

# SOCRATIC METHODS

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## 1. 'The Socratic Method'

Socrates is famous in large part for *how* he philosophized. Some of what he did, especially involving his trial and death, earned him press. So did some of what he said, even if it is difficult for us to be confident which of the sayings attributed to him were genuinely said by him. But his most enduring fame and perhaps his earliest publicity owe more to the distinctive *way* in which he practiced philosophy. As Plato famously portrays him, Socrates regularly asked questions and then tested the answers with additional questions. This is what we think of, broadly, as “the Socratic method”. Plato advertises it as a distinctive form of intellectual activity, and the hypothesis that Socrates philosophized in a novel way helps to explain the proliferation of Socratic literature (*Sōkratikoī logoi*) in the fourth century BCE.

Readers of the surviving *Sōkratikoī logoi* are still attracted to and puzzled by the way in which Socrates philosophizes. Scholars have sought to characterize more exactly Socrates' method, and to distinguish it from other ways of intellectual inquiry. As a result, there are debates about how exactly to characterize Socrates' method and even about whether he has a method at all. This chapter offers an opinionated and selective guide to these debates, insofar as they are focused on Plato's Socratic dialogues, and it starts with the scholars who say that there is no Socratic method, to clarify what is at issue when we talk about Socrates' method.

## 2. Does Socrates have a method?

Scholars have argued that Socrates has no method in two ways that together might seem to pose a dilemma. Either a method is something technical, requiring some worked-out theory or

expertise, or it is just any patterned way of proceeding. If the former, one might argue that Socrates lacks a method on the grounds that he possesses no theory about what he is doing and no relevant expertise (*technē*). And if the latter, one might argue that there is no distinctive Socratic method on the grounds that Socrates exhibits many patterns in his philosophizing. But each of these arguments is contestable, and the dilemma itself leaves room for other characterizations of method.

Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 3-10) and Wolfsdorf (2003) argue that Socrates lacks a method on the grounds that he possesses no theory about what he is doing and no relevant expertise (*technē*). Wolfsdorf (2003) emphasizes that Socrates does not explicitly articulate any theory about how to philosophize. That is true, but can we infer that he has no theory to offer? It is certainly not as though he has *nothing* to say about how he proceeds and why he does so. He regularly and explicitly favors a question-and-answer format, with short answers (*Prot.* 347c-348a, *Grg.* 447b-449d, *Hi.Mi.* 369b-d), and he frequently demands that the answerer state their own beliefs (*Cr.* 49c-d, *Prot.* 331c, *Grg.* 500b, *Rep.* I 346a). Moreover, Socrates has things to say about what *kind* of answer he is looking for when he asks ‘What is F?’, especially in the *Euthyphro* (6d-e) and *Meno* (72a-76a). But on Wolfsdorf’s (2003, esp. 293) interpretation, Socrates’ account of how he proceeds and why he does so remains “theoretically and methodologically naïve,” because he does not investigate the metaphysical and epistemological questions that he would need to answer to have an account that is not naïve. Moreover, Wolfsdorf (2003, 293) takes Socrates to be *aware* of this limitation, as he thinks it best explains Socrates’ disavowals of knowledge.

Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 3-10) also tie Socrates’ lack of a method to his ignorance, by arguing that Socrates lacks expertise (*technē*). One might think that Socrates cannot possess any expertise because expertise confers wisdom (*Ap.* 22d) and he disavows all wisdom, great and small (*Ap.* 22b). But Socrates qualifies this sweeping disavowal when he acknowledges that he has human wisdom, the grasp that he lacks wisdom about ‘the biggest things,’ that is, about how to live (*Ap.* 23a-b).<sup>1</sup> One might also think that Socrates cannot possess any expertise because he sharply distinguishes himself from the ‘craftsmen’ or experts (*Ap.* 22c-d). But in this passage he actually distinguishes himself from the *manual* craftsmen, which leaves the door open for him to possess non-manual expertise (*cf. Grg.* 450a-e).

Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 3-10) have a more promising way of arguing that Socrates lacks expertise, in two steps. Step one extracts from Socrates’ various remarks about cobblers, medical

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<sup>1</sup> Here and throughout the translations are mine, with heavy borrowing from those in Cooper (1997).

doctors, horse trainers, and such seven requirements for expertise (Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 6-7). First, expertise is exercised in an orderly fashion, not by guesswork or at random. Second, expertise is teachable: experts transmit their mastery to apprentices. Third, experts can explain what they do by giving an account of their expertise's object and its causes (*Grg.* 465a, 500e-501b). Fourth, the expert's work and judgments (about their expertise) are free from error. Fifth, the expert stands out from other people in possessing their expertise: others lack the expert's knowledge and cannot do what the expert does without much greater chance of failure. Sixth, every expertise is defined by its own subject matter. And seventh, the expert has knowledge and wisdom insofar as they are an expert.<sup>2</sup>

In step two, Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 7-8) argue that Socrates falls short of these standards. True, he does not proceed randomly or by pure guesswork (requirement 1). But they insist that a *technē* must have not only an orderly procedure but also an orderly outcome (*Grg.* 503d-504e), and they find the predictable outcome of Socratic questioning—perplexity (*aporia*)—to be disorderly (*Eu.* 11b-e, *M.* 79e-80b, *Hi.Mi.* 372a-e and 376b-c). In reply, one might suggest that perplexity is not the ultimate outcome of Socrates' questioning, but that human wisdom is. If human wisdom is not just a passing or isolated awareness of one's perplexity but a deeper kind of self-knowledge—the developed ability to examine one's commitments and to find them falling short of divine wisdom<sup>3</sup>—then the goal of Socratic examination would be the ability to exercise Socratic examination, which is itself orderly. But then Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 8) would surely note that human wisdom, so understood, is *not* the regular outcome of Socratic examination, since so many of Socrates' interlocutors, including especially Charmides, Critias, and Alcibiades, turned out badly (Nails 2002). So how could Socrates be said to be an expert in Socratic examination if he does not regularly achieve the goal of Socratic examination? This is not exactly the inerrancy of expertise (requirement 4).

The defender of Socrates' expertise might answer with two points. First, Socrates' examinations *do* regularly have the outcome of human wisdom *in the case of Socrates himself*. He says that he examines himself when he examines others (*Ap.* 28e, *Chrm.* 166c-d, *Prt.* 348c-e, *Grg.*

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<sup>2</sup> One might compare Reeve 1989, 37-45, Roochnik 1996, and Hardy 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Socrates explicitly conceives of knowledge as an ability (*dunamis*) in the *Republic*—see especially *Rep.* V 476d-480a with Smith 2000—but his use of expertise as a model for knowledge and wisdom in the Socratic dialogues already ties knowledge to ability, as expertise is practical mastery. One might contrast the idea of knowing that one is not wise as an ability with knowing that one is not wise as a piece of knowledge, akin to knowing a friend's sister's name or knowing how to tie a bowline knot. A piece of knowledge can be gained and lost easily (*Smp.* 207d-208a). But abilities, especially expert abilities, require robust development and are then sustained by regular practice.

