## Socratic Method

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Plato's Socratic dialogues repeatedly exhibit a distinctive feature of the main character of those dialogues - the so-called Socratic method.[1] Plato highlights this feature of Socrates when he has his main character in the *Apology* blame his prosecution on his customary method (27b2). Aristotle highlights this feature of Socrates when he limits the two things that can fairly be attributed to Socrates to "inductive arguments and defining the universal" (*Metaphysics* 1078b27-29).[2] Nevertheless, the nature of this so-called Socratic method has been subject to a variety of questions, puzzles, and problems. Indeed, two prominent Socratic scholars have recently been led to proclaim that "that there is no such thing as 'the Socratic [method]'.[3] I maintain that such a response to these questions, puzzles, and problems is neither necessary nor desirable. Plato's Socratic dialogues coherently present Socrates practicing a distinctive philosophical method featuring a common form, a common strategy, and a common epistemological presupposition.

### A Common Form: The *Elenchos*

In the Plato's *Apology* Socrates explains at length why he is being prosecuted. Socrates begins his explanation by doubting that he is being prosecuted because he is believed to be guilty

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[1]The Socratic dialogues are the following (in alphabetical order): *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Euthydemus*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, portions of the *Meno*, *Protagoras*, and *Republic* I. These dialogues have often been classified together as a consequence of their imagined position in the chronological ordering of Plato's composition of the dialogues. They have frequently been taken to compose the earliest of Plato's compositions. Nothing in what follows, however, depends upon such a chronological thesis.

[2]If one takes Aristotle as a relatively independent source for the historical Socrates, then we may suspect that a characteristic feature of the historical Socrates was his method. If, however, one takes Aristotle's account of Socrates to be dependent on Plato, then my discussion should be understood as restricted to the characteristic method of Socrates as portrayed in Plato's Socratic dialogues. For more on the issue of the historical Socrates see chapter 1.

[3]See (Brickhouse and Smith 2002:147 and 154–156), and more recently (Wolfsdorf 2003:301–302). For the identification of 'the Socratic method' and 'the Socratic *elenchos*', see below.

of the official charges brought forward by Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon. Rather, he suggests that the jurors will convict him of older accusations brought forward by a variety of individuals to the effect that he "is guilty of wrongdoing in that he busies himself studying things in the sky and below the earth; he makes the worse argument into the stronger argument, and he teaches these same things to others" (19b4-c1; Grube trans.).[4] But Socrates even doubts that these accusations explain his prosecution. Instead he suggests that he is being prosecuted because of a certain practice he has engaged in at least since Chaerephon visited the Delphic oracle and received the response that no one was wiser than Socrates.[5] This practice that Socrates and his young imitators have employed has angered and embarrassed many men who were reputed to be wise. Consequently, these men have leveled accusations against Socrates that could be leveled at any philosopher. These latter accusations are, however, trumped up as a result of the anger and embarrassment that Socrates and his young imitators have engendered by exposing the ignorance of these men.

Notice that Socrates does not suggest that he is being prosecuted because he advocates unpopular and controversial positions. He does not think he is being prosecuted because he believes and encourages others to believe, for example, that one should harm neither one friends nor one's enemies, that one's leaders should be determined by knowledge, not popular election or lot, or even that the sun is a fiery ball of iron. Though Socrates does not explicitly say so, prosecutions on the basis of unpopular beliefs could be brought against any philosopher and so this would not explain why Socrates, in particular, is being prosecuted.[6] Rather, Socrates believes he is being prosecuted because of a certain practice or manner of philosophizing that is peculiar to him and those who imitate him.[7] Thus, Socrates believes that at least a portion of his

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[4]All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

[5]I am not suggesting that Socrates only began practicing his characterisistic method after Chaerephon's visit to the Delphic oracle. See (Benson 2000:19 n. 6).

[6]See Diogenes Laertius (*Life of Anaxagoras* IX) who tells us that Anaxagoras is one philosopher - the only other one we know of - who may have been prosecuted for the unpopular and impious belief that the sun is a fiery ball of iron.

[7]Socrates here explicitly recognizes that his distinctive practice can be employed by others, although they may be less proficient than he. See (Brickhouse and Smith 1994:27–29). That Socrates takes this distinctive practice to be a

philosophizing can be characterized as peculiarly associated with him, i.e., as Socratic.  It is this portion of his philosophizing that explains his prosecution.  He describes this distinctive practice in relating his response to the Delphic oracle's answer to Chaerephon.

As Socrates describes it, when Chaerephon informed him that the oracle had declared that no one was wiser than Socrates, Socrates was at a loss at what the oracle could mean.  For he was "aware of being wise about nothing great or small" (21b4-5) and yet the god could not lie.  In order to understand the oracle Socrates performed the following investigation.  He sought out those reputed to be wise either by themselves or others, thinking that he could thereby refute the oracle - saying "this man is wiser than I am, but you said I was wiser" (21c2; Grube trans.).  However, after going through the politicians, poets, and craftsmen, Socrates discovered that he was unable to refute the oracle in the manner he had anticipated.  Instead he discovered that all of those whose reputed wisdom he examined suffered the same fault.  They all thought they knew (or were reputed to know) certain things that they did not.  Consequently, his investigation led him to conclude that the oracle meant that "This man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless" (23b2-4; Grube trans.) thereby commanding Socrates to "go around seeking out anyone, citizen or stranger, whom I think wise.  Then if I do not think he is, I come to the assistance of the god and show him that he is not wise." (23b4-7; Grube trans.).[8]

In the course of describing this distinctive manner of philosophizing that Socrates takes to be responsible for his prosecution two features become immediately apparent.  First, it consists in examining the reputed wisdom of anyone Socrates happens to meet.  Socrates likely began his testing of the oracle by presuming that those he examined had the wisdom they were reputed to have, although one suspects that in time the presumption faded.  Nevertheless, the distinctive Socratic practice begins with an examination or test of an individual's reputed

manner of philosophizing is made clear in his response to the jury's hypothetical offer to find him innocent if he will promise to cease philosophizing (*Apology* 29c-30b).
[8]See (Brickhouse and Smith 1983) and (Brickhouse and Smith 1989:87–100) for a plausible account of how Socrates derives a divine command or mission from the oracle's pronouncement.  See also (McPherran 2002).

