# The Unity of Virtue, Ambiguity, and Socrates’ Higher Purpose[[1]](#endnote-1)

# Abstract

In the *Protagoras,* Socrates argues that all the virtues are the very same knowledge of human wellbeing so that virtue is all one. But elsewhere Socrates appears to endorse that the virtues—such as courage, temperance, and reverence—are different parts of a single whole. Ambiguity interpretations harmonize the conflicting texts by taking the virtue words to be equivocal, such as between theoretical and applied expertise, or between a power and its deeds. I argue that such interpretations have failed in their specifics and in general, as I defend an alternative that takes into account Socrates’ higher purpose in testing others, namely to show them their ignorance of virtue.

# Introduction

In the *Protagoras,* Socrates argues that all of the virtues consist in a single power: knowledge of human wellbeing. Since, as Socrates argues, courage is that knowledge, the result is a wholeness claim: *courage must be the whole of virtue*. But in the *Laches, Euthyphro* and *Meno* Socrates seemingly endorses and certainly encourages others to accept that specific virtues are distinct parts of a single whole. For example, in the *Laches* the partness claim is that courage is a mere part of virtue. Such wholeness and partness claims are incompatible and have raised a problem for those who seek a coherent account of the unity of virtue that is both faithful to the Platonic texts and charitable in its interpretation of Socrates’ philosophy. One escape from the dilemma of wholeness and partness claims is to find an ambiguity in Socrates’ talk of virtue that permits both claims to be true in different senses. While Woodruff 1976 was first to propose such ambiguity, the most well developed version is Brickhouse and Smith 2010. After giving the background, Part 1 examines these ambiguities and shows them to fail in their details. Part 2 shows two general problems with all versions of the ambiguity solution: they fail to solve other equivalent contradictions and are unfaithful to Socrates’ higher purpose in cross-examination. By taking into account this higher purpose it is possible to explain why Socrates sometimes gives compelling arguments that the virtues are all one while at other times encouraging his interlocutors to accept that each virtue is a different part of the whole.

# 1. The Ambiguity Alternative

As Socrates himself frames his discussions in the *Laches* and *Protagoras,* his aim there is to seek in partnership with his interlocutors an account of virtue.

Let us not, O best of men, begin straightaway with an investigation of the whole of virtue—that would perhaps be too great a task—but . . . let us undertake first of all to state what courage is (*La.* 190c8-d8, trans. Sprague).

Protagoras, I don’t want you to think that my motive in talking with you is anything else than to take a good hard look at things that continually perplex me (*Prt*. 348c5-7, trans. Lombardo and Bell).

I have no other reason for asking these things than my desire to answer these questions (*Prt.* 360e6-8, trans. Lombardo and Bell).

It is sound interpretive practice, surely, to take him at face value, and this indeed is the dominant practice in Anglophone discussion of the unity of virtue. Versions of this interpretation suppose that Socrates aims to develop an ethical theory in his conversation with Laches, Nicias, and Protagoras. Some versions see Socrates as aiming to teach an ethical theory, in which case he already has one that he wishes to impart, while others see Socrates as aiming to search for an ethical theory, in which case he enlists the interlocutors in the search. Any theory must be implicit because, of course, the dialogues explicitly end in perplexity.

Within this background proponents have reached no consensus nor established a dominant account of what the ethical theory is but have split between two main alternatives ever since the 1850s. On one side Steinhart 1850 proposed the Wise Endurance Alternative, which defines courage as a combination of the insights of Laches and Nicias. It is the part of virtue that is a kind of endurance of soul combined with knowledge of what is good and bad for human beings. On the other side Susemihl 1855 proposed the Knowledge Alone Alternative, which defines courage not as a mere part but the whole of virtue, so that the words ‘courage’, ‘temperance’, ‘righteousness’, ‘reverence’, and ‘wisdom’ all refer to one and the same thing, namely knowledge of what is good and bad for human beings.

There are well-known problems with both alternatives.[[2]](#endnote-2) The basic problem for the Knowledge Alone Alternative is that it has no plausible reason to discount the passages in the *Laches, Euthyphro* and *Meno* where Socrates seemingly endorses and certainly encourages others to endorse that specific virtues are distinct parts of a single whole. The Wise Endurance Alternative fares no better, since it must implausibly explain away Socrates’ commitment to his arguments that virtue is nothing but knowledge of wellbeing. The wholeness and partness claims are two horns of a dilemma facing those who wish to attribute a coherent ethical theory to Socrates.

