

DAVID ROOCHNIK

IN DEFENSE OF *DOXA*: REFLECTIONS
ON PLATO'S *CHARMIDES*

Anyone so foolish as to doubt that Plato is a superbly playful writer should read Fogelman and Hutchinson's essay «Seventeen Subtleties in Plato's *Theaetetus*». The authors show that in the image of the wax block used by Socrates to explain the nature of false «opinion» or «judgment» (δόξα) Plato tells a little joke. He has Socrates enumerate seventeen cases in which a perception of X or Y might connect or fail to connect with previous impressions of X or Y stored in the memory. So, for example, someone may have a memory of (and thereby «know») X and Y, but perceive neither of them. In this case, the false judgment that X is Y or vice versa is impossible. By contrast, someone may know X and Y but perceive only Y. In this case, she may well falsely judge that Y is X. While this enumeration hardly explains the nature of false judgment it at least provides an instance of it, and thereby demonstrates (against Protagoras) that it is possible.

Fogelman and Hutchinson show that Socrates' enumeration of these seventeen cases is both «peculiar» and «incomplete». It is not necessary to rehearse the details of their analysis, for what is relevant here is only their account of why Socrates' procedure is so flawed. They deny that it is due to «carelessness or sloth» on Plato's part [Fogelman & Hutchinson 1990, 304]. Instead, they demonstrate that Plato carefully constructs this passage in order to hark back to an earlier moment in the dialogue in which Theaetetus described his teacher Theodorus' mathematical work.

Theodorus here was drawing some figures for us in illustration of roots, showing that squares containing three square feet and five square feet are not commensurable in length with the unit of the foot, and so, selecting each in its turn up to the square

containing seventeen square feet; and at that he stopped (*Tht.* 147d3-6).¹

As Heath explains, «Theodorus proved the irrationality of $\sqrt{3}$, 5 ... up to $\sqrt{17}$. It does not appear, however, that he had reached any definition of a surd in general or proved any general proposition about all surds». By contrast, «because the number of the surds appears infinite», Theaetetus was impelled to «attempt to collect them into one» (*Tht.* 147d8). In other words, Theaetetus engaged in a far more advanced theoretical project than his teacher. Again citing Heath, (the historical) Theaetetus succeeded in realizing his ambition, for he «generalized the theory of irrationals on lines», and thereby contributed to the composition of Book X of Euclid's *Elements* [Heath 1981, 203]. In sum, compared to his student, Theodorus is a plodder who, rather than attempting a genuinely theoretical enterprise that aims for universality, operates in a mechanical, case-by-case fashion. Fogelman and Hutchinson convincingly argue that Plato contrives the flawed enumeration of the seventeen cases in order to echo, and subtly mock, Theodorus' work. «The alert reader», they say, «will be reminded of the earlier passage, where Theodorus conducted his investigation by enumeration of 17 cases, and will be prompted to take this passage as an example of the same procedure» [Fogelman & Hutchinson 1990, 305].

Another example of Plato's numerical playfulness occurs at the beginning of the *Phaedo*. Here we learn that Socrates' execution has been delayed because of the ritualistic sailing of a ship to the island of Delos to commemorate the occasion when Theseus went to Crete with «fourteen youths and saved them and himself» (*Phd.* 58a11-b1). Not coincidentally, fourteen men are named as being present in Socrates' cell. As several commentators have noted, this parallel suggests that «Socrates is the new, philosophic Theseus» whose arguments are designed to «save» his fourteen (named) companions [Brann & Kalkavage 1998, 3].

Another instance of such numerical playfulness is Plato's frequent use of the mean or middle position in a list, or even in a whole dialogue, in order to give special emphasis. In the *Apology*, for example, both the

¹ All translations of Plato are my own.

first and the last sentences contain a Socratic declaration of ignorance (οὐκ οἶδα at 17a2 and ἄδηλον παντὶ πλὴν ἢ τῷ θεῷ at 42a5), while the middle sentence has him making a strong claim to knowledge (οἶδα at 29b7). In the *Republic*, discussion of the Idea of the Good occurs (roughly) in the central section of the dialogue (505a-509a), as does the digression on the nature of the philosopher in the *Theaetetus* (172d-175e).

While no great philosophical or exegetical content can be extracted from these sorts of number-plays on their own, they do serve as leads that are worth pursuing. Thus in the case of the flawed enumeration in the *Theaetetus* Plato is no doubt reminding the reader that rather than providing lists of examples in answer to the «what is it?» question, philosophers should emulate Theaetetus and attempt to forge a singular and universally applicable definition. And surely the most urgent question raised by the *Apology* is how to reconcile Socrates' denial that he is wise with his strong claim to knowing «the greatest good for a human being» (*Ap.* 38a2). In both cases, then, the number-play should be treated as a serious provocation.

This paper pursues such a lead in the *Charmides*. It concerns the philosophical significance and value of *doxa*. While debunked in the *Republic* (see 480a), and damned with faint praise in the *Meno* (99a-100b), *doxa* plays a surprisingly positive, even privileged, role in this dialogue, one that is signaled by the number-play shortly to be discussed. Before doing so, the context of its appearance must be established.

The question that triggers the *Charmides* is, what is «temperance» (σωφροσύνη)?» (*Chrm.* 158a10). After a series of failed attempts at definition, Critias suggests that «temperance is knowing oneself (τὸ γινώσκειν ἑαυτόν)» (164d4). For support he appeals to the inscription at Delphi, «Know yourself (Γνῶθι σαυτόν)» (164d7), which he equates with the imperative, «Be temperate (Σωφρόνει)» (164e7). The subsequent portion of the dialogue is then devoted to examining the question of self-knowledge.

