

# **Socrates' Conception of Knowledge and the Priority of Definition**

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## **Abstract**

Throughout the early Platonic dialogues, Socrates repeatedly tells his interlocutors that if, as they claim, they truly have knowledge of some moral property, then they should be able to define the nature of that property. Invariably, the interlocutors fail to furnish him with such definitions, and he is unable to find these definitions on his own. This leads him to conclude that he and all humankind are ignorant of any knowledge about such properties. He thus encourages his interlocutors, and us, to adopt a sense of intellectual humility and to dedicate our lives to studying these properties in an effort to gain moral insight.

Many scholars have cited Socrates' demand for definition as evidence that he accepts a Priority of Definition principle — an epistemological principle asserting that a person must first know the definition of a property before the person can know anything else about the property. Many of the scholars who make this ascription also argue, for various reasons, that such a principle is erroneous. If these scholars are correct and Socrates does accept a flawed Priority of Definition principle, then his epistemology, along with his whole philosophy, suffers devastating harm. Students of the early dialogues must consider whether Socrates does, in fact, accept the principle and, if so, whether the principle is incorrect.

This study will examine the issues that arise from the ascription of a Priority of Definition principle to Socrates. The study will first examine textual evidence supporting the ascription along with texts that bring the ascription into question. It will then outline three general philosophical criticisms of the principle. Finally, this study will examine a number of different understandings of Socrates' conception of knowledge. Hopefully, an understanding can be discovered that preserves his philosophy by effectively showing that either (1) Socrates does not accept the principle, or (2) he does accept the principle but the principle is not philosophically problematic. If such an understanding can be discovered, then Socrates' conception of knowledge is saved from the criticisms raised by scholars. Otherwise, his whole philosophy will be placed in a very troubling light.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Socratic Wisdom and the Search for Definition**

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According to Plato's *Apology*, the god of Delphi identified Socrates<sup>1</sup> as the wisest of all people. Yet in that same text Socrates claims himself to be "in truth, worth nothing in regard to wisdom" (*Apology* 23b) and, in several Platonic works, he repeatedly professes his ignorance. Is he showing false humility in denying his wisdom? No, because in the *Apology* he concedes that he is wise in a sense and he goes on to say that all of humanity should share in his wisdom. But he also makes clear both in that work and elsewhere that his claim of ignorance is sincere.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Socrates, the great wise man of Athens, admits he is ignorant of "any wisdom great or small" (*Apology* 21b); yet, according to his understanding of the Delphic oracle, humanity can only become wise by sharing in his wisdom.

#### **The Paradox of Socratic Wisdom**

By characterizing himself as both ignorant and wise, Socrates presents us with one of the most striking paradoxes in the Platonic corpus. This one, like so many of the others, is provocative in that its apparent self-contradiction hides an important idea for us readers to discover.

As we continue reading through the texts, we find that Socrates' profession of ignorance results from his belief that he has no knowledge of moral ideals, or moral properties<sup>3</sup>, such as Justice, Virtue, Piety, and Beauty. Specifically, he laments his ignorance of the fundamental natures or definitions<sup>4</sup> of these properties. He asserts that, if only he knew

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<sup>1</sup> 'Socrates' in this essay refers to the character found in the dialogues of Plato who holds an epistemological view and general philosophical perspective that is consistent with the Socrates of Plato's *Apology*. Later in this Introduction, I will list the dialogues that I consider to be Socratic in this sense.

<sup>2</sup> Some scholars have questioned the sincerity of this claim — see, for example, Norman Gulley [1968] p. 69. However, recent commentators are more confident in accepting Socrates at his word. For an extensive and (I believe) persuasive argument supporting this confidence, see Brickhouse and Smith [1989], pp. 37-47, 100-108, and 133-137.

<sup>3</sup> I specifically talk of moral properties, instead of properties in general, because Socrates clearly believes that he and others possess knowledge of non-moral properties. He repeatedly talks of the knowledge humankind has in the arts and handicrafts and he apparently believes himself to have knowledge of geometry (e.g., *Meno* 74b-76e).

<sup>4</sup> It is important here not to confuse the definitions Socrates wants with dictionary definitions. While a dictionary definition simply gives a description of what some term identifies, Socratic definitions provide much more information. (Socrates, himself, never uses a Greek term equivalent to the English word "definition" — "Socratic definition" is a contemporary scholarly term.) In Chapter One, we will discuss what a Socratic definition might involve.

the relevant definitions, he would be a moral expert who could answer philosophical questions about moral properties — questions such as *is a certain action just?* or *is it truly good for a man to be virtuous?* Socrates believes that only someone who is “truly wise” would know these essential definitions and be able to provide such expert answers.

But alas, he says, such knowledge of definitions belongs only to the gods. We mortals can only possess “human wisdom, which is of little or no worth” (*Apology* 23a). This meager wisdom consists in sharing his recognition that we have no knowledge of moral definitions and that we are thus unable to derive other information from these definitions. That is, we do not have the knowledge that would make us truly wise.

Socrates sees an emptiness in the arrogance we sometimes show when we claim to know that an action is courageous or an activity is pious. He routinely scrutinizes such knowledge claims by self-proclaimed experts like Euthyphro, Thrasymachus, and Polus, and he acknowledges that his own carefully considered beliefs are subject to ongoing scrutiny (e.g., *Gorgias* 508e-509a, *Crito* 46c). Thus, the wisdom of Socrates contains a sort of intellectual modesty that recognizes that human notions about moral properties fall well short of full knowledge and that human moral decisions are always open to question.

Despite this disappointing appraisal of human knowledge, Socrates does not abandon philosophy. He may never be able to claim he has moral wisdom, but the investigation of morality appears to remain important to him because the subject matter — Justice, Virtue, Piety, Beauty, *et alia* — is of utmost importance to humanity. Even if humanity will never achieve moral knowledge, philosophic scrutiny of moral beliefs is beneficial to us because it provokes us to carefully consider and even reform our beliefs — an activity that likely is morally beneficial. Moreover, Socrates seems to consider the actual task of pursuing the “knowledge of the gods” to be mentally and spiritually invigorating, even if he never succeeds in attaining moral knowledge. Hence, he is always eager to examine “how things stand” (*Apology* 23b) in regard to moral properties and he unabashedly asserts that “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

We can thus resolve the paradox of Socratic wisdom as follows: human wisdom lies in realizing that we are ignorant of the definitions of moral properties, and this ignorance makes hazardous our many important moral decisions. Instead of dogmatically clinging to our moral beliefs, we should hold them up to philosophic scrutiny and continually examine the nature of moral properties. Though we may never achieve expert knowledge of these properties, we will improve our own lives by appreciating our epistemic predicament, by working to improve our moral beliefs, and by engaging in philosophy, an activity which Socrates seems to find life-fulfilling.

## **Challenging Socratic Wisdom**

At first glance, this explanation of the paradox and of Socrates' activities seems most satisfying. Many of us readily acknowledge the importance of pursuing understanding of such concepts as Justice, Virtue, Piety and Beauty, and we admit our current poor state of knowledge about these things. Further, we are awed by Socrates' determination, even at the point of death, to continue exposing the ignorance of sham "experts" and to go on probing the nature of moral properties.

But many commentators on the Platonic dialogues have nonetheless criticized the reasoning behind his assertion of human ignorance. They claim that Socrates' demand for definitions is the result of his commitment to a Priority of Definition principle that wrongly requires the definition of some property first be established before any other knowledge concerning that property can be gained.<sup>5</sup> The criticisms of this allegedly Socratic principle can be summarized as three general charges that, for now, can be stated as follows: (1) The principle is false because a person does not need to know the definition of a property in order to possess other knowledge about the property, (2) the principle, if it were true, would wholly undermine the search for knowledge because other knowledge about a moral property must be gained before the definition of the property can be known, and finally, (3) the principle is morally harmful because, in seeming to put moral knowledge out of human reach, it can lead people to lose interest in moral matters altogether and ignore ethical strictures that they probably should obey. This dangerous possibility prompts some scholars to decry the principle as "morally deleterious."

### **Some Results of these Charges**

If Socrates does accept a flawed Priority of Definition principle, then his philosophy suffers catastrophic results. The most obvious of these results is that his claim to wisdom would be discredited. If our inability to define a property does not entail our ignorance of that property, then his conclusion about our general ignorance is unsupported. That is, just because we cannot define a property such as Piety does not mean we have no knowledge about that property; we very well could know many things about it. In this way, Socrates' "human wisdom" that humanity is ignorant would rest on a flawed epistemology and would therefore hardly qualify as wisdom. The so-called "wisest of men" would be made out to be a fool.

A second result of this allegedly Socratic error would be the devaluing of the intellectual modesty that Socrates encourages. If our inability to define a property does not entail our complete lack of knowledge about that property, then we need not be intellectually

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<sup>5</sup> This Priority of Definition principle will be further explained in Chapter One.

humble. We could very well know that an action is just or that Virtue is good for man even if we cannot define Justice or Virtue. Such particular knowledge about the properties may not be as impressive as expert, definitionally-founded knowledge, but it also is nothing of which to be modest.