The Ambiguity Alternative seeks to escape the dilemma by giving different senses to the virtue words in the wholeness and partness claims. In this way Socrates might consistently affirm both claims. Woodruff 1976 was first to propose a version of this Ambiguity Alternative, distinguishing courage in essence (“courage-itself”) from courage in accident (“courage-in-ingots”) on the model of the distinction between *the substance gold*, which is all one, and *gold-in-ingots*, which has as many parts as there are ingots.

But Woodruff’s distinction fails. Suppose that courage-in-ingots is a part of virtue. Now, as Socrates and Nicias agree, this very courage-in-ingots will be nothing but the knowledge or science of future goods and evils. And it is undeniable, as Socrates and Laches rightly agree, that there is no distinctionbetween the science that knows future goods and evils and the science that knows goods and evils past, present, and future (198d, 199a). Thus in whatever sense courage-in-ingots is the science of future goods and evils, it is precisely also the knowledge of all goods and evils, past, present, and future. It follows that courage-in-ingots is the whole of virtue, which contradicts Woodruff’s starting assumption.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Brickhouse and Smith 2010 defend a different version of the Ambiguity Alternative*.*[[4]](#endnote-4) The book in fact proposes two different ways to make the wholeness and partness claims compatible. The first is an analogy to the relation between knowledge and applied knowledge. The second is an ambiguity claim, that the word ‘courage’ sometimes denotes a single power (*dunamis*) while at other times denotes the products or deeds (*erga*) of that power.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Consider first the analogy to the relation between knowledge and applied knowledge:

It is easy enough to see how a single and unitary sort of knowledge could be sorted into different kinds of application . . . The knowledge of triangulation just is the knowledge that allows surveyors to determine property borders and such. The knowledge of triangulation is also the very knowledge that is used in various kinds of navigation—for example, coastal or harbor navigation. Of course, there are obvious differences between surveying and navigation, and no one with any knowledge of these skills would fail to notice the differences (164).

They take the distinction to give us parts and wholes:

Once we begin to distinguish the various applications of this [triangulation] knowledge . . . we can find some applications that seem to be species of others. [For] example . . . harbor navigation . . . would qualify as a species of coastal navigation . . . Hence, there can be “parts” of navigation, if by “part” we mean distinct applications of this skill, just as there can also be distinct “parts” of triangulation, where navigation is one of them (2010: 165).

They claim that this distinction between knowledge and applied knowledge makes the wholeness and partness claims compatible in the following way. According to them, Nicias, makes a mistake in the *Laches* when he agrees that the wholeness and partness claims contradict. For he might say that “the knowledge referred to in his definition of courage is indeed the same as that constituting the whole of virtue. What marks off that knowledge as courage is the distinctive way in which it is applied to a sub-set of goods and evils” (166).

Their compatibility claim depends upon the analogy to triangulation:

The knowledge of triangulation just is the knowledge that allows surveyors to determine property borders and such. The knowledge of triangulation is also the very knowledge that is used in various kinds of navigation—for example, coastal or harbor navigation (164).

Consider, then, navigational triangulation as an applied branch of pure mathematical triangulation. The problem is that navigational triangulation needs to know more than pure mathematical triangulation. For example, it needs to know the precise local time, the declination of the visible stars, and how to use the mariner’s astrolabe (a graduated circle with a diopter for measuring vertical angles), including how to use this instrument on a boat even in rough water. Consider next surveying. Surveyors in determining property borders need to know how to read a map and how to use a theodolite (a movable telescope mounted within two perpendicular axes). I take it that these and other applications of mathematical triangulation need to have knowledge *in addition to* pure triangulation. It follows that it is false to say, as Brickhouse and Smith do, that pure mathematical triangulation “just is the knowledge that allows surveyors to determine property borders.” If courage is applied virtue in the way that navigation is applied triangulation, then the knowledge that is courage must include more than the knowledge that is virtue, so the knowledge equation would be false. Notice also that unapplied mathematical triangulation does not contain navigation or surveying as parts. On the contrary, each of them contains pure triangulation as a part, in addition to other parts having to do with knowledge of the astrolabe or theodolite. So if courage is applied virtue in the way that navigation is applied triangulation, then the partness claim will be false—on the contrary, virtue will be a part of courage. There is no hope for Brickhouse and Smith’s first way to make the wholeness and partness claims compatible.

