficient and effective execution of action. The second kind concerns the attainment of the

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satisfactory conclusion for it'. But he asserts that '[while Plato was] obviously deeply concerned with clearing up verbal ambiguities..., it is impossible to say how far he was aware of the right way to clear them up, since he leaves the thinking to the reader', Tuckey (1951): 113. While I agree with Tuckey that this is impossible to say, I argue that it is possible to say *in which direction* Plato intended the reader to think.

condition of well-being and happiness. We might, therefore, call the former kind ‘efficient doing well’, and the latter kind ‘eudaimonistic doing well’.<sup>354</sup>

One might argue that there is a third kind of doing well, where the doctor cures the patient, and also it is well that the doctor did indeed cure him, in as much as there are no good reasons, whether moral or prudential, why this particular person should not have been restored to health. Socrates entertains such reasons at *Republic* 407c7-e2, where the life to be cured is deemed to be of no use, or even detrimental, to the state.<sup>355</sup> However, I take this third use of ‘doing well’ to be replicating the sense of eudaimonistic doing well, in which the scope of the phrase is extended to apply to the state, or perhaps simply to the welfare of ‘things in general’.

Socrates now questions whether it is acting with knowledge on every occasion alone that will achieve the eudaimonistic kind of doing well. At 173d6-7 Critias insists that without the rule of knowledge, it is hard to see how it will be possible to achieve the fulfilment of well-being and happiness (τέλος τοῦ εὖ πράττειν, 173d6-5). Socrates does not deny this, but he is going to deny that it is the sovereignty of the knowledge of knowledge that achieves this good. He replies to Critias in a way that reinstates his method of identifying knowledge by discerning what it is ‘of’. He says,

Then inform me yet further about a little thing. Of what do you say ‘knowledgeably’? Of the cutting of leather?  
(173d8-9)

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<sup>354</sup> A similar ambiguity occurs in English. We speak of someone ‘doing well’ when he is executing a task efficiently, and we speak of patient ‘doing well’ when he is enjoying a healthy recovery.

<sup>355</sup> A. E. Taylor adverts to this kind of doing well in his commentary on *Charmides* 164a-c, Taylor (1986): 53.

In Socrates' question 'knowledgeably of what?' (τίνος ἐπιστημόνως, 173d8-9) we see Plato continuing to weave through the dialogue Socrates' method of analysing knowledge according to its genitive relation. In the pages that follow, Socrates will bring the method to bear on the problem of identifying exactly which knowledge is 'of' happiness.

Socrates returns to an investigation into what the knowledge of knowledge is 'of' in order to deny that it is 'of' well-being and happiness. The description of his dream and his arguments in support of his *volte-face* are meant to be an explanation for Critias of Socrates' worries and doubts over the correctness of their inquiry. His arguments from 173d8 onward, which follow the dream, give us an indication of why he has changed his mind. And all his arguments focus on the search for that knowledge which has happiness as the *relatum* of its genitive relation, and his discovery that this knowledge is not, after all, the knowledge of what one does and does not know.

The questions that Socrates asks Critias at 173d8-174b9 are designed to demonstrate to him that it is the knowledge of good and bad that is 'of' happiness, not the knowledge of what one does and does not know. He lists several kinds of knowledge, defined by what each knowledge is 'of', such as the knowledge of making shoes and of working with bronze. Critias rejects each one as the knowledge that produces happiness. Socrates points out that Critias is therefore wrong to say that living by knowledge produces happiness, for Critias himself cannot accept that living by the knowledge of cobblery brings happiness, even though this is living by knowledge. Socrates then examines the knowledge of the past and future, and Critias admits that not even

this will bring happiness. Critias finally answers that it is only by living by the knowledge of the good and the bad that one will achieve happiness (174b10).

So, we can see that, by using his method of examining things according to their genitive relation, Socrates establishes that it is the knowledge of the good and the bad that is 'of' happiness, i.e., of eudaimonistic doing well. It is the knowledge of the good and the bad that has happiness as its *ἔργον*. Accordingly, at 174b11-c3 Socrates concludes that it is not living knowledgeably that produces happiness; only the knowledge of good and bad does this. Furthermore, although all the other kinds of knowledge may succeed in producing their products of health, shoes, cloaks, sea voyages etc., without the knowledge of good and bad we shall not know whether it is well and beneficial that they are done (τὸ εὖ γε τούτων ἕκαστα γίγνεσθαι καὶ ὠφελίμως, 174c9-d1). Without the knowledge of good and bad the other knowledges will still be able to do well in the sense of achieving their aims efficiently, but only the knowledge of good and bad can ensure that the other knowledges will do well in the sense of producing happiness.

At 174d8-e2 Critias makes one last ditch attempt to salvage some utility for the knowledge of knowledge. He argues that in the hypothetical community, where such knowledge governs, it would do us good by being in charge of the knowledge of good and bad, as well as of the other knowledges. Socrates contradicts him by pointing out that just as medicine alone produces health as its *ἔργον*, so all the other *ἔργα* that are produced will be produced not by the knowledge of knowledge, but by other knowledges.



And would this [knowledge of knowledge] produce the other [products] of the expert knowledges (τῶν τεχνῶν), and would each of the other knowledges not produce its own product (ἔργον)? Or have we not all along borne witness that it is the knowledge of knowledge and the lack of knowledge, and of nothing else? (174e4-7)

In this way Socrates strips the knowledge of knowledge of any ἔργον, for it is not found to be ‘of’ any ἔργον, but only ‘of’ knowledge and the lack of knowledge. Not even in some sort of supervisory capacity can it produce a beneficial ἔργον, for what is ‘beneficial’ is in some way ‘good’, and the knowledge of good and bad has been identified as alone the art or skill by which good is secured. Indeed, Socrates denies that the knowledge of knowledge, as the knowledge of what one does and does not know, is ‘of’ anything beneficial at all.

