Check for updates

Received: 10 February 2019 | Revised: 28 May 2019 | Accepted: 3 February 2020

DOI: 10.1111/ejop.12537

European Journal of Philosophy WILEY

Socratic reductionism in ethics

Nicholas Smyth

Department of Philosophy, Fordham University, The Bronx, New York, USA

Correspondence
Nicholas Smyth, Department of Philosophy, Fordham University, Collins Hall, 441 E Fordham Rd, The Bronx, NY 10458.
Email: nsmyth1@fordham.edu

Abstract

In this paper, I clarify and defend a provocative hypothesis offered by Bernard Williams, namely, that modern people are much more likely to speak in terms of master-concepts like "good" or "right," and correspondingly less likely to think and speak in the pluralistic terms favored by certain Ancient societies. By conducting a close reading of the Platonic dialogues Charmides and Laches, I show that the figure of Socrates plays a key historical role in this conceptual shift. Once we understand that our narrow, reductionist focus on "thin" ethical concepts is a contingent historical development, we are, I claim, in a much better position to evaluate it.

Genealogy is the study of the ways in which concepts, ideas, values, and norms have emerged, persisted, and developed over time. Recently, philosophers have begun to argue that the method is of great importance for analytic philosophy, which has traditionally shown some resistance to historical inquiry.[1] Arguably, genealogy can be particularly fruitful in ethics, where there is notably wide cultural and historical variation across conceptual schemes. To understand where our ethical concepts come from is to gain insight into their social function(s), as well as to envision ways in which they might be improved, revised, or perhaps even eliminated.

One of the more striking claims in the genre was made by Bernard Williams, and I shall take it as my point of departure in this paper. Williams argued that modern life in certain Western countries was characterized by the increasing prominence of certain forms of reflection, and that this reflectiveness has actually resulted in the declining influence of *thick* ethical concepts (such as *courage* and *honesty*), which, he claimed were de-prioritized in favor of the use of thin concepts (such as *good* and *right*). Williams suggested that the growing influence of reductionist moral theories was a sign that thinner concepts were acquiring more and more currency (Williams, 1985, p. 163).

While these claims can certainly seem both puzzling and ambitious, in what follows, I will argue that Plato's "Socratic" dialogues actually contain a genealogical key to the nature and origin of the process Williams describes. In attempting to explain why we use the concepts we do, there is no more profitable figure than that of Socrates, who has exerted enormous influence over the methodological self-image of Western philosophers. He is a primary agent of the conceptual revolution described by Williams.

I will show that the *Laches* and *Charmides* are foundational texts in the history of reductionism about moral concepts and about moral judgments. These dialogues introduce a model of ethics that is not to be found in pre-Socratic Greek ethics. In addition, the model has since had enormous influence on the working assumptions and methods of

 © 2020 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

modern moral philosophy. In addition, I will argue that the Socratic model has had significant influence on contemporary moral culture—particularly via its enthusiastic adoption by moral philosophers. In other words, Plato's Socrates was a kind of innovating ideologist who has arguably helped to produce the very situation Williams describes.

1 | REDUCTIONISM IN ETHICS

What is *reductionism* in ethics? As I will use the term here, reductionism is a philosophical program that combines two distinct ideas. The first is that thin ethical concepts have logical priority over thick concepts, and the second is that ethical judgments which deploy thin concepts can serve as *all-things-considered* judgments. [Correction added on 16 March 2020, after first online publication: The preceding sentence has been updated for clarity.]

On a reductionist conception of moral judgment, our thinking is significantly regulated by all-things-considered judgments about persons, dispositions, or states of affairs, and these judgments will normally deploy a kind of ethical master-concept such as "good" or "ought." Judgments about an agent's honesty and courage will make sense, but only if they can be analyzed in terms of the master concept. On this view, for example, a courageous person is just someone who has found one particular way of acting *rightly*. Moreover, the converse does not hold; not everyone who has acted rightly has also acted courageously. When I say that for the reductionist, thin concepts have "logical priority," this is roughly what I am referring to.

This reductionist prioritization can play out in other, familiar ways. If you are in a utilitarian mood, you might sum up the happiness produced by some agent's dishonesty, courageousness, kindness, and lack of imagination in order to secure a single judgment concerning the *good* she does overall. If those traits produce effects that are not related to happiness, you will discard those effects as being ethically irrelevant. And you will complete this familiar line of thought by saying that actions are *right* when they produce the most good.

Moral theories that are pluralist in other senses are nearly always reductionist in this conceptual sense. For example, many consequentialists are pluralists about value, but they remain committed to the notion that each situation contains a *right* action, or to the idea that this highly general concept can support an all-things-considered judgment about what an agent does (Railton, 2003). Similarly, while the deontologist W. D. Ross advised us to try to balance a plurality of moral duties as best as we can, he nonetheless thought that there was, in each situation, an action, which it was our "duty proper" to perform, one thing we are *obliged* to do (Ross, 2002). Here, *obligation* is the highly general concept, which supports the all-things-considered judgment.

By contrast, a genuinely pluralist conception of moral judgment is one that has us deploying several irreducible concepts, and it sees us as making a corresponding plurality of discrete judgments about actors, dispositions, and states of affairs. On this model, we never actually subsume these particular judgments under a purely general, higher order concept; the plurality remains as it is. Moreover, according to the pluralist, we never actually make all-things-considered (hereafter: ATC) judgments. These are judgments, which somehow collect together all normative considerations under one heading in order to say what an agent ought to do, *period*. Of course, no one should deny that people ordinarily say things like "that was the best thing to do," but the pluralist insists that the use of the term *best* is a disguised reference to some more substantive concept, such as "prudentially best" (Tiffany, 2007).

As I define them, reductionism and pluralism are *conceptions* of moral thought, theories about how everyday moral practice actually works. Such theories can, of course, be mistaken. However, the historical hypothesis I am exploring is this:

1. Though members of ancient Athenian society had no explicit theories about their own conceptual schemes, those schemes were in fact pluralist.[2]
2. Key agents like Socrates promoted a conceptual revolution by speaking *as if* reductionism were true of those schemes. Adopting some terminology from David Plunkett and Tim Sundell, I will call this an exercise in *metalinguistic negotiation* (Plunkett, 2015; Plunkett & Sundell, 2013).

3. This made space for the actual development and articulation of master concepts, which enable people, in modern societies, to think and speak in reductionist terms.

According to Plunkett and Sundell, a metalinguistic negotiation occurs when "a speaker uses a term (rather than mentions it) to express a view about the meaning of that term, or, relatedly, how to correctly use that term" (Plunkett, 2015, p. 832). As I will show, the figure of Socrates often performs this feat with virtue terms, even with the term virtue (*arête*) itself. In doing so, I argue that he effects a reductionist revolution, both in the dramatic sense (within the dialogues) and in the real world (via the actual reception of those dialogues).