Before turning to their second way, I must disambiguate their words for the application of knowledge. “What marks off [the knowledge of virtue] as courage is the distinctive way in which it is applied to a sub-set of goods and evils” (166). This language might refer to either of two distinctions, the distinction between pure and applied branches of knowledge or the distinction between power and deed, in Greek, between *dunamis* and *ergon*. The application of a pure knowledge might be an applied branch of knowledge, that is, a power to be possessed. This would refer to their first way of reconciling partness and wholeness, which I have already ruled out. But the application of knowledge might as well be a deed that is done*,* such as a particular act of proving a mathematical theorem, or a particular act of navigation. So instead of expressions like *the application of knowledge* I henceforth speak of knowledgeable *deeds* as opposed to the knowledge that is the *causal power* in a person of such deeds.

Here is how Brickhouse and Smith draw the distinction between power and deeds:

Might there not be differences between the virtues in terms of what they accomplish? . . . Moreover, if we can distinguish the virtues as . . . accomplishing different things, then this might also provide grounds for characterizing them in terms of parts and wholes (2010: 160).

Brickhouse and Smith find a model for the distinction between a power and its deeds in Socrates’ definition of swiftness at *Laches* 192a9-b3:

If anyone should ask me, “Socrates, what do you say it is which you call swiftness in all these cases,” I would answer him that what I call swiftness is the power (*dunamis*) of accomplishing a great deal in a short time, whether in speech or in running or all the other cases.

About this definition they say:

Notice that there are actually two elements to this definition: the power, and the idea that the application of the power accomplishes something . . . If we can distinguish the virtues . . . as [deeds] accomplishing different things, then this might also provide grounds for characterizing the virtues in terms of parts and wholes (2010: 158, 160).

On this account, the *power* swiftness is the same in running, harping, speaking, learning—namely, it is the power to do a great deal in a short time—while its *deeds* in speech and running obviously differ. In this way we might say both that the power defining swift running is the very same as the power of swiftness as a whole, while the deeds of swift running are only a part of the deeds of swiftness as a whole.

Here is how the distinction is supposed to work. Socrates uses the word ‘courage’ ambiguously, sometimes to mean *the power courage* and sometimes to mean *courageous deeds.* The partness claim will be true if the speaker uses the word ‘courage’ to mean *courageous deeds,* while the wholeness claim will be true if the speaker uses the word ‘courage’ to mean *the power courage.* On the one hand, the definition of the power-courage as knowledge of what is and is not to be feared is correct, as is the knowledge equation. But at the same time, we might understand the partness claim to be that the *deeds* of courage are but a part of the *deeds* of virtue as a whole. For example, battlefield deeds are by and large deeds of courage and not deeds of temperance, while gustatory deeds are by and large deeds of temperance and not deeds of courage, and so on with the other parts of virtue such as justice and piety. In this way the compatibility claim would be true.

Is Socrates himself ignorant that he equivocates on the word ‘courage’? I think Brickhouse and Smith would deny that he is ignorant. At the same time, I suppose that they would resist the inference that Socrates, to the extent he knowingly equivocates in refuting others, is no better than a sophist. Perhaps Socrates is not villainously manipulating the discussion to ply a fallacy but is innocently compelled by different contexts to use the same word in two different ways without flagging the ambiguity. On this reading we would have to reconcile such conduct with his conduct in the *Euthydemus*, where he repeatedly flags ambiguities.[[6]](#endnote-6) I leave these questions aside.

Brickhouse and Smith aim to make the wholeness and partness claims compatible. They must predict, therefore, that whenever Socrates makes the claim that courage is the same as the whole of virtue, he is talking about courage and virtue as powers, while whenever he talks about courage as a part of virtue, he is talking about deeds of courage as opposed to deeds of virtue. Now it is in the context of *Laches* 190b-e that Socrates makes the claim that courage is a part of virtue. Consider then whether this passage permits us to speak of courage and virtue as deeds, as Brickhouse and Smith require.