A third result, if Socrates' epistemology fails, is that philosophic discussion, as he practices it in the dialogues, should not be used as part of a serious pursuit of wisdom. If it is epistemologically erroneous to try to define a property before attempting to gain other knowledge involving the property, then we would not want our philosophical conversations to focus on the pursuit of definitions in the manner that Socrates' discussions do. For us to do so would be to subvert our own searches for knowledge, which would render us foolish.

Such catastrophic results show some of the consequences if Socrates' epistemological view is flawed. We need to look further into these critics' charges so that we can decide if his claim to wisdom is, in fact, hollow, if the intellectual modesty he encourages lacks the merit he believes it has, and if we should consider the search for definitions to be as important as he thinks it is.

### **The Topic and Structure of this Thesis**

In this thesis, we will examine the issues surrounding the ascription of a Priority of Definition principle to Socrates. Specifically, we will try to determine whether Socrates does, in fact, accept a Priority of Definition principle and, if he does, whether he is committed to a false and problematic principle that subjects him to the catastrophic results described above. This thesis will, in part, be an exercise in textual analysis, for we will examine several relevant passages from the Platonic corpus. This thesis will also, in part, be a consideration of recent scholarship because we will test the views of a number of commentators, some of whom claim Socrates' epistemological view is flawed and some of whom claim it is not. Ultimately, though, this thesis will be a philosophic inquiry into Socrates' conception of knowledge, considering what he believes knowledge to be, how the knowledge of definitions fits into his epistemology, and whether or not his conception of knowledge is philosophically compelling.

The structure of this thesis is as follows: In the remainder of my Introduction, I will briefly address the important question of which texts we will consider as we carry out this study. In Chapter One, we will look at some common characteristics of the early Platonic works that relate to Socrates' interest in definitions and we will examine textual evidence that supports the ascription of a specific version of the Priority of Definition principle to Socrates. Also in that chapter, we will look at some textual problems with that ascription.

In Chapter Two, we will examine four general accounts of Socrates' epistemology as it relates to the Priority of Definition principle. In Chapter Three, we will discuss the three general charges that philosophers level against the Priority of Definition principle and we will test how well these accounts correspond to the Platonic texts. In Chapter Four, we will examine how the accounts outlined in the second chapter address the philosophical issues raised in the third chapter. Finally, in Chapter Five, I will advance my own view of what role the knowledge of definitions plays in Socrates' conception of knowledge.

### **A Prefatory Note on Socratic Texts**

Before we move into the body of this study, we must address the question of which Platonic texts we should consider as we carry out our investigation. This question is important because the character "Socrates" does not appear to hold one consistent epistemological view throughout the Platonic corpus. Instead, his epistemological view — as well as his overall philosophical perspective — seems to change and evolve due, at least in part, to Plato's own philosophic development. If this study is to succeed then we must be careful to examine the dialogues in which Socrates holds a consistent epistemological view that raises the issues surrounding the Priority of Definition.

Scholars, by considering a number of factors such as philosophic content and stylometry, have generally agreed that the Socrates who appears to accept a Priority of Definition principle is the same character who professes humanity's ignorance and who advocates the "wisdom of Socrates" described above. These scholars assert that this Socrates is found in the following Platonic works: *Apology (Ap.)*, *Charmides (Ch.)*, *Crito (Cr.)*, *Euthydemus (Eud.)*, *Euthyphro (Eu.)*, *Gorgias (Gor.)*, *Hippias Major (HMa.)*, *Hippias Minor (HMi.)*, *Ion*, *Laches (La.)*, *Lysis (Ly.)*, *Meno* (except 80d to 86c, which many scholars now consider a later addition by Plato), Book I of the *Republic (Rep. I)*, and the *Protagoras (Pr.)*. These will be the primary texts we use as we carry out the study contained in this thesis.<sup>6</sup>

With this matter settled, we can now turn our attention to how Socrates goes about searching for definitions of various properties and why it is believed that he subscribes to the Priority of Definition principle.

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<sup>6</sup> For a more extensive explanation of why these should be considered the "Socratic" dialogues, see Guthrie [1975] pp. 39-66.

## The Priority of Definition and Socrates' Search for Definitions

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As discussed in the Introduction, Socrates wants to learn the definitions of moral properties. Though this pursuit is not always the central action in each of the dialogues, his interest in these definitions is apparent throughout the early Platonic works. In this chapter, we will examine how his interest in definitions typically affects the course of his discussions. We will then probe textual evidence supporting the ascription to him of a specific Priority of Definition principle that I label **PD**. Finally, we will consider some passages that suggest Socrates does not accept a Priority of Definition principle such as **PD**.

### The Search for Definitions in the Dialogues<sup>7</sup>

At the beginning of a typical early dialogue, Socrates encounters someone who claims to have knowledge about a moral property. This piques Socrates' interest and he asks his interlocutor how he can be so confident in his claim — is he, perchance, an expert on the property? The self-proclaimed knower often responds, in essence, “Yes, I know much about the property because I have fundamental knowledge of the property's nature.”

The classic example of this exchange is found at the beginning of the *Euthyphro*, where the dialogue's namesake tells Socrates that because of his expertise “on matters relating to Piety” he knows that he has a religious duty to bring a legal charge against his father:

**T<sub>1</sub>** SOCRATES: By Zeus, Euthyphro! Do you think that you have such accurate knowledge (ἀκριβῶς οἶει ἐπίστασθαι) of divine things and what is pious and impious that in circumstances like you describe, you can accuse your own father? Are you not, yourself, afraid that you are committing an impious act?

EUTHYPHRO: Why Socrates, if I did not have accurate knowledge (ἀκριβῶς εἰδείην) of all that, I would be worthless and Euthyphro would not be different from most men. (*Eu.* 4e-5a)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> When discussing how Socrates' interest in definitions typically affects the course of the Socratic dialogues, I do not mean to suggest that each of the Platonic texts we are considering follows the same structure. This is because the texts vary widely in form. One, the *Apology*, is really not a dialogue at all but a monologue given by Socrates that is only momentarily interrupted by a short elenchos. Some of the other texts (e.g., *Euthyphro*, *Charmides*, *Laches*) show him as being interested only in examining the various claims to knowledge made by his interlocutors. Others (e.g., *Crito*, *Gorgias*, *Ion*) have him first challenging his interlocutors' claims and then presenting his own ideas, though with the caveat that they are simply his carefully considered beliefs for which he makes no claim to knowledge. Because of these and other differences, any ascription of one general form to the dialogues becomes difficult if not impossible.

Euthyphro says he knows all sorts of things about Piety and Impiety and that this knowledge sets him far apart from the typical person. His confidence in his own expertise leads him to believe that he is correct in taking his father to court.

We can easily imagine Socrates' suspicions about this claim. Nonetheless, he asks Euthyphro, as well as the other self-proclaimed experts encountered in the dialogues, to share their expert knowledge with him. He says, in effect, "Tell me, as an expert, what is the fundamental nature of the property you claim to understand? If I knew this, then I could be like you and derive all sorts of knowledge about the property." The interlocutor invariably agrees to this request and gives an answer. Again, the *Euthyphro* provides an ideal example of this:

**T<sub>2</sub>** SOCRATES: Then speak, and say what it is to be pious and impious (τί φης ε ναι τὸ ὅσιον καὶ τὸ ἀνόσιον).

EUTHYPHRO: Well then, I say that Piety is what I am doing now, prosecuting the wrongdoer who commits murder or robs temples, or sins in any point like that, whether it be your father or your mother or whoever it might be. (*Eu.* 5e)

Socrates is dissatisfied with this reply. Euthyphro, like many of the other interlocutors, does not answer the question he was asked; he provides a list of examples of the property<sup>9</sup> instead of the definition that Socrates wants to know.<sup>10</sup> But Socrates does not want examples; he wants an explanation of the fundamental nature of the property that he can then use to speak correctly and knowingly about the features of the property.<sup>11</sup> He explains this to Euthyphro as follows:

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<sup>8</sup> All translations appearing in this study are based on those appearing in the Loeb Classical series, as revised by me with reference to the accompanying Greek text. See the Bibliography section of this thesis for entries for the translators Fowler, Lamb, and Shorey. All shortcomings in the translations used in this study are, of course, my responsibility alone.

<sup>9</sup> When I use the term "examples" in this sense, I mean general instances of a property (e.g., "murders or sacrilegious robberies"), not particular instances (e.g., a specific murder or a specific robbery). This is an important distinction; historically, commentators have wrongly claimed that the interlocutors' initial answers fail because they list particular instances instead of providing definitions. In fact, the interlocutors usually, if not always, give an answer using general instances just as Euthyphro does in **T<sub>2</sub>**, above. For a discussion of the issues involved in this distinction, see Nehamas [1975] and Benson [1990a].

<sup>10</sup> Socrates does not always point out this failure in his interlocutors' answers. See, e.g., *Rep.* I 331c-d.

<sup>11</sup> Scholars have suggested a number of criteria they believe a Socratic definition is supposed to satisfy. These criteria can be summarized as the following three necessary conditions formulated by thesis committee member Mark Gifford: (1) The definition identifies all and only instances of the property, (2) it explains why these instances are examples of the property, and (3) the definition is understandable, familiar and can be applied effectively by the knower.