Before proceeding to the genealogy itself, I will need to say more about the two axes along which pluralism and reductionism subsist. I will start with the distinction between thick and thin concepts, and I will then move to a quick discussion of ATC judgments.

1.1 | Concepts, thick and thin

Standardly, the distinction between thick and thin concepts is described in the following way: While both types of concept have an evaluative "component," thick concepts are said to have, in addition, a descriptive "component." Thicker concepts are, as Williams puts it, "world-guided"; their application is fixed by public, shareable facts about persons, behavior, or states of affairs (Williams, 1985, pp. 140–142). Examples include *cruelty*, *kindness*, and *chastity*.

However, it is important to see that this is not a theory-neutral way of describing the distinction, since it subtly imports conceptual reductionism. On this picture, there is such a thing as a "purely evaluative" concept (such as *good*, *bad*, *pro* or *con)* and thick judgments are said to "contain" both these concepts and some purely descriptive set of information. Once we are thinking this way, it becomes very natural to think that the evaluative component of a thick concept can, in principle, be "factored out" in some semantic or conceptual sense. One contemporary version of this hypothesis has it that the evaluative component of a thick judgment is merely a pragmatic implication of such judgments, rather than being a part of their literal semantic meaning.[3]

However, someone who wishes to defend the idea that courage and honesty are irreducible, self-standing evaluative concepts should reject the way this distinction is being framed. They should follow Jonathan Dancy, who writes:

> The correct picture, I think … is not that there are two "really" distinct elements which by a pseudo-chemical reaction somehow become indistinguishable from each other. There are no *elements* at all, in any normal sense. So there are not two things to amalgamate (Dancy, 1995, p. 268).

This pluralist conception of ethical concepts has it that each ethical concept is what it is, and not something else. A courageous person is *courageous*, they have not merely found one particular way of being *good*.

Once we deny that thicker concepts can be factored into two components (a more general evaluative concept and a purely descriptive one), we have rejected a key pillar of conceptual reductionism. The resulting pluralist position has been adopted by philosophers other than Williams; for example, Susan Hurley and Simon Kirchin.[4] That said, it is not my task in this paper to directly defend conceptual pluralism, nor to argue for the closely related thesis, also defended by McDowell, that thick concepts pick out irreducible normative properties in the world. Rather, I am primarily interested in how reductionism, as a contingent historical development, got started. So, in order to talk about thick concepts in a way that is as theory-neutral as possible, I will follow a suggestion made by both Kirchin and Debbie Roberts, and simply say that a thinner concept is more *general* than a thick one, that it applies to a wider range of agents, action-types or situations (Roberts, 2017). This means that "thickness" or "thinness" comes in degrees, but that, I take it, is exactly what we should expect (Scheffler, 1986).

1.2 | The "all-things-considered" judgment

Many philosophers have been tempted to say that terms such as *ought* or *best* are used to make normative judgments, which concern what we should do, *simpliciter*. They contrast these ATC judgments with normative judgments that are indexed to a particular evaluative standard, such as the notion of what is prudentially best or what we ought to do from the standpoint of etiquette.

It is not hard to see how the notion of an ATC judgment is tightly connected to the idea that thin concepts have logical priority. After all, once we have decided that (for example) prudence, courage, honesty, and the like are nothing more than varying species of *right action*, it is natural to think that such utterances as "that's the right thing to do" express some special judgment that takes all normative considerations into account. After all, there will be no normative or evaluative "remainder" that could be left out of such a judgment; the logical prioritization of a thin concept strongly encourages us to think in terms of what it is right to do, *period*. Moreover, this ATC judgment is standardly taken to have a certain normative authority over more particular judgments. If one faces a choice between what is prudent and what is right, it seems intuitive to say that we always have most reason to do what is right, since the value of prudence has already been factored into judgments of overall rightness.[5]

Just as some philosophers reject the idea that thin concepts have priority, pluralists like Evan Tiffany, Derek Baker, and David Copp have separately argued that there actually is no such thing as an ATC judgment, that judgments of the form "I ought to X" are in fact indexed to particular modes of evaluation (Baker, 2018; Copp, 1995; Tiffany, 2007). To get a sense for what this position entails, consider the figure of Euthyphro, who runs headfirst into the famous Socratic onslaught in his eponymous dialogue. He only claims to have "knowledge of the divine, and of piety and impiety," and never gives any indication that he thinks of this practical knowledge as somehow part of a larger understanding of rightness, goodness, or of what one *ought* to do, in some unrestricted sense.[6] According to Tiffany, Baker and Copp, we are all like Euthyphro in this respect. We simply deploy a self-standing evaluative metric (such as piety), and there is no higher order question concerning what it is right or best to do, period.

Socrates, as we will shortly see, is very interested in precisely this sort of higher order question. However, before proceeding to a discussion of the relevant dialogues, I will now turn to a discussion of the ancient Greek concepts *sophrosune* and *andreia*. I will try to offer a rough description of these core virtues, in the hopes that a sympathetic understanding of how those concepts functioned in Greek life will bring the strangeness of Socrates's reductionist project into sharp relief.

2 | *SOPHROSUNE* AND *ANDREIA*

In the past 50 years, several philological studies have given rise to something of a tentative scholarly consensus concerning the ways in which the concepts *sophrosune* and *andreia* operated in Greek culture during the centuries leading up to Socrates' birth.[7] To give an unavoidably crude approximation of a fascinating and complex story, the emergence and survival of the Greek *polis* appear to have required the development of both cooperative and agonistic virtues, of which *sophrosune* and *andreia* were among the most prominent respective instances.

2.1 | Sophrosune

The basic etymological sense of the term *sophrosune* is described in Helen North's canonical study. It is, she says, "that quality, intellectual in origin, but predominantly moral in its application and effect, which controls and moderates the passions, whether lust, anger, ambition, cruelty, or even something so trivial as gluttony or drunkenness." (H. North, 1966, p. 17) The ordinary English translation, "temperance," unfortunately masks highly complex patterns of usage. Myles Burnyeat goes so far as to claim that "*sophrosune* is untranslatable, because the phenomena it

grouped together… do not form a whole to our outlook." (Burnyeat, 1971, p. 216) While it is true that the term most often referred to agents who could moderate their passions, it is not true that the relevant passions were the same for each kind of person. In particular, possessors of this virtue were required to know their role within the community so that they might moderate certain passions in response to the requirements of that particular role. As I explain in a footnote, there was a version of the virtue for men and for women, for politicians, for ordinary persons and for nobles.[8] As we will see, the character of Charmides in particular takes his role-specific requirements very seriously.[9]

2.2 | Andreia

On the other hand, the virtue of manly courage (*andreia*), derived from Homeric exemplars, was comparatively simple. However, this was largely because there was, traditionally, only one kind of person (and one kind of situation) to which it applied. Athenian writers on *andreia* frequently made reference to Homeric heroes, often Achilles or Ajax, who stood their ground in combat against difficult odds. Aeschylus describes the seven warriors in *Seven Against Thebes* thusly: "Their *thumos*, iron-hearted and burning with *andreia*, breathes war like lions with blazing eyes." (Torrance, 2013, p.52) Sophocles identifies those who "risked their very life and did not back away from slaughter" as bearers of *andreia*, while Herodotus applies the term to characters in his *Histories* who emulate precisely this standard of conduct.[10] Like any evaluative term, *andreia* could be used in several subtly different ways, but most available sources from the post-Homeric period strongly indicate that it was primarily used to refer to a military person's steadfastness on the battlefield, particularly in the face of unfavorable odds.[11] This older usage clearly survives well after the birth of Socrates, since, as many readers will recall, Aristotle's own discussion of bravery or courage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* explicitly restricts genuine instances of *andreia* to those who are steadfast when facing death in battle (Aristotle, 2009, 1115a).