In Socrates’ first speech he asks: “Well then, Laches, aren’t these two now asking our advice as to the manner in which virtue might *become present* in the souls of their sons to make them better?” (190b3-5). Deeds do not *become present in* one’s soul; deeds are *done by* the soul. So it seems to be the power virtue that the parents desire to become present in the souls of the sons. Socrates’ next speech confirms that we are talking about a thing that is a power not a deed, since it speaks of virtue as a thing to be *acquired*. “In what possible manner might we become advisers about it, how one might best acquire it?” (190b9-c2). It is not deeds but power that we *acquire.* So again here Socrates is talking about virtue as a power. Likewise the word ‘it’ (*auto* 190c4, implied subject of *estin* at 190c6) in the following two speeches refers back to this, so those two references are also to the power virtue that one might acquire, not to the virtuous deeds that one might do. In the next speech Socrates recommends that they not inquire “about the whole of virtue but rather a part”(190c8-9). Here we have the same context for whole and part, and no indication that the context has changed from how best to acquire the whole or part. And in the following speech Socrates recommends the part about which they should inquire: “that towards which the act of learning [how to fight] in armor is supposed to lead” (190d4-5). The supposition is that lessons in fighting in armor will cause a part of virtue—courage—to come to be present in the soul, that the lessons will cause the soul to acquire that part of virtue. The *coming to be present* and the *acquisition* are required by the context, and what comes to be present or is acquired must be the power courage not deeds of courage. This context is confirmed in Socrates’ next speech by the verb ‘come to be present in,’ which occurs twice (*paragenoito* 190e1 and *paragenesthai* 190e2): “Let us then undertake first . . . to say what thing courage is. Then after this we will inquire in what manner it becomes present in our young men, in so far as it becomes present by means of pursuits and studies” (190d8-e2). This verb of becoming present requires that courage here, too, be a power not a deed. Finally, right after this passage, Socrates explicitly calls this same courage a power: “Try to say what power (*dunamis*) . . . is called courage” (192b6-8).

Recall now that Brickhouse and Smith’s distinction between power and deeds aims to make Socrates’ different claims about virtue compatible. In order for this distinction to work, whenever Socrates talks about courage as a part of virtue, he would have to be talking about deeds of courage, not the power courage. The text of *Laches* 190b-e shows that the opposite happens. And so their distinction fails to make the wholeness and partness claims compatible, as those claims are made in the *Laches* and the *Protagoras.* Thus the ambiguity posited by their second way fails.

# 2. Socrates’ higher purpose

Apart from the details of the interpretations just considered, ambiguity is a poor strategy for in general as a way to reconcile the wholeness and partness claims. As a general strategy, it fails to solve other contradictions in the text and ignores Socrates’ higher purpose in his examination of others. Consider the contradiction between claims made by Socrates in the *Apology* and the *Laches.* It is a centerpiece of the *Apology* that Socrates does not take himself to know what virtue is.

If you have heard from anyone that I undertake to teach anyone and charge a fee for it, that is not true . . . Who is an expert in this kind of excellence, the human and social kind? . . . Certainly I would pride and preen myself if I have this kind of knowledge, but I do not have it (19d8-20c3, trans. Grube).

Socrates repeats the same claim of ignorance near the beginning of the *Laches*:

I am the first to say, concerning myself, that I have had no teacher in this subject. And yet I have longed after it . . . and I myself am unable to discover the [expertise] even now” (trans. Sprague, 186b8-c5).

And at the end, Socrates again denies having the needed expertise:

If in the conversations we have just had I had seemed to be knowing and the other two had not, then it would be right to issue a special invitation to me to [teach your two sons]; but as the matter stands, we were all in the same difficulty (trans. Sprague, 200e2-5).

Yet in the *Laches* Socrates makes a contradictory claim to have knowledge of virtue.

(S1) Well then, Laches, aren’t these two now calling upon us for advisement as to the manner in which virtue might become present in the souls of their sons to make them better?

(L1) Yes, indeed.

(S2a) Then we must possess this thing: the knowledge what virtue is. (b) For I suppose if we were not completely to know virtue—what in fact it is—then in what possible manner might we become advisers about it, how one might best acquire it?

(L2) In no manner, it seems to me, Socrates.

(S3) So we do claim to know what it is.

(L3) Really, you know we do make the claim!” (190b3-c5).[[7]](#endnote-7)

Socrates here emphasizes that he has knowledge of virtue—and that Laches also has it—when he first affirms *necessary possession* of it at S2a: “Then we must possess [it]” and then affirms the *claim* to possession at S3, “So we do claim to know.” And Laches has no doubt that Socrates makes the joint claim, when he emphatically reaffirms the claim to possession at L3.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Readers sometimes report to me that as they read this passage, “Socrates just asks questions and in fact it is only Laches who makes the affirmation of knowledge.” Such a report is false: speech S2a is declarative not interrogative in form. Yet there is a grain of plausibility in the readers’ report, because of the equivocal justification Socrates gives of S2a and S3. His justification is the counterfactual he elicits from Laches at L2: “[If we were not completely to know virtue—what in fact it is—then] in no manner [might we become advisers about it].” The counterfactual produces a valid argument for S2a if we join it with a premise stating that Socrates is an advisor as follows.

(P1) Socrates (with Laches) has become an advisor about virtue. (*Supplied.*)

(P2) If Socrates (with Laches) did not know what virtue is, he would not become an advisor. (= *L2.*)

(C1) Thus Socrates (with Laches) does possess knowledge of virtue.