**T3** I did not ask you to tell me one or two of the many actions that are pious; I wanted you to tell me what is the essential form (ε δος) of Piety, itself, which makes all pious actions pious.... Well then, teach me what, precisely, this ideal is, so that, by looking upon it and using it as a standard (παραδείγματι), I can say that any action done by you or someone else is either pious or impious.  
(*Eu.* 6d-e)

To show the sort of answer that he wants, Socrates sometimes offers the definition of a non-moral property. In the *Laches* where he and his interlocutors are searching for the definition of Courage, he uses the example of the property Quickness.<sup>12</sup>

**T4** SOCRATES: As I might ask what is the property which is called Quickness and which is found in running, in playing the lyre, in speaking, in learning, and in many other similar actions, or rather which we possess in nearly every type of action that is worth mentioning of arms, legs, mouth, voice, mind — would you not apply the term ‘quickness’ to all of them?

LACHES: Quite true.

SOCRATES: And if I were to be asked by someone, “What is this thing, Socrates, which, in all of these activities, you call Quickness?” I would say that Quickness is that which accomplishes much in little time — whether in running or in any other sort of action.

LACHES: And you would be speaking rightly.

SOCRATES: And now, Laches, try to tell me in like manner what Courage is.  
(*La.* 192a-b)

In texts **T3** and **T4** we can see why Socrates believes such a definition is useful. Not only does it tell us what Quickness is — that which accomplishes much in little time — but it also enables us to know a lot of other things about the property. We could draw on this definition to recognize examples of Quickness, such as a quick writer who composes many pages in a short amount of time or a quick carpenter who completes a lot of projects in short order. We would also be able to recognize qualities of Quickness such as that it is useful in situations where much needs to be accomplished in little time.

From this consideration, we can see why Socrates is so interested in the definitions of morally significant properties. By knowing the definitions, he believes he would be able to know such things as what actions exemplify Justice and what qualities belong to Virtue.

Once the interlocutor has a better understanding of what Socrates is asking for, he offers a proper type of definition. However, even after this definition is offered, Socrates invariably finds some philosophical problem with it.

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<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere, he uses such examples as Shape and Color (*Meno* 75b-76d).

The most common problem is that the definition covers cases that are thought to lack the property in question.<sup>13</sup> A passage that typifies this sort of flaw is found in the first book of the *Republic* where Polemarchus tells Socrates that to act justly is to “benefit friends and harm enemies” (*Rep.* I, 334b). This definition does not seem to distinguish only examples of Justice; instead, it appears to include some cases that are commonly thought to be unjust. Socrates points this out:

**T5** “May I ask whether by ‘friends’ you mean those who seem to be worthy [of friendship] or those who really are so, even if they do not seem to be — and the same goes for enemies?”

“It is likely,” Polemarchus said, “that men love those whom they suppose to be good and dislike those whom they deem bad.”

“Do not men make mistakes in this matter so that many people seem good to them who are not and vice versa?”

“They do.”

“For those men who make this error, good people are their enemies and bad people are their friends?”

“Certainly,” he said.

“But it is then wholly just for the men to benefit the bad and harm the good?”

“It would seem so.”

“Yet the good are just and incapable of injustice.”

“True.”

“On your reasoning, then, it is just to wrong those who do no injustice.”

“No, no, Socrates, that reasoning cannot be right,” he said. (*Rep.* I, 334c-d)

Polemarchus’ proposed definition is problematic because, if it were used as a standard for identifying examples of Justice, it could lead the user to misidentify an unjust action as a just one. Socrates would certainly not want to accept a definition with such a flaw.

Despite Socrates’ objections, the interlocutors do not need to abandon their answers — they could simply say that their definitions are correct and the worrisome examples Socrates cites are not truly problematic. That is, Polemarchus could say that harming a just person *is* just, contrary to conventional wisdom. But the interlocutors rarely make

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<sup>13</sup> In some other cases, a proposed definition is too narrow, and fails to cover cases that are believed to exhibit the property.

this move.<sup>14</sup> Instead, they admit that their proposed definitions do seem flawed and they set to work trying to find better definitions.

At this point, the dialogues differ as to how they proceed. In some (e.g., *Euthyphro*, *Charmides*), the interlocutors offer a series of revised definitions, but Socrates finds that each one of these is also problematic. These dialogues end in *aporia* — puzzlement — for the reader because every proposed definition seems flawed.

In other dialogues (e.g., *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*), the interlocutor might make a few more unsuccessful attempts at providing an acceptable definition but the discussion then turns to some other question about the property under investigation, such as whether it is useful or teachable. In some of the works in this latter group, Socrates continues to play his customary role of debunker, pointing out apparent flaws in the answers offered by his interlocutors to the new question under consideration. In other texts, he offers his own answers to the new questions, and he supports these answers with spirited defenses. In one such case, in the *Gorgias*, he goes so far as to say of his opinion:

**T<sub>6</sub>** These ideas, which were shown to be as I stated them some time earlier in our previous discussion, are buckled fast and clamped together — to put it somewhat crudely — by arguments of steel and adamant. (*Gor.* 508e-509a)

Despite his sometimes high level of confidence in his own opinions, Socrates shies away from asserting that his claims represent knowledge. Instead, he treats his own opinions as mere tentative answers that are subject to further investigation and he explicitly denies that his ideas are instances of moral knowledge. He is even suspicious of the opinions that are “buckled fast and clamped together ...by arguments of steel and adamant” — immediately following **T<sub>7</sub>** he says, “At least, so it would appear as matters now stand” (*Gor.* 508e).

In all of the dialogues, Socrates holds the same position at the end — he does “not know how things stand” with respect to the property in question. He is ignorant of the relevant definition and, as we will discuss below, he believes himself not to know either examples or qualities of the property. The way is prepared for the wisdom of Socrates — because he does not know the definitions, he must admit that he lacks moral knowledge and he remains suspicious of his own, and others’, opinions about moral properties.

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<sup>14</sup> One interlocutor who does employ this tactic is Thrasymachus who, in *Rep.* I, temporarily befuddles Socrates by denying commonly held ideas about examples and qualities of the property Justice. See *Rep.* I, 340c-341a, 343b ff. For more discussion on this point, see Irwin [1992] p. 20.

## Deriving PD

Socrates' interest in definitions and his explanations for why he has this interest have prompted commentators to ascribe to him a Priority of Definition principle. Several versions of this principle have been put forth over the years but, for the purpose of this thesis, I will primarily consider the following version, which is my own formulation:

**PD** Knowing the definition of a morally significant property<sup>15</sup> is both necessary and fundamental for someone to know examples of that property and is necessary for someone to know the qualities of that property.

Nowhere in the texts does he expressly espouse this principle. However, various passages show him making claims that support the ascription to him of a number of other epistemological principles that, taken together, suggest **PD**.<sup>16</sup>

To recognize one of these lesser epistemological principles, consider the following texts:

**T7** SOCRATES: If you did not know precisely (ἤδησθα σαφῶς) what is pious and impious, it is unthinkable that ...you would ever be moved to prosecute your venerable father. (*Eu.* 15d)

**T8** How do you know (ο σθα) what sort of things are beautiful and ugly? Come now, can you say what the beautiful is? (*HMa.* 286cd)

**T9** How can we consider ourselves friends — and I do consider you a friend — when we have not been able to discover (ἐξευρεῖν) what friendship is? (*Ly.* 223b)

Passages **T7** and **T9**, read conservatively, strongly suggest that it is necessary for certain persons (Euthyphro, in **T7** and Socrates and Lysis in **T9**) to know the definitions of certain moral properties in order to “know” certain would-be examples (the piety of Euthyphro's prosecution and the friendship between Socrates and Lysis). **T8** suggests the scope of this epistemological requirement is much broader; Socrates apparently believes any knower must first know the definition of the property before he can know any of its examples.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In the passages I quote throughout this chapter, Socrates primarily talks about the definitions of morally significant properties. In order to be true to the texts, I choose here to formulate **PD** in such a way that it specifically addresses this sub-class of properties. However, I take it from his frequent use of more general properties to exemplify his epistemic view (see **T4**) that he believes his principle covers knowledge of all properties. For this reason, I will try not to use my formulation of **PD** (in terms of morally significant properties) as a hedge to avoid epistemological problems that may plague the principle when it is applied to the general class of properties. Such a hedge would only be appropriate if an effective argument can be made for treating knowledge of morally significant properties in a way that is different, epistemologically speaking, from general properties.

<sup>16</sup> My argument to support the ascription of **PD** to Socrates owes much to Hugh Benson [1990b].

<sup>17</sup> This principle could be broadened even further. Consider the following passage:

Taken together, these three passages support the ascription of the following epistemological principle to Socrates:

**P<sub>1</sub>** Knowing the definition of a morally significant property is necessary for someone to know examples of that property.

According to this principle, a person can only know examples of a property if he first knows the property's definition. If Socrates does, in fact, accept this principle, then it would explain why he is so insistent upon learning a property's definition before he considers what instances exemplify that property.

