

# Was Socrates the Wisest Man in Athens, and If So, in Which Respects?

**Jean-Paul Vessel**

New Mexico State University

Presidential Address

## 1. Introduction

In a well-known passage near the beginning of Plato's *Apology*, Socrates recounts a story about his friend Chaerephon visiting the Oracle at Delphi. Chaerephon asked the oracle whether anyone was wiser than Socrates "and the Pythian replied that no one was wiser" (21a6-7).<sup>1</sup> Much has been written about what the Pythian meant and in precisely which respect (or respects) Socrates might have been regarded by the oracle (or himself) to be at least as wise as any of his contemporaries. Here I want to develop an extensive inventory of the ways in which Plato's Socrates<sup>2</sup> was—or at least might have been—as wise as or even wiser than his peers. I motivate this discussion by developing a puzzle from Plato's *Apology* 21d-23b. I argue that the negative thesis that Socrates' superlative wisdom consists solely in knowing that he does not know anything "beautiful and good" cannot effectively establish the "fact" that no one was wiser than Socrates. I then proceed to canvass a number of Socrates' other features that might justify the Pythian's declaration. Ultimately, I argue that a strong case can be made for the claim that Socrates was in fact the wisest man in Athens.

## 2. The Oracle's Declaration and Socrates' Response to It

When addressing the jury about how he came to develop the reputation that he has and why many people, some of them prominent political people like Anytus, became comfortable slandering him, Socrates suggests that his possessing a certain type of wisdom explains his reputation and sparked the slander: "What type of wisdom? Human wisdom, perhaps. It may be that I really possess this thing...."

(20d6-7). Socrates then contrasts his human wisdom with the wisdom associated with the sophists Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, and Evenus, who “are wise with a wisdom more than human; else I cannot explain it, for I certainly do not possess it, and whoever says I do is lying and speaks to slander me.” (20d7-9). Almost immediately after this, Socrates reports the oracle’s declaration that no one was wiser than he, precipitating his mission to understand whether the oracle could be right and, if so, in which respects he might be among the wisest people, if not *the* wisest person, of his time.

Socrates then sought out to refute the oracle by seeking out a prominent political person with a reputation of wisdom: If Socrates could find someone wiser than he was, the oracle would be refuted. But when Socrates examined this person, Socrates came to the conclusion that the man “appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not” (21c5-6). After Socrates attempts to show this person that he is not in fact wise, which results in Socrates becoming the target of public odium of this man and others, Socrates comes to a somewhat puzzling conclusion. In one of the most prominent passages in the *Apology*, Socrates thinks to himself (at 21d3-7):

“I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile [*kalos kagathos*<sup>3</sup>], but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know.” (Grube translation in Plato 1997)

“I am wiser than that human. For I daresay that neither of us is aware of anything beautiful-and-good [*kalos kagathos*]; but that one supposes he is aware of something beautiful-and-good, though he isn’t aware; whereas I, as indeed I’m not aware, neither suppose that I am. Therefore, I’m at least likely to be wiser than that person at least in just this one small thing: that the things that I’m not aware of I don’t suppose that I’m aware of either.” (Senn translation in Plato 2019)

There are a few interesting things going on in this passage. First, Socrates concludes that he is wiser than the political man he examined. Second, Socrates suggests that neither of them knows (or is aware of) anything *kalos kagathos* (worthwhile, beautiful-and-good, fine and good, noble and good). Socrates then accuses the political man of thinking that he knows (or is aware of) something *kalos kagathos* when he does not. Finally, Socrates reasons that he is wiser than the political man in at least this small respect: Unlike the political man, Socrates himself does not think he knows what he does not know. Socrates then proceeds to examine another political man regarded even more highly for his wisdom, other politicians, poets, and finally the craftsmen. In each case, he finds the people whom

he examines to be deficient in just the same way: They think themselves to be wise about things outside their areas of expertise—the *kalos kagathos* perhaps and “other most important pursuits” (22d6-7)—but they are not wise about these things.

This suggests that Socrates’ (alleged) superlative “human” wisdom can be articulated solely in terms of epistemic humility. Seemingly everyone whom Socrates examines thinks they know things (or are aware of things) that they do not, and this seems especially so when it comes to things *kalos kagathos*. Socrates, on the other hand, claims that he does not know anything (or is aware of anything) *kalos kagathos*, nor does he think that he knows (or is aware of) anything *kalos kagathos*. Understanding precisely what Socrates means to pick out with the phrase *kalos kagathos* is tricky business; however, there are some clues in the *Apology* and elsewhere in the early dialogues that should assist us in understanding what Socrates means with his use of the phrase *kalos kagathos*.