505e-506a), and we might take him at his word and infer that when he examines others, he also exercises his ability to sustain his human wisdom.<sup>4</sup> Second, we should not demand inerrancy of a would-be expert without regard to the question of whether they have the necessary materials to do their work. We cannot require the cobbler to make good sandals from wool or the shipwright to make good ships from cardboard. So, if many of Socrates' interlocutors prove unable to continue practicing the examinations they begin with him—because they lack the courage (*La.* 194a with *La.* 187c-188d; *M.* 81d, 86b-c) or because they have other desires that pull them away<sup>5</sup>—perhaps this should be explained not as a defect in Socrates' expertise but as a defect in the materials with which—with *whom*—he works.<sup>6</sup>

But even if Socratic questioning proceeds in an orderly fashion toward an orderly outcome and even if his failures do not count against his expertise, Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 7-8) have five other requirements to consider. They take up two of them directly. They say that Socrates is unwise, because he disavows knowledge of the subjects of his inquiries (requirement 3), and they say that his examinations do not appear to have a distinct subject matter, since he uses them to investigate not only questions about virtue but also questions about Ion's activity as a rhapsode (requirement 6). But these points do not distinguish between expertise in examination by question and answer and expertise in the subject matter examined. Socrates could be an expert examiner over many subjects

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<sup>4</sup> Occasionally, Socrates might examine his own views when his interlocutor puts them forward (*La.* 194c-d), and in the *Lysis* and *Hippias Major*, Socrates tests several views that he has introduced, once it is clear that his interlocutors are not up to the task of either testing or putting forward views worth testing. But there is no reason to think that these are the only occasions on which Socrates is examining himself.

<sup>5</sup> For instances: in the *Apology*, Socrates records that responsibilities to one's household or polis can conflict with one's commitment to examination (*Ap.* 23b), and in the *Gorgias* and *Euthydemus*, he records how one might be led by greed to develop rhetorical abilities or eristical skill that does not constitute genuine expertise in examination (*cf. Phd.* 90b-c).

<sup>6</sup> In the *Gorgias*, Socrates argues that if a politician is prosecuted by his own citizens unjustly, he has failed to be a political expert, because political expertise is the art of making citizens live well, which requires making them just (517a-519d). In this argument, Socrates makes no allowance for defective materials. But political expertise is not supposed to be the same as expertise in Socratic question-and-answer conversation. The political expert has broader responsibility for the citizens' well-being than the conversational expert has for their interlocutors' human wisdom because the political expert has power over the education of citizens that the expert examiner lacks. So there is no inconsistency in maintaining that Socrates lacks political expertise but possesses some conversational expertise, despite the failures of Socrates' interlocutors.

though he lacks any subject-matter expertise.<sup>7</sup> Socrates could, that is, disavow knowledge of virtue and of how to live while suggesting that he is an expert in conversations that test his own and his interlocutor's knowledge of virtue and of how to live.

Socrates does in fact suggest that he is an expert at examination by question and answer, what he sometimes just calls 'conversing' (*dialegesthai*).<sup>8</sup> He explicitly tells Euthyphro that he uses expertise in their conversation (*Eu.* 11d), and explicitly tells Polus that he *knows* how to 'produce one witness' for the points he makes (*Grg.* 474a-b).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, he notes that the ability to converse in question-and-answer mode (*dialegesthai*) can be cultivated or neglected, just as speech-giving can, and he chastises Polus for neglecting it (*Grg.* 471d, *cf.* 448d).<sup>10</sup> Socrates has surely cultivated this ability, and he acknowledges having a 'customary manner' of putting words together (*Ap.* 27b2). Finally, he claims

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<sup>7</sup> In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates suggests that experts in rhetoric must also be experts in the subject matter about which they speak (269d-274a, with Brown 2003). But the expertise of rhetoric might well be much more demanding than the art of Socratic examination, just as the political expertise is (see the previous note). Indeed, the expertise of rhetoric might count as part of the political expertise (*Grg.* 517a with 502d-504e, *cf.* *Plt.* 303e-304a). Of course, if the expertise in Socratic examination does *not* require expertise about the subject matters under examination, then Socrates is committed to the possibility of knowing whether someone knows this or that without knowing this or that oneself. In the *Charmides*, he raises puzzles about such second-order knowledge, but we need not think that these puzzles are insuperable. See LaBarge 1997, Carone 1998, Benson 2003, and Tuozzo 2011.

<sup>8</sup> The word 'dialectic' transliterates the Greek word *dialektikē*, which is, etymologically, expertise in conversation (*dialegesthai*). So if Socrates is an expert at question-and-answer conversation, then it would not be inapt to say that he is an expert in dialectic. But caution is required. Although Socrates does make a claim about how to proceed in a way that befits *dialektikē* in *Meno* 75d, he does not use the word *dialektikē* to describe his own abilities in the Socratic dialogues, and there might well be differences between Socrates' question-and-answer conversations and the various conceptions of dialectic that can be found in the *Phaedrus* (262d with 259e-274b) and *Republic* (VI 506c-e with VII 531d-535a, 537c), let alone the *Sophist* and *Statesman* and Aristotle's *Topics*. For a start on Platonic conceptions of dialectic, Benson 2015 and Broadie 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Socrates also calls himself an expert in erotic love (*Smp.* 177d; *cf.* *Lys.* 204c, *Phdr.* 257a) and an expert at midwifery (*Tht.* 149a). These might be related to his suggestion in the *Euthyphro* that he is an expert in examination, for he might claim erotic expertise on the grounds that he is expert in desiring truth and wisdom (or, punning on the similar Greek words for eros and for questions, that he is expert in asking questions) and he might claim midwifery on the grounds that he is expert in testing the fruits of such desire. See also Reeve 2006 and Belfiore 2012 for Socrates as an expert on love and Burnyeat 1977 and Sedley 2004 for Socratic midwifery.

<sup>10</sup> *Cf.* 508a, where Socrates chastises Callicles for neglecting geometry. Perhaps we do not all need to be *experts* in geometry, but we should not entirely neglect it, either.

some knowledge that would seem to be part of the examinational expertise, including the distinction between correct opinion and knowledge (*M.* 98b) and what would follow from what (*Prt.* 360e-361a).<sup>11</sup>

To show that Socrates is wrong to suggest that he is an expert in his customary question-and-answer conversation, Brickhouse and Smith could turn to the requirement that expertise be distinctive, since Socrates wants many others to do what he does (requirement 5). But Socrates plainly does not think that many others already possess expertise in examination. Indeed, if we construe the expertise of Socratic examination as the ability to induce and sustain one's own human wisdom, then the rarity of human wisdom entails the rarity of Socratic expertise.<sup>12</sup>

Still, Brickhouse and Smith can appeal to the two remaining requirements for expertise: experts can explain what they do (requirement 3), and experts can teach others their expertise (requirement 2). Socrates does not explain how he examines others to test their claims to knowledge and he does not obviously take on apprentices to teach them what he does. But should we infer that he *cannot* explain how he does what he does or that he *cannot* teach others? In the *Apology*, he says that his followers imitate what he does, and will continue to do so, even more vigorously, after he dies (*Ap.* 39c-d, *cf.* 23c, 37d). This looks like transmission of the ability to do Socratic examination, and it might even strike the reader of the *Apology* as a piece of advertising that Plato has inserted for himself as Socrates' most successful pupil.<sup>13</sup> But it must be admitted that Plato does not depict Socrates being

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<sup>11</sup> Wolfsdorf (2003, 293n92) cites *Charmides* 175e6 as evidence that Socrates does not think he is an expert inquirer, but I doubt that Socrates is being entirely serious. The dialogue is coming to a close, and he is exhorting Charmides to continue to inquire, and not to despair that he lacks temperance. To do so, he blames himself for the failures of their inquiry he has shared with Charmides and Critias. If there were a time for Socrates to fudge the truth, it would be when he is exhorting others to (continue to) examine.