As we continue reading through the dialogues, we come to realize that Socrates believes that knowledge of definition is not just one of many necessary conditions in order to gain knowledge of examples; it is the fundamental piece of knowledge that provides the knower with the ability to determine examples of moral properties. Once the knower has this ability, it seems he needs only to know specific information about an individual case in order to make a knowledgeable determination about that case.<sup>18</sup>

Again, consider **T<sub>3</sub>** from above:

**T<sub>3</sub>** I did not ask you to tell me one or two of the many actions that are pious; I wanted you to tell me what is the essential form (ε δος) of Piety, itself, which makes all pious actions pious. ...Well then, teach me what, precisely, this ideal is so that, by looking upon it and using it as a standard (παραδείγματι), I can say that any action done by you or someone else is either pious or impious. (*Eu.* 6de)

In this passage, Socrates asks Euthyphro to give him a definition of Piety that he can then use as a sort of template to identify "any action" that is pious or impious. **T<sub>3</sub>**, then, seems to show that Socrates believes knowledge of definition is sufficient to enable the knower to pick out all other examples of the defined property.

A passage from the *Charmides* also supports the ascription of a sufficiency principle:

**T<sub>11</sub>** Tell us what, in your opinion, Sound-mindedness (σωφροσύνην) is, so that we can decide if you are sound-minded or not. (*Ch.* 159a)

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**T<sub>10</sub>** Can anyone know (εἰδέναι) what a part of Virtue is but not know (εἰδόντα) Virtue itself? (*Meno* 79c)

This passage suggests that not only must a person first know a property's definition in order to identify examples of the property, but also to define species of that property. For instance, a person would have to know the definition of courage in order both to identify courageous acts and also define types of courage such as military courage, social courage, intellectual courage, etc. For the sake of simplicity, I will not add another epistemological principle, summarizing this notion, to our collection. I believe our philosophical plates are already adequately filled with the principles outlined in the body of this chapter.

<sup>18</sup> My thanks to thesis committee members Harlan Miller and Jim Klagge for pointing out that this requirement is an epistemological distinction but not a logical one.

Given the context of this passage, it appears that Socrates believes that once he knows what Sound-mindedness is, he will be able to name all sound-minded people.

Both **T<sub>3</sub>** and **T<sub>11</sub>** suggest that we have grounds to ascribe a sufficiency principle to Socrates asserting that he believes that by knowing the definition of a moral property he would then know all instances of the property. But such a principle is obviously false — even if we were to know the definition of the property Justice, we clearly could not then immediately know every just person now living on this planet along with all just people who have died or who have yet to be born. It would seem that we must have knowledge about a person that we could then compare to our paradigm of the nature of Justice in order to determine if this person is, in fact, just. Hence, the knowledge of a moral definition is the key, but not only, necessary ingredient in determining who is just.

Socrates, in **T<sub>3</sub>** above, clearly intends to use a comparison process to identify examples of moral properties. In this way, he seems to understand that knowledge of definition is not fully sufficient for recognizing all instances of a moral property. Instead, he appears to believe that the knowledge of definition empowers the knower *to be able to* identify an example, but the knower must also have other “common” pieces of knowledge about a specific instance in order to identify whether the instance truly is an example of the moral property.

Even though it does not appear that Socrates thinks definitional knowledge is fully sufficient for the identification of examples, passages **T<sub>3</sub>** and **T<sub>11</sub>** show that he believes such definitional knowledge is not just necessary, but of special epistemological importance. In order to capture this importance, let us ascribe a second epistemological principle to him:

**P<sub>2</sub>** Knowing the definition of a morally significant property is fundamental for someone to know examples of that property.

This second principle is significant because it emphasizes how important Socrates believes definitional knowledge is. Not only is it a necessary condition, it is the key intellectual tool for identifying examples and non-examples of a moral property.

Principles **P<sub>1</sub>** and **P<sub>2</sub>** can be combined to form one over-arching epistemological principle concerning examples of properties. This principle is:

**P** Knowing the definition of a morally significant property is both necessary and fundamental for someone to know examples of that property.

According to **P**, if Euthyphro were to know that prosecuting his father is pious, he would first have to know the definition of Piety. Moreover, in knowing what Piety is, he would be able to recognize all other examples of the property. This principle **P**, if true, shows

how important definitional knowledge would be to an expert on some property — the expert would consider such knowledge vital if he wants to identify any situation where the property is exemplified. Given this, if Socrates does accept **P**, then we can see why his pursuit of definitions is so closely connected to his efforts to gain moral knowledge.

Besides the recognition of examples, Socrates seems to believe that knowing the definition of a moral property is necessary in order for the knower to recognize the property's qualities. Consider the following passages:

**T<sub>12</sub>** Must we not first know (εἰδέναι) the nature of Virtue? For if we do not at all know (εἰδεῖμεν) what Virtue is, how can we advise anyone about the best mode of attaining it? (*La.* 190b)

**T<sub>13</sub>** You must think I am someone blessed by the gods to know (εἰδείην) whether Virtue can be taught or how it is attained. In truth, I am far from knowing (εἰδέναι) whether or not it can be taught — indeed, I do not happen to know what Virtue, itself, is... How can I know (εἰδείην) what sort of thing something is when I do not even know (οὐ δα) what it is? Do you suppose that somebody who does not in any way know (γυγνώσκει) who Meno is could know (εἰδέναι) whether he was noble or rich or well-born or the reverse? Is that possible, do you think? (*Meno* 71a-71b)

**T<sub>14</sub>** We should not have inquired whether or not Virtue can be taught until we had first asked the main question of what it is. (*Meno* 86d)

**T<sub>15</sub>** We will not know (εἰσόμεθα) [about how Virtue is attained] until ...we try to discover (ἐπιχειρήσωμεν ζητεῖν) what Virtue is in and by itself. (*Meno* 100b)

**T<sub>16</sub>** If you are ignorant (ἄγνοεῖς) of [what a Sophist is], then you cannot know (οἶσθα) to whom you are entrusting your soul. (*Pr.* 312c)

**T<sub>17</sub>** If I do not know (οὐ δα) what Justice is, I shall hardly know (συχολῆ εἴσομαι) whether it is a virtue or not, or whether its possessor is happy or not. (*Rep.* I, 354bc)

Of these passages<sup>19</sup>, **T<sub>17</sub>** exhibits the most conservative epistemological claim: Socrates asserts that one specific person — himself — cannot know whether the property Justice

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<sup>19</sup> Some scholars would add the following passage to the above collection:

**T<sub>18</sub>** What, Polus? Have you already learned (πέπυσαι) from me what I think (φημί) [Rhetoric] to be, so that you can proceed to ask whether I think (δοκεῖ) it a fine thing? ...I shall not answer whether I consider Rhetoric a fine thing or a bad thing until I first say what it is. For that would not be right of me, Polus. (*Gor.* 462c-463c)

I do not believe this passage should be included with the others. Socrates, here, is not demanding that Polus know what Rhetoric is. Instead, Socrates is saying that in order for Polus to appreciate his, Socrates', opinion about its moral status, Polus must first appreciate what Socrates believes the practice to be. That is, Socrates' demand here seems to be for linguistic clarity, not epistemological correctness.

exhibits two specific qualities unless he first knows the definition of the property. However, the other five passages make clear that this principle is not limited only to the would-be knower Socrates nor is it limited to the property of Justice or to qualities such as teachability and being productive of happiness. In **T13**, for instance, we see that he believes the need for definition applies to *all* properties (or, at least, all moral properties). Moreover, the passage shows that he believes this principle does not just apply to him, but to any would-be knower. With all of this in mind, it seems appropriate to ascribe the following epistemological principle to Socrates:

**Q** Knowing the definition of a morally significant property is necessary for someone to know the qualities of that property.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, this principle holds that a person must first know the definition of a property before he can know the property's characteristics. If Socrates does, indeed, accept **Q**, then we can understand why he is so fervent in his pursuit of definitions — he must know the definition of a moral property before he can know such important things as whether he can learn to exhibit that property and whether it would be useful for him to do so.

If these ascriptions are correct, then Socrates believes that a person must know the definition of a property in order for the knower to have knowledge of the property's examples and qualities. We can thus combine **P** and **Q** into one grand epistemological principle **PD** that I stated above and will repeat here:

**PD** Knowing the definition of a morally significant property is both necessary and fundamental for someone to know examples of that property and is necessary for someone to know the qualities of that property.

If, as seems to be the case in light of the preceding discussion, Socrates does subscribe to this principle, then his interest in definitions is understandable; he apparently believes that, with the knowledge of the definition of a property, he can gain other knowledge about the property, whereas without definitional knowledge, other knowledge about the

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However, the remainder of the dialogue does illustrate why Socrates believes in the epistemological importance of definition. Once he has metaphorically defined Rhetoric as, in essence, “brain candy,” his low opinion of the practice rationally follows.

<sup>20</sup> As pointed out by Jim Klagge, it does seem that **Q** is contrary to **P**. This is because many qualities are, themselves, properties. For instance, we could say, “Justice is a Virtue.” If we apply principle **P** to this claim, we would then say that we must know what Virtue is before we can determine if this statement is true. But if we apply **Q**, then we would say that we must know what Justice is in order to know whether this statement is true.