Just before the passage about the oracle in the *Apology*, Socrates discusses the “more than human” (20e2) wisdom attributed to some of the Sophists. Socrates recounts a conversation he had with Callias, who allegedly had “spent more money on Sophists than everybody put together” (20a5). Socrates asks Callias whether he knows of anyone who “is an expert in this kind of excellence, the human and social kind” (20b3-4)<sup>4</sup> and finally asserts: “Certainly I would pride and preen myself if I had this knowledge, but I do not have it, gentlemen” (20c2-3). I think that it is reasonable to suppose that Socrates’ use of the phrase *kalos kagathos* at *Apology* 21d is intended to pick out a certain type of arete or excellence: personal and civic virtue.<sup>5</sup> This interpretation meshes well with some of the more prominent themes in the *Apology*, especially Socrates’ mission to exhort his fellow citizens to care primarily for the best possible states of their souls (30b1-2) and to “care for virtue” (31b5).<sup>6</sup> With this interpretation in mind, some might be inclined to articulate Socrates’ human wisdom solely in terms of epistemic humility, especially with respect to things *kalos kagathos*.

EH: Socrates does not think he knows things that he does not know. Socrates claims that he does not know anything *kalos kagathos* nor does he think he knows anything *kalos kagathos*.

This attempt to capture the nature of Socrates’ human wisdom is naturally extracted from the passages we have been looking at (*Apology* 19e-23b).<sup>7</sup> But I am unpersuaded that it successfully accounts for the entirety of Socrates’ human wisdom. Consider this challenge one of my students lodges against it in an extra credit essay on Plato’s *Apology*. My student writes:

So what? Why does this make Socrates so wise? I admit that I don’t know anything fine and good. I admit that I really don’t know the true nature of

moral virtue, nor do I know which things are best to pursue in a human life. I guess no one in Ancient Athens was wiser than me either. I'm as wise as Socrates! But I doubt that I'm anywhere near among the wisest here in Las Cruces; in fact, I suspect I'm not even close to as wise as many of my classmates.

This challenge to the claim that Socrates' (perhaps) unparalleled wisdom can be completely captured by EH is straightforward and simple. Many newcomers to philosophy quickly realize how perplexing are the natures of some of our most important moral concepts. And those with intellectual integrity will readily admit that while they have some ideas about these concepts, they cannot be sure that their ideas track the truth. Until these ideas are sufficiently challenged—and until the perplexities about these concepts are resolved in theoretically satisfying ways—we should admit that we do not actually know anything *kalos kagathos*.<sup>8</sup> The upshot of this challenge is that it seems too easy to become as wise as Socrates on this EH account. Those who have never thought seriously and carefully about things *kalos kagathos* can easily admit that they do not really know anything about them. They would thus be as wise as Socrates. And so would those who recognize that their beliefs and ideas about things *kalos kagathos* simply do not meet the standards required for knowledge. But Socrates brought something to Hellas that shocked the entire world. His wisdom cannot be had so easily.

### 3. Socrates Examines the Craftsmen

One might object to the challenge above by pointing out what might be important differences between Ancient Athenian men and today's young students and citizens. Today's young students have access to philosophers (and other teachers) who can pose serious theoretical challenges to various conceptions of things *kalos kagathos* that today's youth might deem accurate or in some ways theoretically attractive. The Ancient Athenians—it seems—had only Socrates, the first philosopher to investigate moral concepts and principles with his elenctic method.<sup>9</sup> There is also the fact that today's (American) society is radically more heterogeneous than Ancient Athens was. Perhaps the proud, impressive, homogenous Athenian culture bred epistemic confidence—even epistemic hubris—among its citizens regarding things *kalos kagathos*. This is certainly suggested by early passages in the *Apology* and several passages within many of the other early Platonic dialogues. Members of contemporary communities also display similar epistemic confidence and hubris regarding things *kalos kagathos*, but there are many people in today's societies who do not, for a variety of sociological reasons. Perhaps these acute differences between the Ancient Athenians and contemporary societies could be used to mount a defense of an EH account of Socrates' human wisdom. Still, challenges and puzzles remain, some of

which emerge from Socrates' examination of the craftsmen.