<sup>12</sup> In addition, although Socrates occasionally reasons from the rarity of this or that expertise (*e.g.*, *Ap.* 24c-25b), he is not obviously committed to the thought that every expertise is necessarily rare. A political community's need for a diverse range of products and services suffices to explain why there are many different kinds of expertise (*cf.* *Rep.* II 369b-371e), and given that there are many different kinds of expertise and each expertise requires a considerable investment of time and effort to obtain, it is inevitable that most expertises will be held by a small portion of the community. But this reasoning does not establish that expertise *as such* must be rare, or that expertise in Socratic examination must be. For all this reasoning says, if there were an expertise needed to live well, we might all share that expertise. (Do many share the expertise of arithmetic? *Cf.* the previous note.) We do not all need to be cobblers to live well, and in fact, if we all spent the time and energy needed to become cobblers, it would be harder for us to *also* provide for clothes, shelter, food, education, and health care.

<sup>13</sup> In the *Apology*, Socrates issues a blanket denial that he is a teacher (*Ap.* 33a-b), but arguably he is not denying that he teaches anything in any way, but only that he teaches by conferring beliefs about what is valuable to pupils who otherwise would have lacked those beliefs. For discussion, see Kraut 1984, 294-304; Reeve 1989, 160-169; Nehamas 1992; G.A. Scott 2000.

examined about how he does what he does, so there is room for uncertainty about whether Socrates is or is not fully an expert at what he does.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to these doubts about the arguments that Wolfsdorf (2003) and Brickhouse and Smith (1994) advance, one might question their assumption that Socrates cannot have a method without a theory or expertise. Socrates himself nowhere limits methods to experts or theoreticians. He does not say, for instance, that Gorgias lacks a method of persuading audiences when he argues that Gorgias lacks expertise. In fact, he effectively concedes that Gorgias persuades audiences by using some techniques that he has learned from experience (*empeiria*), and he does not deny that Gorgias can pass these techniques on to his pupils. Instead, Socrates argues that Gorgias lacks expertise because he cannot provide an account (*logos*) of the causes by which he persuades (*Grg.* 465a). That is, Socrates highlights Gorgias' theoretical deficiencies but not any deficiencies of method or practice when he distinguishes between Gorgias' skill and genuine expertise. This supports Brickhouse and Smith's insistence that *expertise* requires some theory, but it does not show that Socrates requires theory or expertise for the possession of a *method*.

At this point, the scholarly disagreement over whether Socrates possesses a method seems to turn on what counts as a method, perhaps as opposed to a mere 'customary manner' (*cf.* Wolfsdorf 2003, 302). Plato's Socrates does not help here, since Plato does not use the word *methodos* in the *Gorgias* or any other Socratic dialogue.<sup>15</sup> This might seem to be grist for Wolfsdorf's (2003) mill, since Socrates' lack of an explicit account of what a method is might tell against his possessing a method. But Plato does use the word *methodos* in other dialogues, and he typically uses the word to describe a self-conscious, orderly manner of inquiry, whether it is used by someone who is an expert (as, for instance, Hippocrates [*Phdr.* 270c]) or by someone who is seeking to become an expert (*Phdr.* 270d; *cf.* *Phdo.* 79e4, *Rep.* X 596a). In fact, so far as I can tell, Plato's dialogues nowhere insist that a method belongs exclusively to those who possess a theory or expertise, and their use of the term *methodos* matches easily Socrates' own 'customary manner' of putting words together (*Ap.* 27b2).

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<sup>14</sup> Scholars often call Socrates an expert examiner without confronting the grounds for doubt. LaBarge (2005, 32-34) is exceptional in this regard, but more work is needed. I thank Jeremy Henry for helpful discussion of Socrates as an expert.

<sup>15</sup> Unless one thinks of the *Theaetetus* as Socratic (see Sedley 2004). *Methodos* occurs in the *Laws* (638e4, 965c6), *Phaedo* (79e4, 97b6), *Phaedrus* (269d8, 270c4, 270d9), *Republic* (435d1, 510b8, 510c5, 531c10, 533b2, 533c8, 596a6), *Sophist* (218d5, 219a1, 227a8, 235c7, 243d7, 265a2), *Statesman* (260e9, 266d7, 286d9), and *Theaetetus* (183c2).

But one might still doubt that Socrates has a method, because one might think that he does not have a *single* self-conscious, orderly manner of inquiry. Carpenter and Polansky (2002) and Brickhouse and Smith (2002) make a case for this conclusion by pointing to the plurality of ways in which Socrates conducts question-and-answer conversations. Carpenter and Polansky (2002) suggest that Socrates is typically engaged in examination to refute something his interlocutor has said, but they point to ‘much variety in the sorts of things Socrates sets out to refute and some variety in the ways in which he sets out to refute them’ (Carpenter and Polansky 2002, 90; cf. Brickhouse and Smith 2002, 147). This argument, too, threatens to devolve into a debate about what *we* think, for we might well disagree about how to individuate methods. Does a sculptor who sculpts in wood and stone use two different methods, or the same method in different materials? Does a sculptor who sculpts horses use the same method as the one who sculpts humans? Socrates says he has ‘a customary manner’ of putting words together (*Ap.* 27b2), but we can easily draw some distinctions among the ways in which he does this. Should we say that Socrates is wrong to say he has a customary manner? Should he have said that he has customary manners of putting words together? We do not have to do that. We could just think of his ‘customary manner’ as a general method that is employed in several different ways, or as a general superordinate method with some specific, subordinate methods.

We surely should not doubt that Socrates has a method on the grounds that his orderly way of proceeding is not *self-conscious*. For Socrates is perfectly self-conscious in possessing a customary manner, perfectly self-conscious in rejecting long speeches (*Prot.* 347c-348a, *Grg.* 447b-449d, *Hi.Mi.* 369b-d) and majority rule (*Cr.* 46d-47d, *La.* 184d-e, *Grg.* 473e-474b), in favor of short question-and-answer, in the pursuit of truth. Carpenter and Polansky (2002, 90) suggest that these methodological remarks ‘tend to be restricted to the immediate context of the present argument with a particular interlocutor,’ so that ‘an embracing reflection upon all elenctic [that is, refutative] discussion does not appear’ (quoted favorably by Brickhouse and Smith 2002, 152). But in the *Apology*, Socrates *does* offer some ‘embracing reflections’ on what he does when he converses in his ‘customary manner’ and philosophizes. He thinks his accusers misunderstand him because they think of all philosophers as atheistic nature-theorists and sophistical rhetoricians (*Ap.* 23d, cf. 19b-c). In response, Socrates identifies his philosophizing with examining people (*Ap.* 28d-29a)—that is, testing to see whether



they have knowledge about how to live (*Ap.* 21e-23b, 29e)—and with exhorting people to care less for their possessions and social status and more for their soul (*Ap.* 29d-30b).<sup>16</sup>

In sum, in the Socratic dialogues, Socrates reverts again and again to question-and-answer conversation, as opposed to other means of inquiring, and in the *Apology*, he presents himself as conversing in his ‘customary manner’ for general aims, to induce in himself and others the concern for human wisdom, in particular, and the right values, more generally. We might doubt that he has a rich enough theoretical grasp of what he is doing to count as having a method, or we might doubt that his various ways of leading conversations manifest just one general method. But there is room to make good on the widespread assumption that Socrates’ ‘customary manner’ of putting words together is a distinctive method. To do so, we need to look more closely at Socratic conversations, and in particular at how he examines and how he exhorts.