Therefore neither is it of benefit (ὠφελίᾱς), my friend, for we in turn just now attributed this product (ἔργον) to another expert knowledge (τέχνη). (175a3-4)

Hence, Socrates concludes at 175a6-7 that the knowledge of knowledge is not beneficial because not it, but the knowledge of good and bad is productive of benefit. But we immediately see that this is hardly a defeat for the knowledge of knowledge that does not equally dash any pretensions of other knowledges to be beneficial and to do any good. Since the knowledge of good and bad alone is ‘of’ what is beneficial, therefore all other knowledges, too, are not ‘of’ anything beneficial.

Socrates does not explicitly say that the other knowledges are ‘of’ nothing beneficial. But the application of the method of defining kinds of knowledge by identifying what they are ‘of’ soon establishes this for us. Plato has ensured that

we are well-tutored by now in the use of Socrates' method of examination according to the genitive relation, and we clearly see that Socrates' argument against the utility of the knowledge of knowledge has reserved the eudaimonistic ἔργον for the knowledge of good and bad alone. Only by the knowledge of good and bad can well-being and happiness be produced. All the other ἔργα of the other knowledges are of no use or benefit, except in so far as the knowledge of good and bad governs and directs their productions.

Socrates does not subject the knowledge of good and bad to examination according to the genitive relation, as he has done so thoroughly with other knowledges since 165c4. Indeed, his conclusion at 175a6-7 that σωφροσύνη, as Critias defines it, cannot be of any benefit concludes Socrates' elenchus of Critias' position. For Socrates to continue the inquiry as he is wont to do would require Critias or another interlocutor either to make a further attempt to propose a definition of σωφροσύνη or to address Socrates' worries about the previous arguments and disclose where they went wrong. It is entirely appropriate that Plato ends the inquiry here at 175a7 with the refutation of Critias' conception of σωφροσύνη, as being neither possible nor beneficial.

But at the same time, it is entirely appropriate that we do not end the inquiry here. We shall see that at 175a9-d5 Plato will once again, as he did at 169a1-7, challenge us to undertake further research ourselves. But before looking at how he does this, we should first consider what conclusions we might draw from the little that Socrates has said about the knowledge of good and bad prior to 175a9. Plato's painstaking demonstration of Socrates' method of examination according to the genitive relation has equipped us to take the inquiry further

along these lines. The method itself has, as it were, built up a momentum throughout the second half of the dialogue, and its application to the knowledge of good and bad is, therefore, easily done. At 175a3-4 Socrates reminds Critias that the eudaimonistic ἔργον is produced by the knowledge of good and bad alone.

At 174c2-d1 Socrates remarks that all the other knowledges may well produce their ἔργα, but none of them will be productive of benefit without the aid of the single knowledge that causes anything to be beneficial, viz., the knowledge of good and bad. If we now scrutinise this knowledge further by examining more closely what it is 'of', we immediately notice that it cannot produce its ἔργον without the aid of the other knowledges. That is to say, in the absence of the other knowledges, such as medicine, political science, house-building, weaving, cobblery, generalship, agriculture, cooking, etc., the knowledge of good and bad would have nothing with which to materialise its ἔργον.

The reason for this is that the ἔργον of the knowledge of good and bad is parasitic on the ἔργα of the other knowledges. The knowledge of good and bad supervises and directs which ἔργα should be done, when, where, by whom, how far and in what manner. Without these ἔργα for the knowledge of good and bad to regulate so that we fare well and benefit from them, the ἔργον of the knowledge of good and bad simply cannot be. The knowledge of good and bad does, indeed, have an ἔργον, but its ἔργον can manifest only upon the rightly ordered manifestation of the ἔργα of the other knowledges. For example, the

happiness and well-being of the community, which is the  $\xi\rho\gamma\omicron\nu$  of the knowledge of good and bad, depends at least in part upon medical knowledge producing its  $\xi\rho\gamma\omicron\nu$ , albeit according to the dictates of the knowledge of good and bad.

Furthermore, the superintending role of the knowledge of good and bad places it in an unusual relation in respect of the other knowledges. In order for it to produce its  $\xi\rho\gamma\omicron\nu$ , it must know intimately how, to what extent and in what way the  $\xi\rho\gamma\alpha$  of the other knowledges are able to contribute to well-being and happiness. To take a modern example, the knowledge of good and bad must know not only whether a cure for a terminally ill NHS patient ought to be administered, but also which cure ought to be applied, in cases where one cure is more likely to succeed than another, but is also far more expensive. Or where there are enough resources to offer the cure only to one of two patients, in order to make its decision it must know enough of the knowledge of justice and its  $\xi\rho\gamma\omicron\nu$ , and likewise for all the other knowledges that impinge on its decision, to ensure that the  $\xi\rho\gamma\omicron\nu$  of happiness ( $\epsilon\upsilon\delta\alpha\iota\mu\omicron\nu\acute{\iota}\alpha$ ) is produced. Likewise, it must know about genetic science and its  $\xi\rho\gamma\omicron\nu$ , as well as social and political science and their  $\xi\rho\gamma\alpha$ , to ascertain whether medical research involving genetic engineering is safe or not, or just or not, and therefore good or bad.

These few examples illustrate how the knowledge of good and bad must function as a second-order knowledge that embraces the other knowledges and their  $\xi\rho\gamma\alpha$  in its purview, so that it may direct them. In this way, Plato's guidance for our further examination of the knowledge of good and bad according to its genitive relation evinces the notion of a synoptic kind of

knowledge, which stands in relation to the other knowledges in a way that resembles the way in which Socrates portrayed the knowledge of knowledge earlier in the dialogue at 172b1-c2. There, the knowledge of knowledge ‘beholds in addition’ whatever is known and the knowledge that knows it. Here, for the knowledge of good and bad to produce its ἐργον, it too must behold not only the ἐργα of the other knowledges, but also how the other knowledges produce them, in order to regulate their operation for the good.