wisdom, whatever Socrates presumes the test will show.  Second, he performs this examination not only to relieve his ignorance of the meaning of the oracle, but also to persuade those reputed to be wise of their ignorance, if they are not wise (*Apology* 23b7), and to learn from them, if they are wise (*Apology* 22b5).[9]  Here, then, we have something like the identity conditions of a distinctively Socratic manner of philosophizing - at least distinctively Socratic by Socrates' own lights.  Those episodes in the Socratic dialogues in which we find Socrates examining the reputed wisdom of interlocutors in order to persuade them of their ignorance (if they are revealed not to be wise) or to learn from them (if they are revealed to be wise) can be identified as instances of Socrates' distinctive practice.  So identified this distinctive Socratic practice is the Socratic *elenchos*.[10]  It is not, however, the only manner of philosophizing that Socrates employs.  Consider, for example, most of the argument of the *Apology* for which no reputedly wise interlocutor whatsoever is present,[11]  or the speech of the Laws in the *Crito* during which the eponymous interlocutor has very nearly disappeared following his admission of his ignorance at 50a5,[12] or the myth of the afterlife in the *Gorgias* during which the self-professed wise Callicles has in fact disappeared.[13]  Nevertheless, Socrates does frequently engage in his distinctive practice.

Throughout the Socratic dialogues Socrates can be seen engaging in short question-and-answer exchanges with interlocutors reputed to be wise either by themselves or by others.  Of the

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[9]See also *Hippias Major* 287a6-7 and *Hippias Minor* 369d1-e2.  These two motivations for examining the knowledge of others are related.  Socrates' over-riding goal even prior to the oracle's response is knowledge of the most important things.  Attempting to learn this from others who have it is an obvious way to achieve this goal, but also attempting to encourage others who lack it to join him in the search is another.  Socrates is convinced that no one will seek the knowledge they lack until they first recognize that they lack it.

[10]See (Wolfsdorf 2003:306) against employing the *Apology* in this way.

[11]The exchange with Meletus at *Apology* 24b-28 resembles a genuine *elenchos*, but I would maintain that it is not.  Socrates is neither genuinely examining Meletus' wisdom (he has no doubt that Meletus fails to be wise), nor is Socrates concerned to persuade Meletus of his ignorance (he is concerned to persuade the jurors of Meletus' ignorance).  But I will not argue the point here.  The key is that Socrates is not always practicing the *elenchos* in the Socratic dialogues, whether or not he is during his exchange with Meletus.

[12]Once Crito admits his ignorance at *Crito* 50a 4-5, he responds to a Socratic question only three times during the course of the next 4 Stephanus pages.

[13]One may object that myth is not an argument, but it is hard to deny that myth does not compose part of Socrates' method of philosophizing in the elenctic dialogues; see, for example, (McCabe 1992).

34 interlocutors[14] in the Socratic dialogues 21 have some claim to wisdom that Socrates goes on to examine.[15] In no case is the interlocutor's wisdom uncovered and in only 7 cases is the interlocutor persuaded of his ignorance.[16] Nevertheless, in nearly every case Socrates appears prepared to learn from the interlocutor should his wisdom be confirmed and attempts to persuade the interlocutor of his ignorance once Socrates recognizes it.[17] Thus, while we should not take every Socratic argument as an instance of Socrates' distinctive practice, he repeatedly engages in his distinctive practice throughout the Socratic dialogues.

In those exchanges in which Socrates does examine the reputed wisdom of his interlocutor a pattern begins to emerge. Socrates begins by asking the interlocutor a question, the answer to which is an indication of the interlocutor's reputed wisdom. This is often, though

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[14]Meletus, Charmides, Critias (twice), Crito (twice), Dionysodorus, Euthydemus, Cleinias, Crito, Ctesippus (twice), Euthyphro, Gorgias, Polus, Callicles, Hippias (thrice), Eudicus, Ion, Melesias, Lysimachus, Laches, Nicias, Hippothales, Lysis, Menexenus, Meno, Slave-boy, friend, Hippocrates, Protagoras, Callias, Alcibiades, Prodicus, Cephalus, Polemarchus, and Thrasymachus.

[15]Charmides (*Charmides* 154e5-155a1), Crito (*Crito* 45a3 & 46a7-8 together with the argument at 47a-48a), Critias 162d4-e5, Dionysodorus (*Euthydemus* 271c5-272b4, 273c2-274b4), Euthydemus (*Euthydemus* 271c5-272b4, 273c2-274b4), Euthyphro (4e4-5a2), Gorgias (*Gorgias* 449c9-d2), Polus (*Gorgias* 462a5-7), Callicles (*Gorgias* 487a-488a), Hippias (*Hippias Major* 281a-c, 286d-284-7b), Hippias (*Hippias Minor* 364a-b), Ion (*Ion* 530c1-d3), Laches (*Laches* 184e11-187a1, 190c4-5), Nicias (*Laches* 184e11-187a1, 196c), Menexenus (*Lysis* 211b6-d4), Meno (*Meno* 71d5-8, 71e1-72a2), Slave-boy (*Meno* 82e5-6), Hippocrates (*Protagoras* 311a8-b2, 312c4-5), Protagoras (*Protagoras* 316c-317c, 320c-d), Polemarchus (*Republic* I 331e7-8, 335e1-4), and Thrasymachus (*Republic* I 338a1, 344d-e).

[16]Charmides (*Charmides* 162b9-10 & 176a6-b4), Crito (*Crito* 50a4-5), Ion (*Ion* 541e1-542b), perhaps Nicias (*Laches* 199e11-200c1), Hippocrates (*Protagoras* 312e6-313c4), Meno (*Meno* 79e7-80b4) and Slave-boy (*Meno* 84a1-2). These last two are unique in that only in their case does the exchange between Socrates and the interlocutor continue following their recognition of ignorance. Euthyphro (11b6-8), Laches (*Laches* 194a6-b4), and Menexenus (*Lysis* 213c9), all admit to being unable to say what they know, but not to ignorance. Finally, Lysis never appears to be reputed to be wise and was not counted among the 21 whose reputed wisdom Socrates goes on to examine. Nevertheless, Socrates does indicate that his exchange with Lysis is meant as a model of how one should engage one's beloved. The goal of such an exchange should be to force the beloved to recognize his ignorance or eliminate his high-mindedness, which apparently Lysis does at *Lysis* 210d4-8.