### 3. Socratic Examination

Socrates’ examinations have prompted scholarly debate about two broad questions, his aim and his results. First, does Socrates examine merely to refute his conversational partner—that is, to show that they lack knowledge—or to establish the true answer to the questions he asks, or somehow both? Second, whatever his aim, does Socrates have a method or manner of examination that succeeds to in achieving that aim?

That Socrates aims to refute his interlocutor has long seemed obvious to many readers. Their point is not merely that Socrates confesses to this aim on occasion (*Chrm.* 166c-e; *Rep.* I 348a). Rather, he announces this as his *general* aim. In the *Apology*, he says he converses with people to test whether they know how to live, and he says he has found everyone wanting. Moreover, the conversations that Plato records in his Socratic dialogues largely fit this characterization. Socrates regularly argues against some interlocutor’s claim, often a definition, and the regular results of these conversations is perplexity (*aporia*) and the interlocutor’s failure. Unsurprisingly, then, there is a long tradition, going back to Grote 1865 and Campbell 1867, of referring to Socrates’ method of ‘the elenchus,’ after the

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<sup>16</sup> Here and at a few other points in this chapter, I am drawing on Brown (forthcoming), which concerns Socrates’ conception of philosophizing in the *Apology*.

Greek word *elenchos* which applies to tests or refutations and is one of the terms used most often by Plato to refer to Socrates' 'customary manner' of conversation.<sup>17</sup>

The basic pattern of Socrates' refutations has also long seemed clear. Robinson (1953, 7) articulates the simple schema: Socrates (1) targets an interlocutor's claim for testing or refutation, (2) elicits some further premises, and then (3) shows that these premises entail the contradictory of the targeted claim.<sup>18</sup> Vlastos (1983/1994) adds to this schema the insistence that Socrates also (4) takes the conclusion drawn from the elicited premises to be true and thus infers that its contradictory, the targeted claim, is false. But this fourth element of the refutations, says Vlastos, is problematic, because Socrates' reasoning shows only that the targeted claim is inconsistent with the elicited premises, and not that the elicited premises or what follows from them is true.

In this way, Vlastos (1994, 3-4 and 21) claims to discover '*the* problem of the elenchus,' but he also proposes that Socrates has a solution, built of three points. First, for every false belief that Socrates might target, the interlocutor who believes that claim *also* believes further claims that can be elicited as premises that entail the contradictory. So if the interlocutor were to try to save the targeted claim from refutation by rejecting one of the elicited premises, Socrates would just generate another set of elicited premises that contradict the targeted claim. Second, the premises that Socrates elicits in his elenctic arguments are acceptable not only to the interlocutor but also to Socrates himself. Third, as a result of his long experience with elenctic arguments, Socrates possesses a consistent set of beliefs. Given that Socrates' beliefs are consistent (point three), they must be all true, as every false belief is accompanied by a set of beliefs that contradict it (point one). But if Socrates' beliefs are all true, and if he elicits only those premises he agrees with (point two), then he can be justified in taking what follows from these elicited premises to be true, and their contradictory, the targeted claim, to be false.

Vlastos' account has generated a flurry of responses that engage more specific versions of our two main questions about Socratic examinations. First, is Vlastos right to insist that Socratic refutations aim to establish truths? Second, is he right to propose the solution that he does? Some

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<sup>17</sup> Tarrant (2002) helpfully studies how Plato uses *elenchos*, related words, and a range of other terms for Socrates' customary manner of conversation.

<sup>18</sup> Robinson (1953, 23) further distinguishes Socrates' 'direct' and 'indirect' refutations, where the 'indirect' ones 'deduce' an 'obvious falsehood' from the targeted claim itself. On this view, some of Socrates' refutations aim to show that an interlocutor's claim is in some way self-contradictory. This interpretation has not won many supporters, but Forster (2006) makes a case for it, which depends upon a broad view of what follows from a given claim.

scholars have agreed with Vlastos about *‘the problem of the elenchus’* but have proposed alternative solutions. Other scholars have criticized all the proposed solutions to *‘the problem of the elenchus’* but have urged that there is no such problem because Vlastos was wrong to insist that Socratic refutations aim to establish truths. Still other scholars have been skeptical about how much Vlastos’ schematic account of Socratic refutations captures of Socrates’ customary way of leading question-and-answer conversations.<sup>19</sup>

If Socratic refutations are to establish truths, and not merely contradictions, then the elicited premises must have some status superior to that of the targeted claim, a status that warrants the conclusion that what follows from the elicited premises should be accepted as true and its contradictory, the targeted claim, should be rejected as false. Perhaps, then, the elicited premises are supposed to be more obvious (e.g., Reeve 1989, 165), or more ‘reputable’ because more widely held or held by the wise (Polansky 1984), or more deeply held (*cf.* Brickhouse and Smith 1991) than the targeted claim.

Aristotle seems to have thought that some of the premises in Socratic refutation have privileged status. He credits Socrates with originating not only ‘universal definition’ in his ‘What is F?’ questions but also ‘inductive argument’ (Aristotle, *Metaph.* XIII 4.1078b27-29). By ‘inductive argument,’ Aristotle has in mind Socratic reasoning from, say, the carpenter does such-and-such, the medical doctor does such-and-such, and the cobbler does such-and-such to experts do such-and-such. Socrates’ examinations offer this kind of reasoning from time to time, and then they use a general premise like ‘experts do such-and-such’ in the set of elicited premises that entails a contradiction with the interlocutor’s targeted claim. But Socratic ‘induction’ does not always work like that. Sometimes, Socrates skips the general premise that ‘experts do such-and-such’ and moves directly from a string of individual kinds of experts to another kind of expert (as, for instance, the expert in bravery). And sometimes, Socrates uses ‘induction’ not to generate a premise in the set of elicited premises, but to establish the contradictory of the targeted claim (e.g., *Hi.Mi.* 373c-375d).