2.3 | Athenian pluralism

When Meno is asked about virtue, he receives a well-known response, which says a great deal about the traditional Athenian conception of virtue:

> It is not hard to tell you, Socrates. First, if you want the virtue of a man, it is easy to say that a man's virtue consists of being able to manage public affairs and in so doing to benefit his friends and harm his enemies and to be careful that no harm comes to himself; if you want the virtue of a woman, it is not difficult to describe: she must manage the home well, preserve its possessions, and be submissive to her husband; the virtue of a child, whether male or female, is different again, and so is that of an elderly man, if you want that, or if you want that of a free man or a slave. And there are very many other virtues, so that one is not at a loss to say what virtue is. (Meno 71e)

Socrates, of course, immediately claims that Meno must tell him what this "swarm" of virtues has in common (*Meno* 72b). But this question, as I will soon emphasize, simply presupposes the denial of a pluralism which appears to have come quite naturally to Athenians at the time.

Consider that Greek tragedies were often thematically organized around the ways in which various virtues could come into conflict in an individual. Athenians in particular appear to have been keenly aware of the ways in which the proud, strong, and violent hero could enact *hybris*; forgetfulness of his place in relation to other persons and especially to the gods. *Andreia* and *sophrosune* represented two poles of this conflict, a conflict which in many ways was the central problem for a city-state in dire need of military success on the one hand and social and political order on the other.[12] This is important because it highlights a *pluralism* which, I claim, lay at the heart of Athenian morality.

Rather than argue for the supremacy of any one value or principle, traditional Greek moralists were happy to accept an irreducible plurality of virtue-concepts. Indeed, even apparently general terms like *arête* (translated into English as "virtue" or "excellence") had no general, all-purpose sense in the Homeric context. Rather, as historian Joseph Bryant notes, "the word is best translated as *an* excellence in some concrete capacity rather than the more abstract virtue of later Greek philosophers." (Bryant, 1996).

In fact, even the word we translate as "good"—*agathon*—seems to have been understood in terms of more substantive concepts. As W.H. Adkins wrote:

> To be *agathos*, one must be brave, skillful and successful in war and in peace; and one must possess the wealth and (in peace) the leisure which are at once the necessary conditions for the development of these skills and the natural reward of their successful employment. (Adkins, 1960, pp. 32-33)

One way to gauge the thickness of an ethical concept is to ask how much information a person needs in order to be able to correctly apply the concept to a particular case. Thus, even superficially thin terms like *agathon* and *arête* function as thick concepts, and it is equally clear that *sophrosune* and *andreia* meet this description as well. In order for a pre-Socratic Athenian to correctly apply these concepts to an individual, they not only needed to know quite a lot about the situation, behavior, and psychology of that individual, they also needed to know *who* the individual was, or what social role they occupied in the *polis*.

As strange as it may seem, there is, in this scheme, no sign of a perfectly general master-concept, one which is used to make all-things-considered judgments that apply without qualification to any action, person, or trait. Perhaps the closest concept is *orthos logos*, often translated as "right reason" or "correct reason."[13] This seems to have referred to doing something in the right way or to the correct degree. But no one would have thought that to simply say *of* an action that it was done "in accordance with right reason" would be to circumscribe its basic ethical significance. No one, that is, except possibly Socrates. As Aristotle himself says:

> Socrates, then, thought the virtues were instances of reason (*logos*)... while we think they merely *involve* reason. (Aristotle, 2009, 1144b25-30)

The figure of Socrates, I will claim, bears a deeply antagonistic relationship to any pluralistic ethical worldview, and he is a prime mover with respect to the cultural shift under study here. Of course, he did not just spring up out of nowhere and undermine the pluralistic conception all on his own—the shift was probably, as historians of the period have argued, precipitated by social and economic factors (Bryant, 1996). Yet, his role as a mouthpiece for the conceptual revolution was arguably very significant.

How does he play this role? In the so called "definitional" dialogues, Socrates performs an exercise in metalinguistic negotiation. He inserts, without argument, two distinct presuppositions, which necessarily lead to the thinning out of moral discourse. The first assumption is that a virtue-concept must be highly *general*, that is to say, it must in principle be predicable of any person in a wide variety of situations. The second is that a virtue-concept must be *beneficial* to its possessor. I will show that Socrates' arguments in the *Laches* and the *Charmides* are structured around these very assumptions. Each assumption acts as a distinct sort of "thinning agent," which enables Socrates to arrive at a maximally thin conception of the virtues.

3 | GENERALITY IN THE SOCRATIC ELENCHUS

In their eponymous dialogues, the characters of Laches and Charmides begin their discussions with Socrates in the same way. Each offers a definition of the virtue-concept under discussion—*andreia* and *sophrosune*, respectively—that is strikingly similar to the traditional definitions I have been describing. Plato is probably using comparatively

unsophisticated characters as mouthpieces for those very conceptions in order to show how his teacher, Socrates, went about attacking traditional moral ideas (Schmid, 1992, p. 24).[14] I claim that a close examination of these texts reveals one key Socratic assumption about virtue which works to undermine traditional thick Athenian concepts. The *Laches* contains a passage that is as illustrative as any, and it comes just after Laches himself has given a definition of *andreia* that is basically congruent with the Homeric conception just outlined. “If,” he says, “a man is willing to remain at his post and to defend himself against the enemy without running away, then you may rest assured that he is a man of *andreia*.”[15] Socrates responds:

> So as I said just now, my poor questioning is to blame for your poor answer… I wanted to include not only those who are courageous in warfare but also those who are brave in dangers at sea, and the ones who show courage in illness and poverty and affairs of state; and then again I wanted to include not only those who are brave in the face of pain and fear but also those who are clever at fighting desire and pleasure. (*Laches* 191d-e)

Since any person is, in principle, capable of “fighting desire and pleasure” in many contexts, the implication here is that the virtue can be possessed by virtually anyone in a wide variety of situations.[16] This looks very much like a metalinguistic negotiation, since Socrates does not actually argue for a new definition of a term, nor does he merely seem to be accusing his interlocutors of ignoring common usage, since his usage is *not* common. Rather, Socrates is *using* the term *andreia* in a manner, which implies that an old definition is inadequate and must be discarded. He directly ascribes courage to politicians, to the poor and to the sick, in defiance of ancient convention, and this, as Plunkett and Sundell argue, is a standard way in which speakers communicate the idea that everyone *ought* to be using a term differently than they in fact do (Plunkett and Sundell 2015, 839–840).