At 172b1-8 Socrates offered an augmentation of Critias’ first-order only model of knowledge that was able to accommodate the existence and benefit of the knowledge of knowledge. There, Socrates expanded on Critias’ conception of knowledge so as to accommodate a knowledge that beholds both each thing that is known, and also the knowledge itself of those things. With Socrates’ suggestion of a more sophisticated conception of knowledge, the knowledge of knowledge did seem, after all, to be something that very much does exist and is useful, but only because it constitutes a second-order, synoptic kind of knowledge that the Critian conception of knowledge could not countenance.

Now at 175a3, our further application of Socrates’ method of examining the genitive relation elucidates another instance of knowledge, viz., the knowledge of good and bad, that falls foul of Critias’ limited conception of knowledge. Such a knowledge may well be ‘of’ good and bad, as its exclusive property, but once one removes all the ἐργα that are the property of the other knowledges, there remains nothing for the knowledge of good and bad to be exclusively ‘of’. However, such a knowledge may indeed be seen to exist if we make use of

Socrates' refined conception of knowledge that allows for a second-order, synoptic kind.

Through the introduction of the knowledge of good and bad right at the end of the dialogue and our preparedness to apply to it the methodology that has driven the second half of the dialogue, Plato encourages us to persevere in the inquiry by means of Socrates' concluding remarks. At 175a9-d5 Socrates recites a catalogue of failures that his inadequacy as an inquirer has occasioned. In this summing up, he focuses our attention back on the problem of Socratic wisdom and shows what further business there is to be done.

Socrates' catalogue of failures (175a9-d5) provides the reader with direction  
for further research.

At 175a9 ff. Socrates concludes his inquiry into Critias' definition of σωφροσύνη as knowing oneself. He begins by accusing himself of being incapable of inquiring adequately into what σωφροσύνη is. He refers back to his expressions of fear of proceeding in the wrong way (at 166c7-d2 & 172e6), and he attributes his and Critias' failure to account for the utility of σωφροσύνη by condemning his uselessness at following a proper method of inquiry (πρὸς τὸ καλῶς ζητεῖν, 175b2). Socrates describes Critias and himself as defeated (ἡττώμεθα) and incapable of discovering what σωφροσύνη is, i.e., incapable of conducting an inquiry into σωφροσύνη properly to its end. Having highlighted the issue of methodology once again, Socrates offers a summary of key failures

in their inquiry, where their method failed to find a reasonable and sound way forward.

At 175b4-d5 Socrates lists three main points of failure in their procedure. He reminds us of the problematical claims that he and Critias have made, contrary to what their argument warranted (οὐ συμβαίνονθ' ἡμῖν ἐν τῷ λόγῳ, 175b5). This does not mean, of course, that the claims are wrong, for as Socrates has just pointed out (175a9-b1), his argument has been faulty, in that it has failed to find a way out of *aporia*. Indeed, the argument, being a manifestation of Socrates' and Critias' incapacity to follow a method of inquiry successfully to a veridical conclusion, may itself have been at fault in not indicating how Socrates' and Critias' agreements were indeed right.

For example, they may have been right to agree that the knowledge of what one does and does not know is possible, but their argument foundered upon their failure to relieve itself of the restriction that Critias' limited, first-order only conception of knowledge was placing upon the inquiry. It is this possibility that Socrates draws our attention to, when at 175b6-7 he singles out for special mention the first of three main errors that he condemns Critias and himself for making. This is their agreement to the claim that there exists a knowledge of knowledge, when their argument did not allow this to be so. If the argument is faulty, as Socrates says it is, and it did not allow this claim, perhaps there is something in the claim after all, which another argument with a better conception of knowledge might validate.

He then alerts us to the second main error, viz., their agreement to a second unwarranted claim.

And moreover we agreed that with this knowledge we know (γιγνώσκειν) also the products (ἔργα) of the other knowledges, when our argument did not allow even this, so that we could have it that (ἴνα δὴ ἡμῖν) the σάφρων person would know (γένοιτο... ἐπιστήμων) both that he knows what he knows and that he does not know what he does not know. (175b7-c3)

Although Socrates did intimate that with such a knowledge a person would ‘behold’ knowledge itself ‘in addition’ to each thing that is known (172b1-6), here he declares that his method of inquiry failed to justify this claim. He draws our attention to the ‘unwarranted’ notion of a synoptic kind of knowledge by which ‘we know also the products of the other knowledges’, and at the same time he faults the arguments that failed to find warrant for it. In this way, Plato directs us in further research to discover whether such a knowledge does indeed exist, and what its nature might be.

At 175c3-8 Socrates focuses on the second half of this unwarranted second claim. He first says that he and Critias failed to consider the impossibility of a person’s knowing at all that which he does not know in any way (τὸ ἀδύνατον εἶναι ἅ τις μὴ οἶδεν μηδαμῶς ταῦτα εἰδέναι ἀμῶς γέ πως, 175c4-6), for they agreed ‘that one knows things, that one does not know them’ (ὅτι γὰρ οὐκ οἶδεν, φησὶν αὐτὰ εἰδέναι, 175c6-7), and yet, in his opinion, there is nothing more irrational (ἄλογώτερον) than this (175c6-8).

The translation of Socrates’ and Critias’ agreement ‘that one knows things, that one does not know them’ is awkward, but demonstrates how exactly Socrates’ Greek matches his words at 164c1, where he speaks of the doctor who ‘does not know himself, how he has acted’ (ιατρός οὐ γινώσκει ἑαυτὸν ὡς



ἐπραξεν) and at 164c6, when he argues that it seems the σώφρων person ‘does not know himself, that he is σώφρων’ (ἀγνοεῖ δ’ ἑαυτὸν ὅτι σωφρονεῖ). This intratextuality shows how the dialogue evolves the issue of knowledge of oneself into the knowledge of what one does and does not know, or Socratic wisdom. The locution expresses knowledge that we have ‘of’ something, that it is such and such. Socrates’ methodical examination of the genitive relation since 164c1 has demonstrated just how complex this relation is, especially in cases of knowledge. At 164c5-6, Socrates asks Critias whether the σώφρων person has knowledge ‘of’ himself, viz., that he is σώφρων. Now at 175b7-c3 he mirrors this locution, leaving us with the puzzle of how a person can have knowledge ‘of’ things, that he does or does not know them.