Disappointed by the poets, Socrates turns to the craftsmen, whom he claims to have "knowledge of many fine (or beautiful<sup>10</sup>) things" (22d2-3), a certain sort of wisdom to be sure. After examining the craftsmen, Socrates reflects:

In this I was not mistaken; they knew things I did not know, and to that extent they were wiser than I. But, men of Athens, the good craftsmen seemed to me to have the same fault as the poets: each of them, because of his success at his craft, thought himself very wise in other most important pursuits.... (22d3-7)

Socrates admits here that the craftsmen knew things that he himself did not know, and thus to that extent they were wiser than he was. But then Socrates levels his familiar charge of epistemic hubris against the craftsmen too: Because of his success at his craft,<sup>11</sup> each craftsman "thought himself very wise in other *most important pursuits*."<sup>12</sup> These *most important pursuits* (or the *greatest things*) should surely be considered things *kalos kagathos*.<sup>13</sup> Socrates concludes that the craftsmen thought themselves to have wisdom about these most important pursuits, but—in fact—they did not.<sup>14</sup> Socrates continues to reflect upon his examination of the craftsmen:

...and this error of theirs overshadowed the wisdom they had, so that I asked myself, on behalf of the oracle, whether I should prefer to be as I am, with neither their wisdom nor their ignorance, or to have both. The answer I gave myself and the oracle was that it was to my advantage to be as I am. (22e1-5)

Socrates suggests here that the epistemic hubris of the craftsmen regarding the most important pursuits eclipses their craft-oriented wisdom so much so that Socrates—with neither epistemic hubris about the most important things nor beautiful craft-oriented wisdom—emerges as wiser than the craftsman. Socrates' suggestion is both intriguing and puzzling. Moreover, another challenge against an EH account of Socrates' human wisdom can be wrought from it.

It seems that Socrates' ranking of himself over the craftsmen with respect to wisdom is defensible only if *all* of the craftsmen in Ancient Athens were epistemically hubristic regarding things *kalos kagathos* and the *most important pursuits*.<sup>15</sup> Maybe they were; we'll never know. But maybe some of them were not so epistemically hubristic about such things. There are stories—perhaps apocryphal—about Socrates spending a substantial amount of time with various craftsmen. Diogenes Laertius reports that Socrates was friends with Simon—a cobbler—and that "[w]hen Socrates came to his workshop and began to converse, [Simon] used to make notes of all that he could remember."<sup>16</sup> Simon (allegedly)

was a philosopher too. Diogenes Laertius credits him with thirty-three dialogues, including several (seemingly) about things *kalos kagathos*: *Of the Good*, *On the Beautiful*, *On the Just: two dialogues*, *Of Virtue, that it cannot be taught*, *Of Courage: three dialogues*, and *Of Honour*, among others. If Diogenes Laertius' report about Simon is accurate, then we can be assured that Simon definitely had a lot of philosophical ideas—maybe he even held positions—about things *kalos kagathos*. But was he epistemically hubristic about these ideas and positions? Maybe. But maybe not.

The titles of some of Simon's (purported) dialogues suggest that he might have been confident about positions on things *kalos kagathos*, perhaps especially: *Of the Good*, *On the Just: two dialogues*, and *Of Virtue, that it cannot be taught*. There might even be some stridency in the latter title. But we must also take into consideration that Simon (allegedly) wrote *Socratic* dialogues, not treatises. And we can imagine what Socrates' influence on Simon might have been like.

Consider Plato's early dramatic masterpiece: *Protagoras*. The character Socrates in *Protagoras* seems especially attracted to an intellectualist account of the virtues and argues for it at great length, but also confidently (or ironically?) deploys arguments against the thesis that virtue can be taught. At the end of the dialogue, Socrates articulates the unresolved perplexities that have emerged from his dialectical discussion of the virtues with Protagoras (361a5-c3). Socrates requests that they continue their inquiry with the hope that some theoretical progress can be made (361d1-4), but Protagoras opts to table the discussion for the time being, adding—however—that:

Indeed, I have told many people that I admire you more than anyone I have met, certainly more than anyone in your generation. And I say that I would not be surprised if you gain among men high repute for wisdom. (361e3-6)