So, without explicitly identifying it or arguing for it, Socrates is imposing the following requirement on the conversation:

> **The Generality Requirement**: Virtue-concepts must be applicable, at least in principle, to any agent in almost any situation.

Laches submits to this requirement without offering any resistance, accepting that *andreia* can, in principle, be displayed by any person in a wide variety of situations. He says, “Well then, I think it is a sort of endurance of the soul, if it is necessary to say what its nature is in all these cases.” (*Laches* 191e) However, someone truly interested in defending the traditional conception of *andreia* would have no reason to proceed in this way, for the generality requirement is fatal to a thick concept which uses a particular kind of person (a warrior) in a particular kind of situation (a battle) as a reference-fixing paradigm case. Of course, Laches submits, and subsequently proposed definitions are general in the required way. Predictably, *andreia* as it traditionally described in Greek literature does not survive this line of questioning.[17]

When we turn to the *Charmides*, we find Socrates performing a nearly identical trick. Here, the virtue-concept *sophrosune* is under scrutiny, and the young nobleman Charmides is asked to give a definition of the term. *Sophrosune*, recall, demanded different sorts of behavior from different kinds of people, and Charmides, a young nobleman in the presence of his superiors, simply focuses on what sophrosune is for him. He begins by suggesting that *sophrosune* is a kind of “quietness”:

> At first he shied away and was rather unwilling to answer. Finally, however, he said that in his opinion temperance was doing everything in an orderly and quiet way—things like walking in the streets, and talking, and doing everything else in a similar fashion. “So I think,” he said, “taking it all together, that what you ask about is a sort of quietness.” (*Charmides* 159b)

The definition certainly captures much of what it would have meant to be a *sophron* agent in Charmides' social position, and in the sort of situations that Charmides might have found himself *qua* young aristocrat. However, he does not explicitly restrict his definition of *sophrosune* to persons like himself or to a particular class of situations, indeed, he proclaims that sophrosune is doing *everything* quietly and slowly. This misrepresentation—a generalization from Charmides' own particular position to the population as a whole—provides Socrates with all he needs to undermine the traditional conception of the virtue. Socrates easily shows that *sophrosune* could not have consisted in doing *everything* quietly and slowly, for “quietness and slowness” are not admirable in a wide variety of situations: lyre-playing, boxing, running and jumping, and in matters of bodily health. Yet, he argues, since *sophrosune* is necessarily admirable, sophrosune cannot be quietness.

However, we are now in a position to recognize a suppressed premise in this discussion: the generality requirement. For Socrates, a virtue-concept must be applicable to any agent in a wide variety of situations, and this assumption allows him to claim that *sophrosune* must be something that an agent can display in a very broad set of situations. Yet, *sophrosune* was, for men like Charmides, a kind of orderly quietness in certain *restricted* set of social situations, which did not necessarily include lyre-playing or boxing. Thus, the generality requirement works in the background here, preventing interlocutors in both dialogues from exploring the idea that a virtue-concept may not require the same things of all persons in all situations. Moreover, notice that a much thinner concept is being subtly prioritized. *Sophrosune* cannot simply be what it is; rather, it must be an instance of the *admirable*.

Thus far, the generality requirement has lead Socrates to reject the traditional conceptions of the two virtues in question. I conclude that we have, in Plato's early dialogues, a portrayal of Socrates' attempt to eliminate thick ethical concepts via the covert imposition of a requirement that necessarily undermines those same concepts and motivates their replacement with thinner ones. Williams' hypothesis about the effects of a certain form of reflection on such concepts is now beginning to look much more plausible.

4 | THE BENEFICIALITY REQUIREMENT

However, this may not be all that Socrates is out to accomplish. As scholars have long noted, he can be profitably read as introducing a second requirement which also functions to replace older thick concepts with a new, thinner ones.

4.1 | The requirement

Plato's Socrates often affirms the idea that possessing a virtue entails that one's soul is necessarily in a better position than it would be without the virtue. As Gerasimos Santas has helpfully indicated, this idea is almost definitional for Plato, because he consistently associates the virtues with the term *agathon*, and, “Plato takes it for granted—never argues—that *agatha* always benefit (*ophelein*) the possessor of them.” (Santas, 1964, p. 49) In other words, Socrates appears to be committed to:

> **The Beneficiality Requirement**: Virtues necessarily benefit their possessors.

Thus far in the *Laches*, the first definition of *andreia* has been rejected for being too narrow, and a second definition is sought. Laches, after being informed of the generality requirement and of the resulting failure of his first attempt, claims that *andreia* must be “a kind of endurance of the soul.” (*Laches* 192c) Socrates, however, makes short work of this much broader definition by arguing that endurance “accompanied by folly” would be “harmful and injurious” (*blabera kai kakourgos*). Laches sheepishly agrees that this result is unacceptable, and he comes to reject this second, final attempt on the grounds that anyone displaying “foolish endurance” could not be *andreios*. (*Laches* 193d). Several

examples follow, which directly link folly to personal harm and injury, and the implication is that without the opposite of foolishness, no one can possess *andreia*.[18]

Charmides, for his part, has just had his first definition rejected via the generality requirement. As is the case in the *Laches*, Charmides' second definition of *sophrosune* (modesty) does not survive the imposition of the beneficiality requirement. Socrates has him agree that the virtue must be beneficial, and proceeds to quote a line from Homer: “modesty is not a good mate for a needy man.”(*Charmides* 161a) Socrates concludes that modesty is not always beneficial. Hence, the modest man is not necessarily *sophron*, since *sophrosune* must be beneficial to him.[19]

So, a critical premise of these arguments is that a virtue necessarily brings benefit to its possessor. Socrates believes that if a character trait can be shown to be harmful or injurious in a single case, then that trait is simply banished from the list of the virtues. Now, it is true that in the Platonic dialogues, we rarely encounter a character who *rejects* the beneficiality thesis outright.[20] We might be tempted to conclude, on this basis, that the thesis itself was embedded in ordinary Athenian thought. We should resist this temptation. The potential conflict between the virtuous life and the beneficial life shows up again and again in pre-Socratic Greek thought. Adkins quotes a line of Hesiod that echoes a now-familiar line from Homer:

> *Aidos* (self-respect) is not beneficial when it attends upon a needy man— *aidos* which both greatly harms and prospers men. (Adkins, 1972, 26)

Adkins takes this line to derive from a popular proverb, one which reflects a deep awareness of the ways in which virtues can, in certain circumstances, lead a person to ruin. In other words, Socrates' predecessors thought that virtues were not always beneficial. As such, it is odd that the characters of Charmides and Laches acquiesce so readily to the assumption that the virtues *always* benefit their possessors. Yet, as I will now argue, it is this very assumption that enables Socrates to produce a maximally thin replacement for the traditional virtues. What, after all, is the opposite of foolishness?