Soon after proposing his definition of «knowing oneself», Critias reformulates it: self-knowledge becomes «knowledge of the other knowledges and is itself of itself».² He has made two substitutions.

² Tuckey [1951], 57-59 provides an extensive discussion of this problem.

First he replaced τὸ γινώσκειν, whose base meaning is «recognize» or «become familiar with», and is regularly used to signify knowing or recognizing another person, with ἐπιστήμη, often translated as «science».³ In the *Charmides* (and several other dialogues) ἐπιστήμη is used interchangeably with τέχνη – often translated as «art» – and finds its key examples in «sciences» such as calculation and geometry, as well as productive forms of knowledge like building and weaving (see 165d4-e8.). Second, Critias substituted «itself (ἑαυτῆς)», whose antecedent is ἐπιστήμη, for «oneself (ἑαυτόν)». As a result, he transformed the potentially quite personal and introspective sense of knowing oneself into a more abstract, or epistemological, conception in which knowledge knows itself.⁴

This move could conceivably be justified, but only if the human self were deemed to be essentially a knower. But this is questionable, for in making this move Critias seems to substitute a segment of human selfhood, namely knowing, for the whole. After all, one might suggest (as Socrates himself later seems to do) that being-a-self includes engaging in activities such as perception, desiring, wishing, loving, fearing, and opining (see 167c7-168a4). If this is the case, then knowledge of knowledge would be too narrow to do the job.

For the moment, however, follow Socrates' lead and suppress this question. Grant to Critias that knowing oneself is equivalent to knowledge of knowledge. Unfortunately, far from making the task of uncovering the nature of self-knowledge any easier, this equivalence only causes headaches. This is because knowledge of knowledge seems at odds with the conceptual structure that characterizes other forms of knowledge. Socrates elaborates by explaining that the salient feature of knowledge is the fact that it has an object other than itself. This holds whether the knowledge is productive, like housebuilding – whose object is houses and not housebuilding (165e7) – or theoretical, like calculation, whose object is the odd and the even (166a6). By contrast, knowledge

³ Hyland [1981], 96-102 thoroughly analyzes this substitution. See Snell [1976], 20-39 for a discussion of the meaning of γινώσκειν.

⁴ And, as Socrates characteristically adds, also of the «absence of knowledge»: see 166e7. The substitution of “itself” for “oneself” is much discussed in the literature. See Tuckey [1951], 42-49 and McKim [1985], 61-62.

of knowledge has itself as its own object. Unlike ordinary forms of knowledge, it is self-reflexive.

Socrates next challenges the very plausibility of epistemic self-reflexivity by adducing a list of relations, which, he seems to imply, is representative of the self in action, including the act of knowing. All are intentionally directed at an object other than themselves, and so none of them, it seems, is self-reflexive. For example, vision, the first item on the list, is of a visible object (that which has “color”) and not of vision. Hearing is not of hearing, but of sound. The list (167c7-168a8) runs thus:

Activity of the self	Object of the activity
1. Vision	the visible (\neq vision).
2. Hearing	sound (\neq hearing).
Generalization to «all senses» (167d7).	
3. Desire	pleasure (\neq desire).
4. Wish	good (\neq wish).
5. Love	beautiful (\neq love).
6. Fear	the terrible (\neq fear).
7. <i>Opinion (doxa)</i>	? (\neq <i>opinion</i>).
8. Knowledge	branch of learning (μαθήμα) (\neq knowledge). ⁵

From these examples Socrates infers the following: «Wouldn't it be absurd (ἄτοπον) if there is [a kind of knowledge that is not of some branch of learning but is of itself and the other forms of knowledge]?» (168a10). He resists being dogmatic here, for he quickly adds, «However, we should not yet be confident that there isn't, but instead should investigate whether there is» (168a10-11). In other words, he leaves open the possibility of there being this sort of knowledge, this sort of self-reflexive psychological relation.

Socrates explains further what these relations have in common, and in so doing prepares to add five more items. Knowledge, he says, «has the capacity (δύναμις) to be of something (τινός)» (168b3). In a similar

⁵ «Branch of learning» is Sprague's translation of μαθήματος. Sprague [1992], 24.

fashion, «the greater», he says, «has just this capacity, namely to be greater than something (τινός)» (168b6). Here Socrates trades on two of the several senses of the Greek genitive. The first is the partitive, which «may denote a whole, a part of which is denoted by the noun it limits» [Smyth 1963, 315]. For example, calculation is knowledge of the odd and even. The second is the genitive of comparison, which «denotes that with which anything is compared» [Smyth 1963, 330]. So, for example, X is greater than Y. Where English uses two different prepositions, «of» and «than», Plato can retain the same pronoun (τινός) in the genitive. Even so, with this move Socrates conflates two different kinds of relations, namely intentionally directed psychological acts and quantitative comparisons like being greater than. Again, cut Socrates some slack here and proceed to the next five items.⁶

- | | |
|-------------|--------------------------------------|
| 9. Greater | greater than the less (≠ greater). |
| 10. Double | double than the half (≠ double). |
| 11. More | more than the less (≠ more). |
| 12. Heavier | eavier than the lighter (≠ heavier). |
| 13. Older | older than the younger (≠ younger). |

About these five quantitative relations Socrates is dogmatic: «when it comes to magnitude and plurality these sorts [of self-reflexive relations] are absolutely impossible» (168e6). After all, if the greater were greater than itself, it would also be less than itself, which is impossible. When it comes to the first eight, however, he announces that «a great man is needed» (169a3) to perform the proper division that would determine which of the non-quantitative relations could possibly be self-reflexive and which not.⁷ Socrates confesses that he himself is not up to the job.