This is high praise from Protagoras.<sup>17</sup> He definitely detects Socrates' wisdom. If Socrates can retain his epistemic humility regarding the true natures of the virtues and whether they can be taught throughout, and even after, his investigation with Protagoras, then so might Simon the Cobbler retain his own epistemic humility upon the completion of his own dialogues. Of course, we'll never know the truth about this. But suppose Simon did, in fact, maintain an attractive form of epistemic humility throughout his philosophical inquiries. Given this supposition, it would appear that Simon is wiser than Socrates. He shares Socrates' epistemic humility regarding things *kalos kagathos* but also possesses valuable craft-specific wisdom about cobbling. Socrates admits as much. Simon could then serve as a counterexample to the Pythian's declaration. But should we conclude that Simon was wiser than Socrates? I would be reluctant to do so. Protagoras seemed to be onto some of Socrates' attractive features. Perhaps those features reflect a sort of

wisdom that outstrips any non-craft-specific wisdom that Simon enjoys. If so, we must reject an EH account of Socrates' superlative wisdom.

Now consider Simon's (completely fictional!) craftsman friend Skepticos. Skepticos is a potter who wanders into Simon's workshop while Simon is engaged in philosophical discourse with Socrates. Skepticos is shell-shocked when he witnesses Socrates and Simon clearly illustrate that popularly endorsed Athenian conceptions of courage, virtue, and honor are mired in inconsistencies. Socrates then turns to Skepticos, asking him whether he knows anything about courage, virtue, and honor. Skepticos immediately realizes that while he has some ideas about those moral concepts, he has no knowledge of them, none whatsoever. And—unlike Simon—Skepticos never attempts to work out accounts of these concepts. Yet he remains skeptical, embodying the type of epistemic humility about things *kalos kagathos* that Socrates claims for himself. If there were a person like Skepticos in Ancient Athens, then Socrates—and perhaps even the oracle—would have to admit that Skepticos (or whoever) is wiser than Socrates. He shares Socrates' wisdom grounded in epistemic humility but also possesses craft-specific wisdom about how to create beautiful pieces of pottery. If we are reluctant to embrace this conclusion, we must reject an EH account of Socrates' human wisdom. There must be something more to the nature of Socrates' wisdom that is responsible for (at least perhaps) his own wisdom enjoying an elevated position above whatever wisdom his peers possessed.

#### 4. IDENTIFYING INCONSISTENCIES AND POSING PERPLEXING PHILOSOPHICAL CHALLENGES

In the remaining sections I canvas several other admirable features of Socrates in an attempt to articulate the full extent of Socrates' human wisdom. Some of these features are related to Socrates' epistemic humility in robust ways, others perhaps less so. In any case, my hope is to show that the fusion of these features with Socrates' epistemic humility makes for a more complete and more attractive account of Socrates' human wisdom than can be provided by his epistemic humility alone.

Socrates brought to light that the Athenian positive morality was muddled in serious ways. Socrates pointed out that features of the popularly-endorsed Athenian conceptions of the virtues (and subsequently moral improvement) were unprincipled in some cases and inconsistent in others. And given how important Socrates regarded caring for one's soul or psyche (*Apology* 30a7-b4) and caring for virtue (*Apology* 31b5), these were important discoveries, both for Socrates and so many others. Socrates, however, was not alone in pointing out problematic features of the Athenians' positive morality, and he may not have even been the first. Sophocles displays some of the conceptual tensions within the Athenian positive morality in his plays.<sup>18</sup> But Socrates did more than merely expose some

puzzling features of Athenian positive morality. He proved that popular Athenian beliefs about virtue were inconsistent: He derived contradictions from them.

Socrates also posed serious and puzzling theoretical challenges to commonly embraced features of the moral virtues and thereby injected philosophical perplexity about the nature of morality into the Athenian culture.<sup>19</sup> In Plato's *Laches*, a young Socrates investigates the nature of courage with the esteemed Athenian generals Laches and Nicias. Socrates reveals some of the inconsistencies plaguing Laches' conception of courage and poses perplexing philosophical challenges to Nicias' (Socrates-inspired!) conception of courage and its conceptual relationship to virtue in general. Socrates introduces interesting ideas about courage and virtue into the discussion, but the perplexities are never completely resolved. Similar things can be said about the investigation that Socrates leads into the nature of sophrosune (temperance) with Charmides and Critias in Plato's *Charmides*, or Socrates' discussion of piety with Euthyphro. The ability to identify inconsistencies in Athenian positive morality and make them explicitly known to others requires a certain sort of wisdom, or so it seems to me. And so does the ability to pose perplexing philosophical challenges to popularly endorsed conceptions of the moral virtues. The human wisdom required to ground these abilities is attractive and impressive. Socrates likely enjoyed more of this wisdom than any of his peers. And Socrates used this wisdom to inspire his fellow Athenians to engage in sincere philosophical investigation into the nature of virtue itself.