4.2 | “Knowledge of Good and Evil”

In the *Laches* and the *Charmides*, the invocation of the beneficiality requirement is a critical step toward the proposal that courage and temperance might amount to “knowledge of good and evil” (198c, 174b). This, it seems, is Socrates' final word on what virtue essentially is.[21] Of course, the historical character of Socrates is not traditionally read as espousing any positive ethical theory at all, and I should emphasize that I am only offering a possible reading that makes sense of many things that Socrates is portrayed as saying in the so-called early and middle dialogues.[22] It is striking that in both the *Laches* and *Charmides*, this definition receives so much attention, and we should not forget that in the *Protagoras*, Socrates comes very close to saying that the virtues are all *identical* with knowledge of good and evil. Many scholars have suggested that Plato is here reporting and defending a view which the historical Socrates actually held.[23]

Socrates arrives at this new conception of virtue in three distinct stages. First, he deploys the generality requirement in order to eliminate traditional conceptions of *andreia* and *sophrosune*, and second, he deploys the beneficiality requirement in order to get his interlocutors to agree that knowledge of good and evil is an essential prerequisite for any virtue. He argues that any purported good can in fact lead to personal unhappiness if it is not used wisely, and this leads him to conclude, in conjunction with the beneficiality requirement, that knowledge of good and evil is necessary for the possession of any virtue.

Combine these thoughts with a more famous Socratic thesis—that *akrasia* is impossible or that knowledge of the good is *sufficient* for virtuous action—and you arrive at the idea that knowledge of good and evil is both necessary and sufficient for acting well.[24] A complex and multifarious set of virtues has now been reduced to a single kind of knowledge. In other words, Socrates has made good on his reductionism. He is now in possession of a single (very

skeletal) analysis of virtue-as-such, and in articulating this explanation, he has eliminated the possibility that there is an irreducible plurality of virtues.

5 | CONCEPTUAL GENEALOGY

According to the story I have told in this paper, the move from traditional thick concepts like *sophrosune* and *andreia* to thinner concepts like "knowledge of good and evil" has been motivated by two key ideas. The first is generalism, or the view that ethical concepts should apply, in principle, to a maximally wide array of persons and situations. The second is the beneficiality requirement, which, I have suggested, motivates the subordination of ordinary virtue-concepts to some more general one. Socrates never directly defends these requirements; rather, he simply speaks as if they *must* be true, inserting them into the dialogue as conversational presuppositions rather than as contestable hypotheses. Yet, once one accepts the presuppositions, one is lead fairly inexorably to reductionism, the idea that some very small cluster of thin concepts has (and should have) total logical priority in our ethical thought. Moreover, these are the concepts which will, for Socrates, support an all-things-considered judgment concerning what is virtuous *as such*. What relevance does this story have for us today?

5.1 | Evaluating Socrates' influence

Socratic reductionism has been enormously influential in moral philosophy. In fact, with a few notable exceptions, reductionism is virtually hegemonic within most research programs in normative ethics, meta-ethics and applied ethics.

Consider that most normative theorists take it as virtually axiomatic that their task is to define or deploy thin concepts, and our students are routinely taught the aforementioned Rawlsian mantra that all moral theories can be understood in terms of the priority they give to two thin concepts, rightness and goodness (Rawls, 1988). One recent book claims that moral progress is nothing *but* the mutual adjustment of conceptions of rightness and goodness in light of one another. This author considers the mutual-adjustment thesis to be an important innovation, but does not even notice that he is working under the assumption that these are the only ethical concepts that require mutual adjustment (Richardson, 2018). And, of course, Derek Parfit, in a book hailed by some as the greatest work in ethics in over a century, portrays moral philosophy as progressively ascending towards the discovery of what he calls a "single higher-level wrong-making property."(Parfit, 2011).

When we continue to explore meta-ethics more generally, we find that its practitioners adhere fairly strictly to the Socratic model. They begin their semantic and metaphysical theorizing by studying concepts such as *good*, *right*, or *reason* and the associated sentences and judgments which deploy them. Thicker concepts, when they occasionally appear, are standardly explained in terms of these thinner ones.[25]

Nor is this reductionist picture only influential within the halls of academia: many of the most widely cited works in applied ethics simply involve a rigorous application of reductionist moral principles to various social and environmental problems.[26] Moreover, the emerging effective-altruism movement has at its core the idea that "everyone should do the most *good* they can,", and its proponents often provide single, nonindexed rankings of various options for charitable donation (Harris, 2006; Singer, 2015). This is what reductionism looks like in practice.

In sum, Socratic reductionism remains virtually hegemonic in moral philosophy, producing a strong emphasis on the logical priority of thin concepts and the importance of ATC judgments. Williams' puzzling claim—that modern life involves a certain kind of reflection which undermines thick concepts—turns out to be not so implausible after all. Rather than see ourselves as asking and answering a plurality of questions, we tend to write and speak as though there were really only *one* kind of question, "what is the good/right thing to do?" Is this the right approach?

Obviously, Homeric *sophrosune* and *andreia* are, to put it mildly, concepts for which we have limited use in the modern context. But what of pluralism itself?

One way to answer this question is to return to the conceptual genealogy and ask: do we have reason to accept the requirements that Socrates places on moral concepts? While I lack the space to definitively answer this question, I do want to note that each requirement has been subjected to serious criticism. If these criticisms have merit, then the conceptual genealogy shows that our way of thinking about (and deploying) concepts has been subjected to a distorting influence.

5.2 | Beneficiality and Eudaimonism

To begin, take the beneficiality requirement, which seems to be related to *eudaimonism*, or the classical view that a virtuous life is the same as a flourishing one. If we accept this view, it is entirely natural to suggest that the virtues benefit their possessors. Socrates strongly indicates his support for eudaimonism (see *Meno* 88c and *Crito* 47e–48a), and there is broad scholarly consensus that he held this view (Annas, 1999; Bobonich, 2010; Brickhouse & Smith, 1994; Vlastos, 1991). Indeed, it is clear that one of the foundational assumptions of his project is that virtue is constitutively related to happiness or flourishing in some deep way, such that a vicious person is necessarily unhappy. Yet, it is precisely this strong form of eudaimonism that has seemed so implausible to most contemporary moral philosophers. Few of us, particularly in the face of the horrors of the 20th century, can stomach it. Unless we define "happiness" in such a way as to render the thesis trivial and uninteresting, there are just too many obvious counterexamples. This suggests that the beneficiality requirement should be rejected.