Socrates’ focusing on the most irrational thing of all (οὐδενὸς ὅτου οὐχὶ ἀλογώτερον, 175c7-8) that he and Critias agreed to leaves Socratic wisdom as the focal point of the second half of the dialogue. In this way Plato leaves the puzzle of Socratic wisdom as the most alarming piece of unfinished business. Socrates’ condemnation at 175c6-8 of his agreement to this most irrational proposition, viz., that one can know that one does not know, is perhaps the most startling indictment we find in Plato of what appears to be the ‘human knowledge’ that the Socrates of the *Apology* claims to have, for the indictment comes out of Socrates’ own mouth. And yet, immediately after this, Socrates once again declares the incompetence of his inquiry (ἡ ζήτησις) to have established the truth (εὐρεῖν... τὴν ἀλήθειαν, 175c8-d2). With these words Plato throws down the gauntlet, challenging the reader to discover how to repair and advance upon Socrates’ method and arguments in order to discover what

Socratic wisdom is, as it appears throughout the *Apology* and *Charmides*, viz., the means by which the only life worth living for a human is lived.

At 175c8-d5, to his great disappointment, Socrates identifies the third error of their inquiry as its failure to find any benefit in σωφροσύνη, and this leaves us mindful of Socrates' concluding argument that the knowledge of good and bad must be the key to success in attributing benefit to something, whether σωφροσύνη or anything else. It makes an adequate conception and account of knowledge all the more pressing for us to discover, in order to accommodate so important a kind of knowledge.

The *Charmides* ends with a challenge to the reader to continue the inquiry into the puzzle of Socrates' 'human knowledge'.

From 175d5 to the end of the dialogue, Socrates returns to his ruse about the Thracian cure and advises Charmides to continue to look to see whether he does in fact have σωφροσύνη, and therefore has no need of the charm. In effect, Socrates invites him once again to look into himself and know himself, whether he is σώφρων or not. Charmides admits that he will need Socrates' help to do this, and he makes a final, passing reference to Socrates' epistemic condition, saying that he does not believe Socrates in fact does not know what σωφροσύνη is, when he says he does not know (176a7-b1). Here again Plato impugns Socratic wisdom in the words of Charmides, challenging us to prove how it is possible that Charmides is wrong about Socrates' epistemic condition.

In the course of this chapter, the second half of the *Charmides* has been subjected to a double dialogue reading so that we can see how Plato directs the reader's attention to methodology in philosophical inquiry and to the challenge of evolving an account of knowledge that can accommodate such forms of knowledge as Socratic wisdom and the knowledge of good and bad. In the final chapter I shall show how this double dialogue reading of the *Charmides* provides a resolution to the apparent inconsistency between the *Apology* and the *Charmides* on the subject of Socratic wisdom, and how this resolution reveals Plato's intention to facilitate the reader's further research into what Socratic wisdom is. Plato even shows Charmides himself, at the end of the dialogue of his name, resolving to do what the reader is now invited to do, viz., to continue to inquire under the direction of Socratic wisdom (176b2-c4).

## Chapter 5. Plato's 'Inconsistency' Resolves into a Challenge.

### Section 1. The double dialogue reading of the *Charmides* resolves the problem into a challenge.

In the survey in chapter 3 of the various strategies of interpretation applied to Plato since his death, we concluded that the best chance we had of ascertaining what Plato thought was carefully to read what he wrote.<sup>356</sup> Chapter 2 demonstrated how a close reading of the *Apology* and *Charmides* reveals an apparent inconsistency in Plato, in that the former presents Socratic wisdom as an ideal epistemic condition that we all should cultivate in order to live the only life worth living for a human, whereas the latter concludes in *aporia*, unable to discover how Socratic wisdom is either possible or useful. The close, double dialogue reading of the second half of the *Charmides* in chapter 4, however, gives us what we need to resolve this apparent inconsistency.

The double dialogue method of reading Plato tracks carefully not only the arguments between the interlocutors, but also the reflections upon those arguments that Plato is likely to have intended the reader to make. Plato's choice of dialogue as his genre, as we argued in chapter 3, supports this method of interpretation, especially in that the way in which Plato writes dialogues is a rather inefficient way for an author to deliver his doctrines. This is not to rule out the possibility that in what are classified as 'middle' and 'late' dialogues Plato may be advancing philosophical positions that he himself endorsed and

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<sup>356</sup> A principle robustly advanced by Myles Burnyeat in the Old Chestnuts Seminar, King's College London, 25<sup>th</sup> April 2006.

meant for his readers to consider adopting, after sifting through the arguments themselves. But even in these dialogues, it is hard to identify beyond doubt which positions these would be. Certainly for what are called the ‘early’ dialogues, amongst which are the *Apology* and *Charmides*, reading them in order to extract Platonic doctrine is even more difficult.

Nevertheless, the endorsement of Socratic wisdom in the *Apology* seems to be as clear a case as any for positive doctrine that Plato did endorse, and yet it appears to be repudiated in the *Charmides*. If we were to accept the conclusions of the *Charmides* without delving any further beneath the surface and challenging the arguments, then we would go away with the problem of trying to reconcile inconsistent doctrine in these two works. But the careful reading of the arguments and dramatic frame in the second half of the *Charmides* reveals that Plato did not intend us to read these dialogues in this way. He left for his readers an abundance of clues to induce them to subject the *Charmides* itself to examination, just as the *Apology* insists they do to their lives.