Klagge theorizes that this contrariness suggests Socrates may see wisdom as a state where the wise knower will simultaneously understand the natures of both the property and the quality.

property is beyond his grasp. This belief, if it is Socratic, would explain why his interest in definitions plays such a significant role throughout the dialogues and why, because his search for definitions is always frustrated, he continues to think of himself as hopelessly ignorant.

### **A Textual Problem for the Ascription of PD**

The many passages cited above strongly support the ascription of **PD** to the Socrates of the early dialogues. However, there are other passages (quoted below) that bring this ascription into question. These depict him making apparent claims to knowledge about several moral properties.<sup>21</sup>

Such statements, in themselves, do not demonstrate his non-acceptance of **PD**; indeed, according to the principle, he is entitled to make such knowledge claims — *only if* he has already learned the relevant definitions. But, as we noted in the Introduction, he disavows knowledge of these definitions. So, if he does make knowledge claims about various properties but he believes he has no knowledge of the definitions of the properties, then it would seem that one of the following three situations must be the case: (1) Socrates does not, in fact, accept **PD**, (2) he does know the definitions of some moral properties, or (3) he is philosophically sloppy and routinely violates his own epistemology. Since the Principle of Charity entails that it is unlikely that a philosopher of his standing would be so sloppy, then we must think that, if these statements do represent knowledge claims, we should hesitate before ascribing either total ignorance or **PD** to him.

To illustrate this apparent textual problem, let us look at some statements that he makes about the specific property Justice. As we would expect, he repeatedly disavows any knowledge of its nature:

**T19** It is our inability [to explain the nature of Justice] that is at fault [for our unsuccessful discussion]. (*Rep.* I, 336e)

**T20** Why, my dear fellow, I said, how could anyone answer you [about what Justice is] if [like me] in the first place he did not know (εἰδέναι) [what Justice is]? (*Rep.* I, 337e)

**T21** The result of our discussion is that I know (οὐδέν) nothing [about Justice]. (*Rep.* I, 354b)

Despite this self-proclaimed ignorance, Socrates explicitly asserts that he has knowledge of Injustice:

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<sup>21</sup> Socrates also makes numerous knowledge claims about non-morally significant properties. (See, e.g., *Eud.* 293b and 301cd; *Ion* 537e). Given **T14**, it seems that Socrates believes he must also know the definitions of these properties before he can claim to have knowledge about them.

**T22** I knew (ἐπίσταμαι) that [good men are not unjust] long ago. (*Eud.* 296e)

**T23** For injustice is ignorance; no one could still not know (ἀγνοήσκειν) this. (*Rep.* I, 351a)<sup>22</sup>

**T24** But I know (οἶδα) that it is evil and disgraceful to do injustice and to disobey one's superior, whether he is a god or man. (*Ap.* 29b)

If Socrates does accept **PD**, then, given **T22** - **T24**, he should believe that he knows the definition of Injustice. Yet if he believes he knows what Injustice is, then it seems reasonable to think that he would also believe he knows what Justice is. But he clearly does not believe he knows the definition of Justice, given **T19-T21**. It would thus seem that we must account for the apparent conflict between these two sets of texts by either questioning the ascription of **PD** or else by assuming that Socrates cannot determine the definition of Justice from the definition of Injustice.

Given this latter possibility that Socrates could know the definition of Injustice without knowing what Justice is, we could account for **T23** - **T25** while preserving the ascription of **PD**. But if he were to make any knowledge claims about Justice, then this latter possibility becomes immaterial — Socrates, if he does accept **PD**, would have to know the definition of Justice in order to make such claims.

He makes no explicit knowledge claims about Justice anywhere in the texts, but he does advance a number of statements about the property that appear to be implicit claims of knowledge. Consider the following passages:

**T25** [The penalty I have suggested for myself is] strictly in accordance with Justice. (*Ap.* 36e-37a)

**T26** If you [raise my sons well], I shall have had justice at your hands. (*Ap.* 42a)

**T27** For it has been made clear to us that in no case is it just to harm anyone. (*Rep.* I, 335e)

**T28** Justice [is] a thing more precious than much fine gold. (*Rep.* I, 336e)

**T29** Justice brings oneness of mind and love. (*Rep.* I, 351d)

**T30** The gods, too, are just. (*Rep.* I, 352a)

Socrates does not hedge on any of these statements; he does not resort to his common practice of using prefacing qualifiers like “It seems that—” or “If these statements are true, then—.” Moreover, he makes these claims in the midst of situations that would command his seriousness and thoughtfulness — the law court in the first two instances

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<sup>22</sup> Benson [1990b] does not consider this a true knowledge claim but merely a hypothetical statement. However, I believe his arguments for this (pp. 26-27) are strained and incorrect.

and an earnest discussion in the other four — so it seems he would neither be speaking carelessly nor intend for his comments be taken ironically. Instead, from the tone and context of these passages, we must believe that he is fully confident of their truth and, therefore, that they are implicit claims to knowledge. But if he does believe that he knows these things yet also believes he is ignorant of the definition of Justice, then we have reason to question the ascription of **PD** to him.

Admittedly, passages **T22-T30** do not show, beyond all doubt, that Socrates violates the Priority of Definition principle. At no place in the early dialogues does he make an explicit claim to knowledge about a moral property<sup>23</sup> when, elsewhere, he explicitly claims not to have knowledge of the nature of that property.<sup>24</sup>

However, his explicit and apparently implicit knowledge claims do seem to clash with his numerous blanket admissions of ignorance<sup>25</sup> as well as his more specific statements of what he does not know. This clash, combined with our respect for Socrates' philosophical acumen and integrity, gives us reason to question the ascription of a Priority of Definition principle to him.

If Socrates does, in fact, accept the Priority of Definition principle, then we must look for a way to reconcile this principle with passages like **T22-T30**. On the other hand, if he does not accept the principle, then we need to provide some other explanation for why he makes such statements as those found in passages **T7-T17**.

In the next chapter, we will look at a number of views put forth by scholars in an effort to explain why Socrates is interested in the search for definition, whether this interest entails his acceptance of a Priority of Definition principle, and what he believes the knowledge of definition will do for him.

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<sup>23</sup> Other passages where he explicitly claims to know about morally significant properties include *Ap.* 29b (**T25**, quoted later in this study) and *Gor.* 512b (**T35**).

<sup>24</sup> Besides Justice, other properties that Socrates expressly professes ignorance of include: Sound-mindedness (*Ch.* 165b, 175b), Friendship (*Ly.* 223b), Piety (*Eu.* 6b, 16a), and Virtue (*Gor.* 506a, 509a, *La.* 186c-e, 200e, *Meno* 71ab, 80c).

<sup>25</sup> Examples of these blanket admissions can be found at *Ap.* 21b, 21d, *Eu.* 2c, *HMi.* 372b and *Ion* 532d.

## **Four Interpretations**

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Over the past half-century, scholars have given considerable attention to the question of whether Socrates adheres to a Priority of Definition principle like **PD** and, if he does, what this adherence suggests about his understanding of knowledge. Four significant conceptions of his epistemological outlook have emerged from this scholarship: a received view, two significant departures from that view that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, and a new view that several commentators have put forth in the 1990s.

In this chapter, we will study each of these four interpretations and we will examine how well they correspond to the early Platonic texts. As part of this consideration, we will give special attention to whether any of these views can resolve the textual issues raised in Chapter One. With these four interpretations in mind, we will be prepared to probe the philosophical problems that some scholars attribute to Socrates' acceptance of the Priority of Definition.

### **The Received View — All moral knowledge must start with knowledge of definition**

The traditional view holds that Socrates' interest in definitions and his skepticism about claims to non-definitional based moral knowledge come from his belief that a person cannot have knowledge about a moral property unless he first knows the fundamental nature, or definition, of that property. As one of the chief proponents of this view, Richard Robinson [1953] explains, "Socrates thinks there is no truth whatever about [a moral property] that can be known before we know what [that property] is" (p. 51).

Supporters of this view claim that Socrates' repeated requests for definition, such as those found in passages **T<sub>1</sub>**, **T<sub>3</sub>**, **T<sub>7</sub>-T<sub>17</sub>**, **T<sub>19</sub>**, and **T<sub>20</sub>** that we discussed in Chapter One, are inspired by his acceptance of a broad, straightforwardly understood Priority of Definition principle that requires the relevant moral definition be identified before other knowledge about that property can be claimed. Peter Geach, another proponent of this view, explains how such a principle connects with Socrates' request for the definition of Piety found in the *Euthyphro*:

If Euthyphro really knows that his action [in prosecuting his father] is pious, then, [according to Socrates,] he must be able to say what is pious; he must not just give examples of pious actions, like his own action or again the punishment of sacrilegious robbery, but say "what kind of thing it is that makes whatever is pious to be pious." (p. 371)

Besides Robinson and Geach, proponents of this Received View include I.M. Crombie [1962], W.K.C. Guthrie [1969], Hugh Benson [1992, 1995] and, at one time, John Beversluis [1974]<sup>26</sup>. Though each of these scholars present his own version of the Priority of Definition principle, the versions generally follow **PD** that we derived in Chapter One.