Notice that this kind of wisdom likely played a key role in developing and justifying Socrates' epistemic humility. If the Athenians' conceptions of the virtues were internally inconsistent, or if they were unable to resolve perplexities at the hearts of these conceptions, then surely they lacked knowledge of the true nature of moral virtue and corresponding things *kalos kagathos*.

## 5. OPERATING IN THE PHILOSOPHICAL DIALECTIC

Socrates developed his elenctic method with the hope that it would provide a route to progress in ethical and social-political inquiry. As far as we know, no one before him investigated moral matters strictly within the confines of the philosophical dialectic,<sup>20</sup> and Socrates' elenctic method was perhaps the earliest, methodologically fruitful version of the philosophical dialectic in action.<sup>21</sup>

Socrates frustrates but also amazes Protagoras with his dialectical prowess throughout Plato's *Protagoras*. Socrates articulates competing theses about the nature of the virtues and the nature of moral failure before submitting each of them to tremendous dialectical pressure. Socrates seems to make some theoretical progress in various respects, but the dialectical discussion with Protagoras leaves them both perplexed (perhaps) about serious issues. Despite his frustration, Protagoras ends the dialogue by heaping praise upon Socrates (as was noted in

section 3). And earlier in the dialogue, Alcibiades pays homage to Socrates' dialectical abilities: "But when it comes to dialectical discussion and understanding, the give and take of argument, I would be surprised if he [Socrates] yields to anyone" (336c2-4). Socrates' dialectical abilities are impressive and philosophically fruitful too.

Socrates realized that the only route to theoretical improvement regarding insight into moral (and social-political) matters is via the (the very "human") elenctic method. Tough, tricky, and creative dialectical work is required for philosophical progress. And theoretical insight into the nature of moral virtue (and perhaps other things *kalos kagathos*) is required for serious practical moral progress,<sup>22</sup> something Socrates craved not only for himself but for his fellow Athenians and visitors as well.

Socrates came to understand that the targets of virtuous action must enjoy some theoretical justification, and Socrates was (justifiably) confident that any principle, account, position, or argument that could survive dialectical refutation held promise and might even come close to approximating the truth, at least in many cases. Socrates displays this confidence on a number of occasions in the early Platonic dialogues. Socrates' confidence regarding the dialectical challenges he poses for Euthyphro's proposals concerning the nature of piety is clear and apparent. So is his confidence regarding the principles he embraces and uses to justify his position that he should endure his execution rather than escape with Crito. Socrates declares to Crito:

I cannot, now that this fate has come upon me, discard the arguments I used; they seem to me much the same. I value and respect the same principles as before, and if we have no better arguments to bring up at this moment, be sure that I shall not agree with you, not even if the power of the majority were to frighten us with more bogeys, as if we were children, with threats of incarcerations and executions and confiscation of property. (*Crito* b6-c6)

Socrates expresses similar confidence about the prospects of philosophical success in his discussion with Callicles in *Gorgias* about whether it is worse to commit injustice than to suffer it. Excited about the fruitfulness of a dialectical discussion with Callicles about "the topics of greatest importance" (487b5)—"...that of what a man is supposed to be like, and what he's supposed to devote himself to and how far..." (487e9-488a1)—Socrates declares:

I know well that if you concur with what my soul believes, then that is the very truth. I realize that a person who is going to put a soul to an adequate test to see whether it lives rightly or not must have three qualities, all of which you have: knowledge, good will, and frankness. I run into many

people who aren't able to test me because they're not wise like you. Others are wise, but they're not willing to tell me the truth, because they don't care for me the way you do. (486e5-487a6)

Socrates continues:

If there's any point in our discussions on which you agree with me, then that point will have been adequately put to the test by you and me, and it will not be necessary to put it to any further test, for you'd never have conceded the point through lack of wisdom or excess of shame, and you wouldn't do so by lying to me, either. You are my friend, as you yourself say, too. So, our mutual agreement will really lay hold of truth in the end. (487e1-7)

Socrates even celebrates their mutual success regarding the respective shamefulness of committing injustice and suffering it: "These conclusions, at which we arrived earlier in our previous discussions are, I'd say, held down and bound by arguments of iron and adamant, even if it's rather rude to say so." (508e6-9).<sup>23</sup> Socrates' dialectical prowess is indisputable. His trust in the dialectical method as the only way to claw towards philosophical truths marks another aspect of Socrates' (perhaps) peerless human wisdom.