Such self-doubt is warranted. To explain why, consider these

⁶ Sprague [1992, 83] cuts Socrates too much slack when she says that «the expression translated as ‘greater than’ is, literally, ‘greater of’». Also, see *Republic* 438b-d for a comparable discussion of relations that are τινός.

⁷ Here Socrates adds two more items to the list: motion moving itself and heat burning itself (168e9-10). Note that the former is the definition of the soul found in the *Phaedrus*.

two scenarios: (1) I have a job interview scheduled for tomorrow. Remembering my emotional state in past performances, I may today become fearful that tomorrow I will become afraid and perform badly. It seems possible, in other words, to fear fear. (2) I am writing an epistemology textbook and have a chapter in it titled «What Are Opinions?» Since I am not terribly dogmatic, I have consistently claimed that my chapters reflect only my own opinion. It seems that I have formulated an opinion of opinion.

If it is possible to fear fear, then presumably the fear that is feared must have the same characteristic as do all other objects of fear: it must be «terrible» (δεινόν: 168a1). To cite the example Socrates uses to illustrate his general point: if «hearing itself were to hear itself, it would hear itself insofar as it has sound» (168d6-7). The reason why a «great man» is needed to figure out which of the first eight relations are properly self-reflexive is that in each case it must be determined whether the psychological activity can take on the same quality as its standard object. Vision and hearing cannot, for while I can see my eye, seeing itself does not have color and so cannot be seen. (Although I may well somehow see that I see.) As suggested above, however, each of the subsequent six examples is more complicated. To reiterate, it may be possible to fear fear. If so, then the fear that is feared would have take on the standard quality of a fearful object; namely, being terrible.

The first eight items on Socrates' list constitute a catalogue of psychological activities. We share with other animals the capacity for sense perception and the desire for pleasure. We have a rational imagination that allows us to wish for what we believe will be good, and we fall in love with someone we take to be beautiful. We suffer emotions like fear, formulate opinions, and perhaps even know a thing or two. In other words, fully comprehending all the items on the list, and determining which are self-reflexive and which not, might actually constitute self- knowledge.

We now approach the numeric clue discussed above. For two playfully serious reasons, the seventh of the thirteen items, *doxa* («opinion» or «belief»), is especially noteworthy. First, it is in the middle position. Second, unlike the other twelve entries, no object of *doxa* is identified. Instead, about it Socrates only says this: «have you

ever observed an opinion that is an opinion of opinions and of itself and does not opine any of the objects (ὄν) of which the other opinions opine (δοξάζουσιν)?» (168a3-5). The answer is negative, but no further information is offered on what the object of an opinion might be. Perhaps this is because it has the same object as knowledge; namely, a branch of learning (μαθήμα). Even if this were so (a notion denied at *Republic* 478b-e), in the context formed by the other items on the list, the absence of an object of opinion is striking.

To defend the hypothesis that the numerical structure of this list is a device meant to draw the reader's attention to the item in the middle, consider an earlier passage. When Socrates first began his examination of Charmides he said this to the boy:

If temperance is present in you, you will be able to form some opinion (δοξάζειν) about it. For surely it is necessary that, if it is present, it will provide you with some awareness (αἴσθησις) on the basis of which you would have an opinion (δόξα) about what temperance is, and what sort of thing it is. Or don't you think so? I do think so, Charmides replied.

And, I said, do you also think this? Since you know how to speak Greek, surely you would be able to say how it appears to you (158e7-159a7).

With these remarks Socrates proposes the following sequence: presence of temperance within→awareness→opinion formation→articulation of the opinion. This scheme, with “→” symbolizing «provides the conditions for», suggests that epistemic access to temperance is available (to those who possess it) through some mode of introspection. To formulate an opinion about what temperance is one must first look within and examine one's own internal awareness of it. Without delving into what exactly «awareness» means – Hyland [1981, 45-55] does this well – I shall next show how Socrates' scheme sets the stage for the dramatic exchange that shortly ensues between Charmides and himself, and in so doing offers an important clue about how the question of self-knowledge is treated in this dialogue.

Charmides' first attempt to express his opinion – to answer the question, what is temperance? – is «a kind of quietness» (159b5).

Socrates praises him for «speaking well» (159b7). By this he does not mean that Charmides is right. Indeed, he refutes the answer rather easily in the lines that follow. Again without going into details, which Schmid [1998, 22-27] does well, suffice it to say here that this definition only reports an observation of what is at best a behavioral feature of a person typically counted as temperate. In other words, while it may be true that many of those who are temperate act quietly, quietness is, for the reasons Socrates elicits, inadequate as a definition of temperance. Nonetheless, his praise of the boy here is sincere, for Charmides has abided by the rules implied by the scheme Socrates introduced. He examined his own «awareness», his own beliefs about those who are temperate. He stayed within the horizon of his own *doxa*.

Socrates next exhorts the boy to do better by saying, «Once again, Charmides, apply your mind and look into yourself (εἰς σεαυτὸν ἐμβλέψαζ). Speak well and courageously (ἀνδρείως) and tell us what temperance seems to you to be» (160d5-e1). This time the boy answers that «temperance is modesty (αἰδώς)» (160e4).⁸ Again, Socrates refutes Charmides' proposal, this time merely by citing a single line from Homer: «modesty is not good for a man in need» (161a4). If Homer is to be trusted, then, because temperance is counted as a good, modesty is the wrong answer.⁹

Finally comes the dramatic moment promised above. Having twice been refuted, Charmides offers a third definition. «I just now remember something that I heard from someone else; namely, that temperance is 'minding one's own business' (τὸ τὰ ἑαυτοῦ πράττειν). So examine whether it seems to you that the one who said this is speaking correctly». Socrates replies: «You bastard (μιαρέ)! You heard this from Critias here, or some other wise man» (161b4-c1).