Clearly, the Received View offers a solid account of Socrates' repeated requests for definition in the dialogues. It also offers a good explanation for his disinclination to accept knowledge claims about examples and qualities of a property when the property has not been satisfactorily defined. The view also explains his repeated professions of ignorance (some of which are listed in n. 25 and 26 in Chapter One); since he believes he has no knowledge of definitions, it would follow that if he accepts the Priority of Definition principle then he would reasonably consider himself devoid of all moral knowledge.

However, there are other passages from the early Platonic dialogues that pose problems for the Received View. These passages, which include **T22-T24** discussed in Chapter One, show Socrates making some explicit knowledge claims that, if the Received View is correct, then he should feel himself prohibited from making. This view also does not explain why he displays moral confidence when making numerous statements that appear to be implicit claims to knowledge, such as **T25-T30**. If he does believe himself to be ignorant of moral definitions and if the Received View is correct, then he should consider himself incapable of making such moral claims.

Interestingly, most commentators who support this view give little attention to these Socratic knowledge claims. But until an effective explanation can be found as to how such passages are consistent with a Priority of Definition principle, we must have some reservations about accepting the Received View.

### **The Irwin View — Knowledge of definition comes through testing true belief**

Terry Irwin's *Plato's Moral Theory* [1977] offers a significant departure from the Received View. In a brief section in that book, Irwin argues that Socrates does accept a broad, straightforwardly understood Priority of Definition principle. But, Irwin adds, Socrates' epistemological view is more complex than the traditional interpretation holds; Socrates recognizes a second intellectual state that earlier scholars failed to appreciate.

According to Irwin, Socrates uses the term 'knowledge' to refer specifically to a cognitive state where the knower holds a reliable, effectively defended understanding of the definition of a moral property and may also hold other pieces of knowledge about that property. Irwin writes:

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<sup>26</sup> Beversluis has since stepped away from this interpretation and is now one of many scholars who support what I call the New View. See Beversluis [1987].

Socrates observes strict conditions for knowledge, and allows knowledge about [a property] only to someone who can answer the Socratic question and say what it is. (p.40)

This Socratic notion differs from notions found in contemporary epistemology where knowledge is usually understood to be “justified, true belief.” In contemporary epistemology, the necessary justification can come in several forms and is not limited to reasoning from definition. In this way, Irwin seems to say, Socrates is using “knowledge” in a specific sense that should not be confused with our contemporary notion of the word.

If a person knows the definition of a moral property, Irwin says, and can use that definition to produce other information about the property, as Socrates envisions, then that person likely is epistemically superior to a person who has some other reasonable justification for accepting his beliefs. It is this epistemic superiority that Socrates anoints as knowledge and that he says is possession of experts.

Besides knowledge, Socrates does recognize a second intellectual state of positive beliefs, according to Irwin’s view. Irwin explains that this state, which has lower criteria than Socratic knowledge, requires only that the pieces of cognition be reliable. This reliability can be ascertained using philosophical testing, as Irwin writes:

The elenchos — apparently just a device for exposing confusion and inconsistency — is used to support positive doctrines. (p. 37)

Irwin talks of Socratic recognition of “true belief” that has passed several reliability tests but has not passed the criterion for knowledge.

With these beliefs, Socrates is able to, and does, hold several positive moral doctrines even though, as he says repeatedly, he has no moral knowledge. Irwin explains:

If Socrates demands this stringent justification [of the knowledge of definition] for a claim to knowledge, it is not surprising that he claims no knowledge for himself. But he can still claim positive beliefs, which lack this stringent explicit justification, but are still reliable. (p. 40)

Using this supposedly Socratic notion of true belief, Irwin is able to account for several passages from the Platonic texts that appear to be problems for the Received View. Passages showing Socrates having confidence in certain moral claims are the products of reliable and true beliefs, according to Irwin, and these beliefs are so reliable that Socrates steadfastly follows them even as he admits he has no knowledge. Moreover, the examples and other ideas that Socrates uses in his testing of proposed definitions are made available to him because he considers them to be reliable, and even true, beliefs. In this way, Irwin is able to make sense of how Socrates can follow a Priority of Definition principle and admit he is ignorant, yet still have a number of positive beliefs that he accepts and utilizes.

But Irwin's view appears unable to account for the small collection of Socrates' explicit knowledge claims, including **T22-T24** that we discussed in Chapter One. According to Irwin, Socrates does not recognize reliable and true beliefs to be sufficient for knowledge, so it would seem that these knowledge claims cannot be accounted for by the new intellectual state that Irwin ascribes to Socrates. Further, it seems from Socrates' repeated professions of ignorance that he has not satisfied the Priority of Definition requirement for any moral property, so the pieces of knowledge that he asserts in the texts would apparently not qualify for what Irwin describes as Socratic knowledge. Because of this textual problem, we have to be concerned that Irwin's view may not present us with a complete explanation of Socrates' epistemological outlook.

### **The Nehamas View — Only “challenging cases” require knowledge of definition**

Alexander Nehamas [1986] makes a more radical departure from the Received View by claiming that Socrates does not accept a broad Priority of Definition principle. Instead, Nehamas says, the passages that are usually interpreted as evidence for a principle like **PD** should be understood as demonstrating that Socrates holds other, significantly-less-controversial, epistemological principles concerning the need for knowledge of definitions.

In making this claim, Nehamas analyzes several pieces of text, including two passages we have already seen:

**T8** How do you know what sorts of things ( $\delta\pi\omega\iota\alpha$ ) are beautiful and ugly? Come now, can you say what the beautiful is? (*HMa.* 286cd)

**T17** If I do not know what Justice is, I shall hardly know whether it is a virtue or not or whether its possessor is happy or not. (*Rep.* I, 354bc)

In Chapter One, we used these passages to support, respectively, our ascriptions of **P1** and **Q** to Socrates. But Nehamas argues such arguments overinflate the scope of the epistemological principles that likely are at work in the passages.

According to Nehamas, the *Hippias Major* passage probably shows Socrates' commitment to the reasonable idea that a person must know the definition of a property in order to identify *all* examples of that property, including examples that most people would fail to recognize. Such a principle is significantly narrower than **PD** because the Nehamas principle does not entail that the person must know the property's definition in order to know *any* examples, including commonly-recognized ones.

Nehamas writes of the *Hippias Major* passage:

The emphasis [here] is not on the recognition of individual instances of the [beautiful]. On the contrary, it seems to me, the questioner seems to ask whether Socrates can tell *in general* what is and isn't [beautiful] without knowing what the

[beautiful] is.... [This] implies that the issue Socrates raises does not concern the mere recognition of individual cases of the [beautiful]. (pp. 287-288)

Nehamas believes that Socrates does not, in fact, accept **P<sub>1</sub>**, but instead he accepts the following principle:

**N<sub>1</sub>** Knowing the definition of a moral property is necessary for someone to know all examples of the property, including tough or borderline cases.

Similarly, Nehamas argues that the *Republic* I passage does not necessarily show a Socratic commitment to **Q**. Instead, he says, the piece of text demonstrates only that Socrates is committed to the more reasonable principle that a person must know the definition of a property in order to know *all* qualities of a property, including highly controversial qualities. Nehamas says of this passage:

The claim Socrates makes here is characteristically narrow. The features of justice with which Socrates is concerned have all, at least in this context, been highly disputed by Thrasymachus (significantly, they included the possibility that justice is wisdom and thus introduced the issue of teachability). In order to decide whether such features, once they have been denied in connection to justice by Thrasymachus, are actually true of it, we may well have to know what its definition or essence is. (p. 290)

In saying this, Nehamas commits himself to the idea that, instead of **Q**, Socrates holds the following belief:

**N<sub>2</sub>** Knowing the definition of a moral property is necessary in order for someone to know all qualities of the property, including controversial qualities

Nehamas similarly adduces other passages to support his ascription of these two epistemological principles to Socrates in place of a principle like **PD**. In essence, Nehamas says that Socrates holds a view of cognition that is shared by most philosophers — he accepts some claims to knowledge as being true, but he is skeptical about broad, unclear or controversial claims that are not accompanied by sufficient fundamental knowledge about the moral properties under discussion. Nehamas writes:

Socrates' insistence on the priority of definition is therefore very narrowly circumscribed. First, it seems to concern primarily the virtues and not every thing or every term, as Geach supposed. Second, it seems to apply only to specific issues, and not to all the features of virtue, as Geach's opponents actually conceded to him. Socrates seems to believe that we need to know the definition of a virtue in order to decide whether certain disputable features (either traditionally disputed, like teachability, or disputed on particular occasions, like its benefits in the case of Thrasymachus) are or are not true of it. We also need to know it in order to decide whether particularly disputable courses of action do or do not fall under it. And we need to know it in order to discourse generally about it, that is,

in order to present ourselves, as Hippias does, in the guise of experts in its regard. (pp. 290-291)

This view overcomes the textual problems of Socrates' implicit and explicit knowledge claims, which caused problems for the Received View and for Irwin. According to Nehamas, such claims are appropriate for Socrates to make because, if he accepts **N<sub>1</sub>** and **N<sub>2</sub>** instead of **PD**, he can possess all sorts of knowledge, albeit non-controversial or broad, without knowing the relevant definitions.