Of course, plucky neo-Aristotelians continue to insist that moral judgments only have content if they can be shown to connect up, in the right ways, with the happiness or flourishing of the agents to whom they apply. Yet, even these thinkers only hold to a much weaker form of eudaimonism: virtue, they say, has to be a good *bet* for happiness, not a guarantee (Hursthouse, 1999). This weaker assumption—itself still deeply contestable—will not secure or even motivate conceptual reductionism, since, to return to the Homeric example, modesty may be a good bet in general, even if it is not beneficial to a needy man in particular. Thus, the beneficiality requirement, as it appears in the Socratic dialogues, is derived from a worldview, which has been subjected to serious, perhaps even devastating criticism.

Now, consider the generality requirement, which asks us to employ ethical concepts, which apply to any possible action, trait, or state of affairs. What might be said for or against it?

5.3 | Generality

Now, the idea of a perfectly general ethical concept has come under attack in recent years. As already noted, Baker, Copp, and Tiffany each argue that the concept of *ought simpliciter* is incoherent.[27] Moreover, according to certain plausible views about the semantics of "good," defended separately by Peter Geach, Judith Thomson, Michael Ridge, and Steven Finlay, its usage always contains an implicit, contextually mediated reference to some kind of standard, or some *way* of being good.[28] On this view, there really is no such thing as a purely thin concept, and correspondingly, the notion of an ATC judgment is rendered particularly mysterious.

However, defenders of good *simpliciter* have shot back, arguing that even if the word "good" normally functions to pick out some way of being good, that does not mean that there is not also some thinner, more general sense that the word can legitimately have in our language (Pigden, 1990). Richard Arneson writes:

> Suppose someone says, "Pleasure is good."… the question is whether this is a well-formed assertion that says what it seems to say on its face, and is capable of being true or false.

Arneson imagines Thomson asking: "What do you mean? In what *way* is pleasure good?"

> To this stiff-arm response the initial speaker might with linguistic and conceptual propriety respond, "I mean that pleasure is good, period." (Arneson, 2010, p. 740)

Arneson seems to be basically right. There does seem to be a space in our conceptual and linguistic scheme—if a somewhat shadowy one—for the notion of good, simpliciter. But as the genealogical story in this paper has shown, this new space is a contingent historical development, not a human universal. Moreover, if my diagnosis is correct, Socrates has had a major influence on the development itself. So, the question is: *should* we have made this conceptual space? What is gained by our having done so?

Here, it is worth mentioning that a Marxist skeptic could answer: *moral philosophers* gain, as a social class, from the existence of ATC judgments which deploy thin concepts. This provides them with an esoteric subject-matter over which they can claim special expertise. Of course, this might be more than a little uncharitable. But is it really a coincidence that Socrates' brightest pupil was to eventually argue that philosophers actually ought to *rule* in virtue of their special acquaintance with the Good? There is surely something to this skeptical line, which sees, in these Socratic encounters, the birth of a self-sustaining social class.

That said, I cannot properly adjudicate all of this here. After all, perhaps reductionism is *true*, and so perhaps Socrates ought to count as an extremely important innovator. My point is this: eudaimonism and generalism are both very controversial. Generalism has been thought to embody a false picture of how evaluative language actually works, and it has been thought to encourage a conceptual scheme that leads us to misconceive the subject-matter of ethics itself. Strong eudaimonism is even less popular. If these critiques are ultimately successful, then a pluralist conception of the ethical domain will be hard to resist. As such, the conceptual genealogy I have offered will support the following conclusion: at a critical juncture in the history of Western thought, our conceptualization of the ethical domain was subjected to a distorting influence. Or, as the judges who condemned Socrates were inclined to say: a *corrupting* influence.

6 | CONCLUSION

Once again, I will stress that it has not been the primary task of this paper to directly defend an alternative, pluralist conception of moral thought. More modestly, I have aimed to show that conceptual genealogy can help us to see more clearly what is at stake in such debates. In coming to appreciate the historical contingencies that mediate the development of our conceptual scheme, we are in a better position to ask whether we should continue to think this way. Genealogy cannot answer this question for us, but in portraying the contingency itself and reminding us of real human alternatives, it enlarges our sense of what is possible. Athenian citizens such as Laches and Charmides may have been unable to defend their worldview against the Socratic onslaught, but once we understand how Socrates was able to undermine that same worldview, we are in a better position to give it a fair hearing.

ORCID

Nicholas Smyth https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6155-1461

ENDNOTES

[1] For advocates for and practitioners of this method, see Adams (2015), Craig (1990), Davidson (2004), Hacking (1995), MacIntyre (2013), Novaes (2015), Plunkett (2016), Smyth (forthcoming), Taylor (1989), Thomas (2008).

[2] To use an illustrative example here, it may well be that our conceptual scheme contains something like Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities, such that in actual practice we treat properties such as extension, shape, and solidity as being more fundamental (in some sense) than properties such as color. But it is exceedingly unlikely that

ordinary English speakers could explicitly articulate this distinction if prompted; the conceptual structure is implicit in their practice and not something that is ever the object of conscious awareness.

[3] Pekka Väyrynen argues for this conclusion by deploying sentences of the following form:

> Whether or not Madonna's show is lewd, it's not bad in any way distinctive of explicit sexual display. (Väyrynen, 2013)

Since this sentence makes sense, the evaluative component of the concept lewd is, he thinks, cancelable. Cancellability being the hallmark of pragmatic implication, Väyrynen concludes that thick concepts (unlike thinner ones) do not really contain evaluation as part of their literal semantic meaning.

[4] Hurley labels her view "non-Centralism," whereas Kirchin defends something he calls the "no-priority" view (Hurley, 1992; Kirchin, 2017).

[5] In this paper, I will follow Derek Baker in thinking that ATC judgments *must* be taken to have this special normative force. As Baker convincingly argues, it is totally unclear what the point of an ATC judgment would be if it merely added another competing category of normative reasons to an agent's set of reasons (Baker, 2018).

[6] Plato, *Euthyphro*, 4e. Of course, Socrates is eventually going to get him to agree that piety must be a *part* of the more general notion of justice; this is an instance of the very move under discussion in this paper.

[7] In what follows, I draw on Hobbs (2000), H. North (1966), Rademaker (2005), Schmid (1992).