If we view Plato’s dialogues as opportunities for the reader to witness what the author offers as particularly fine examples of the practice of ‘philosophy in action’, inconsistencies and contradictions in the positions that prevail in the debates do not *per se* defeat the author’s purpose. Indeed, if the author has a special interest in education, as Plato clearly evidenced through his founding and leadership of the Academy, then inconsistencies and contradictions may be seen to serve very well the teacher’s aim of engaging the readers themselves in the tackling of philosophical problems. For far from allowing his readers to sit on the sidelines, as it were, and merely witness others doing philosophy,

apparent aberrations in the texts arouse their interest by requiring them to reflect upon the apparent anomalies in their search for understanding, which necessarily involves their own critical evaluation of the treatment by Socrates and the other interlocutors of the philosophical issues they discuss.

By viewing the dialogues not as the end products of philosophy, but as examples of doing philosophy, we can appreciate that the inconsistencies and contradictions are not problems, but rather confrontations and challenges for the reader. Just as Socrates challenges his interlocutors to think for themselves, so Plato challenges us to think for ourselves. As McCabe points out,

That the dialogues repeatedly fail is part of their challenge—a challenge which the reader is invited to take up... to develop, as the dialogue invites, a systematic and unified account of what it is we are endeavouring to understand.<sup>357</sup>

In Plato's works, we have *prima facie* good reason to view inconsistencies and contradictions as instruments to induce *aporia* in the reader, not merely in regard to what Plato's doctrine might be, but far more importantly in regard to what the readers themselves think, and indeed what the truth of these matters actually is. In this approach to reading the dialogues, the 'problem of Socratic wisdom' is primarily not about what Plato thinks Socratic wisdom is, but about what *we* think it is, and indeed about what Socratic wisdom actually is.

The problematical arguments, analogies and claims in the *Charmides* that Socrates asserts and then withdraws or impugns with doubt, and his reluctance to conclude anything for certain, except that further inquiry is urgent, demonstrate that Plato intends the dialogue to be an instrument not for

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<sup>357</sup> McCabe (2006a): 20 (draft copy).

delivering his settled doctrine about Socratic wisdom, but for unsettling his readers and guiding their own course of inquiry into what it is. The reconciliation of the inconsistency between the *Apology* and the *Charmides* then becomes not a matter of squaring the advocacy and the denial of Socratic wisdom as Platonic doctrine, but of how a reading of the apparent refutation of Socratic wisdom in the *Charmides* is meant to supplement what Plato appears to endorse unequivocally in the *Apology*.

## Section 2. Inconsistency as an instrument to induce *aporia* in the reader

The reader comes away from the *Apology* emulating Socratic wisdom, charmed as he is by Socrates' arguments and Plato's dramatic art. But does he really know anything about what Socratic wisdom actually is? Whatever else the second half of the *Charmides* is—and of course there is much else that it is—it is clearly a confrontation of the reader's understanding of what Socratic wisdom is. Unless the reader is the 'very great man' that Socrates defers to at 169a1-5, his understanding will have been reduced to *aporia*, just as Critias' is. But if the reader does not know what Socratic wisdom is, how will he practise it?

At least the reader knows by the end of the *Charmides* that he does not know what Socratic wisdom is. He himself has become an instance of what the arguments in the *Charmides* fail to find, viz., someone who now knows that he does not know. Although he may have been somewhat complacent before the

*Charmides*, thinking that he knew what Socratic wisdom is, when in fact he did not, now at least he knows that he does not know, and can therefore inquire.

The double dialogue reading of the *Charmides*, which views the reader as much in dialogue with the author as the interlocutors are with Socrates, challenges us to confront our own ignorance and find our own way out of *aporia*. This challenge assumes the form of the following questions. What have we missed that ‘a very great man’ would not miss? Where has the methodology fallen short, as Socrates so frequently laments that it has? What clues or threads of the argument can we pick up and use to further the inquiry? What unfinished business has been identified, by which we might make useful advances? And what means have we been given to conduct it?

### Section 3. Plato’s direction for further inquiry

Throughout the second half of the *Charmides* Plato has tutored the reader in a method of inquiry that examines knowledge according to its genitive relation. Not only have we seen Socrates doing this over and over again, but Plato has also drawn our attention to this by the frequent remarks by both Socrates and Critias on the correctness and importance of methodology.

In two sections of the second half of the *Charmides* (164c7-169d & 169d-175d) Socrates indicates how he has been reduced to *aporia*, and that there is further work to be done. Socrates’ indication of further work is Plato’s challenge to us. The first section leaves us to wrestle with the problem of



whether and how knowledge can be reflexive, i.e., of whether and how there can be self-knowledge. The second section ends with the problem of making any sense of knowing what one does and does not know, i.e., of Socratic wisdom.

The methodology that Socrates uses throughout the second half of the dialogue has been to analyse knowledge according to the genitive relation, but he repeatedly censures his analysis of it, as being inadequate to resolving the *aporia* over self-knowledge and Socratic wisdom. The close reading of the *Charmides* in chapter 4, however, has shown that Socrates' application of the method is doomed from the start by being required to work with his interlocutor's limited conception of knowledge.

Under the constraints of the Socratic elenchus, Socrates asks questions of his respondent and then follows wherever the argument leads. If the argument leads to contradiction or *aporia*, then progress out of *impasse* requires that we discover what is invalid or untrue about the assertions that either Socrates makes in his questions or the respondent makes in his answers. And in the *Charmides* we can see how the shortcomings of the Critian conception of knowledge preclude the possibility of a coherent account of self-knowledge or of the knowledge of knowledge.

Section 4. Direction for further analysis of the genitive relation of knowledge on the unfinished business of the first *impasse* (164c7-169d2):

How can knowledge be reflexive?