Notice how this argument equivocates. The verb ‘to advise’ has two meanings, either *to give an opinion how to act* or *to give a wise opinion*. And there are two corresponding meanings for the noun ‘advisor’, the first requiring only the power to opine while the second requires the power to opine wisely. Even ignoramuses might become advisors in the first sense, if they seem wise to themselves and the advisee, but only someone who possesses knowledge might advise in the second sense. Thus conclusion C1 is established only if the word ‘advisor’ has the second meaning, but with that meaning premise P1 is uncertain at best. Socrates did consent to “try to advise” the two fathers insofar as it was in his “power” (*ti dunōmai)* at 181d1-2, but such cautious consent indicates that he was uncertain, at best, of possessing the relevant knowledge.

And here is the grain of plausibility in the readers’ report that it is in truth only Laches who makes the affirmation of knowledge. Socrates’ affirmation S2a—“Then we must possess this!”—has the appearance of an affirmation of a necessary truth. But it is perhaps preferable in context to interpret S2a merely as the affirmation of a necessary consequence of an argument, an argument that Socrates does not himself accept but merely elicits from Laches. Socrates does not himself assert the counterfactual P2 but merely elicits it with the question he asks at S2b. And while there is no doubt that Socrates would himself affirm the truth of P2 in the second sense of ‘advisor’ given above,[[9]](#endnote-9) nevertheless, it remains true that Socrates merely asks and does not affirm premise P2, and he leaves altogether unstated premise P1, which Laches must himself supply.

Consider in comparison the evidence we have to attribute to Socrates the celebrated partness claim that courage is but a part of virtue entire. That claim follows right after Laches’ speech L3.

(S4) Well then (*oukoun*), if we know something, we must be able to say what it is.

(L4) Of course.

(S5) Then (*toinun*) let us not ask, most virtuous man, about the whole of virtue—perhaps that is more work—but let’s see whether we have sufficient knowledge about some part of it—which, as seems likely, is an easier question.

(L5) Yes, Socrates, let’s do as you propose.

(S6) Then (*oun*) which one of the parts of virtue? Surely, that towards which the act of learning how to fight in armor is supposed to lead? And to most people this [mere part to which the lessons lead] seems to be courage, doesn’t it? (190c8-d5).

On the face of it, Socrates’ partness claim S5 is offered much more tentatively than his claim to possess knowledge at S2a. Speech S2a appears as the affirmation of a necessary truth, but S5’s implied claim that the whole of virtue will take more work to investigate than a mere part is qualified by the word ‘perhaps’, and the implied claim that virtue has some mere part about which it will be easier to see if there is sufficient knowledge is likewise qualified by the phrase ‘as seems likely’. So on the face of it, Socrates affirms his possession of knowledge more strongly than he affirms the partness of courage. Considered in context, however, S2a and S5 are open to the very same question. As shown above, it is perhaps preferable in context to interpret S2a not as the affirmation of a necessary truth but as the affirmation of a necessary consequence of an argument that Socrates does not himself state. In a similar way, speech S5 is marked by the Greek inferential particle *toinun* (‘then’—a word Sprague fails to translate)*.* Denniston (1954: 569) describes the force of this particle in dialogue as presenting the speech “as springing from the actual words, or general attitude, of the previous speaker.” Likewise S6 is introduced by the inferential particle *oun* (‘then’). It is perhaps preferable in this context to interpret S5 and S6 as containing an implicit, tentative claim *not* about the partness of virtue *but* about what springs from the words or attitude of Laches.

As it happens, in this same way every passage where Socrates on the face of it endorses a partness claim is open to question in such a way that it is perhaps preferable to interpret them all as Socrates’ claims about what springs from the words or attitude of the interlocutor, and not as claims about the partness of virtue. Consider one more example, from Socrates’ examination of Nicias, a passage Socrates introduces by saying, “I think it worthwhile to ask Nicias what he has in mind when he defines courage” (*La.* 197e2-3, trans. Sprague).

(S1) Nicias, tell me again from the beginning—you know that when we were investigating courage at the beginning of the argument, we were investigating it as a part of virtue.

(N1) Yes, we were.

(S2) And didn’t you give your answer supposing that it was a part, and, as such, one among a number of other parts, all of which taken together were called virtue?

(N2) Yes, why not?

(S3a) Then (*oun)* do you also speak of the same things as I do? (b) In addition to courage, I call temperance and justice and everything else of this kind parts of virtue. (c) Don’t you?

(N3) Yes indeed.