[17]Of the 21 interlocutors whose wisdom is examined, Socrates explicitly announces his desire to learn from them in 12 cases (*Euthydemus* 272b, 272d5-6, 273c2-d9, *Euthyphro* 5a3-c8, *Gorgias* 447c1-3, 461d, 487e-488a, *Hippias Major* 286d-287b, *Hippias Minor* 369d-e, 372a-d, *Laches* 191c-d, 196c, *Lysis* 212a4-7, *Protagoras* 348c5-349a6, *Republic* I 337d-338b, 344d-e, 344e). In three others this motivation is implied (Critias in the transition from Charmides, Crito by argument, and Meno by the sting-ray analogy). The motivation to persuade the interlocutor of his ignorance is never explicitly expressed. This is to be expected given Socrates' desire for the interlocutor to permit his wisdom to be examined. Nevertheless, this motivation is evidenced by the fact that Socrates never takes a single elenctic episode to suffice (except perhaps in the case of Crito who admits his ignorance). A single elenctic episode may suffice for Socrates to recognize the interlocutor's ignorance, but will seldom be enough to disabuse the interlocutor. Consider those passages in which the interlocutor admits to being unable to say what he knows but not to his ignorance cited in previous note.

not always, Socrates' 'What is F-ness?' question.[18]  Following the interlocutor's answer to this

initial question, a series of other questions elicit answers from the interlocutor that are used by

Socrates to derive the negation of the original answer.  At this point the interlocutor either

revises his initial answer (e.g., *Euthyphro* 10d1-2), offers an entirely new answer (e.g., *Hippias

Major* 289e2-4), admits to being unable to say what he knows (e.g. *Laches* 194b1-4), professes

his ignorance (e.g., *Charmides* 162b9-10), is replaced by another interlocutor whose wisdom is

examined (e.g., *Gorgias* 461e5-462b2), or marches off in a huff (e.g., *Euthyphro* 15e3-4).

Consequently, typical instances of Socrates' distinctive practice have roughly the following

formal structure:

> First, (1) Socrates asks the interlocutor a question the answer to which is meant to exhibit the interlocutor's wisdom usually, but not always, concerning the definition of some moral concept.  (I will refer to this initial answer, *p*, as the **apparent refutand**.)
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> Next, (2) the interlocutor provides answers, *q*, *r*, and *s* to a series of other Socratic questions.  (I will refer to these answers as the **premises** of the *elenchos*.)
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> Third, (3) Socrates goes on to show that these answers entail the negation of the original answer.
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> Thus, (4) the conjunction *p* & *q* & *r* & *s* is false.[19]

Thus, we have found a distinctive Socratic practice of philosophy displaying a common form.

We have found, that is, the Socratic *elenchos*.  We have also, unfortunately, only just begun to

face the questions, puzzles, and problems that it raises.

## A Common Strategy:  Doxastic Coherence

In his now-classic essay, Gregory Vlastos maintained that *the* problem with the Socratic

*elenchos* is "how Socrates can claim ... to have proved that the [apparent] refutand is false, when

all he has established is its inconsistency with premises whose truth he has not tried to establish

in that argument."  This alleged 'problem of the *elenchos*' depends upon maintaining that

Socrates concludes from the false conjunction at (4) that *p*, the apparent refutand, is false and

that not-*p* is true.  To resolve it one must explain what would justify Socrates in so concluding.

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[18]For the connection between the 'What is F-ness?' question and wisdom, knowledge, or expertise, see pp ## below.

[19]See (Vlastos 1994:11) for a similar characterization of the form of what Vlastos refers to as the 'standard elenchus'.

A variety of scholars have followed Vlastos in understanding the *elenchos* in this way. They agree that Socrates sees his *elenchos* as establishing the truth or falsity of individual answers, although they do not all agree about what justifies Socrates in understanding his method in this way.[20] Such an interpretation of the *elenchos* has been called a constructivist interpretation since it understands the *elenchos* as establishing the truth or falsity of individual answers. The *elenchos*, on this interpretation, can and does have constructive or positive results. This interpretation, however, has been challenged. According, to what has been called the non-constructivist account, Socrates neither takes his *elenchos* to establish the truth or falsity of individual answers, nor would he be justified if he had.[21] Rather than rehearsing the details of this debate I want to focus on what I take to be its essence - the relative credibility of the premises of the *elenchos* - *q, r,* and *s*.

If the *elenchos* fails to establish the truth or falsity of individual answers it is not because of its form. Anyone who sought to show that an opponent's thesis was false or that one's own position, denied by an opponent, was true would seek to obtain premises from which the negation of one's opponent's position could be derived. Doing so would not in any way hinder establishing the truth or falsity of the relevant thesis. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how else one would proceed. What hinders establishing such truth or falsity is not the form of the *elenchos*, but the relative credibility of its premises. If the premises obtained are not better known, more evident, more justified, or in some way more credible than the thesis whose falsity one aims to establish, then the argument cannot establish the falsity of that thesis. Moreover, even should the premises of the *elenchos* be more credible than the apparent refutand, Socrates must recognize that they are and take such an epistemic distinction to be relevant to the intended result of the *elenchos*. Otherwise we should not understand Socrates' use of the *elenchos* as intended to show the falsity of the alleged refutand. But an examination of the strategy Socrates

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[20]See, for example, (Kraut 1983), (Polansky 1985), (Reeve 1989), (Adams 1998), and (Woolf 2000),
[21]See, for example (Stokes 1986), and (Benson 2000:ch. 2–4).

employs in practicing his distinctive method shows that Socrates recognizes no relevant epistemic distinction between the premises of his *elenchos* and the apparent refutand. As far as Socrates is concerned the premises and the apparent refutand are equally credible. According to Socrates, they are all - the premises and the apparent refutands - merely the beliefs of the interlocutor. It is for this reason that the *elenchos*[22] can do no more than establish the falsehood of the conjunction of the alleged refutand and the premises of the *elenchos*, i.e., of the conjunction *p & q & r & s*.[23]

The argument that Socrates recognizes no epistemic distinction between the premises of the *elenchos* and the apparent refutand is simple. Let us call it 'The Argument Against Constructivism.'