Socratic ‘induction’—sometimes called Socratic *epagōgē*—is an important part of his method or manner of conversing, and there are questions about how exactly it is supposed to work. Robinson (1953, 33-48 at 35) frames one central question as whether Socrates and his interlocutor take their ‘induction’ to involve (a) the intuition of the universal in the instances, (b) the certain inference of the

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<sup>19</sup> In the interests of space, for the material in the other sections of this chapter, I will pass over much of this literature in silence. Benson (2011) and Wolfsdorf (2013) offer fuller and more detailed surveys.

universal from a complete enumeration of instances, or (c) the probabilistic, defeasible inference of the universal from the instances. Strangely, Robinson (1953, 36) finds in the Socratic dialogues (b) more than (a) or (c): he thinks that Socrates ‘vaguely supposes that he has gone through all the cases.’ Vlastos (1991, 267-269) maintains that these ‘inductions’ are not inductive inferences at all, because they certainly do not involve (c). On his view, Socrates introduces the instances just to get at what the universal means, almost as if (a) were right and the ‘induction’ were just the intuition of the universal in the instances. McPherran (2007) offers the fullest reckoning, and he argues that Aristotle was right to attribute genuinely inductive arguments to Socrates, as Socrates does occasionally make probabilistic inferences from instances to a universal claim. *Charmides* 159b-160d is McPherran’s star evidence, and it also serves as a plain example of rational support for a premise in a refutation of an interlocutor’s targeted claim.

Still, it is not tenable that *all* the elicited premises in Socrates’ refutations have higher status than the targeted claim. Euthyphro’s claim that the gods argue with each other (*Eu.* 7b), for instance, is surely not viewed as having higher status by Socrates (*Eu.* 6a, 7d, 8e). So it is difficult to maintain that the refutations are methodically designed to establish the *falsity* of the targeted claim by inferring its contradictory from the elicited premises. Accordingly, it is available to maintain, as Benson (1987; 1995; 2000, 32-56; 2002; 2011) has, that Socratic refutations are *not* designed to establish any truth or falsehood but are designed only to show that the interlocutor lacks knowledge. Benson concedes that *some* of the elicited premises in Socratic refutations are more plausible than others, that Socrates accepts some of them, and even that some of them are supported. But according to Benson (2011, 186), the only requirement that *must* be met by an elicited premise is that the interlocutor accept it, and he calls this—Vlastos’ (1994, 7) ‘say what you believe’ requirement—the ‘doxastic constraint.’

One problem for Benson’s interpretation is that the ‘doxastic constraint’ seems not to be a requirement of every elicited premise in every Socratic refutation. In fact, Brickhouse and Smith (2002, 147-149) argue that if genuine Socratic refutations require clear evidence that the interlocutor believe the elicited premises, then very few Socratic conversations will count as genuine Socratic refutations. For one thing, while Socrates occasionally insists that his interlocutor state what they believe (*Cr.* 49c-d, *Prot.* 331c, *Grg.* 500b, *Rep.* I 346a), he also occasionally allows an interlocutor to go along with the argument without explicit agreement (*Prot.* 333c, *Grg.* 505d-507a, *Rep.* I 350d-e). For another, when Socrates presses an interlocutor from one definition to another to another, any

evidence that the interlocutor believes one of these definitions is evidence that the interlocutor does *not* believe the others.

But these objections do not undo Benson's interpretation. His point is that Socratic refutations aim to show that the interlocutor is inconsistent and thus does not have knowledge. If Socrates has shown this before he lets Protagoras, Callicles, and Thrasymachus save face a bit, then he has not failed to refute them. And if he continues to articulate their inconsistencies without forcing them to own up publicly to them, is this any the less obviously a refutation? Also, if Socrates shows that each of an interlocutor's several definitions conflicts with other things the interlocutor believes, does it really matter that it is unclear which, if any, of these definitions the interlocutor really believes? The conversation has started from the interlocutor's beliefs, and it has shown that the interlocutor does not have knowledge.

The more serious problem for Benson's interpretation is that it severs Socrates' refutations from the pursuit of the truth. This is not the worry that Socrates has no way of pursuing the truth, for Benson correctly insists that refutations can be just one of several tricks in Socrates' bag. But if Socrates' refutations do not pursue the truth, then what distinguishes his refutations from those of Dionysodorus and Euthydemus, the experts at disputation (*eristikē*) who refute their interlocutors for sport? We cannot now say that Socrates' refutations, unlike theirs, pursue the truth (Brickhouse and Smith 2002, 153-154). Benson (1989) responds by arguing that disputatious or eristic debaters focus merely on *verbal* contradictions and not, as Socrates does, on contradictions in *beliefs*. But one might still worry about severing Socratic refutations from the truth. If Socrates' refutations do not pursue the truth, why does Socrates at least occasionally advertise them as truth-seeking (*Eu.* 7a, *Lys.* 218c, *Rep.* I 339b)?<sup>20</sup>

The difficulties facing those who have tried to characterize Socratic refutations on the simple schema of Robinson (1953) and Vlastos (1983/1994) have led some scholars to seek a slightly more complicated schema. Wolfsdorf (2003), for instance, focuses on how Socrates tests definitions, in particular, and he distinguishes between two kinds of elicited premise that Socrates uses to do so. Some of the premises articulate a fundamental condition that the definition must meet and others articulate how the definition fails to meet that condition. On Wolfsdorf's (2003, 275-278) analysis,

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<sup>20</sup> Vlastos (1983/1994) originally leaned hard on evidence from the *Gorgias* for the claim that Socratic refutations were truth-seeking, but this left an opening for others to think that the *Gorgias* was an outlier of sorts. But there is clear evidence outside the *Gorgias* that Socrates presents his refutations as truth-seeking.

Socrates almost always agrees with the condition that must be met, while he does not nearly so often agree to the premises used to show that the definition fails to meet the condition. But because Socrates regularly concentrates on the conditions that he accepts, Wolfsdorf argues, Socrates' intention is plainly to cooperate with his interlocutor and to make progress toward an acceptable definition. Wolfsdorf (2003, 299-302) concludes that Socrates' conversations are not refutative ('elenctic') at all because they are not adversarial. They are, instead, shared inquiries.<sup>21</sup>

With this move, Wolfsdorf severs Socrates' use of refutation in the search for definitions from his stated goal, in the *Apology*, to help the god by eliminating the false conceit of knowledge. Wolfsdorf (2003, 306) suggests that Plato has particular aims for the *Apology* that distort its picture of Socratic activity. But we do not have to think that Socrates' conversations are either adversarial refutations or cooperative inquiries. They can be both. Socrates can be showing that his interlocutors lack knowledge, that their definitions (and other targeted claims) do not agree with their other beliefs, while he also seeks truth, including true definitions, by building on premises that he himself accepts. Wolfsdorf might be right that Socrates' examinations are not best characterized as *adversarial*, since he aims for common goods (e.g., *Chrm.* 166d, *Grg.* 505e). But the common goods include being shown that one does not know (e.g., *Grg.* 505e-506a), and even if Socrates does not undertake this out of hostility, it can *feel* hostile to those being examined. This, as we will see, is one way in which Socratic examination poses a special challenge to Socratic exhortation.

But before we proceed to Socratic exhortation, there are two other ways of complicating the schema for Socratic examination. Robinson (1953) and Vlastos (1983/1994) define an episode of Socratic refutation narrowly: one argument against one targeted claim counts as one iteration of the Socratic method of refutation. By this reckoning, Plato shows Socrates regularly going through multiple iterations of refutation with each interlocutor. But perhaps the natural unit for the Socratic method of conversing in question-and-answer is not given by our logic, but by Socrates' conversations. That is, perhaps we should count a single conversation with an interlocutor as a single iteration of the Socratic method of refutation. This allows one iteration of the method to test and refute several claims, which makes it easier to see how the method aims *both* at refutation *and* at pursuing the truth. For some individual arguments are clearly less helpful for truth-seeking than others, and one

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<sup>21</sup> Compare Tarrant 2002.

individual argument refuting one individual claim is unlikely to shake many interlocutors' confidence that they know.