(S4) Stop there. We are in agreement on these points (*La.* 198a1-b2, trans. Sprague, slightly revised).

True to Socrates’ introduction, speeches S1 (“you know that”) and S2 (“didn’t you give your answer supposing that”) are about what Nicias has in mind. Socrates’ speech S3b on the face of it affirms what Socrates calls parts of virtue in addition to courage. But the inferential particle *oun* (‘then’) introducesspeech S3 as a consequence springing from the words or attitude of Nicias in N1 and N2. And so it is perhaps preferable to interpret speech S3b as about what springs from the words or attitude of Nicias, not as a claim about the partness of virtue.[[10]](#endnote-10)

As just shown, the textual evidence that Socrates claims to possess knowledge of virtue is equal or greater than the textual evidence that Socrates claims there are parts of virtue. It is an open question whether Socrates in fact makes either claim. However, proponents of the Ambiguity Alternative take Socrates at face value in making the partness claim. By the same standard of evidence, such proponents ought likewise to take him at face value in his claim to possess knowledge. In their aim to produce a coherent account of Socratic ethics, it is remarkable that these proponents worry about the incompatibility between the wholeness and partness claims but ignore the conflicting claims to moral knowledge that Socrates makes in the *Apology* and *Laches*. Certainly there are possible ways to propose ambiguities to harmonize such ignorance claims with such knowledge claims, ambiguities depending upon different senses of the word ‘knowledge’. But such proposals are inferior as interpretations.[[11]](#endnote-11) Like the current ambiguity claims about the word ‘virtue’, such proposals ignore Socrates’ stated higher purpose in his philosophical examinations with others.

Socrates states his higher purpose in the *Apology.* When the Pythian oracle declared that no one was wiser than he, he took it to be a riddle, since he knew that he was “wise in nothing big or small,” yet the god would not lie (21b2-7). Socrates then tried but failed to find a counter-example—someone wiser—to bring back to the oracle. This led to his solution to the riddle. Finding that “human wisdom is worth little or nothing” (23a6–7), Socrates interprets the oracle “as if the god were saying: ‘Among you human beings, he is wisest who, like Socrates, recognizes that truly he has no wisdom of value’ ” (23b1–4). Having discovered the meaning of the god’s words, Socrates takes the god to have given him a mission: “The god gave me a station, as I believed and understood, with orders to spend my life in philosophy and in examining myself and others” (28e4–6), so that to cease to philosophize in that way is “to disobey the god and therefore impossible” (37e6–7). Socrates asks the jury to view his work as “labors performed so that, because of me, the oracle would be irrefutable” (22a7–8). The labors were a full-time occupation, leaving him no time for conventional public or family life. “I have no leisure for any public or household affairs worth mentioning—I am in vast poverty on account of my service to the god” (23b8–c1).[[12]](#endnote-12) Socrates’ higher purpose, therefore, in conversation with others was to “examine” those who claim to possess expertise at virtue and wellbeing.

I go around seeking out anyone, citizen or stranger, whom I think wise. Then if I do not think he is, I come to the assistance of the god and show him that he is not wise (23b5-7, trans. Grube).

One way to examine a person’s claim to knowledge is to say something false to see if the person catches the error. Socrates often mentions examples of such tests. In the *Apology*,he says that Meletus looks as if he is “making a test” (*diapeirōmenō[i]*) in his indictment of Socrates “to see whether Socrates, the ‘wise man,’ will recognize the contradiction” (27a1-4, again at 27e3-4, *apopeirōmenos*). In the *Protagoras*, Socrates says that Prodicus was “testing” Protagoras (*apopeirasthai,* 341d8) when Prodicus falsely said that Simonides in his poem used the word ‘hard’ to mean *bad* not *difficult*. Socrates says that Prodicus made this test “in order to see whether Protagoras can support his statement” (341d8-9). In the same dialogue, Socrates says that Protagoras was likely to have been “testing” (*apopeirasthai*) Socrates when Protagoras falsely said that virtue had parts (349c8-d1).

Notice that by falsely claiming or suggesting that his interlocutors have such knowledge, Socrates can test them to see if they take themselves to be knowledgeable. I take it that Socrates does have good reason—as he plausibly and carefully argues in the *Protagoras*[[13]](#endnote-13)— to think that courage is the whole of virtue and therefore that the partness claim is false. Whenever interlocutors, having made a claim to expertise, then go on to accept a false partness claim, then Socrates might proceed to elicit the corresponding wholeness claim, driving them into contradiction, which in turn might lead them to awareness of their ignorance. This method, as a way of convincing others that they are inexpert, is certainly not foolproof, but I suppose it is more effective than the impolite alternative of directly telling the other person: “You’re ignorant!”