In 164c7-169d2 Socrates explains to Critias why he is in *aporia* over the latter's claim that  $\sigma\omega\phi\rho\omicron\sigma\upsilon\eta$  is 'knowing oneself'. He immediately puts in place the methodology he will use for the rest of the dialogue by targeting the genitive relation between knowledge and what it is of at 165c4-6. Then, in Socrates' argument comparing self-knowledge with other kinds of knowledge at 165c8-166b6, the inquiry into the genitive relation is brought to bear on self-knowledge as an instance of a reflexive genitive relation. Finally, Socrates' arguments by analogy at 166e4-169a1 disclose that Critias cannot come up with an account of knowledge that tolerates the reflexive genitive relation, and the whole issue of self-knowledge is shelved for the attention of some very great man.

In the meantime, however, we detect that Critias' failure to object to Socrates' characterisation of perception and desire etc. as instantiating irreflexive relations betrays not only his inadequate conception of perception and desire etc., but also thereby vitiates these analogies as of any use in understanding self-knowledge. It also betrays the poverty of Critias' conception of knowledge. There appears to be no place in Critias' cognitive world for reflection, since he so readily dispenses with perceiving that we perceive, desiring to have some desires but not others, and disliking that we have certain dislikes. And since Critias is willing to accept unreflective accounts of

perception and desire etc. as analogies for knowledge, then it is not surprising if in his cognitive space there turns out to be no room for knowing what we know.

The analogy of comparatives looks *prima facie* rather bizarre in this argument, but it turns out to be very useful, for the possibility of one and the same thing being both greater and less offers a way of thinking about the same thing being both knowledge and known. The analogies of perception and desire etc., characterised by Socrates as instantiating only irreflexive relations, do not so readily offer this notion: it is very hard to conceive how seeing might be colour, although it may be less hard to conceive how desire might be pleasure. However, the relativity of comparatives, where one thing can be opposites, e.g., at the same time both large and small, albeit relatively to different *comparanda*, suggests a way that we might explore towards bridging the gulf between knowledge and the known.

When we bring to the *Charmides* our concerns about reflexivity in perception and desire etc., and reflect on the relativity of comparatives, we find that Plato has furnished us with lines of further inquiry. Within the very analogies themselves, which are supposed to show the irreflexivity of the genitive relation, are the seeds of what shows the way towards investigating further in pursuit of an account of reflexivity in the genitive relation. The goal is an account of knowledge of itself, and the defects in the argument, to which Socrates' self-recrimination directs our attention, point the way. Plato intends us to address these defects and thereby find our way out of *aporia* by following Socrates' example of inquiry in company with others.

Section 5. Direction for further analysis of the genitive relation of knowledge on the unfinished business of the second *impasse* (169d2-175d5):

How can we know what we do and do not know?

Socrates constructs the second major *impasse* at 169d2-175d5 by arguing that the knowledge of knowledge cannot be what σωφροσύνη is, since it cannot be seen to be of any benefit, whereas σωφροσύνη is beneficial, being an excellence. The argument, in fact, centres on Socrates' professed difficulty in seeing how the knowledge of knowledge and the lack of knowledge is the same thing as knowing what one does and does not know (169e6-8). The force of the argument relies on Socrates' whittling away the content of the *relatum* that corresponds to the knowledge of knowledge. That is to say, Socrates ends up failing to find anything for the knowledge of knowledge to be 'of' that comes near to the good that σωφροσύνη is 'divined' (μαντεύομαι, 169b4-5) to confer. Furthermore, even when Socrates does suggest a benefit for the knowledge of knowledge (172b1-8), it is not expressed in terms of what one does and does not know.

It is, however, in this very passage, where Socrates speaks of what the knowledge of knowledge is 'of', that Plato offers us a clue for further research into Socratic wisdom, i.e., the knowledge of what one does and does not know. At 172b1-8 Socrates gives an account of the *relatum* of the knowledge of knowledge in terms quite different from his account of the *relata* of other kinds of knowledge. Whereas the *relatum* of medical knowledge is health, the *relatum* of the knowledge of knowledge is beholding the knowledge in addition

to each thing that is known. Of course, beholding in addition requires that the *relatum* of the knowledge of knowledge consist in both the first-order knowledge and the things known by virtue of the first-order knowledge. In other words, the *relatum* of the knowledge of knowledge turns out to be more complex than that of first-order knowledge, in that it can somehow comprehend the *relata* of first-order knowledge.

Critias, however, does not see this. He never sees the implications of such a *relatum* for the knowledge of knowledge. But it is important for us that he does not, for his failure to see this betrays the cause of his failure, which is an inadequate conception of knowledge. Plato gives us our first clue for feeling our way to an account of second-order knowledge. We must expand the Critian notion of knowledge that is patterned on a grasper-grasped model of perception, and that offers no provision for cognitive reflection or an attitude of Socratic diffidence towards what one thinks one knows. That Critias lacks such an attitude is demonstrated in his reluctance to come clean and admit his *aporia* (169c3-d1).

The second clue that Plato gives us for our further inquiry comes in Socrates' discussion about what knowledge it is that confers the *εργον* of well-being and happiness (172c4-175a7). The passage begins just after the passage in which he mentions the *relatum* of the knowledge of knowledge. He first takes issue with his description of the community governed by the knowledge of knowledge at 171d1-172a5, for he now thinks that he and Critias were wrong to agree that such a community would necessarily be happy. He relates his dream (173a7-d5), and then argues that the knowledge of knowledge is not, in

fact, the knowledge that secures happiness. When Critias finally catches on, Socrates declares that it is the knowledge of good and bad alone that makes us happy (174b1-c2).

In his brief explanation of why this is so (174c3-d1) Socrates describes how all the other kinds of knowledge may execute their tasks and produce their  $\xi\rho\gamma\alpha$  well, but nothing they can do will guarantee that what they do will be well. It falls to the knowledge of good and bad alone to supervise and direct the other knowledges in the production of their  $\xi\rho\gamma\alpha$ . When Critias objects that the knowledge of knowledge would still do us good, in as much as it would supervise and direct the knowledge of good and bad (174d), Socrates points out that he has it back to front: only the knowledge of good and bad confers goodness (175a3-7).