⁸ «*Aidōs* acts as a forerunner to *sophrosyne* in epic poetry. What the classical *sophrosyne* shares with the Homeric *aidōs* is chiefly a fear of overstepping boundaries. It is for this reason that both can restrain *hybris*, the arrogant violation of limits set by the gods or by human society» [North 1996, 6].

⁹ Plato smuggles in a slick kind of pragmatic consistency here. *Aidōs* understood as modesty especially requires young people to defer to authority figures. And here he has Charmides defer to Homer's authority, and thereby manifest the very quality he has just proposed.

Socrates' denunciation of Charmides here is so strong – the Greek word he uses literally means «polluter» – because the moment the boy, in the hope of saying something impressive, quotes Critias, he has ceased to «look into himself». He has failed to generate an opinion that takes its bearings from his own «awareness» of what lies within himself. Instead of honestly examining himself, he opts to sound like a sophisticated intellectual. If the presence of temperance leads to an awareness of it, and if this leads to the capacity to formulate an opinion of what it is, then he has squandered his opportunity to understand not only the temperance within himself, but himself as such.

Socrates' vehement response to the boy's quotation of Critias reinforces the contention that earlier he was sincere in praising Charmides for speaking well on his first attempt, even though his answer was wrong. There the boy had looked inside of himself, had examined images of those he took to be temperate men, and then had generalized to «quietness». However inadequate as a philosophical definition, this was actually a sensible representation of a traditional view about temperance. It was, at least, an honest effort to think about the question. Even better was his second venture, «modesty», for with this answer Charmides had nicely improved upon his first. Schmid explains:

The quality of moderation cannot be determined at the level of behavior alone. It must be found at another level. But what might be more appropriate than the quality within the person, which would cause him to behave on his own in a manner that is regarded as moderate? [...] [and this is modesty] [Schmid 1998, 25].

In short, Charmides was making progress. But on his third attempt he fouled up. He looked away from himself and towards Critias (ἀπέβλεπεν: 162b11). As a result, he relinquished his access to the temperance present within him. Indeed, he may have revealed that it was not there in the first place. For surely, in having him do this, Plato was reminding his Athenian readers of what they all would have known about Charmides' later career: he joined forces with the Tyranny of the Thirty, became entirely corrupted by Critias, and died at his side fighting against the democrats in 403. (See the entry for Charmides in Nails [2002].)

Recall that after the first refutation Socrates had exhorted the boy not only to look within himself but also to speak «courageously». We now know why. The temptation to sound good, to quote or imitate or be guided by the leading scholars in the field, is powerful. As such, it takes courage to remain resolutely within the horizon of one's own *doxa*. While this word is commonly translated as «belief» or «opinion» its meaning can be broadened considerably, if awkwardly, to «how the world appears or seems». Indeed, as in the text of Parmenides, it can come close to meaning «ordinary experience».¹⁰ It takes courage to take one's bearings from an examination of one's own experience of the world rather than from pre-packaged notions borrowed from external sources. It is precisely this courage that both Charmides and Critias, two future tyrants, lack. In fact, when he substituted «knowledge of knowledge» for «knowledge of oneself», the latter already revealed this deficiency in his character. He has no interest in knowing himself or genuine introspection. Instead, by formulating the sophisticated notion of knowledge of knowledge he shows himself to be an «ambitious» (φιλοτιμῶς: 162c2) man eager only to impress his audience.

To reinforce these observations, consider the *Meno*. In order to «show» (ἔνδειξαι: 82a6) Meno – a historical figure said to be a «totally unscrupulous man, eager above all to accumulate wealth» [Klein 1965, 36] – that because the soul «has seen all things, and there is nothing that it has not learned [...] it is able to recollect that which it knew before» (81c7-9), Socrates summons a slave. He asks the boy a series of questions about the various squares he has sketched in the sand, and from the responses he finally elicits the correct answer to the question, what is the length of the side of a square whose area is 8? After the boy successfully arrives at the solution, Socrates asks Meno whether any of his answers were not «his own opinion» (δόξαν...αὐτοῦ: 85b8). No, Meno responds, they were all his. Since it had been established that the boy did not know geometry before the exercise, and that Socrates only asked him questions and did not teach him, Socrates infers that «these opinions were present (ἐνῆσαν) in him» (85c4), and that the slave did no more than recollect them.

¹⁰ For example, βροτῶν δόξας, «opinions of mortals», at I.30 means much the same as ἔθος πολύπειρον, «much-experienced habit», at VII.3. See Diels and Kranz 1964.