This view also seems effective at explaining away a number of passages that have historically been thought to demonstrate a Socratic commitment to some principle such as **PD**. Instead, according to Nehamas, these passages support the ascription of his much-less-controversial **N<sub>1</sub>** and **N<sub>2</sub>**.

However, there is one passage that, despite Nehamas' best efforts, does not seem to fit his view:

**T<sub>13</sub>** You must think I am someone blessed by the gods to know whether Virtue can be taught or how it is attained. In truth, I am far from knowing whether or not it can be taught — indeed, I do not happen to know what Virtue, itself, is... How can I know what sort of thing something is when I do not even know what it is? Do you suppose that somebody who does not in any way know who Meno is could know whether he was noble or rich or well-born or the reverse? Is that possible, do you think? (*Meno* 71a-71b)

Socrates' rhetorical question of “How can I know what sort of thing something is when I do not even know what it is? (ὁ δὲ μὴ οὐδὲ τί ἐστὶ, πῶς ἂν ὁποῖόν γέ τι εἰδείην;)” is of tremendous importance. Logically, this question seems to commit him to accepting the principle that it is necessary for a person to know what something is in order to know about that thing.

Nehamas works hard to interpret this passage as supporting his principle **N<sub>2</sub>**. He asserts that the epistemological scope of the rhetorical question must be much narrower than it first appears. Nehamas writes:

[The question] is made in a very specific context. And this context, together with the force of the example through which Socrates illustrates the principle, places severe limits on the range of features of virtue about which he claims to be ignorant as long as he is also ignorant of the definition.

The *Meno* is essentially concerned with the question [of] whether or not virtue can be taught, and this is the issue that is explicitly under discussion here. We could now say that whether or not virtue is teachable is as *disputable* as the question of what constitutes its essence. Alternatively, we could say that it is a feature which, whether or not it is strictly speaking *essential*, belongs to virtue directly on account of what the essence of virtue is. (pp. 284-285)

That is, Nehamas asserts that readers should recognize that the context of Socrates' rhetorical question indicates its narrowness of scope; a person only needs to know the definition of the property in order to answer certain difficult questions about the property.

Unfortunately, Nehamas' argument on this point seems strained; it is difficult to narrow the scope of ὁποῖόν because it is very broad term, best rendered into English as "the sort of thing." However, if this were the only textual problem for his view, then we could probably dismiss the problem.

There is another problem for Nehamas that emerges from Socrates' many broad ignorance claims, including the two below:

**T<sub>31</sub>** I must reproach myself that I know nothing at all about Virtue (ἐμᾶντὸν καταμέμφομαι ὡς οὐκ εἰδὼς περὶ ἀρετῆς το παράπαν). (*Meno* 71b)

**T<sub>32</sub>** For I am all wrong about how things work and I know nothing about them....  
I am found to know nothing. (*HMi.* 372b)

It seems clear from both the words and the apparent emotional import of these passages that Socrates considers himself to be generally ignorant of moral matters, and not simply lacking the knowledge that would give him the authority to knowledgeably answer difficult questions or to speak in broad terms. Hence, it appears inappropriate for Socrates to consider himself so completely ignorant if he is only unable to satisfy Nehamas' **N<sub>1</sub>** and **N<sub>2</sub>**. However, he would be entitled to have such strong lament for his ignorance if he accepts a Priority of Definition principle like **PD** that asserts that, if he does not know the relevant definitions, then he knows nothing else about moral properties.

Because of this textual concern involving the ignorance claims and the earlier issue raised by **T<sub>13</sub>**, we have reason to be skeptical of embracing Nehamas' view.

### **The New View — Two types of knowledge**

In 1985, Gregory Vlastos presented a new interpretation of Socrates' epistemological outlook. In essence, this view asserts that the philosopher recognizes two types of knowledge, only one of which is governed by a Priority of Definition principle like **PD**. In subsequent years, other prominent Socrates scholars, including Beversluis [1987], James Leshner [1987], Paul Woodruff [1987, 1990], C.D.C. Reeve [1989], and Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith [1989, 1994], have offered similar accounts of Socrates' epistemological view. Taken together, we will refer to these interpretations as the New View.

According to these scholars, the Priority of Definition principle is fundamental to one type of knowledge that Socrates recognizes and very much wants to have. The scholars refer to this knowledge as "certain knowledge" or "expert knowledge," which, they say, is

a cognitive state where a person, by knowing the definition of a moral property, is able to speak knowledgeably about that property, including many difficult-to-recognize or unusual cases involving that property. These scholars hold that, by reasoning from the known definition, the moral expert is able to recognize and divulge other pieces of knowledge.

The second type of knowledge that these commentators say Socrates recognizes is not supported by definition but instead is verified and judged dependable through other means. Many people, including Socrates himself, possess pieces of lesser knowledge, according to these scholars, but having this knowledge does not qualify the knower as a moral expert; he cannot draw on the foundational knowledge of definition when discussing the piece of moral knowledge that he possesses and he cannot pursue other pieces of knowledge about the property by reasoning from definition. Instead, his knowledge is restricted to whatever pieces of knowledge are provided to him by his sources of verification and justification.

The commentators differ on what sources of verification and justification Socrates recognizes for lesser knowledge. Vlastos, Leshner, and Beversluis primarily talk of this knowledge as being the product of elenctic testing while Woodruff, Reeve, and Brickhouse and Smith list a number of different sources for lesser knowledge, including types of justification that many contemporary epistemologists theorize are sufficient to qualify belief as knowledge in the contemporary sense of the word.

These scholars also differ on the very important question of how expert knowledge is superior to lesser knowledge. According to Vlastos and Beversluis, expert knowledge is superior because it is more heavily justified than lesser knowledge. However, these two scholars fail to state clearly what the nature of this justification is or how it is obtained. Woodruff and Brickhouse and Smith say the superiority of expert knowledge lies in its explanatory power: it not only provides information that some instance exemplifies a property or that some property contains a quality, but it also draws on the definition to explain *why* this is so and it is reliable in all cases. It is this explanatory power that elevates expert knowledge, according to these scholars.

Despite these disagreements, the general view is the same for all of these scholars: Socrates recognizes two types of knowledge, expert knowledge that is rooted in the knowledge of definition and lesser knowledge that is justified by some method other than reasoning from definition. Further, they say that he holds lesser knowledge in little regard while he aspires to expert knowledge.

Such a Socratic division of knowledge into two classes should not strike us as peculiar or *ad hoc*, Vlastos explains. Indeed, it is common in most people's epistemological views. Vlastos writes:

Let us reflect on our own use of the terms 'know' and 'knowledge'. That they are all-purpose words, used to mean quite different things in different contexts, is a commonplace in present-day philosophy.... There are times when we readily say, in a given context, that we know something, while in a sufficiently different context we would be reluctant to say that we know it and might even prefer to deny that we do, and this without any sense of having contradicted ourselves thereby. (p. 11)

Vlastos and the others support their ascription of this epistemological view to Socrates by noting that he, like us, uses the term "know" in the dialogues in ways that would seem contradictory if he did not recognize the existence of two types of knowledge. As we discussed in Chapter One, Socrates repeatedly asserts his ignorance of moral matters, yet he also sometimes explicitly claims to possess pieces of moral knowledge and he often displays remarkable confidence while making moral claims. This apparent contradiction between his ignorance and his knowledge is dissolved if we attribute to him this bifurcated conception of knowledge, as Vlastos explains:

When declaring that he knows absolutely nothing, [Socrates] is referring to that very strong sense in which philosophers had used before... and would go on using long after... — where one says one knows only when one is claiming certainty. This would leave him free to admit that he does have moral knowledge in a radically weaker sense — the one required by his own maverick method of philosophical inquiry, the *elenchus*. (p. 12)

In this way, Vlastos and the other proponents of the New View draw on both Socrates' knowledge claims and his ignorance claims to support their interpretation.

It is clear that this view receives significant textual support from passages showing Socratic knowledge claims and ignorance claims. The view also connects well with the various passages historically adduced to support the ascription of a Priority of Definition principle such as **PD**; the scholars simply claim that these pieces of text demonstrate Socrates' conception of expert knowledge and not knowledge in a general sense.

The most common objection that opponents to the New View raise is to argue that Socrates likely would not use the term "knowledge" in two significantly different senses, especially without carefully noting to his interlocutors exactly which sense he is using. Benson [1992], for one, argues that Socrates is a "linguistic monist" who would only use one understanding for each term.

This argument can, of course, be countered by Vlastos' comments that most people, even the epistemologically unsophisticated, use the term 'knowledge' in both ways. It should not be surprising to us, Vlastos would say, if Socrates, when talking in his customary, sociable way, would alternate between the two senses and would expect his interlocutors to recognize which sense he is using at a given moment. While it is unclear whether Vlastos' response fully quiets Benson's objection, we likely are unwilling to be skeptical on account of this point alone.