The clue that Plato offers us is what Critias fails to register. In his haste to assert the mastery of the knowledge of knowledge, conceived as an unreflective grasping of what is known and a ruling over other knowledges, Critias misses the distinctive character that the knowledge of the good and bad must have. In order for it to accomplish its  $\xi\rho\gamma\omega\nu$ , it must not only embrace, as what it is ‘of’, the other knowledges and their  $\xi\rho\gamma\alpha$ , but also the complex structure of value that we discussed with modern-day examples at the end of chapter 4. The knowledge of good and bad is the knowledge of value. It assesses the place a thing holds within a spectrum or pattern of goodness and badness. In order to know that something is good, e.g., that a patient be treated in a certain way, the knowledge of good and bad must behold that particular treatment within the

context of some structure of valuation. Only thus can one know whether this medical treatment is better than that, and worse than another.

With this consideration of the knowledge of good and bad, and its relation to the other kinds of knowledge and their ἐργα, Plato offers us another feature to explore in our search for a conception of knowledge that, unlike the Critian conception, will accommodate synoptic and holistic aspects. The synoptic capacity is required to allow second-order knowledge to comprehend within its purview first-order knowledges and their *relata* and ἐργα. The holistic aspect relates the parts to the whole in a way that locates the constituents of knowledge and value within a pattern or structure of justification and normativity.

Knowing that we know something involves locating what we know within the context of what we know. This may take the form of giving epistemic justification for our beliefs, in accordance with a foundationalist epistemology, or we may give reasons for our claiming to know that are grounded in other things that we claim to know, as a coherentist epistemology seeks to do. Likewise, knowing that something is good involves a contextualisation of something within a spectrum or gradient of value. Neither capacity can be envisaged when the Critian conception of knowledge is our starting point, and Socrates' brief remarks offer a way forward for us to think about these issues.

Socrates' observations at 172b1-8 and 174b11-d1, indicating how the Critian conception needs to be extended, provide us with suggestions of how we may address the most irrational (ἀλογώτερον) thing they agreed to, and yet,

in his opinion, there is nothing more irrational than this (175c6-8), according to Socrates at least. He remarks that he and Critias failed to consider

... that it is impossible to know at all the things which one does not know in any way; for that one does not know, our agreement asserts that one knows things, that one does not know them (ὅτι γὰρ οὐκ οἶδεν, φησὶν αὐτὰ εἰδέναι). And yet, in my opinion, nothing would be seen to be more irrational (ἄλογώτερον) than this. (175c4-8)

That one can know what one does not know is, of course, one of the features of Socratic wisdom. And even here Plato offers us food for further thought. In Socrates' assertions about the benefit of the knowledge of knowledge (172b1-8) and the way in which the knowledge of good and bad secures its ἔργον (174b11-d1), Plato intimates what I shall offer here only as speculation on how we might try to feel our way toward an account of such an apparent paradox as this 'most irrational' feature of Socratic wisdom.

In these two passages (172b1-8 & 174b11-d1) Socrates seeks to allow for second-order knowledge that operates in a synoptic and holistic way as an assessor of structure and the positions of things within that structure. In the light of this more sophisticated conception of knowledge, knowing what one does not know might be more analogous to detecting an absence of completeness, a gap in the jigsaw, as it were. Knowing that I do not know something need not involve my grasp of what I do not know, as Socrates suggests when he cites the 'most irrational' thing he and Critias agreed to (175c4-8). Rather, knowledge of what I do not know may be more like the recognition of a part that is missing from the pattern of explanation or the system of value.



What I do know, then, provides sections of the blueprint of the way things are, contextualised within a pattern of explanation or value, and what I do not know ‘appears’ as sections of the blueprint that are incomplete or entirely unavailable to me. With this more complex picture of knowledge, the knowledge of what one does not know no longer appears to be as irrational as Socrates says it is when we have only the Critian conception of knowledge to work with. In this way Plato suggests a direction in which our further research might move, in order to make sense of Socratic wisdom, i.e., of knowing what we do and do not know.

Indeed, these are the terms in which Bernard Williams speaks of our capacity to know even what we *cannot* know. He considers the possibility that there may be discoveries in the future that employ concepts, language and theoretical structures that are not available to us now. Such discoveries

... could constitute knowledge. But we cannot know what that knowledge would be, for the radical reason that we have no ways of expressing it; consequently we cannot know what it is exactly that, in lacking that knowledge, we do not know.<sup>358</sup>

So, while we cannot now know what scientists may come to know centuries hence, we can at least say where our ignorance currently lies, to which our research can then be directed. We can recognise gaps in our current structures of explanation or patterns of value that are yet to be filled by such future discoveries, and so while we cannot now know what we do not know (for Williams’ reasons above), we can now know what we do not know since we can detect the gaps in our web of knowledge that our ignorance leaves.

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<sup>358</sup> Williams (2006): 175.

Another example that illustrates how Socrates' remarks may help our further inquiry is the issue of mental causation. We see the problem, e.g., whether my desire and decision to move my arm cause the electro-chemical events that move my arm. Are mental events distinct from physical events, and do they enjoy a causal prerogative? Or are mental events merely epiphenomena supervening upon the physical events, and without causal power? Or are they just the physical events under another description? The philosophy of mind refines the question and clarifies the point at issue, and this circling and surveying of the problem give us a better knowledge of what it is that we do not know, in that we get clearer about the gap in the pattern of our knowledge that needs filling.