[1]     The only property Socrates requires that the premises of the *elenchos* have is that they are believed by the interlocutor.[24]

[2]     The property of being believed by the interlocutor is also required of the apparent refutand.[25]

[3]     Consequently, Socrates fails to recognize an epistemic distinction between the premises of the *elenchos* and the apparent refutand; they are equally credible.

[4]     Consequently, Socrates fails to take the falsity of the apparent refutand as established.[26]

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[22]At least an individual elenctic episode. See (Brickhouse and Smith 1994:3–29) for a defense of the view that repeated elenctic episodes may be capable of more constructive results.

[23]Given Socrates' commitment to the view that knowledge entails doxastic coherence (see pp. 000-000 below), Socrates can conclude from the results of an individual elenctic episode that the interlocutor fails to have the knowledge he is reputed to have. But Socrates' ability to draw this conclusion derives not from successfully establishing the truth or falsity of an individual answer, but from sucessfully establishing the interlocutor's doxastic incoherence, i.e., from establishing the falsity of the conjunction.

[24]This premise is similar to the variously named 'say what you believe requirement' ((Vlastos 1994:7)), or 'rule of sincerity' ((Irwin 1993:11)) which has become a common place of Socratic scholarship. See (Beversluis 2000:38 n. 3) for an admirably complete list of scholars who endorse this requirement. More recently, one might add (Bailly 1999:66), (Woolf 2002:242 n. 38), and (Blondell 2002:116). While the 'say what you believe requirement' stipulates that being believed by the interlocutor is a necessary condition for premise acceptability, the first premise in the argument against constructivism adds that this is the *only* requirement for premise acceptability. For a recent argument that the premises are also believed by Socrates see (Wolfsdorf 2003:280–283). He does not show, however, that Socrates thinks he must believe the premises for the *elenchos* to achieve its intended results.

[25]The argument for this premise can be found at (Benson 2000:54–55).

[26]Actually, [1] and [2] only entail that there is no relevant epistemic distinction between the premises of the *elenchos* and the apparent refutand and that the falsity of the alleged refutand is not established. The logic leaves open whether Socrates recognizes these conclusions. In chapter 4 of (Benson 2000) (see also (Benson 1995)) I argue that nothing in the elenctic dialogues requires that Socrates fails to see the force of these conclusions.

The argument may be simple, but the issues surrounding the premises are not.

Scholarly attention has appropriately focused primarily on the first premise - that according to Socrates being believed by the interlocutor is both a necessary and sufficient condition of premise acceptability.  I have previously offered three considerations in its defense.[27]  First, Socrates methodological remarks concerning the premises of his *elenchos* always and only appeal to the beliefs of his interlocutor.  For example, when trying to determine whether the premise that the inexpert well-diver is more courageous than the expert well-diver when each dives into a well should be accepted in the *elenchos* aimed at examining Laches' professed knowledge that courage is wise endurance of the soul, Socrates indicates that it should if and only if Laches believes it (*Laches* 193c6-8).[28]  Second, a careful examination of the actual premises Socrates employs in his elenctic episodes in the Socratic dialogues indicates that the only property they all have in common is that they are all believed by the interlocutor.  Properties like being believed by Socrates,[29] self-evidence,[30] common sense, or the beliefs of the wise[31] are subject to immediate counter-example.  And finally, being believed by the interlocutor is just the right sort of property for Socrates to appeal to given the universality of his elenctic examinations. It is only the property of being believed by the interlocutor that is likely to be available to any interlocutor he happens to meet, young or old, citizen or stranger, who professes to care about truth or knowledge or the care of their soul (*Apology* 29e4-30a4).  Nevertheless, these considerations presuppose a more orthodox and simplistic conception of belief than the text of the Socratic dialogues allows.

At *Gorgias* 474b2-6 Socrates ascribes to Polus[32] the belief that he would prefer to suffer injustice rather than do it, despite Polus' adamant denial that he believes any such thing[33] -

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[27] For a longer version of these three considerations see (Benson 2000:37–55).

[28] See also *Protagoras* 331c1-d1, *Gorgias* 495a7-c3, 499b9-c6, and *Republic* I 349a4-8.

[29] See (Vlastos 1994:1–37) and (Wolfsdorf 2003).

[30] See (Gulley 1968), (Nakhnikian 1971), and perhaps (Santas 1979).

[31] See (Polansky 1985) and (Bolton 1993).

[32] And to everyone else.  I here leave to one side the implications and justification for this additional claim.  See (Brickhouse and Smith 1994:79–82).

indeed, despite Polus' claim to believe, on the contrary, that suffering injustice is worse that doing it. Here Socrates ascribes a belief to Polus that Polus clearly is not disposed to act on nor even thinks that he has.[34] But, then, why does Socrates ascribe such a belief to Polus? The answer seems clear. Polus has other beliefs that he is disposed to act on and/or thinks he has from which the belief that it is preferable to suffer injustice than to do it follows. Socrates is about to show him that this is so. Socrates here includes among Polus' beliefs not only those doxastic phenomena on the basis of which Polus is disposed to act, and which Polus thinks he has,[35] but also those which are deducible (whether Polus recognizes it or not) from those phenomena Polus is disposed to act on or thinks he has. This is a heterodox and expansive conception of belief.[36] It amounts to ascribing to each and every individual an infinite number of beliefs most of which one will never be disposed to act on or recognize one has. On such an expansive conception of belief, however, the first premise of the argument against constructivism cannot stand. Polus' 'belief' that it is preferable to suffer injustice than to do it does not suffice for accepting it as a premise of the *elenchos*. If it did the argument at *Gorgias* 474b-479e would not be necessary. Polus' 'beliefs' are immediately inconsistent. To see what other property for premise acceptability Socrates requires we can turn to another passage often cited against the first premise of the argument against constructivism.

At *Republic* 348d Thrasymachus claims that injustice is virtue and wisdom and justice their opposites (hereafter 'injustice is virtue' for short). Socrates complains that it will be harder than he had anticipated to persuade Thrasymachus that the life of the just person is more profitable than the life of the unjust person, contrary to his expressed belief that the life of the

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[33]*Gorgias* 474b2-6. See also *Gorgias* 482a6-c3.