The nature and import of Socrates' questions, and thus the implications of this exercise for a theory of knowledge acquisition, are problematic. What matters here is only that the slave boy functions as a perfect foil to Meno. The latter refuses to remain within the horizon of his own *doxa*, to look into or think for himself. He enjoys quoting others (such as Gorgias at 73d) and is willing to accept a sophisticated or «theatrical» (τραγική: 76e3) formulation, such as «color is the effluvium of shapes that are commensurate with vision and is perceptible» (76d4), even if he does not have a clue what it means. He is a man eager to impress others, and thus continually in flight from himself. By contrast, the slave tries hard to come up with the right answer on his own. When, for example, he is asked what is the length of the side of a square whose area is double the area of the original square (whose length was 2 and area 4), he responds, «it is clear, Socrates, that it will be double» (82e2). What seems clear to the boy is not the right answer, since a square whose side is 4 generates an area of 16 rather than 8. Instead, what is clear to him is his own *doxa*. Because he is ignorant of geometry the answer he proposes appears before his (mental) eyes as clearly as the statement $2 \times 2 = 4$. He is wrong, but he is thinking for himself. He does the same when he realizes that the desired length of the square whose area is 8 must be more than 2 but less than 4, and so answers 3. For someone ignorant not only of irrational numbers, but also of fractions, this is a reasonable response. Finally, when Socrates shows him that 3 is incorrect, the slave realizes that he does not know how to solve the problem and says, «By Zeus, Socrates, I do not know» (84a2). The boy is excited. Like Socrates, he is not only willing to acknowledge his own perplexity, but seems energized by it. He is, as a result, poised to learn. By awful contrast, Meno conceives of perplexity as paralysis. (See 80a.) He wants Socrates to spoon-feed him the right answers, which he can then take home with him and recite to others. In having Meno distance himself from his own *doxa* Plato is showing the reader the fundamental defect of his character. He lacks the «courage» (81d4) that is required to look within and to remain resolutely within the horizon of his own thought.

The recollection thesis of the *Meno* parallels the scheme Socrates provides in the *Charmides*. In the latter, he says that the presence of

temperance within leads to awareness, which makes possible opinion formation and articulation, and which in turn provides the possibility of attaining knowledge. In the *Meno*, Socrates says because there is nothing that the soul has not learned, «it is able to recollect that which it knew before» (81c9). As a result, all inquiry that looks within and remains intent on honestly trying to think within the horizons of one's own *doxa*, all attempts to grapple with «what is it?» questions, are rendered potentially fruitful. Whether either the *Charmides*' scheme or recollection are true is, of course, another question entirely. But this much is clear: if they are true, then human beings both can and should examine their own *doxa* in order to learn (or recollect). Socrates makes precisely this point upon concluding his questioning of the slave in the *Meno*:

I am not entirely confident about my argument concerning everything else, but that in believing that we must inquire about that which we do not know we will be better and more courageous and less idle than if we believe that what we do not know we are unable to investigate and so should not seek, on behalf of this notion I will battle in both word and deed as hard as I can (86b6-c2).

In other words, while the evidentiary status of the slave boy episode, and thus the truth of recollection, is questionable, Socrates has no doubt that believing in recollection has salutary practical consequences. Meno would be a better man were he to introspect and plunge into his own *doxa* in search of knowledge even if, at the end of the inquiry, he ends up in perplexity. The same is true in spades for the two tyrants, Critias and Charmides.

Back to the *Charmides*: the eighth item on Socrates' list, knowledge, raises the question, is epistemic reflexivity, and hence self-knowledge, possible? The following sketches the arguments that lead Socrates to conclude that the conceptual problems surrounding this question are daunting.

In order for knowledge to know itself, it must become an epistemic object; a «branch of learning». To illustrate the difficulties that Socrates has in mind here (and ignoring the many arguments to the contrary),

assume that knowledge is reasonably defined as “justified true belief”, a definition that Socrates comes close to proposing in both the *Theaetetus* («true opinion with a rational account»: 201c9) and the *Meno* (98a). If this definition were true (and if one could justify it), then the one asserting it would qualify as having knowledge of knowledge. Unfortunately, even if this is granted, knowledge of knowledge is shown to be vacuous, a critique that Socrates develops while exploring the question of its possible benefits. (The assumption that temperance as self-knowledge is beneficial has been in place for most of the dialogue. See 163c4, 164b7, and 164b6.)

Although Socrates maintains that the possibility of epistemic self-reflexivity is dim, he still «intuits» that «temperance is something beneficial and good (ὠφέλιμόν τι καὶ ἀγαθόν)» (169b4). In fact, he even has a dream about it. Imagine a world, he suggests, in which temperance – understood as knowledge of knowledge – ruled. It would be epistemically efficient to the highest degree. No one, for example, would get away with falsely claiming to be a ship’s pilot or a physician or a general. Instead, with knowledge of knowledge at the helm, everyone would be allowed to undertake only those tasks they could perform knowledgeably. There would be no fraud, pretense, or deception. (See 173a7-d3.)

Unfortunately, Socrates does not allow us to enjoy this dream for very long. Assume that I know knowledge – that is, I know and can say what it is – and that you profess to be a physician who has studied medical science. You then tell me that a healthy pulse for an adult is between 60 and 100 beats per minute. Simply as knower-of-knowledge I cannot determine whether this assertion is true, and thus whether your claim to be a physician is legitimate. In order to make these determinations I too would have to have studied medical science and thereby mastered the same epistemic content as you. To use the language of the *Charmides*, I would have to be «of the same knowledge» (ὁμοτέχνον: 171c8) as you. Because knowledge is necessarily «of something» (τινός) by which it is then determined, and because this something is mastered only by the experts in the field, the dream of benefit, of epistemic efficiency, goes up in smoke. (It could be preserved only by allowing someone to have knowledge of the content of all forms of knowledge; that is, to know everything.)