[8] Several examples will illustrate the point. First, there is feminine temperance: in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Phaedra's struggle to control her sexual passions is described as an attempt to achieve *sophrosune*, and Semonides' famously misogynistic diatribe contains the claim that wives who appear to be *sophron* are in fact often guilty of sexual treachery (Seimonedes, *Women*, 110–115). Thus, in controlling sexual desire, a wedded woman could attain *sophrosune*, but the virtue required no such control from other kinds of person. Moreover, a *sophron* woman was expected to remain focused on domestic duties and to be self-sacrificing. Second, there is the example of class-based temperance: the virtue was a favorite subject of the conservative poets Theognis and Pindar, who portrayed members of the lower classes as "*sophrones*" when they obeyed their rulers. Third, there is a kind of political temperance: in controlling his greed, the *sophron* politician did not use his powers for personal gain. Solon was a widely cited exemplar, and it was said that he created a political equilibrium, which mirrored the harmonious state of his own soul. Finally, there is a kind of temperance possessed by young aristocrats: these persons were expected to avoid displays of vanity or self-importance in the presence of their superiors (H. F. North, 1977).

[9] See Tuozzo (2011), pp. 86–88. Tuozzo notes that other sources, such as Xenophon, portray Charmides as humble and self-deprecating in the face of his superiors, and as someone who entered politics with a keen sense of his own limitations.

[10] Specifically, at 3.82.4, 5.72.2, 6.69.1, and 6.72.2.

[11] There is some question about the extent to which the term was gendered. It was probably derived from the noun *aner*, which means "male human being," but it is sometimes applied to female figures without any obvious sense of irony.

[12] A.H Adkins' *Merit and Responsibility* makes the canonical case for this feature of Greek ethical thought (Adkins, 1960). See also North (1966), p. 22–29.

[13] For an excellent discussion of the problems faced by translators of this term, see Moss (2014).

[14] By comparison, the subsequent interlocutors in both dialogues, Critias and Nicias, are well-spoken, educated, and quick to provide counter-arguments in conversation with Socrates.

[15] (*Laches* 190e). Øyvind Rabbås helpfully indicates that this is a kind of *paradigm*-definition of the virtue, a definition that does not state jointly necessary and sufficient conditions, but rather refers to a well-known paradigm case. He further notes that this sort of definition plays a central role in a primarily oral, narrative culture with very little explicitly codified moral precepts (Rabbås, 2004).

[16] Walter Schmid disagrees with this reading of the text, arguing that Socrates does not explicitly claim that *andreia* ought to be recast as a "universal human virtue," and that the references to pleasure and desire are simply a reference to a certain kind of political virtue (Schmid, 1992, 106). However, I think that Schmid misses the obvious similarity to other passages in the dialogues (Such as *Meno* 71e) where Socrates is unquestionably attempting to generalize the concept in question to all persons. Furthermore, Schmid's reading of the passage may be too literal: that Socrates does not explicitly make the generality-claim does not mean that the generality-claim is not rhetorically *implied*, especially given the contrast with Laches' comparatively narrow definition.

[17] Nicias thinks that "you are not defining courage in the right way, Socrates. And you are not employing the excellent observation I have heard you make before now… that every one of us is good with respect to that in which he is wise

and bad in respect to that in which he is ignorant." (194d) This allows him to provide his definition of *andreia*: "knowledge of the grounds of fear and hope." This conception is far broader in scope, both in terms of the people who might possess it and the kinds of situations in which they might display it. At this stage, little remains of the traditional conception.

[18] It is not immediately clear whether the agent's foolishness causes harm to herself or to people in general. However, several examples follow which directly link foolishness to personal harm and injury, and not merely to causing harm in general. Socrates gives the example of two men in opposite military camps, both of whom stand their ground, but where only one knows that his strategic position is far superior. "Surely," he says, "the endurance of [the man with lesser knowledge] is more foolish than that of the other." Similarly, he gives examples of those who risk their lives foolishly by engaging in cavalry attacks without knowledge of horsemanship and diving into wells without skill. All stand as counterexamples to Laches' claim that endurance on its own can qualify a person for *andreia*. Now, if these examples were meant to lend support to the idea that virtue must benefit people *in general*, they would be non-sequiturs. By hypothesis, the man who stands his ground without knowledge is benefitting the man in the opposite camp who does so with knowledge: he is engaging in a battle that he is sure to lose, and allowing his opponent an easy victory. These examples only work in Socrates' favor if he is deploying an agent-relative conception of benefit.

[19] Notice that if the sense of "benefit" or "improvement" here was agent-neutral such that the relevant benefit could accrue to anyone at all, Socrates' argument would fail. For in immodestly acquiring what he needs, the needy man might well take something from someone else.

[20] A possible exception is Polus in the *Gorgias*.

[21] As argued in Teloh (1989).

[22] In particular, one important challenge to my reading—one I must regrettably set aside— is offered in Naomi Reshotko's *Socratic Virtue* (Reshotko, 2006). Reshotko argues that Socrates is not a moral philosopher at all, that he has no theory of what agents *ought* to do. Rather, for Reshotko, he simply outlines a broadly naturalistic theory of how to become happy, where "knowledge of good and evil" is the only reliable means to achieve this end.

[23] See, for example Irwin (1995) and Nussbaum (2001).

[24] *Protagoras* 345d-e. Indeed, he comes to this conclusion precisely by rejecting a premise in his own argument in the *Laches*, namely, that courage is merely a part of virtue (*Laches* 199e, *Protagoras* 333b). Though, it is not clear whether, in the *Laches*, Socrates is actually committed to the premise, or whether he simply adopts it for the sake of argument.

[25] Thus, when Alexander Miller's textbook introduces the topic of meta-ethics, his first example of a moral judgment is "murder is wrong," and goodness and rightness remain his primary topics throughout. Similarly, when Mark van Roojen introduces meta-ethics, his first example concerns the judgments about *wrongness*, and he describes meta-ethics as the study of "the true nature of moral obligation, rightness and wrongness." Neither book contains any discussion of thick concepts (Miller, 2003; Van Roojen, 2015).

[26] Perhaps most famously, Peter Singer argues that a single, highly general principle (that it is our *duty* to aid poor and suffering persons, so long as we can) provides an exhaustive diagnosis of our moral relation to global poverty (Singer, 1972).

[27] Baker and Copp each claim that accounts of the ATC judgment face an inevitable regress. There is, they say, no way to make sense of the special normative force behind such judgments that avoids begging the question, because we need some conceptual scheme or standpoint from which to evaluate the force of ATC judgments (Baker, 2018; Copp, 1995).

[28] The Thompson-Geach argument is simple: *if* "good" named some simple property, it would function like the predicate "red," From

X is a red apple

We can infer that

X is red and X is an apple.

Yet, "good" does not function this way. From

X is a good car

We cannot infer that

X is a car and X is good.

Judgments of goodness, Thomson concluded, are always indexed to some hidden standard or functional role, Ridge basically accepts this argument, and Finlay deploys a similar one (Finlay, 2014; Geach, 1960; Ridge, 2014; Thomson, 2008).

REFERENCES

Adams, Z. (2015). *On the genealogy of color: A case study in historicized conceptual analysis*. Routledge.