[34]This rules out both behaviorist accounts of beliefs and straightforward Cartesian transparency accounts. Note that in rejecting the conditional 'if A does not believe that A believes that p, then A does not believe that p', Socrates need not be rejecting the conditional 'if A believes that A believes that p, then A believes that p'.

[35]Socrates does not deny that Polus believes that it is preferable to do injustice than to suffer it. Such a belief ascription is relatively familiar - based on a disposition to act in some way or a self-ascription based on introspection. The familiar idea that beliefs are dispositions or capacities (*dunameis*) to behave in various ways (if only verbally) is suggested at *Laches* (190c6) and elsewhere, while the idea that beliefs can be self-ascribed as a result of introspection is suggested, for example, in the *Charmides* (158e7-159a7).

[36]Vlastos describes beliefs of this sort marginal or covert beliefs; (Vlastos 1994:23).

unjust person is more profitable.[37]  Nevertheless, Socrates asserts, he must pursue the argument as long as Thrasymachus really believes what he has just asserted.  When Thrasymachus replies by asking what difference does it make, whether he believes it or not, Socrates surprisingly responds - "It makes no difference" (349b1).

As I mentioned, this passage is often cited as a violation of the first premise of the argument against constructivism.  Rather than claiming that it is necessary that Thrasymachus believe the premises of the *elenchos*, Socrates appears here to explicitly deny that it matters.  But, despite appearances, this is not what the passage suggests.  Socrates claims that it does not matter whether Thrasymachus believes that injustice is virtue.  But 'injustice is virtue' is not a premise of the *elenchos* from 349b1-350c11.  It is the apparent refutand of this *elenchos*.  Socrates had hoped to use the premise that justice is virtue and wisdom, and injustice its opposite (hereafter 'justice is virtue' for short) in his examination of Thrasymachus' wisdom, viz. in his attempt to persuade Thrasymachus that the just life is more profitable than the unjust life contrary to Thrasymachus' belief that injustice is more profitable.  But Thrasymachus denies believing justice is virtue and instead asserts that injustice is virtue.  Socrates is about to show that Thrasymachus really does believe justice is virtue, whatever else he thinks he believes.  Socrates is about to provide an argument from premises which Thrasymachus recognizes he believes to the belief that justice is virtue (349b1-350c11).  Socrates here employs the expansive conception of belief indicated in the *Gorgias*.  According to Socrates, Thrasymachus believes that justice is virtue, whether he thinks he does or not.[38]  It makes no difference to Socrates whether Thrasymachus really believes that injustice is virtue.  What matters is that he believes justice is virtue.  If he also believes injustice is virtue, then, Socrates will have established an

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[37]See *Republic* 348a-b for this explicit goal.  Given Socrates' praise (however ironic) of Thrasymachus reputed wisdom and his desire to be taught by him at 337d-338b and 344d-e Socrates appears to suggest to Glaucon at 348a-b that they try to persuade Thrasymachus that he also believes that the life of the justice person is profitable as well as that the life of the just person is not profitable in order to examine his reputed wisdom.

[38]We know from the *Gorgias* that his believing that injustice is virtue is no obstacle to his also believing justice is virtue, even though the two propositions are contraries.

inconsistency in Thrasymachus' belief set already by 350d;[39] if he does not, then the subsequent arguments from 350d onwards will.

Notice that rather than serving as evidence that the interlocutor's belief is not necessary for premise acceptability, this exchange indicates that such belief is not sufficient. According to Socrates, Thrasymachus believes that justice is virtue whatever else he believes or thinks he believes at 348e just as Polus believes that suffering injustice is preferable to doing it at *Gorgias* 474b. Thrasymachus' belief that justice is virtue is deducible from other beliefs that Thrasymachus recognizes that he has. Nevertheless, Socrates is unwilling to employ such a belief as a premise in his elenctic argument until he has come to show Thrasymachus the deduction. Not only must the interlocutor believe the premise before it can be employed in a Socratic *elenchos*, but the interlocutor must also recognize that he believes it. This is why Socrates is concerned to determine Thrasymachus' sincerity at 349a. If Thrasymachus is sincere in claiming to believe injustice is virtue and not to believe justice is virtue, then Socrates will need to show Thrasymachus that he also believes justice is virtue, i.e., provide the argument of 349b1-350c11, in order to employ justice is virtue as a premise in the subsequent *elenchos*. If he is not, then the argument is otiose. What is necessary and sufficient for premise acceptability is not simply that Thrasymachus believe justice is virtue, but that he recognize that he believes it.[40]

Now that we have seen the difficulties surrounding the nature of belief involved in the first premise of the Argument Against Constructivism, one immediately wonders about the

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[39]For at least the second time. He had done this previously at 339b-342e.

[40]What is not required, however, is that interlocutor admit that he recognizes that he believes the relevant proposition. Socrates is concerned to make the interlocutor recognize his cognitive incoherence, his ignorance, not to make the audience of the *elenchos* recognize the interlocutor's cognitive incoherence. This may be the point of two other passages that are often cited as violations of the first premise of the argument against constructivism - *Protagoras* 333c2-9 and 352c-d. In the first case Socrates apparently accepts a premise which the many believe, but Protagoras claims not to believe, and in the second case, the apparent refutand is ascribed to the many but Protagoras denies believing it. In both cases Socrates may feel that the deduction from Protagoras' man is the measure doctrine and his belief that the many believe that *p* to *p* is true is too immediate for Protagoras to plausibly fail to recognize it. Consequently, despite Protagoras' denial Socrates feels confident in assuming that Protagoras does indeed recognize that he believes, i.e. is committed to, the premise and the apparent refutand, whatever Protagoras says. Indeed, it is interesting that in both cases it is not so much that Protagoras denies that he believes these propositions than that he would be ashamed to admit them.

nature of belief involved in the second premise. In what sense, one may worry, does the interlocutor genuinely believe the apparent refutand given how quickly he seems to reject it when he sees that it is inconsistent with the other beliefs he recognizes that he has and how quick he is to offer an alternative?[41]