But this broadened schema of Socrates' method might not be broad enough. Socrates converses in his 'customary manner' not just for the sake of examining his interlocutor but also for the sake of examining himself (*Ap.* 28e, *Chrm.* 166c-d, *Prt.* 348c-e, *Grg.* 505e-506a), and nothing limits Socrates' methodical work of examining himself to just one conversation.<sup>22</sup> Even if an individual conversation does not contain enough elicited premises of privileged status to infer anything of interest, the conversation still offers Socrates some evidence about where inconsistencies arise. After he has conversed with many people over a long period of time, he has a very large body of evidence about what premises cohere and which introduce inconsistency. Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 10-29), Gentzler (1994), and Irwin (1995, 17-30) have independently argued that Socratic refutations successfully pursue the truth by some induction from this larger body of evidence. McPherran (2002) carefully analyzes how this works in one case, when Socrates infers what the oracle means from a large set of refutations (*Ap.* 21b-23b). McPherran's point is not that Socrates *proves* what the oracle means, but that he arrives at a plausible, inductively supported interpretation by testing multiple interpretations through a large number of conversations. Similarly, Brickhouse and Smith, Gentzler, and Irwin would explain Socrates' confidence that (for instance) it is better to suffer injustice than to do injustice to be grounded in his repeated showings that alternatives to this claim meet with contradiction.<sup>23</sup>

Socratic examination turns out not to be simple, especially if we take him at his word when he says he examines to find the truth. Even when Socrates is targeting a claim for refutation, eliciting premises, and showing that these premises entail the contradictory of the targeted claim, he is not

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<sup>22</sup> Some of Socrates' conversations also address an audience that is not currently participating in the conversation.

Sometimes this is indirect: in the *Lysis*, for instance, Socrates' conversation with Lysis and Menexenus about friendship *also* provides Hippothales with a model of how to woo to compare with his own. But sometimes the audience members are being invited to examine themselves in just the way that the conversation-partner is. In the *Gorgias*, for instance, Socrates' deflationary account of rhetoric as a mere knack for flattery arises in his conversation with Polus but is clearly aimed at Gorgias, as well. At the margins of Socrates' conversations, Socrates is offering many people some *potential* examination, and in this way inviting them to examine themselves. See the next section on the exhortation of the audience.

<sup>23</sup> Vlastos (1983/1994), too, has Socrates' confidence rest on his long experience. But for Vlastos, that confidence is embedded in sweeping assumptions that convert each of his refutations into truth-seeking a demonstration. The other scholars considered here do not take Socrates to suppose that his beliefs are entirely consistent or that every false belief is accompanied by beliefs that contradict it, and they do not claim that every refutation is a demonstration of truth and falsehood.

merely doing that. So he *is* arguing *ad hominem*, using premises his interlocutor accepts, but not merely that. This refutation is part of a larger conversation, and in any given conversation, some arguments are more constructive than others, drawing on premises that Socrates himself accepts and not merely on premises that his interlocutor accepts. But the conversation, too, is part of a larger pattern of inquiry for Socrates. To understand Socrates' 'customary manner' and to uncover whatever method he might have requires these broader perspectives in addition to the careful focus on each individual argument.

#### 4. Socratic Exhortation

In the *Apology*, Socrates characterizes his philosophizing not only as examination but also as exhortation. He not only tests people to see whether they know how to live; he also encourages them to care less about social and material resources and to care more for their soul. This is a project of conversion. Socrates sees a sharp divide between his cares—justice and wisdom—and those of his fellow Athenians, and he recognizes no common ground (*Cr.* 49d; *cf. Ap.* 31d-32a). He seeks to persuade people who care about money and status and who eagerly devote themselves to the affairs of their household and city to turn away from those concerns and to turn toward being just and pursuing wisdom. One might distinguish here between a broad project to convert toward virtue and a narrow project to convert toward philosophy (Slings 1999, 59-60), but Socrates sees no distinction between these. But how does Socrates exhort others? How does he seek to convert others to the life that loves justice and wisdom above all else?

Socrates appears to answer these questions in the *Apology*, but his answers puzzle many readers. He explains that he exhorts the Athenians by

saying in my customary way, 'Best of men, since you are a citizen of Athens, the greatest city and a city most famous for wisdom and power, aren't you ashamed to care to get as much money, reputation, and honor as you can, while you do not care for or think about wisdom and truth and the best condition of your soul?' (*Ap.* 29d-e)

This is puzzling because Plato does not regularly show Socrates speaking like this. And the puzzlement deepens when Socrates proceeds to say,



I go around doing *nothing other* than persuading the younger and older among you not to care for your bodies or money before or as intently as the best condition of your soul, by saying ‘Virtue does not come to be from money, but from virtue money and all other things become good for human beings, both individually and collectively.’ (*Ap.* 30a-b, emphasis added)

Plato’s portrait of Socrates is dominated by Socrates’ examinations of others, and not by Socrates making speeches about the superior importance of the soul over the body.

There are at least three ways of dissolving this puzzle. First, one might suppose that in the *Apology* Socrates is exaggerating his exhortations, or even misrepresenting what he does. After all, he is on trial, and the rhetorical needs of this occasion are quite different from those of the other Socratic dialogues (*cf.* Wolfsdorf 2003, 306, as mentioned above). Second, one might suppose that Socrates’ characterizations in the *Apology* are only slightly exaggerated, and the discrepancy with the other Socratic dialogues is to be explained by Plato’s particular interests. Perhaps Plato was more interested in Socratic examinations than in Socratic exhortations, and thus he largely suppresses the hortatory aspect of Socrates’ philosophizing. If Slings (1999) is right that Plato wrote the *Clitophon*, but wrong to say that Clitophon’s quotations of Socrates (esp. 407a-e) are a parody of another author’s portrayal of Socratic exhortation, then the *Clitophon* shows that Plato did not entirely suppress Socrates’ hortatory speeches. But still, one might be eager to explain the differences between Plato’s Socrates and Xenophon’s in part by their different attitudes toward explicit exhortation and advice. Perhaps, however, there is no real misfit between the *Apology* and the other dialogues to be explained away. Socrates might be exactly right that he does *nothing more* than exhort others, even though he does spend a lot of time examining them. He might be exactly right because his examinations are *also* exhortations, as Irwin (1995, 19) and many other scholars insist.