Finally, I make a general observation about the theoretical topic and dramatic form of many Socratic dialogues. The topic concerns excellence at human life and the expertise that produces such excellence. The form is in two parts: first, Socrates establishes that the interlocutor pretends to such expertise, and second, he demonstrates that the interlocutor lacks that expertise. In the *Laches,* he establishes Laches’ pretense at T1 and the ignorance by 200a4-5, where Nicias says, “Laches, you yourself were just now shown to be a person who knows nothing about courage.” In the *Meno,* Socrates establishes the pretense at 71e1, where Meno declares, “It is not hard to say” (what virtue is, trans. Grube). And Socrates establishes the ignorance when Meno admits, “I am quite perplexed” (about what virtue is, 80a3-4, trans. Grube). In the *Euthyphro,* Socrates establishes the pretense when Euthyphro boasts, “I would not be superior to the majority of men, if I did not have accurate knowledge” (of the divine, of reverence, and of irreverence, 4e9-5a2, trans. Grube). Although Euthyphro breaks off the dialogue before admitting ignorance, it is clear that his attempts to define reverence have all failed. As Socrates says at the end, “By going you have cast me down from a great hope I had, that I would learn from you the nature” (of reverence and irreverence, 11b6-7, trans. Grube).[[14]](#endnote-14)

Moreover, in each dialogue Socrates suggests a partness claim *after* the interlocutor makes a claim to wisdom, which the interlocutor invariably accepts. In the *Apology*, Socrates says that his dialogues consist among other things in “testing” (*exetasō*, 29e5). My proposal is that the ethical theorizing—in the *Meno* and the *Euthyphro* as well as the *Laches*—is done in service to the higher purpose of examining his colleagues. On my proposal, Socrates makes or suggests partness claims to interlocutors as a way of testing their wisdom claim. This harmonizes with the postulate that Socrates univocally accepts his arguments for the wholeness claims, as indeed he ought to, seeing that they are compelling.

# Conclusion

I conclude that, instead of drawing distinctions between courage-in-ingots and courage-in-itself, or between pure and applied branches of knowledge, or between knowledge as a power and knowledge in deeds, we should use Socrates’ higher purpose to explain why he suggests false claims to his interlocutors. He is using what we might call a *pedagogy of testing* to help others to recognize their ignorance. The fact that Socrates is on a mission from God provides a better explanation of the seeming contradictions. This higher purpose explains why he carefully proves to skeptical audiences his wholeness claims about courage and virtue while elsewhere encouraging his interlocutor to accept partness claims about the same virtue. And it explains why he makes both his singular claim of ignorance about virtue in the *Apology* and his joint claim with Laches of knowledge about the same thing.