Now we should not over-estimate the speed with which the interlocutors abandon their initial answers. Hippias in the *Hippias Minor*, for example, does not quickly abandon his belief (which serves as the apparent refutand for all of the *elenchoi* in that dialogue) that Achilles and Odysseus are distinct because the former is honest, while the latter is deceitful, nor does Protagoras quickly abandon his belief that courage and wisdom are distinct, the apparent refutand of the last quarter of the *Protagoras*. Moreover, Nicias' defense of his answer that courage is knowledge of fearful and daring things at *Laches* 195a-200c and Critias' defense of his initial answer that temperance is doing one's own thing at *Charmides* 162e-164c both are maintained through multiple *elenchoi*.[42] Nor, can we simply discount the evidence that the interlocutors believe the apparent refutand, given that roughly half of the answers offered to Socratic 'What is F-ness?' questions are explicitly propounded as believed or thought by the interlocutor.[43]

Nevertheless, there is something to this worry. It is doubtful whether at the beginning of the *elenchos* with Laches, for example, that he can be determinately said to believe what courage is. Does he believe that courage is endurance of the soul or does he really believe that it is wise endurance of the soul? According to the expansive concept of belief found in the *Gorgias*, he probably believes that courage is wise endurance of the soul. But he thinks he believes that courage is simply the endurance of the soul and Socrates does not suggest that he does not. In fact, what Laches thinks he believes about the nature of courage is confused, vague, and

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[41]For an explicit statement of this worry see (Brickhouse and Smith 2002:149).

[42]See *Laches* 195a2-196c1, 196c1-197d8, and 197e2-200c2, and *Charmides* 162e7-164d3 and 163e1-164c7.

[43]See *Euthyphro* 9e8-9, 12e5-8, (see also 15e1-2), *Charmides* 159a9-b6, 160e3-5, 160d5-e1, 162e6, *Laches* 192b9-c1, *Meno* 73d9-10, 78c1-2, and *Hippias Major* 288a3-5, and 293e7-8.

indefinite. Indeed, this may explain in general why the interlocutor usually (but not always) abandons or modifies his proposed definition or the apparent refutand.

Moreover, it is unlikely that in the *Charmides*, for example, Charmides is as committed to his third answer to the 'What is temperance?' question as he is to his first. By the time Charmides proffers the answer that temperance is doing one's own business he is grasping at straws. He is giving answers he has heard from others. He is not sure he believes this. He is not even sure he understands what it means as the subsequent discussion with Critias suggests. But he thinks he believes it, and that is sufficient for Socrates.[44] Nevertheless, even if we do understand this last answer as in someone way expressive of Charmides' belief - although in some vague or indefinite way - we cannot deny that this belief is weaker than his belief in the first answer. Not only are the interlocutors' beliefs often confused, vague, and indefinite, they also come in a variety of degrees.

None of this, however, shows that the Argument Against Constructivism fails. What it does show is that the conception of belief employed in the second premise, as also in the first, is too orthodox and simplistic to capture Socrates' practice.[45] The Socratic *elenchos* does not show that Laches, for example, has an inconsistent set of well-formed determinate beliefs all of the same strength concerning courage. Rather, it shows that Laches' doxastic condition concerning courage is confused and indefinite. His beliefs about the nature of courage are not well-formed, determinate, and consistent. But none of this suggests that Socrates requires that the premises of his elenctic episodes must be more determinate or more strongly held than the interlocutor's doxastic commitment to the apparent refutand. All that Socrates requires is that the interlocutor

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[44]I am not here committing Socrates to the principle that if A believes that *p,* then A believes that A believes that *p,* which the Polus passage would appear to violate. Rather, I am committing Socrates to the principle that if A believes that A believes that *p*, then A believes that *p*, which is nowhere violated in the Socratic dialogues to my knowledge, and which is supported by Socrates' commitment to the notion that simply requires the interlocutor to be sincere in answering his questions.

[45]Although it is an open question whether Socrates and/or Plato would have thought it was mistaken. Plato's suggestion that belief is a silent dialogue (*Sophist* 263e and *Theaetetus* 189e-190a) may indicate that he would not. I suspect that the evidence from the Socratic dialogues underdetermines the answer. Nevertheless, this does suggest a valuable research project. See, for example, (Brickhouse and Smith 1994:73–83).

recognizes or is aware of his doxastic commitment (whether directly or through inference). Socrates' common strategy for examining an interlocutor's wisdom is to test his doxastic coherence evidenced by the interlocutor's sincere attempt to answer Socrates' questions according to what he thinks he believes. Doxastic incoherence, however, may not be a result of inconsistent determinate beliefs all of the same strength, but rather a result of indefinite or confused beliefs or acceptances or near beliefs.[46] Evidence of such doxastic incoherence provides no reason to suppose that some allegedly targeted belief is false or that its negation is true. For this we need evidence that Socrates thinks degree of belief or definiteness of belief carries with it some epistemic weight.[47] But no such evidence is to be found.

Of course, a strategy of examining the doxastic coherence of his interlocutors in order to examine their reputed wisdom presupposes a rather robust conception of knowledge or wisdom.[48] Since Socrates repeatedly takes the discovery of doxastic incoherence to reveal the interlocutor's lack of wisdom, he must be presupposing at least that doxastic coherence is a necessary condition of wisdom. Such a robust conception of wisdom is displayed in an additional feature of Socratic method to which we will now turn.

**The *Elenchos* as Definition Testing**

Thus far, we have said nothing (except in passing) of what Aristotle highlights as a central feature of Socrates' characteristic method - his concern with definition.[49] While Plato does not highlight this feature of Socratic method in the *Apology*, he certainly does in other Socratic dialogues. Of the 14 Socratic dialogues, six are primarily definitional: *Euthyphro*, *Charmides*, *Hippias Major*, *Laches*, *Lysis*,[50] and *Republic* I, while three others contain

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[46]For the distinction between belief and acceptance see (Cohen 1992), and for the notion of near or partial beliefs see (Morton 2002:55–80).

[47]Even this would not suffice. We would need evidence that all of the premises of the elenctic episodes are more strongly held or more definite than the interlocutor's commitment to the apparent refutand.