Despite this setback, Socrates persists in trying to uncover a possible benefit of knowledge of knowledge.¹¹ Assume, he suggests, that «in addition to what one learns (μανθάνη) one also sees in addition (προσκαθορῶντι) knowledge» (172b5). Imagine, for example, that along with his pre-med courses in college a physician also studied epistemology and learned that knowledge is justified true belief. He would then be able to learn other subjects «more easily and everything would appear to him more clearly» (172b4). Furthermore, such a physician would be equipped to investigate others who claim to have mastered the medical science: he would examine whether their assertions are both true and well justified. Such a benefit, however, remains limited at best, because the purview of even the epistemologically minded physician would still be restricted only to those who are «of the same knowledge» as himself. He could determine whether a fellow physician knows what she's talking about, but would be incapable of examining the truth of the claims made by a ship's pilot or a general. Once again, the search for the benefit of self-knowledge founders, this time on the question of epistemic content.

The problem of content initially surfaced in the *Charmides* when Socrates allowed Critias to assert that «alone of the other forms of knowledge, [temperance] is knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) of itself and of the other forms of knowledge». He then included a characteristic addition: «if it is of knowledge, then it would also be knowledge of the absence of knowledge». Critias agreed. Finally he said this: «the temperate man alone will know (γνώσεται) himself and be able to investigate what he happens to know (εἰδώς) and what he does not [...]. Indeed, temperance is knowing oneself (ἑαυτὸν... γιγνώσκειν), namely knowing (εἰδέναι) what one knows (οἶδεν) and what one does not know» (167a1-7).

From knowledge of knowledge, which has been construed in this paper (for the sake of argument) as justified true belief, Socrates shifted to content: knowing what one knows and what one does not. I know, for

¹¹ Politis 2008 claims that Socrates argues both sides of the two questions, is knowledge of knowledge possible, and is it beneficial? Nonetheless, he denies that Socrates contradicts himself because he employs two different formulations. If knowledge is *only* of itself, then it may well be neither beneficial or possible. However, if knowledge is «not only of one's knowledge» [Politis 2008, 19], then it may be both.

example, that I know arithmetic but am ignorant of quantum mechanics. Unlike Critias' knowledge-of-knowledge, this sort of self-knowledge requires introspection. Guided by my knowledge that knowledge is justified true belief, I scrutinize my own beliefs in order to make sure that they are both true and justifiable.

This passage in the *Charmides* inevitably reminds readers of Socrates' self-description in the *Apology*. As Kahn puts it, «this conception of self-knowledge is formulated in terms that refer unmistakably to Socrates's own practice of testing the knowledge claims of his interlocutors, as reported in the *Apology*» [Kahn 1988, 546]. There he says that unlike those who are reputed to be wise, but in fact are not, he actually does possess a form of wisdom; namely, «human wisdom» (ἀνθρωπίνια σοφία: 20d8). While another man may «believe (οἶεται) that he knows (εἰδέναι) something but in fact does not, just as I do not know, I do not believe that I know. Thus it seems that by this little bit I am at least wiser than he; namely, I do not believe that I know that which I do not know» (21d4-7). Presumably guided by some notion of what knowledge is (say, justified true belief), as well as by introspection, Socrates refuses to claim to know what he does not know. Furthermore, and more problematically, he is able to reveal that others make illegitimate claims, for he «examines» (διασκοπῶν: 21c3) and «converses with» (διαλεγόμενος: 21c5) them, and then shows them that while they believe they are wise, in fact they are not. This is the work of the *elenchus*, the examining or refutative argument by means of which Socrates reveals inconsistencies in his interlocutor's position.

Vlastos identified what he called «the problem of the Socratic *elenchus*» as the question of whether it elicited any positive truth claim in addition to the negative result of exposing an interlocutor's claims as being inconsistent.¹² Suffice it to say here that whether the result of the *elenchus* is positive or not, it must proceed with at least some knowledge of knowledge. Socrates presumably knows that knowledge requires the holding of a consistent set of beliefs or propositions. But the dilemma raised in the *Charmides* remains forceful. In order to

¹² In Vlastos [2000] he asks, «how can Socrates claim [...] to have proved that the refutand is false, when all he has established is the inconsistency of *p* with premisses whose truth he has not undertaken to establish?» [Vlastos 2000, 41].

evaluate the truth of any of those beliefs Socrates would have to be «of the same knowledge» as his interlocutor. Because he is neither a doctor nor a ship's pilot, he cannot verify that their claims are true. (He can, however, expose their claims to knowledge as bogus if he can uncover inconsistencies in their beliefs.) The dream of the *Charmides* threatens to remain unfulfilled.

After Socrates concedes that knowledge of knowledge cannot bring the dream of epistemic efficiency to fruition, and hence may ultimately be useless, Critias changes tack and proposes that only as knowledge of «the good and bad» (174a10) would temperance supply the benefit that he and Socrates have been seeking. But when he says this, Socrates responds by saying, «You bastard! You've been leading me around in a circle!» (174a11). He is angry because earlier in the dialogue Critias had offered «the doing of good things» (163e10) as his fourth attempt to define temperance. Socrates rejected this answer precisely because it lacked a certain kind of self-reflexivity. «Is it necessary», he asked, «for a physician to know (γινώσκειν) when he heals beneficially and when he does not?» (164b7-8). No. «For sometimes the physician, in acting either beneficially or harmfully, does not know himself (οὐ γινώσκει ἑαυτόν) with regard to how he has acted» (164c1). A contemporary example comes to mind: a physician is asked to treat a 92-year-old Alzheimer's patient who has pneumonia. He knows that he can cure the infection with a heavy dose of anti-biotics. But should he treat such a patient? In the language of the *Laches*, is this a case where «a man's recovery is more to be feared than his illness?» (195c9-10). Simply as a physician, as one who knows health and disease, the physician does not know. This argument impels Critias to offer the fifth definition of temperance: «knowing oneself» (164d4).