Adkins, A. W. H. (1960). *Merit and responsibility*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.

Adkins, A. W. H. (1972). *Moral values and political behaviour in ancient Greece*. New York, NY: Norton.

Annas, J. (1999). *Platonic ethics, old and new* (Vol. 57). Cornell University Press.
Aristotle. (2009). *The Nicomachean ethics*. OUP Oxford.
Arneson, R. J. (2010). Good, period. *Analysis*, *70*(4), 731–744.
Baker, D. (2018). Skepticism about ought simpliciter. *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, *13*, 230–252.
Bobonich, C. (2010). Socrates and Eudaimonia. In *The Cambridge companion to Socrates* (pp. 293–332). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
Brickhouse, T. C., & Smith, N. D. (1994). *Plato's Socrates*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Bryant, J. M. (1996). *Moral codes and social structure in ancient Greece: A sociology of Greek ethics from Homer to the Epicureans and Stoics*. SUNY Press.
Burnyeat, M. F. (1971). Virtues in action. In *The philosophy of Socrates* (pp. 209–234). Springer.
Copp, D. (1995). *Morality, normativity, and Society* (Vol. 58). Oxford University Press.
Craig, E. (1990). *Knowledge and the state of nature: An essay in conceptual synthesis* (Vol. 42). Oxford University Press.
Dancy, J. (1995). In defense of thick concepts. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, *20*(1), 263–279.
Davidson, A. I. (2004). *The emergence of sexuality: Historical epistemology and the formation of concepts*. Harvard University Press.
Finlay, S. (2014). *Confusion of tongues: A theory of normative language*. New York: OUP.
Geach, P. T. (1960). Ascriptivism. *Philosophical Review*, *69*(2), 221–225.
Hacking, I. (1995). *The emergence of probability* (Vol. 26). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
Harris, J. (2006). *The Value of Life: An Introduction to Medical Ethics*. Routledge.
Hobbs, A. (2000). *Plato and the hero: Courage, manliness and the impersonal good*. Cambridge University Press.
Hurley, S. L. (1992). *Natural reasons: Personality and polity*. Oxford University Press on Demand.
Hursthouse, R. (1999). *On virtue ethics*. Oxford University Press.
Irwin, T. H. (1995). Prudence and morality in Greek ethics. *Ethics*, *105*(2), 284–295.
Kirchin, S. (2017). *Thick evaluation*. Oxford University Press.
MacIntyre, A. (2013). *After virtue*. A&C Black.
Miller, A. (2003). *An introduction to contemporary Metaethics*. Polity.
Moss, J. (2014). Right reason in Plato and Aristotle: On the meaning of logos. *Phronesis*, *59*(3), 181–230.
North, H. (1966). *Sophrosyne: Self-knowledge and self-restraint in Greek literature* (Vol. 35). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
North, H. F. (1977). The Mare, the vixen, and the bee:" Sophrosyne" as the virtue of women in antiquity. *Illinois Classical Studies*, *2*, 35–48.
Novaes, C. D. (2015). Conceptual genealogy for analytic philosophy. In *Beyond the analytic-continental divide: Pluralist philosophy in the twenty-first century* (pp. 75–93).
Nussbaum, M. C. (2001). *The fragility of goodness: Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy* (Vol. 2). Cambridge University Press.
Parfit, D. (2011). *On what matters*. Oxford University Press.
Pigden, C. R. (1990). Geach on 'good'. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, *40*(159), 129–154.
Plunkett, D. (2015). Which concepts should we use?: Metalinguistic negotiations and the methodology of philosophy. *Inquiry*, *58*(7–8), 828–874.
Plunkett, D. (2016). Conceptual history, conceptual ethics, and the aims of inquiry: A framework for thinking about the relevance of the history/genealogy of concepts to normative inquiry. *Ergo, An Open Access Journal of Philosophy*, *3*.
Plunkett, D., & Sundell, T. (2013). Disagreement and the semantics of normative and evaluative terms. *Philosophers' Imprint*, *13*(23).
Rabbås, Ø. (2004). Definitions and paradigms: Laches' first definition. *Phronesis*, *49*(2), 143–168.
Rademaker, A. (2005). *Sophrosyne and the rhetoric of self-restraint: Polysemy & persuasive use of an ancient Greek value term* (Vol. 259). Brill Academic Publishers.
Railton, P. A. (2003). *Facts, values, and norms: essays toward a morality of consequence*. Cambridge University Press.
Rawls, J. (1988). The priority of right and ideas of the good. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, *17*(4), 251–276.
Reshotko, N. (2006). *Socratic virtue: Making the best of the neither-good-nor-bad*. Cambridge University Press.
Richardson, H. (2018). *Articulating the moral community: Toward a constructive ethical pragmatism*. Oxford University Press.
Ridge, M. (2014). *Impassioned belief*. OUP Oxford.
Roberts, D. (2017). Thick concepts. In T. McPherson & D. Plunkett (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of Metaethics*. Routledge.
Ross, W. D. (2002). *The right and the good*. Clarendon Press.
Santas, G. (1964). The socratic paradoxes. *The Philosophical Review*, *73*, 147–164.
Scheffler, S. (1986). Morality's demands and their limits. *Journal of Philosophy*, *83*(10), 531.
Schmid, W. T. (1992). *On manly courage: A study of Plato's Laches*. SIU Press.
Singer, P. (1972). Famine, affluence, and morality. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 229–243.

Singer, P. (2015). *The most good you can do: How effective altruism is changing ideas about living ethically*. Yale University Press.
Smyth, N. (forthcoming). A genealogy of emancipatory value. *Inquiry*.
Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity* (Vol. 18). Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.
Teloh, H. (1989). Socratic education in Plato's early dialogues. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, *26*(1), 60–61.
Thomas, A. (2008). The genealogy of epistemic virtue concepts. *Philosophical Papers*, *37*(3), 345–369.
Thomson, J. J. (2008). *Normativity* (Vol. 70). Open Court.
Tiffany, S. B. E. (2007). Moral philosophy does not rest on a mistake: Reasons to be moral revisited. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, *37*(5), vii–xl.
Torrance, I. (2013). *Aeschylus: Seven against thebes*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
Tuozzo, T. M. (2011). *Plato's Charmides: Positive Elenchus in a 'Socratic' dialogue*. Cambridge University Press.
Van Roojen, M. (2015). *Metaethics: A contemporary introduction*. Routledge.
Väyrynen, P. (2013). *The Lewd, the rude and the nasty: A study of thick concepts in ethics*. Oxford University Press.
Vlastos, G. (1991). *Socrates, ironist and moral philosopher* (Vol. 50). Cornell University Press.
Williams, B. (1985). *Ethics and the limits of philosophy*. Routledge.

How to cite this article: Smyth N. Socratic reductionism in ethics. *Eur J Philos*. 2020;28:970–985. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12537