[48]Throughout I have been and will continue to use 'knowledge' (*episteme*), 'wisdom' (*sophia*), and 'expertise' (*techne*) interchangeably following Plato, at least in the Socratic dialogues. See (Benson 2000:10–11).

[49]I here reserve for another time Aristotle's mention of induction (*epagoge*); see briefly (Benson 2000:77 n. 82) and now (McPherran 2004).

[50]There is some dispute about whether the *Lysis* is genuinely definitional. See, for example, (Sedley 1989).

substantial definitional sections: *Protagoras* 312c-314d, *Gorgias* 449a-466a, and *Meno* 71d-79e. After briefly rehearsing the primary adequacy conditions of Socratic definition, I will conclude this essay by discussing the connection between this Socratic concern and his concern to examine the reputed wisdom of those he happens to meet.

Let me begin with a caveat. While it is traditional to discuss this Socratic interest as an interest in definition, we must be careful. Socrates does sometimes use the Greek word for definition (*horimos*) in these dialogues, but it is his fascination and preoccupation with a certain form of question that is noteworthy. The question at issue is the 'What is F-ness?' question where 'F-ness' is a placeholder for something like a property or nature susceptible in principle to multiple instantiations. For example, in the *Laches* Socrates searches for an answer to the 'What is courage?' question, in the *Euthyphro* 'What is piety?', in the *Charmides* 'What is temperance?', in the *Meno* 'What is virtue?', and in the *Protagoras* 'What is a sophist?'. Socrates illustrates his questions with examples like 'What is a bee?', 'What is shape?' and 'What is color?' in the *Meno*, and 'What is swiftness?' in the *Laches*. I mention this primarily to remind us that in describing Socrates' concern here as a concern for definition is to already interpret the text. What the text displays is a fundamental concern with the 'What is F-ness?' question. To describe this concern as a concern for definition is to understand the 'What is F-ness?' question in particular way - a way, indeed, that is potentially misleading.

It is nearly certain that in pursuing his 'What is piety?' question, for example, Socrates is not asking for the meaning of the word 'piety' (or better the meaning of the word *hosiotes*). He is certainly not asking a question that could be answered by using a dictionary. He is asking the same sort of question that scientists ask when they ask 'What is water?' and discover that the answer 'Water is $H_2O$'. We might put this point by maintaining that in asking his 'What is F-ness?' question Socrates is after a real definition as opposed to a nominal definition,[51] but it might be less anachronistic to maintain that Socrates is after the essence or essential nature.

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[51]See (Locke 1961:3.3) and, for example, (Fine 1992:202).

Socrates himself explains that in asking the 'What is piety?' question, for example, he is seeking "the form itself by which all the pious things are pious." In asking his 'What is F-ness?' question, Socrates is after what makes F things F. He is seeking what explains why pious actions are pious.

In addition to this explanatory requirement, Socrates requires that answers to his 'What is F-ness?' question be co-extensive with F-things. Socrates puts this by maintaining that answers to his 'What is F-ness?' question must be in (*Meno* 73a1-3), through (*Meno* 74a9), common to (*Meno* 73d1), over (*Meno* 75a4-5), or had (*Meno* 72c6-d1) by all and only F-things. For example, Socrates objects to Euthyphro's answer that piety is prosecuting the wrong doer on the grounds that according to Euthyphro prosecuting the wrong-doer is not common to all pious actions. On the other hand, he objects to Gorgias' answer that rhetoric is the craft that uses speech on the grounds that this does not belong to only rhetoricians.

Finally, Socrates indicates that an answer to his 'What is F-ness?' question must be 'what is called F-ness in all and only F things'. For example, in explaining his 'What is courage?' question to Laches in the *Laches*, Socrates explains that in asking 'What is swiftness?' he is asking for what is called swiftness in all and only swift things (192a9-10). With this condition we have come nearly full circle. Some commentators take this condition to indicate Socrates' concern with meanings, while others maintain that this so-called semantic condition is compatible with a Socratic concern with so-called real definitions. However this last dispute is to be resolved we can conclude this brief excursion into the nature of Socratic definition by maintaining that according to Socrates an adequate answer to his 'What is F-ness?' question must appeal to what is called F-ness in all and only F things, what belongs to all and only F-things, and what makes F-things F.[52]

With this account of Socratic definition in hand one might wonder what motivates Socrates concern with definition. Why does Socrates devote so much time to seeking answers to

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[52]For a more sustained discussion of the nature of Socratic definition see (Benson 2000:99–111). See also (Vlastos 1981) and (Wolfsdorf 2003).

his 'What is F-ness?' questions from his interlocutors?  It was once a commonplace to answer this question in part by appealing to Socrates' belief that definitional knowledge, i.e. knowledge of the answer to a Socratic 'What is F-ness?' question, was prior to knowledge of anything else about F-ness.[53]  Thus, Euthyphro cannot accurately claim to know that prosecuting his father for murder is pious, if he fails to know what piety is, nor can Meno claim to know that virtue is teachable, if he fails to know what virtue is.  In the Socratic dialogues, Socrates tests his interlocutor's reputed wisdom by asking them the relevant 'What is F-ness?' question and our earlier examination of the elenctic method indicates that Socrates takes a minimal condition of the interlocutor's knowledge of the answer to such a question to be the interlocutor's doxastic coherence.  If Hippias, for example, is to maintain his reputation for wisdom concerning fine speeches and activities, he must at least maintain his doxastic coherence in the course of an elenctic test of his knowledge of what fine-ness is.

In recent decades, however, a variety of objections have arisen against attributing this view of the priority of definitional knowledge to Socrates in the Socratic dialogues.  It will not be my purpose in the few pages remaining in this essay to fully respond to these objections nor to otherwise defend this attribution.  Rather, I will turn to the objection which I take to lie at the heart of the others and suggest a response that integrates nicely with the account of Socratic method I have been developing.