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# Endnotes

1. For helpful discussion, I gratefully acknowledge the audience at *Socrates: A Conference in Honor of Nicholas D. Smith,* Lewis & Clark College, October 2014, two anonymous referees, and especially correspondence with the editor of this journal, Ronald Polansky. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Rudebusch and Turner 2014 review the problems with these alternatives. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Rudebusch 2011 gave this argument against Woodruff’s version of the Ambiguity Alternative. According to Hardy 2011: 116-136 the ambiguity is that sometimes Socrates uses the word ‘courage’ in an extensional sense (denoting the very same as the word ‘virtue’ in this sense) and sometimes in an intensional sense (denoting a mere part of virtue). Hardy 2011: 128 deploys these terms (about slightly different theses): “The statements are indeed extensionally equivalent, but not intensionally equivalent (*extensional gleich, aber nicht intensional gleich*).” Hardy 2011: 124 also speaks of courage as one thing having two aspects, depending upon which perspective it is seen from. “As agents (*handelnde Personen*) we perceive courage as the [ . . . ] wise endurance that Laches had in view. Nicias, on the other hand, appears to take a view of things that is detached from agency.” A substitution in this argument of either of Hardy’s proposed senses of courage as a mere part—*courage in an intensional sense* or *courage from the agent’s perspective*—in place of Woodruff’s *courage-in-ingots* (and either *courage in an extensional sense* or *courage detached from agency* in place of Woodruff’s *courage-in-itself)* likewise refutes Hardy’s solution. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Brickhouse and Smith 2010 develop theses in Brickhouse and Smith 1997 and Ferejohn 1984. The reviews—by Butler, Carson, Devereux, Gómez-Lobo, Jones (twice), Mooney, Rowe, Shaw, and Waterfield—have let their 2010 version of the Ambiguity Alternative pass without remark. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Clark 2015 posits a similar ambiguity between courage as *ousia* and as *dunamis,* distinguishing “the prior question *what virtue is”* from “the secondary question *the sort of thing virtue is”* and claiming that “the investigations of the *Laches* and *Protagoras* are concerned [only] with the *psychological state* (*dunamis*) of the virtuous person” (463). His account must implausibly construe Socrates’ question to Protagoras—“Are the five names of wisdom, temperance, courage, justice, and piety attached to one thing, or underlying each of these names is there a distinct essence and a distinct thing that has its own particular capacity, each being different from the others?” (*Prt.* 349b, trans. Clark)—to mean, “Do the virtues each have a distinct sense and a distinct reference?” (465 n. 17). And he treats the *Laches* as ignoring primary and secondary questions, although Socrates clearly separates them at 190d7-e1: “Let us undertake first of all, Laches, to state what courage is. Then after this we will go on to investigate in what way it could be added to the young” (trans. Sprague). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Socrates flags ambiguities at *Euthydemus*  277e-278b, 285a-b, and 295b-296c. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The Greek is *famen mentoi,* where the *mentoi* is emphatic. As Denniston (1954: 399) describes this particle: “[*men]* denotes objective certainty, while [*toi*] brings the truth home to another person: [as in the English] ‘really, you know.’” [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Prior to this passage Socrates says, “I think it is by knowledge that one ought to make decisions, if one is to make them well, and not by majority rule” (184e8-9 trans. Sprague). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Devereux (1992: 772) builds on this passage his interpretation that Socrates endorses partness claims in the *Laches.* Evidently he takes the passage at face value and not, as is perhaps preferable, in context: “At 198a-b Socrates says that *he* calls courage, temperance, and justice parts of virtue, and then says that he and Nicias *agree* on these points—that is, that courage, etc. are parts of virtue.” [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The passages I have cited as claims of ignorance (*Ap.* 19d8-20c3, *La.* 186b8-c5 and 200e2-5) are claims not to possess expertise at living well (*exein tautēn tēn technēn,* cf. *Ap.* 20c1 and *La.* 186c5, and hence to need a teacher, *La.* 200a4). Commentators such as Vlastos 1985 have worried about how to harmonize these and similar such claims of ignorance (for example, at *Ap.* 21b2-5and 21d2-6) with claims to know particular moral propositions (such as that [i] disobedience of a superior is evil, *Ap*. 29B6-7, that [ii] injustice is ignorance, *Rep*. 351A5-6; or that [iii] it is better for a wicked man not to live, *Gorg*. 512B1-2). Here it is helpful to recognize the difference on the one hand between the claim *not* to possess something like craft knowledge and on the other hand the claim *to know* particular propositions. Once we distinguish between craft knowledge and propositional knowledge (call this distinction an “ambiguity strategy” if you like), we can see there is no contradiction in those two sets of Socrates’ statements. There is no contradiction in me saying on the one hand that I lack expertise at piloting jet airplanes while saying on the other hand that I know that [i] if an emergency forced me to pilot, I would be bad not to follow expert advice how to do so, that [ii] my flying badly without advice would be the result of ignorance, or that [iii] I would be better off dead than to take command of the piloting of a jumbo jet under the delusion that I possessed piloting expertise.

    Socrates at S2a and S3 makes a different knowledge claim, the claim to know how to advise parents about inculcating virtue, which certainly is a claim to possess an expertise and not a claim to know some propositions. Statements S2a and S3 threaten a different contradiction with Socrates’ claims to be ignorant of such expertise. No one yet has proposed to deal with this threat by proposing ambiguity in the expressions ‘knowledge’ or ‘expertise’. I thank Ron Polansky for discussion here. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. For further discussion of Socrates’ mission, see Rudebusch 2009: 17-29. Daniel and Polansky 1979 raise the question of Socrates’ occupation before hearing the oracle, solving the riddle, and discovering his divine mission, leading them to the interpretation that the story of the oracle cannot be “an actual historical depiction” (1979: 85). In contrast, the interpretation of Rudebusch 2009: 30-46 accounts for Socrates’ similar occupation before and after the oracle while preserving the historical accuracy of Socrates’ account of the oracle in the *Apology*. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For defense of the soundness of Socrates’ argument, see Rudebusch 2009: 62-73. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For discussion of the shared details of dramatic form in the three dialogues, *Laches, Meno,* and *Euthyphro,* see Rudebusch 2009: 88-99 and Rudebusch 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)