This aspect of Socrates' wisdom too is related to his epistemic humility in an intimate way. Recognizing that the only path to philosophical insight is via the dialectic, and realizing how difficult it is to secure anything with certainty via his dialectical method, Socrates came to know how much philosophical truth there was out there yet to be known and how tremendously difficult it would be to grasp those truths with sufficient dialectical justification—a divine task to be sure, perhaps beyond the limited intellectual powers of even the strongest human thinkers, including the likes of Socrates himself. A god-like being, on the other hand, might have direct intellectual insight into the complete structure of the nature of morality, resulting in systematic, comprehensive, certain, and infallible knowledge of the moral realm.<sup>24</sup> Such a being would be able to provide a "full and successful dialectical account"<sup>25</sup> of the nature of moral virtue and all things *kalos kagathos*. Socrates realized that such knowledge was beyond him and perhaps beyond any human being, so he continued to inquire, testing and examining any potentially attractive principle, position, or argument that came his way. Socrates' epistemic humility was hard won and well-earned.<sup>26</sup> This too distinguishes him from most of his peers, if not all of them. Socrates realized that whatever philosophical progress he made was paltry in comparison to the divine philosophical knowledge he craved. His dialectical efforts frequently enjoyed limited successes, but those successes were incomplete in radical ways: Unresolved perplexities lurked everywhere Socrates ventured, and it was Socrates

himself who brought many of those perplexities to light.<sup>27</sup>

## 6. CHARACTER GROUNDED IN PHILOSOPHICAL COMMITMENTS

Socrates was an exemplar of someone who leads a philosophical life. He was completely committed to whatever philosophical morsels he discovered or latched onto, that is, whatever resisted refutation in the philosophical dialectic. Socrates committed himself completely to whatever (at least seemingly) theoretically viable features of virtue he could grasp.<sup>28</sup> His behavior never wandered from his philosophical commitments:<sup>29</sup>

So I disregard the things held in honor by the majority of people, and by practicing truth I really try, to the best of my ability, to be and to live as a very good man, and when I die, to die like that. And I call on all other people as well, as far as I can—and you especially I call on in response to your call—to this way of life, this contest, that I hold to be worth all the other contests in this life. (*Gorgias* 526d4-e4)

Socrates' virtue—or at least the degree to which he exemplified it—was grounded in his philosophical commitments, commitments developed through continual, critical inquiry in the philosophical dialectic. Socrates was a pioneer in this. And this too reflects a sort of wisdom that Socrates enjoyed in ways that his peers did not.

## 7. CONCLUSION

I have tried to lay out a strong case in defense of the Pythian's reply that no one was wiser than Socrates. Many philosophers have attempted to articulate Socrates' superlative yet human wisdom solely in terms of epistemic humility, especially about things *kalos kagathos*:

EH: Socrates does not think he knows things that he does not know. Socrates claims that he does not know anything *kalos kagathos* nor does he think he knows anything *kalos kagathos*.

I readily admit that Socrates was probably peerless when it came to being epistemically humble about philosophical matters. But restricting Socrates' wisdom to just his epistemic humility does him a serious injustice. Socrates was able to identify inconsistencies in the Athenian positive morality and reveal perplexities emerging from philosophical investigations into the moral virtues. It was Socrates who developed the elenctic-dialectical method and recognized that the only path to philosophical (and subsequently moral) progress was via

strenuous, creative, and continual dialectical work—and Socrates worked hard. Sure, these features are intimately related to his epistemic humility; in fact, they likely ground his epistemic humility in a philosophically attractive way. But he was probably unrivaled with respect to these features too. Combining these features with his commitment to become as virtuous as he could while realizing that moral virtue must ultimately be grounded in defensible philosophical commitments makes for a tremendously attractive person, a person who (among his peers) was likely unsurpassed with respect to wisdom, and beautiful forms of wisdom at that. Was Socrates the wisest man in Athens? Probably.

## NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, translations of the Platonic passages are those provided in Cooper.

2. Hereafter, I will use *Socrates* to refer to Plato's Socrates.

3. Scholars translate this important phrase *kalos kagathos* in a variety of similar ways. Here is a sample: "fine and good" (Harold North Fowler in Plato 1914), "beautiful and good", "admirable and good" (both provided by Scott Senn in Plato 2019), and "noble and good" (Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West in Plato 1984).

4. Here is how Senn translates the passage in Plato 2019: "Who is knowledgeable about the virtue of that sort: about the human's and citizens's virtue?" Hereafter I will refer to Senn's translation of Plato merely as *Senn's translation*.

5. Richard Bett points out that in many of the early aporetic dialogues dedicated to investigations of various virtues and important moral concepts—*Hippias Major*, *Euthyphro*, *Charmides*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, and (the transitional dialogue) *Meno*—Socrates professes ignorance regarding the targets of investigation in these dialogues and "this professed ignorance is not dispelled in the course of the dialogue[s]" (222). Bett also points out that Socrates intimates on several occasions how exceptionally valuable such knowledge would be if one could obtain it. Bett continues on, offering an interpretation roughly the same as my own: "Taken together, these two points suggest that knowledge of the nature of the virtues and other related qualities is, or is at least a prime example of, the wisdom or truly valuable knowledge that Socrates disclaims in the *Apology*." 222

6. I will have a bit more to say in favor of this interpretation when I discuss Socrates' examination of the craftsmen.

7. Cf. Benson 170 and Bett 219.

8. Cf. with the trilogy of early Socratic dialogues *Charmides*, *Laches*, and *Lysis*. The natures of sophrosune (and any conceptual relationships it may have with self-knowledge), courage, virtue, and friendship are investigated. Each investigation ends in perplexity. Even if some theoretical progress is made in these dialogues, knowledge of the concepts under investigation remains elusive, or so it seems. The investigations in *Laches* seem particularly apt when thinking about this. Suppose that after investigating the natures of courage and virtue with Socrates, the generals Laches and Nicias admit that they do not know the nature of courage, nor do they know the nature of virtue in general. In doing so, they too would be just as wise as Socrates on this EH account. But it is doubtful that they

would be. That is why they are eager (Nicias) or willing (Laches) to investigate these matters with a young Socrates.

9. Note, however, that the playwright Sophocles was onto conceptual tensions within the Athenian concept of arete. I touch on this issue below.

10. Senn's translation.

11. Senn's translation: "because of beautifully working out his art".

12. Emphasis is mine. Cf. Senn's translation; again the emphasis is mine: "...each deemed himself to be wisest in the other things too—the *greatest things*."

13. This interpretation is bolstered by attending to the contexts in which Socrates uses the phrases *most important pursuits*, *greatest things*, and *topics of the greatest importance* in Plato's *Gorgias*; see especially 487b5 and 527e1. Also see *Gorgias* 487e-488a, where Socrates expands upon his conception of the "topics of greatest importance" in terms of "that of what a man is supposed to be like, and of what he's supposed to devote himself to and how far..." (487e9-488a1). At *Gorgias* 500c3, Socrates claims that his discussion with Callicles is about "the way we're supposed to live". My interpretation is also consonant with Socrates' renowned declarations at *Apology* 38a.

14. Also see *Gorgias* 452a-c, where Socrates has a doctor, a physical trainer, and a financial expert each claim of his craft that it is "concerned with the greatest good for humankind".

15. Thanks to Mark Walker for pushing me in this direction.

16. Book II, Chapter 13 of *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*.

17. Plato sometimes singles out Protagoras as particularly admirable among the sophists; see, for example, *Meno* 91d2-92a1.

18. In *Antigone* (first performed when Socrates was about thirty years old), poor Clytemnestra is torn between what is morally due to her polis and what is morally due to her family—seemingly competing and incompatible demands—resulting in her tragic, suicidal demise. In *Philoctetes*, Odysseus and Neoptolemus dispute whether Odysseus' plan to deceive Philoctetes constitutes honorable or dishonorable action, especially given that Philoctetes receives Odysseus and Neoptolemus with trust and honesty. No resolution of the dispute is provided; rather, the demi-god Heracles steps in as peacemaker. Alasdair MacIntyre discusses these cases in his chapter "The Virtues in Athens" in *After Virtue*.