Note well: at 164b-c Socrates interprets not knowing benefit as not having self-knowledge. When, however, he turns to self-knowledge as knowledge of knowledge and the absence of knowledge, or knowing what one knows and what one does not know, he runs into a dead end precisely on the question of benefit. His anger at Critias is thus rather unfair since it was he, not Critias, who subverted the definition «doing good things» in the first place and thereby prompted the hunt for self-knowledge; a hunt that ends up returning to knowledge of the good and

the bad. In any case, at the end of the *Charmides* it seems that only knowledge of a particular something – namely, the good and bad – can bring real benefit.

Sprague finds the conclusion of the *Charmides* to be promising. By her lights, in discovering that «temperance is the science of good and evil» Socrates finally «gets the answer he wants» [Sprague 1992, 93]. For as so defined temperance would be capable of generating benefit by bringing Socrates' dream of epistemic efficiency to fruition. This «science» would be a «second-order art» whose purview would include the contents of first-order arts. So, to return to the familiar example, the possessor of «the science of good and evil» would know how the physician, who understands health and disease, should properly use or apply her knowledge for the good. He would, Sprague's account assumes, possess the «using τέχνη», which is mentioned at both *Republic* 601d and *Euthydemus* 289c. (Also see *Phaedrus* 274e.)

Assume with Sprague (and Politis) that «good and evil» can become a proper epistemic object.¹³ While the person knowing it would still be incapable of verifying the truth claims made by a physician about health or a ship's pilot about navigation – although, to reiterate, she could still debunk their claims if their proposition sets were revealed to be inconsistent – she would be able to examine their claims to goodness, for in this field alone would she be «of the same knowledge».¹⁴ Socrates seems to suggest just this in the *Apology* when he describes his examination of the «technicians» (χειροτέχνας: 22c9). While he concedes that they know «many fine things» (22d3) in their own fields – although it is unclear how, without being one of them, Socrates could possibly know this – he criticizes them for thinking that «on account of their knowledge» they believed that they were «wise when it comes to the greatest matters» (τὰ μέγιστα: 22d7). Presumably the greatest matter is the good. If so, Socrates' critique of the «first-order» technicians is that they over-extend their epistemic reach. They do not know how to use well or rightly apply, they do not know what is good about, what they know. A physician does not know when «a man's recovery is more to be

¹³ Politis 2008 claims that it is «possible that this knowledge could be *both* of one's knowledge and lack of knowledge *and* of the good and the bad» [Politis 2008, 20].

¹⁴ See McKim [1985], 69-71 for a discussion of this issue.

feared than his illness». By contrast, if Socrates actually has knowledge of the human good – a claim he makes at *Apology* 38a2 – then he is equipped both to reveal inconsistencies in the technicians' positions as well as to understand the worth or goodness of their work.

The above reflects a view held by Vlastos, according to whom Socrates does have moral knowledge, and seems to support the optimistic reading of the *Charmides* proposed by Sprague. (See Vlastos 2000, 71). Unfortunately, in the *Charmides* the proposal that good and bad can become the object of a form of knowledge that will bring benefit, and perhaps bring the dream of epistemic efficiency to fruition, sinks like a stone. Socrates does not declare that a «second-order art» of the sort Sprague hopes for is possible, and so the dialogue ends in *aporia*. For chronologically minded (that is, most) commentators, the failure of the *Charmides* to identify temperance understood as knowledge of good and bad signals that it is an early dialogue. Such commentators turn to the *Republic* and the Idea of the Good – which is described as «the greatest branch of learning» (μέγιστον μάθημα: 504e5) – as the required supplement to the analysis.¹⁵ This is hardly an unreasonable strategy. But on its own the *Charmides* is far from promising. First, Socrates concludes the dialogue by listing all the many concessions he had to make in order to allow the conversation to progress. Most important, he granted, against the evidence to the contrary, that epistemic self-reflexivity, «that knowledge of knowledge», is possible (175b6). Second, he allowed that it is possible «to know what one does not know», even though this seems “irrational” (175c7-8). Third, nowhere in the dialogue does he indicate that «good and bad» is analogous to standard epistemic objects like numbers or houses, which are clearly and distinctly other than the forms of knowledge apprehending them. In fact, as mentioned earlier, when Socrates takes up the question of a physician knowing the value of a medical treatment – when he asks, in other words, «is it necessary for a physician to know when he heals beneficially and when he does not?» (164b7-8) – he answers by saying, «sometimes the physician, in acting either beneficially or harmfully, does not know

¹⁵ See Sprague [1976] for a full exposition of her argument. Kahn [1988], 546 argues that this section of the *Charmides* is «designed to be read proleptically, by reference to the doctrine that is finally stated here in *Republic VI*».

himself» (164c1). In other words, knowledge of value is counted as somehow self-reflexive, rather than being of a distinct object and as such it (or a «second-order» art) must be construed as problematic. Finally, the dialogue ends with a troubling reminder of Charmides' future role as Critias' henchman. He threatens to use force against Socrates because, he says, Critias «has ordered me to do so» (176c8). The dialogue thus appears to be a comprehensive failure.