In addition to these sorts of pointers for further research into the nature of knowledge, Socrates' two brief intimations of second-order knowledge (172b1-8 & 174b11-d1) also suggest a way of accounting for the character of Socrates' elenchus, as we find it in the elenctic dialogues. When Socrates refutes, he does so by exploiting inconsistencies or gaps in his interlocutor's thinking. He can detect incoherence where others do not, for they are convinced of the coherence and completeness of their knowledge. Thus, Socrates' elenchus sets out not to prove propositions to be true *or false*, but to demonstrate that certain propositions advanced by his interlocutors are inconsistent with other propositions that they believe. There are holes in the fabric of their knowledge. He merely demonstrates the failure of their knowledge to consist in a coherent and complete structure. For this reason the *aporia* at the end of his elenchus does not establish what is true or not, for this is what first-order knowledge of

things establishes, and he disavows that he has any of this. Rather, his elenchus establishes only the incompleteness or inconsistency of the pattern or structure of knowledge in others, which he is also acutely aware of in himself. Indeed, this awareness or recognition in regard to himself constitutes his ‘human knowledge’, his self-knowledge, that the god of Delphi extols for mankind.

What Socrates’ examination of Critias demonstrates is that our reflections on what we do and do not know and on what is and is not good require a complexity that the Critian conception of knowledge does not afford. Plato does not protract the *Charmides* by developing further what conception of knowledge might be adequate to the task of accounting for how we can know what we do and do not know, or know what is and is not good. But then someone like Critias is not the sort of interlocutor with whom Socrates is likely to succeed in making any further progress. This, too, is part of the message of the *Charmides*.

#### Section 6. The inconsistency of Socratic wisdom resolved

The aim of this thesis was not to discover a theory of knowledge that, unlike the Critian conception, could accommodate either an account of Socratic wisdom, i.e., of how we know what we do and do not know, or an account of the knowledge of the good. In any case, the *Theaetetus* and the *Republic* tackle that huge epistemological task far better than this dissertation ever could. The aim has been rather to show how a double dialogue reading of the *Charmides*

resolves the apparent inconsistency between the *Apology* and the *Charmides* on the subject of Socratic wisdom.

John Beversluis echoes many commentators who, like W. K. C. Guthrie, find that ‘the *Charmides* is a curious and difficult dialogue’, or like Crombie, conclude that it is a dialogue ‘whose point is very hard to see’.<sup>359</sup> Beversluis himself writes off the *Charmides* as failing to amount to a piece of serious philosophy.

The dialogue provides no reason for thinking that Socrates has conducted a serious investigation into anything. His purpose throughout does not seem to be truth, but victory... Although more than a third of the dialogue is concerned with self-knowledge, no one achieves it; on the contrary, if the dialogue proves anything, it proves that self-knowledge is difficult to define, even more difficult to achieve, and, in the end, probably not worth achieving.<sup>360</sup>

It should be now clear where Beversluis has gone wrong in his assessment of the dialogue. While he has much to say of interest in challenging whether Socrates’ claims in the *Apology* to benefit his interlocutors are borne out in practice in the ‘early’ dialogues, and while he rightly notes that *Charmides* does not appear to have been morally improved by the end of the dialogue, nevertheless he fails to see how we, the readers, have been assisted by the guidance of the arguments and the clues that Plato leaves for further research. After all, it is we whom Plato, the author, is interested in benefiting, not his character *Charmides*.

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<sup>359</sup> Crombie (1962): I. 211, Guthrie (1998): 163.

<sup>360</sup> Beversluis (2000): 158.

The discussion of self-knowledge in the second half of the *Charmides* is not a useless exercise, *pace* Beversluis. By focusing on the dialogue that Plato engenders in his readers in response to the dialogue of the interlocutors, we have seen how the *Charmides* advances our understanding of Socratic wisdom. First, it demonstrates the inadequacy of our grasp of Socratic wisdom from our reading of the *Apology*, by infecting us with the *aporia* in which Socrates and Critias languish. Second, it flushes out of the undergrowth of our opinions the fundamental conception of knowledge that must undergird any study of kinds of knowledge and ignorance. It demonstrates how vital it is to any epistemological enterprise to address the foundational issue of what knowledge is. Third, it provides us with clues for revising the inadequate conception of knowledge that Critias unwittingly endorses, and that may prevail also in us.

The resolution of the apparent inconsistency of Socratic wisdom lies not in our unifying Platonic doctrine, as extracted from our reading of the *Apology* and the *Charmides*. It is found in our realisation that Plato intends the apparent inconsistency of doctrine to goad us into self-examination, much as Socrates acted as a gadfly for the Athenian people (*Apol.* 30e5). The apparent inconsistency of Socratic wisdom dissolves as a problem for Plato and his doctrine, and instead stands defiantly as a problem for the readers for their development as philosophers, a direct challenge to them to apply the philosophical techniques, which Plato amply illustrates in the *Charmides*, upon the inconsistencies and incompleteness that Socrates reveals in the readers' own structure of understanding. In this way, Plato offers his readers the opportunity

to do some philosophy themselves, and thereby take their understanding of Socratic wisdom further than it was after their reading of the *Apology*.

The immense contribution to philosophy of the second half of the *Charmides* lies, at least in part, in its forcing us to challenge our pre-reflective grasp of Socratic wisdom, as gleaned from the *Apology*, and in its setting us on our way in Plato's even larger project of examining what we know and how we know it. It is an epistemological enterprise that surfaces here and there in the other dialogues, perhaps most notably in the *Theaetetus*, where passages resonate in intertextuality with the *Charmides*, e.g., whether one can know what one does not know (καὶ μὴν εἰδότα γε μὴ εἰδέναι τὸ αὐτὸ ἢ μὴ εἰδότα εἰδέναι ἀδύνατον, *Theaetetus* 188a10-b1), and whether there are 'knowledges of knowledges and the lack of knowledges' (ἢ πάλιν αὖ μοι ἐρεῖτε ὅτι τῶν ἐπιστημῶν καὶ ἀνεπιστημοσυνῶν εἰσὶν αὖ ἐπιστῆμαι...; *Theaetetus* 200b6-7). This participation of the *Charmides* in Plato's larger epistemological project is what a double dialogue reading reveals to us, and by its success in resolving the apparent inconsistency of Socratic wisdom in Plato, it surpasses other strategies of interpretation that have been used throughout the centuries to elucidate the philosophy of Plato.

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