These scholars have explored how Socratic examinations implicitly and explicitly exhort others to virtue and wisdom. Implicitly, the examinations are supposed both to show the examinee that they lack knowledge, which removes an obstacle to the pursuit of wisdom, and to stimulate the desire to continue examining, both to pursue a better understanding of how to live and to sustain human wisdom. One way in which Socratic examination can stimulate the examinee’s desire to examine is by the examinee’s experience of perplexity (Robinson 1953, 11-12; Matthews 1999; Belfiore 2012, 68-74). The inability to answer questions one would like to answer can stimulate the desire to continue searching for an answer. Socrates explicitly offers this explanation in the *Meno* (84a-d), and it fits with his discussions of desire in the *Lysis* and *Symposium*, since those discussions suggest that we

all desire what we both lack and perceive to be good for us.<sup>24</sup> Another way in which Socratic examination can stimulate the examinee's desire to examine is by making the examinee feel shame at their lack of knowledge (Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 25). Nicias seems to refer to this in the *Laches*, when he explains that Socratic examination inevitably targets the life of the examinee and 'brings to [their] attention what [they] have done or are doing wrong' (187e-188c, quoting 188a-b; cf. *Sph.* 230c-d).<sup>25</sup>

Stump (2020) argues that these mechanisms by which examination stimulates the desire to examine are not enough to explain how examination counts as exhortation, because they are not enough to explain the conversion of the examinee from their prior values to the philosophic values that prize the examined life. He proposes that what converts the examinee into a committed examiner, in love with examination, is the pleasure of examining. But while Socrates mentions that his examinations bring pleasure to onlookers, who then take pleasure in imitating him (*Ap.* 23c, 33c), he also sees that the refutations offered by the disputatious, unphilosophical Dionysodorus and Euthydemus bring pleasure to the audience (*Euthd.* 276b-c). So the pleasure of examination cannot *by itself* explain the conversion to philosophy, either. It is, at best, a supplement to the curiosity or shame that drives the examinee to satisfy their curiosity or remove their shame.

There is a deeper problem with the implicit hortatory mechanisms of Socratic examination. The perplexity and shame induced by Socratic examination often stimulate not the desire to examine further but despair or hostility toward Socrates and his examinations. Alcibiades describes his own despair as a common response to Socratic examination (*Smp.* 215d-216b), and many characters, including especially Socrates' accuser Anytus (*M.* 89e-95a), manifest hostility, as Socrates well knows (*Ap.* 21e, 22e-23a, 24a-b). So whereas Socratic examination is supposed to encourage examination, it can in fact induce 'misology,' hatred of inquiry (cf. *Phdo.* 89c-91c). This makes Socratic examination a risky way of implicitly exhorting people to care about virtue and wisdom (cf. *Rep.* VII 537d-539d, *Phlb.* 15d-16a).

But Socratic examination also *explicitly* exhorts examinees to care about virtue and wisdom. The most obvious way Socrates does this is by steering the conversation toward certain questions. In the *Laches*, for instance, two fathers want to know how to train their sons, and Socrates argues that

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<sup>24</sup> See Obdrzalek, 'Socrates on Love', this volume.

<sup>25</sup> This effect of Socratic examination shows again how important the 'say what you believe' requirement or 'doxastic constraint' is.

they need to find an expert in the virtue that they want that training to produce, which leads to an inquiry about what courage is. And while Laches, one of the generals consulted by the fathers, is quick to think of courage in behavioral terms, Socratic examination leads to the thought that courage should be defined in psychological terms. So the fathers are given reasons to focus on the state of their sons' souls. This Socratic two-step, from an ordinary, worldly concern to a question about what virtue is, and from an ordinary, behavioral account of virtue to a psychological one, is common in Socratic dialogues. Socrates does not simply examine his interlocutors on whatever topic they happen to care about. He steers the examination until it focuses on the state of their souls.

In addition, Socrates weaves explicit exhortation into his conversations, sometimes as part of an examination and sometimes as a distinct incitement. He does this most often by attempting to shame his interlocutor away from non-philosophical commitments and toward philosophical ones, just as he advertises in the *Apology* (29d-e, quoted above). So, for instance, he explicitly tries to shame Callicles out of his hedonism (*Grg.* 494c-e), and to shame Meno into being 'manly' (or courageous, *andreios*) enough to continue examining (*M.* 81d, 86b). But he also sometimes joins these shaming incitements to some strange, mythical stories. For Callicles, Socrates compares pleasure-seeking souls with leaky jars, drawing on stories he attributes to wise people in Sicily or Italy, and he offers these images to 'make clear what I want to persuade you to change your mind about if I can' (*Grg.* 492e-494a). For Meno, Socrates appeals to another story from 'wise men and women,' this one a tale of the soul's existence before birth, when it learns all things (*M.* 81a-e). He offers this story to give Meno some reason to suppose that he has the correct answer somewhere within him and that he therefore can inquire successfully.

These mythical appeals, which are absent in many Socratic dialogues but appear in the *Meno* and *Gorgias*, and again in the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, might not fit Socrates as Plato initially characterized him, and might have been grafted on to Socrates after Plato visited Sicily and heard such stories. Schofield (2019), for instance, offers this plausible speculation. But even if these parts of Plato's portrait of Socrates are clearly indebted to sources other than the historical Socrates, Plato manifestly sees no difficulty in adding them to Socrates' set of hortatory tools. The mythical story just adds a layer to the straightforward exhortation that Socrates needs to offer, because Plato's Socrates is committed to exhortation and is not limited to exhorting by examining.

Socrates' concern for exhortation also manifests itself in the *Euthydemus*, where he asks Dionysodorus and Euthydemus for a display of exhortation (274e-275b, 278d, 282d) and then twice

provides the brothers a model of the sort of display he wants (278d-282d, 288c-293a). Socrates wants and models what he calls ‘exhortative or protreptic speeches’ (*protreptikoi logoi*, 282d6), and it might sound as though he is referring to a special kind of speech or argument, or even a special literary genre.<sup>26</sup> Socrates’ first model of exhortative argument differs from his ‘customary manner’ of examination, since it does not target a claim for refutation and leave Cleinias in perplexity, but instead leads Cleinias from the premise that everyone wants to do well to the positive conclusion that wisdom is the only good thing for a human being (*Euthd.* 281e, cf. 292b), *via* the thought that only wisdom has the power to cause a person to do well, since other things benefit us only when they are used wisely and harm us when they are used foolishly.<sup>27</sup> So this protreptic argument does not exhort Cleinias to a life of examination indirectly, by refuting him, but rather gives him a direct case in favor of pursuing wisdom. Socrates’ second model of exhortative argument picks up where the first leaves off and seeks to identify the wisdom that Cleinias is newly motivated to pursue, but this part of the discussion ends in perplexity.

Two other Socratic dialogues, possibly not written by Plato, appear to comment on the *Euthydemus* and its protreptic arguments, and thus further complicate our picture of Socrates’ ways of exhortation. In the *Alcibiades I*, Socrates offers another protreptic argument, with a positive

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<sup>26</sup> Scholars agree that by the third century BCE, there was a special literary genre of ‘protreptic,’ with Aristotle’s *Protrepticus* as the genre’s paradigm. (For the reconstruction of Aristotle’s lost *Protrepticus*, see Hutchinson and Johnson 2005.) There is, however, some dispute about when this genre of exhortations to the philosophical life arose. Gaiser (1959) locates the origins in sophistic discourse of the fifth century, which combined the advice prominent in some earlier poetry and encomiums to construct an exhortation to a life of virtue, or a specific way of living. Slings (1999) and Collins (2015) both criticize Gaiser’s speculative account, but disagree about the genre’s subsequent origins. Slings finds the genre in Socratic discourse of the fourth century, whereas Collins (2015) sees the genre as still in embryonic form at that point. Part of their dispute concerns what a genre is: Slings (1999) and Collins (2015) draw on competing theories of genre, Slings from Cairns (1972) and Collins from Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986). Another part of their dispute rests on what to make of some evidence of missing fourth-century work. Slings eagerly collects fourth-century texts and passages that plainly involve some exhorting or something called exhorting, combines them with later reckonings of what protreptic is, and builds from these some characteristics of ‘protreptic’ that fit the fourth-century scraps. Collins charges Slings with finding what he was looking for and with failing to give due credit to how flexible and unsettled the fourth-century cases of broadly exhortative literature are. So, for instance, later antiquity might have seen some fourth-century works as protreptics, such as the lost works by Antisthenes and Aristippus called *Protrepticus*, but these titles might not accurately reflect their authors’ original conception of the works.