But all is not lost, for a positive can still be extracted from the *Charmides*, and as the number-play with which this paper began suggested, it is crucially related to *doxa*. To reiterate, *doxa* is the seventh and thus central item on the list, and of the original 13 items it alone is identified by no special object. Unlike vision, which is only of that which has color, or desire, which is only of pleasure, one can formulate an opinion about anything; about, for example, vision and desire. This is arguably true of knowledge as well: it is possible to have a theory of vision and desire and so on.¹⁶ But unlike knowledge, which repeatedly falters on the question of self-reflexivity, *doxa* can without a doubt be of itself. In fact, this capacity is precisely what makes the project of Socratic inquiry possible, for it is what we exercise when we become the least bit reflective or self-critical; when we question our own opinions and beliefs. To put the point more sharply: Socratic questioning itself requires *doxa* to be self-reflexive. When Socrates asks us, what is X?, and the X is a term which we commonly invoke to guide the way we live our lives – such as «good» or «just» or «courageous» – we are asked to look within ourselves and grapple with what it is we seem to or think we know.¹⁷ As Socrates puts it to Critias in the *Charmides*, «if someone cares about himself (αὐτοῦ...κήδεται) even a little, he must investigate what appears to him (προφαινόμενον) and not proceed carelessly» (173a4-5). Caring-for-oneself is essential to a decent life and human beings go bad when they cease to look within. *Doxa*, one might say, is the arena of self-reflection.

In his typically insightful fashion, Alcibiades acknowledges just this principle in the *Symposium*. In explaining why Socrates makes

¹⁶ As Aristotle puts it in *De Anima* III.4, the soul «thinks all things».

¹⁷ Hyland 1981 makes this theme of questioning central to his interpretation of the *Charmides*. This important work has not received nearly the attention it deserves.

him feel so ashamed of himself, Alcibiades says that ««he forces me to agree that despite the fact that I am so deficient I disregard myself (ἐμᾶυτοῦ...ἀμελῶ) [...] and instead tend to the affairs of the Athenians» (216a4-6). Alcibiades seems to understand that in looking away from himself, in being seduced by political power and the prospect of glory, he becomes thoughtless and therefore a danger to both himself and his fellow-citizens. A good life is led by a vigilant probing of one's own *doxa*.

To reformulate: Vlastos rightly insisted that in order to participate genuinely in the Socratic *elenchus* one must abide by the «say what you believe rule» [Vlastos 2000, 46]. For Socratic inquiry to bear fruit the interlocutors must stay within the horizon of their own *doxa*. Failure to do so is not merely a form of epistemic cheating but, as is the case with *Meno*, *Charmides*, and *Critias*, evidence of a potentially disastrous character flaw.

To sum up: the *Charmides* may fail to articulate a theory of self-knowledge, but in its arguments, its choice of characters, and its playful use of numbers, it succeeds in sending a powerful message. To find the temperance that is present within us, we must probe our own «awareness» of it, and then try, on our own and without relying on the authorities in the field, to articulate an opinion of what it is. Doing so requires courage for it exposes us to the possibility of being refuted by Socrates. But failure to do so is even worse for it reveals a lack of «care» for ourselves and thereby begins a process of self-flight whose outcome can be catastrophic.

Texts Cited

- Brann E., Kalkavage, P. [1998], *Plato's Phaedo*, Newburyport (MA), Focus.
- Diels, H., Kranz, W. [1964], *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Berlin, Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung.
- Fine, G. [2000], *Plato*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Fogelman, B, Hutchinson, D. [1990], Seventeen Subtleties in Plato's *Theaetetus*, in: *Phronesis* 35, 303-306.

- Heath, T. [1981], *A History of Greek Mathematics*, New York, Dover.
- Hyland, D. [1981], *The Virtue of Philosophy: An Interpretation of Plato's Charmides*, Athens (OH), Ohio University Press.
- Irwin, T. [1995], *Plato's Ethics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Kahn, C. [1988], Plato's *Charmides* and the Proleptic Reading of Socratic Dialogues, in: *The Journal of Philosophy* 85, 541-549.
- Klein, J. [1965], *A Commentary on Plato's Meno*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press.
- McKim, R. [1985], Socratic Self-Knowledge and 'Knowledge of Knowledge' in Plato's *Charmides*, in: *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 115, 59-77.
- Nails, D. [2002], *The People of Plato*, Indianapolis, Hackett.
- North, H. [1966], *Sophrosune: Self-knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- Politis, V. [2008], The Place of *Aporia* in Plato's *Charmides*, in: *Phronesis* 53, 12-36.
- Schmid, W. [1998], *Plato's Charmides and the Socratic Ideal of Rationality*, Albany, SUNY Press.
- Smyth, H. [1963], *Greek Grammar*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press.
- Snell, B. [1976], *Die Ausdrücke für den Begriff des Wissens*, New York, Arno Press.
- Sprague, R. [1976], *Plato's Philosopher King*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press.
- Sprague, R. [1992], *Plato's Laches and Charmides*, Indianapolis, Hackett.
- Tuckey, T. [1951], *Plato's Charmides*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Vlastos, G. [2000], Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge, in: Fine [2000], 63-94.

Keywords

Plato; Charmides

Abstract

The paper argues that in the *Charmides* Plato offers a philosophical defense of *doxa* (“opinion”). The key passage is 158e7-159a6. There Socrates says to Charmides, «If temperance (σωφροσύνη) is present in you, you will be able to form some opinion (δοξάζειν) about it. For surely it is necessary that, if it is present, it will provide you with some awareness (αἴσθησις) on the basis of which you would have an opinion (δόξα) about what temperance is, and what sort of thing it is». To formulate a genuine opinion about what temperance, or any other virtue, is – and thus genuinely to participate in a Socratic dialogue – one must first look within and examine one’s own internal “awareness” of it. Doing so requires courage for it exposes the interlocutor to the possibility of being refuted by Socrates. But failure to do so is even worse for it reveals a lack of “care” about oneself and thereby begins a process of self-flight whose outcome, as it was for the (historical) Charmides, can be catastrophic.

David Roochnik
Boston University
E-mail: roochnik@bu.edu