Most of the objections to attributing the priority of definitional knowledge to Socrates in the Socratic dialogues fall roughly into two groups - first, it is objected that there is no compelling textual evidence for attributing to Socrates such a priority view,[54] and second, it is objected that there is good textual evidence against attributing this view to Socrates.[55]  But at the heart of these first two sorts of objections lies a third objection that the priority of definitional

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[53]See (Robinson 1953:51) who for a long time got away with the claim that the dialogues gave the 'vague impression' that Socrates was so committed.  We might put the priority of definitional knowledge as follows 'If A fails to know what F-ness is, then A fails to know, for any x, that x is F, or for any G, that F-ness is G.'
[54]See (Beversluis 1987:215), (Lesher 1987:285), and (Nehamas 1986:278–291).
[55]See (Nehamas 1986:292), (Woodruff 1987:22), and (Vlastos 1994:74).

knowledge is false.  It is simply too implausible to be attributed to the likes of Socrates.[56]  The

implausibility of the view is familiar from Wittgenstein (among others).[57]  As Peter Geach

succinctly put it in a classic piece:  "We know heaps of things without being able to define the

terms in which we express our knowledge."[58]  It is this implausibility objection that motivates

the other two.  If Wittgenstein and Geach are correct, we should expect virtually incontrovertible

evidence before attributing the likes of this view to Socrates.   Moreover, any textual evidence

however slight, will suffice to keep from attributing to Socrates a view so obviously implausible.

The bottom line is that if Wittgenstein and Geach are correct, we can no longer rest content with

Robinson's judgment that the Socratic dialogues give the 'vague impression' that Socrates is

committed to the priority of definitional knowledge.

Now, of course, not everyone has opted for this kind of response to the implausibility

objection.  Neither Geach nor Wittgenstein took the implausibility of the view to be a reason for

denying that Socrates held it.  Rather they blamed Socrates for this 'style of mistaken thinking'

which according to Geach, at least, was more influential in the course of post-Platonic

philosophy even than Plato's theory of Forms.  Moreover, a rather powerful best explanation

argument supports attributing this view to Socrates.  While it is true that Socrates never states his

commitment to the priority of definitional knowledge explicitly and in full generality and while

there are hints in the text that can be understand as arguing against his commitment, when all of

the passages are put alongside one another interpretations seeking to avoid such a Socratic

commitment begin to look *ad hoc*, partial, and forced.  Attributing to Socrates the fully general

priority of definitional knowledge view begins to look like the best explanation of the variety of

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[56]All three of these objections are plausible and have been powerfully defended, but they should not carry the day.
For a sustained rebuttal to the first two sorts of objections in particular, see (Benson 2000:112–141).  A fourth objec-
tion maintains that the priority of definitional knowledge is incompatible with Socrates' repeated professions of ig-
norance of answers to 'What is F-ness?' questions and his infrequent professions to know various things.  For a re-
sponse to this objection see (Benson 2000:223–238), (Wolfsdorf 2004), and (Wolfsdorf 2004).
[57]See (Wittgenstein 1965:19–20) and (Wittgenstein 1958:section 70).  See also (Moore 1962:225).
[58] (Geach 1966:371).

texts.[59]  Consequently, rather than appealing to charity to force a variety of apparently *ad hoc*, partial, and gerrymandered attributions, we would do better to let charity force us to re-evaluate the implausibility of the priority view.[60]

Wittgenstein, Geach, et al. object to the priority of definitional knowledge on the grounds that we know - in the ordinary or justified true belief sense of know - 'heaps of things' about F-ness without knowing what F-ness is.  But given the frequency of passages which can be explained by appeal to the priority of definitional knowledge charity might lead one to question whether the knowledge employed in the view is knowledge in the ordinary sense.  Rather than thinking that the view implies that one cannot know in the ordinary sense anything else about F-ness prior to knowing what F-ness is, we might be more charitable to Socrates to think that he does not have the ordinary sense of knowledge in mind.  What the attribution of the priority of definitional knowledge to Socrates indicates is not that he is committed to an implausible view, but that he is committed to a stronger conception of knowledge than the ordinary one.  Socrates might agree with Wittgenstein, Geach, et al., that we can know in the ordinary sense - insofar as Socrates would recognize such a sense of knowledge[61] - heaps of things about F-ness prior to knowing what F-ness is.  But Socrates' appeal to the priority of definitional knowledge indicates that he has little - if any - interest in such a sense of knowledge.  He is interested in a stronger, more robust sense of knowledge and it is that sort of knowledge that one cannot have about anything about F-ness prior to knowing what F-ness is.  Indeed, finding Socrates committed to such a sense of knowledge should not surprise us in light of everything else we have learned about the Socratic method in this essay.  We should remember that Socrates' characteristic method is motivated by his recognition of his lack of knowledge of 'heaps of things' and his desire to rectify that ignorance by examining the knowledge claims of others.  Moreover, we

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[59]For a longer more complete defense of this inference to the best explanation see (Benson 1990:19–44).  For the most sustained rebuttal to this defense see (Brickhouse and Smith 1994:45–54).
[60]For other responses see (Prior 1998) and (Wolfsdorf 2004).
[61]See 'elenctic knowledge' in (Vlastos 1994:39–66).

should remember that his method of rectifying that ignorance, i.e. learning from those whose knowledge claims are confirmed, is foiled by his utter failure to confirm the knowledge claims of those he examines. Finally, we should remember that his method of examining those knowledge claims depends upon examining the doxastic coherence of the one whose knowledge is being examined, and when the individual's beliefs are found to be doxastically incoherent Socrates concludes that he lacks the knowledge he claims to have. Such a condition on knowledge is hardly ordinary, and suggests a robust conception. Consequently, Socrates' concern with definition so understood fits nicely with rest of his characteristic method.

**Conclusion**

In this essay, I have maintained that in the elenctic dialogues Plato presents us with a coherent and distinctive Socratic method. It is not the only method that Socrates practices in those dialogues, though it does tend to predominate. It is the method that Socrates takes to lead to his trial and eventual execution and, consequently, a method that he takes to be distinctive of, but not unique to, himself. Further, it is the method by which he seeks to examine the robust knowledge claims of those reputed to be wise. He does this for two reasons. First, he aims to encourage these individuals to seek the robust knowledge they lack, if indeed they are found to lack it. Second, he aims to acquire the knowledge he lacks from them, if they are found to have it. Finally, he examines the robust knowledge of these individuals by testing their doxastic coherence through a series of questions often beginning with his notorious 'What is F-ness?' question. Such an account of Socrates' characteristic method is coherent and plausible when properly understood. Such an account is the Socratic *elenchos*.

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