<sup>27</sup> For this argument, see Dimas (2002) and Jones (2013). Jones and some others would say that I am misrepresenting Socrates’ conclusion, and that he really concludes only that wisdom is the only independent or unconditional good, since he allows that some other things, such as health and wealth, are beneficial when used wisely. But these other things are no more conditional goods than they are conditional bads, and Socrates consistently prescind from calling them good things of any sort and even offers an alternative label of ‘intermediates’ (*ta metaxu*) for them in *Gorgias* 467e-468a.

conclusion that Alcibiades ought to pursue virtue (135b). But this argument starts not with a premise that applies to everyone—everyone wants to do well—but with a premise particular to Alcibiades—Alcibiades wants supreme power over people (105b-c). Perhaps Plato really wrote the *Alcibiades I*, in part to portray direct protreptic arguments as an important part of Socratic exhortation.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, in the *Clitophon*, Clitophon praises Socrates for successfully turning people toward the pursuit of virtue, but criticizes him as unable to say what virtue is and help anyone with that pursuit. This seems to mirror the success and failure of Socrates' two protreptic models in the *Euthydemus*,<sup>29</sup> but the hortatory speeches that Clitophon praises are not protreptic *arguments*, but direct admonitions that seek to turn people away from their concern for wealth, say, and toward virtue. Slings (1999) might be right that the *Clitophon* offers a parody of Socratic protreptic, and not a straight presentation of how Plato's Socrates exhorts. Or Slings might be wrong in concluding that the *Clitophon* was written by Plato. But it is also possible that Plato really wrote the *Clitophon* and is signaling that Socrates' ways of exhorting others were much broader than some protreptic arguments and a lot of examinations woven together with some shaming. Plato's *Sophist* contrasts two ways of teaching, one that encourages and admonishes, as parents do with children, and the other that examines and refutes (229d-230e). Perhaps both of these are in the toolkit of Plato's Socrates.

However that may be, Socrates' attempts to convert others to the examined life and the pursuit of virtue and wisdom are not limited to his examinations. So he has some resources with which to mitigate the risks and limitations of his exhortations *via* examination. But we should not think that Socrates' expanded toolkit gives him regular success in converting others. Plato reminds us of these failures, by drawing attention to interlocutors such as Alcibiades, Charmides, and Critias who later did very bad things, and in the *Gorgias*, he dramatizes at least one failure, when Callicles withdraws from Socratic examination without having been persuaded or brought to perplexity.<sup>30</sup>

In the *Euthydemus*, Socrates comments shrewdly on the difficulty of converting someone to the pursuit of wisdom and virtue. After Dionysodorus and Euthydemus have claimed to be able to teach virtue and make their pupils good, Socrates asks, 'Are you able to make good only a man who is

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<sup>28</sup> For the dispute over the authenticity of the *Alcibiades I*, see Denyer (2001, 14-26) and Jirsa (2009) for, and Joyal (2003) and Smith (2004) against.

<sup>29</sup> The success I attribute to the first model can be questioned; Collins (2015, 97) argues that Cleinias is ambiguous in his commitment to philosophizing at *Euthd.* 282d.

<sup>30</sup> See Woolf 2000.

already persuaded that he should learn from you, or can you also make good that one who is not yet persuaded, either because he thinks generally that this thing, virtue, cannot be taught, or because he thinks that you two are not its teachers?’ (*Euthd.* 274d-e) In other words, Socrates notices that conversion requires openness to being converted, and some disposition to think that the would-be converter is worth taking seriously. It is striking, then, that the youngster Socrates tries to convert in the *Euthydemus*, Cleinias, goes straight to Socrates to sit beside him (*Euthd.* 273a-b). Perhaps even here, when Plato is flagging the difficulty of conversion, he is also making room for another means at Socrates’ disposal, as his character attracts admiration that makes others more likely to be converted by him.

## 5. The Socratic Method

Much of what Plato’s Socrates does is not especially distinctive. He shares refutations with disputatious sophists, such as Dionysodorus and Euthydemus in the *Euthydemus*, and as Ausland (2002) argues, he even shares refutations as examinations aiming at the truth with forensic practices in the law-courts (*cf.* *Grg.* 471e). The exhortations to virtue and a distinctively philosophic way of life were likely to be found in other Socratic texts, but also in Isocrates’ work, as Nightingale (1995) and Collins (2015) show. What marks Plato’s Socrates’ philosophizing as so distinctive is his *combination* of these activities: he refutes and he exhorts, often in the same conversation. He weaves his examinations and exhortations together with the aim of inducing himself and others to continue to examine, so that these continued examinations might keep them aware of their lack of wisdom and bring them a better grasp on truths about how to live.

To really appreciate Socrates’ customary manner of philosophizing, one needs to study his full conversations, and some of the best scholarship on ‘the Socratic method’ in recent years has done just this, abjuring sweeping investigations that draw on evidence from a wide range of dialogues (as this chapter does) and focusing on one full dialogue at a time.<sup>31</sup> When one studies full conversations, one will see ways in which his refutations do and do not exhort, ways in which they do and do not pursue the truth, and how he weaves in other forms of exhortation. Sometimes, the whole conversation

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<sup>31</sup> Consider, for some instances, Kahn 1983 and Woolf 2000 on the *Gorgias*, Weiss 2001 and Scott 2006 on the *Meno*, and Miller 1996 and Harte 1999 on the *Crito*. The dialogue-by-dialogue approach is also clear in some broader studies, such as Peterson 2011.

seems to succeed, and at least for a time, Socrates' interlocutor seems to be interested in more examination and in pursuing wisdom. But aside from Socrates himself and Plato, it is not clear how many people Socrates turned to the examined life.

Perhaps this checkered track record defies what one expects of a method, or at least what one expects of an expert's method. Or perhaps the wide variety of turns that Socratic conversation takes defies the tidy patterns one expects of a method. But the expert cobbler will vary their techniques to make different sorts of shoes, or to work on different materials, and no expert cobbler can turn the weakest materials into strong sandals or the hardest materials into comfortable footwear. The medical doctor's art is still more complicated, and we should not expect the expert physician to treat every patient, no matter their condition, in the same ways or to have the same results. So there is room for a complicated expertise of Socratic conversation, too, a mastery of a method that includes a flexible range of tools and techniques. But as we enrich and complicate our account of Socrates' customary manner of conversation to account for the many things he does in the conversations Plato depicts, there is also the risk that Socrates' mastery of Socratic conversation becomes nothing more than his mastery of being himself. Perhaps there is no Socratic method detachable from its one and only practitioner, but only imitations of it.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> I thank the editors for their invitation and for their encouragement and help. Their patience and efficiency have been exemplary.

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