19. See Gareth B. Matthews's excellent *Socratic Perplexity and the Nature of Philosophy*.

20. See Guthrie 138.

21. Perhaps Parmenides and Zeno should be credited for being the first philosophers to employ fruitful versions of the philosophical dialectic. Empedocles and Anaxagoras might have employed interesting dialectical strategies too. Even so, none of these Presocratic philosophers dedicated themselves to inquiry into moral matters.

22. Cf. Senn 83, who writes: "... he [Socrates] values philosophizing as a necessary means for getting genuine virtue/wisdom."

23. Near the end of *Gorgias*, Socrates declares:

But among so many arguments this one alone survives refutation and remains steady: that doing what's unjust is more to be guarded against than suffering it, and that it's not *seeming* to be good but *being* good that a man should take care of more than anything, both in his public and his private life.... (527b3-7)

24. Cf. Cooper, who writes: “Wisdom, then is a permanent, deeply settled, complete grasp of the total truth about human values of all sorts, in all their systematic relationships, primed for ready application to all situations and circumstances of human life.” (Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom* 46) Cooper continues:

For Socrates, then, knowledge is the grasp of the truth of some fact or group of facts on the basis of a comprehensive, complete understanding of the whole system of facts, and relationships among them, that constitute some distinct area of intellectual inquiry. In the case of the human good and what is bad for human beings, such knowledge is a grasp of what to do in particular sets of circumstances, where that grasp derives from and depends upon a complete understanding of the whole realm of human values. Wisdom goes beyond that knowledge by requiring that, once acquired, it be so deeply and firmly settled in one’s mind that one would be prepared, for all future time, when in normal possession of one’s powers, to apply that knowledge, with confidence and demonstrable authority, in any and every circumstance, so as always to do what is right and best, with a complete and fully grounded justification in mind for what one does. (48)

25. Cooper, “Arcesilaus” 182, fn. 24.

26. Thanks to Hal Thorsrud for pressing this point.

27. Cf. Vlastos, who writes:

[Socratic] knowledge is full of gaps, unanswered questions; it is surrounded and invaded by unresolved perplexity. But this does not trouble Socrates. He does not find it debilitating, but exhilarating.... So if an inquiry should run into *aporia*, he can reckon the exercise not total failure but incomplete success. Nothing has transpired to show that the unfound answer is unfindable, nor yet to invalidate the fragmentary truths unearthed along the way and shake his claim that in their case he does have knowledge<sub>E</sub>. (19-20)

28. See, for example, *Crito* b6-c6 (quoted above).

29. See especially *Apology* and *Crito* but *Laches* too.

## WORKS CITED

- Benson, H. *Socratic Wisdom: The Model of Knowledge in Plato’s Early Dialogues*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Bett, Richard. “Socratic Ignorance.” *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*. Edited by Donald R. Morrison, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 215-236.
- Cooper, John. “Arcesilaus: Socratic and Sceptic.” *Remembering Socrates*. Edited by Lindsay Judson and Vassilis Karasmanis, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 169-187.
- . *Pursuits of Wisdom*. Princeton University Press, 2012.
- Guthrie, W. K. C. *Socrates*. Cambridge University Press, 1971.
- Laertius, Diogenes. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Translated by R.D. Hicks, Harvard University Press, 1972. (First published 1925).

- MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.
- Matthews, Gareth. *Socratic Perplexity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Plato. (1914) *Euthyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo. Phaedrus*. Trans. Harold North Fowler. Loeb Classical Library vol. 36. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Plato. *Four Texts on Socrates*. Translated by Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West, Cornell University Press, 1984.
- . *Plato: Complete Works*. Edited by John M. Cooper, Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.
- . *The Good, the Just, & the Happy in Four Platonic Dialogues: Socrates' Defense Speech, the Euthyphro, the Crito, & the Meno*. Translated by Scott J. Senn. Available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2727511>. (2019)
- Senn, Scott. "Ignorance or Irony in Plato's Socrates? A Look Beyond Avowals and Disavowals of Knowledge." *Plato Journal*, vol. 13, 2013, pp. 77-108.
- Vlastos, G. "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge." *Socratic Studies*. Edited by M. Burnyeat, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 39-66. (Original version published in 1985).