There is a second problem, however, that may give us reason to hesitate before adopting the New View. Most of the proponents of this interpretation seem to agree that positive moral beliefs accepted by Socrates all hold the same epistemological weight — that is, they are all beliefs that have been judged reliable and true through some justifying operation such as the elenchus. Socrates, himself, seems to recognize that, though his positive beliefs fall short of expert knowledge, some of them are reliable and true in this way. But there are other passages where he indicates that, though he has confidence in some of his beliefs, he is unsure whether they are true. Here are two such pieces of text:

**T6** [The truth of what I say about Justice] has been made evident by what I said earlier in our discussion and is bound together, if I may speak crudely, with reasons of steel and adamant — so it would seem at least, on the face of it. (*Gor.* 508e-509a)

**T33** I cannot, now that this has happened to us, discard the arguments I used in advance, but they seem to me much the same as ever and I revere and honor the same ones as before. Unless we can bring forward better ones in our present situation, be sure that I shall not give way to you. (*Crito* 46bc)

In both of these passages, Socrates clearly indicates that his confidence in his beliefs is inspired by those beliefs' performance under philosophical scrutiny of the sort that the proponents of the New View seem to consider is appropriate justification for lesser knowledge. Yet Socrates, in these passages, does not appear to treat these beliefs as knowledge; he seems to recognize that it is possible that they could prove false. Given the high value that he places on reliability, it seems inappropriate that he would consider certain beliefs to be knowledge — even lesser knowledge — if they could prove false.

This issue does not demonstrate that the New View is false, but only that it is incomplete — there seems to be more to Socrates' epistemological outlook than just two levels of knowledge. This view will have to be completed before we can confidently attribute it to Socrates.

We now have an appreciation of the different conceptions of Socrates' epistemological outlook that scholars have put forth in the last half century. Further, we understand how

these views depict his interest in definitions and whether they support the ascription to him of a principle such as **PD**. With this information in mind, we can now shift our attention to three philosophical problems that some scholars attribute to the Priority of Definition.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Three Philosophic Problems with the Priority of Definition**

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Just as Meletus, in the *Apology*, brought three criminal charges against Socrates, so do many scholars who ascribe to him a Priority of Definition principle such as **PD** bring three philosophical charges against his epistemological view. In my Introduction, I briefly described these criticisms as follows:

- (1) The principle is false because a person does not need to know the definition of a property in order to possess other knowledge about the property;
- (2) The principle, if it were true, would wholly undermine the search for knowledge because other knowledge about a moral property must be gained before the definition of the property can be known;
- (3) The principle is morally harmful because, in seeming to put moral knowledge out of human reach, it can lead people to lose interest in moral matters altogether and ignore ethical strictures that they probably should obey.

In this chapter, I will explore the reasoning behind each of these charges in order to better understand why the Priority of Definition is thought to be objectionable. If any of these criticisms succeeds, then we have all the more reason to want to know if Socrates does, in fact, subscribe to the principle. If he does, then this error would have disastrous philosophical consequences for him and would, in turn, lead us to call into question the “wisdom of Socrates.”

#### **Charge One — The principle is false**

Many scholars have argued that the Priority of Definition principle is obviously false; people can and do have knowledge about properties without first knowing the philosophically rigorous definitions of these properties. Richard Robinson [1953] presents this criticism as follows:

A twentieth century philosopher would [say of the Priority of Definition] that it is a matter of experience that we can and do make useful statements about [a property] without being able to say what [that property] is in the way Socrates desires; and therefore that [his reasoning in support of the Priority of Definition] must contain some false premise or fallacious inference. (p. 52)

These critics point to common experience to support their argument. They assert, for instance, that few people could give a philosophically rigorous definition of the property “being a car” yet almost everyone knows examples of cars (e.g., that the shiny thing in my driveway is a car) or qualities of cars (e.g., cars are machines). Likewise, these scholars say, a person does not need to know the definition of a moral property like Justice in order

to know such things as that it is unjust to maliciously harm others or that Justice is a virtue. Thus, these scholars argue, the Priority of Definition principle is clearly false and, if Socrates does accept the principle, then his epistemological view is flawed and his entire philosophic project is suspect.

These critics do admit that deriving information from Socratic definitions is one way of gaining knowledge about a property. But, they say, it is an exceedingly arduous and often unsuccessful method, as shown by the many *aporetic* dialogues. Further, they say, there are more effective methods for knowledge acquisition, such as using the process of inductive reasoning. These scholars conclude that, since there are other successful ways of gaining knowledge about properties, we should not be beholden to the Socratic method grounded in the Priority of Definition.

### **Charge Two — The principle fully undermines the search for knowledge**

Many epistemologists argue that a person comes to know the definition of a property through a process of inductive reasoning that begins with the consideration of examples of the property. For instance, a person could only come to know the definition of “being a car” through examination of several cars, followed by the abstracting and testing of possible characteristics that could apply to a universal “car-ness.” Likewise, these philosophers would say, moral properties can only be knowingly defined through a similar process; knowledge of what, for instance, Justice is can only come through the consideration of what common features are shared between various known just acts.

For these epistemologists, Socrates’ method of knowledge acquisition seems wholly wrong. Consider Wittgenstein’s [1958] comments:

[Socrates’ method] has shackled philosophical investigation; for it has not only led to no results but also made the philosopher dismiss as irrelevant the concrete cases which alone could have helped him to understand the usage of the general term.<sup>27</sup> When Socrates asks the question, “What is knowledge?” he does not even regard it as a preliminary answer to enumerate cases of knowledge. (p. 19-20)

Clearly, some scholars say, this approach to moral knowledge acquisition is fully contrary to a method grounded in the Priority of Definition principle. According to the principle, in order for a person to know examples of a property, he must first discover the definition of that property. But according to proponents of the current epistemological view, knowledge of this definition can only result from known examples. John Beversluis [1974] explains why there is tension between the two views:

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<sup>27</sup> In stating this, Wittgenstein disregards the fact that Socrates’ philosophical project is markedly different from Wittgenstein’s linguistic project.

For [Socrates] to allow that the investigation into what [a property] is may begin inductively by means of scrutiny of known examples of [that property] would be tantamount to his holding that we have already correctly identified them as examples. The view of epistemological priority ascribed to him, however, is precisely the opposite. That is, the ability to correctly identify something as an instance itself presupposes that we already know the [definition]. (p. 333)

This tension, according to some scholars, reveals that Socrates is following a wholly ineffective method of knowledge acquisition.<sup>28</sup> As Crombie [1962], using the example of the moral property Piety, explains:

Unless I first know what acts are pious, how can I ever begin to enquire what Piety is in itself? ...Surely it must be a blunder to suggest that the ability to define or analyze a property is logically prior to the ability to decide what things have that property. (p. 57)

Unlike the first criticism, which makes no claim about the possibility of acquiring knowledge of definitions given the constraint of the Priority of Definition principle, this second criticism asserts that, in light of current epistemology, the principle clearly bars access to knowledge of definitions by saying that there can be no knowledge of examples of a property prior to knowing the definition of that property.

In this way, these critics claim that if Socrates does accept the Priority of Definition principle, then he can never achieve success in his search for moral knowledge. According to their view, Socrates' ongoing pursuit of moral knowledge in the face of this impossibility demonstrates either his blindness to the impossibility of success or his apparent willingness to carry on a search that he knows is doomed.

### **Charge Three — The principle is morally harmful**

Scholars who level this third charge argue that the Priority of Definition principle is not only problematic epistemologically but also practically. These critics point out that Socrates' own professions of ignorance, inspired by his inability to satisfy the Priority of Definition requirement, would suggest to observers that they are doomed to never have moral knowledge. They may even become convinced that no moral truth exists and that

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<sup>28</sup> Some earlier scholars (e.g., Robinson and Geach) go so far as to claim that Socrates gives no consideration at all to *any* sort of example — either known or hypothesized — of a property (in contrast to Socrates' consulting of *known* examples, as per the Second Charge) as part of his search for definition. But this extreme criticism is obviously false; Socrates repeatedly considers examples both in his refutations of various interlocutors' proposed definitions and in his hypothesizing of potential definitions. However, it is unclear what epistemic status Socrates gives to these notions about examples. Beversluis [1987] claims Socrates believes he knows these examples are examples of the properties under discussion while Benson [1990b] argues that these are only justifiably-believed (but not known) examples. Subsequent scholars typically fall into one of these two camps.

they need not be concerned with ethical matters. Geach [1966] offers the best known and most potent statement of this criticism. He writes:

I am sure that imbuing a mind with the Socratic fallacy is quite likely to be morally harmful. Socrates, let us suppose, starts chatting away with an ingenious youth and says he has been puzzled about what injustice is. The youth says, “Well, that’s easy; swindling is unjust.” Socrates asks him what swindling is; no, examples will not do — a formal definition is required. Failing that, we don’t know, do we?, what swindling is, or that it is unjust. The dialogue, we may assume, ends in the usual *aporia*. The ingenious youth decides that perhaps swindling is not unjust; he turns to ways of villainy, and ends as one of the Thirty Tyrants. After all, a number of Socrates’ young men did end that way. (p. 372)

Though his writing is somewhat over-dramatic, Geach does have a point: Socrates’ epistemological view, if it does include the Priority of Definition, could promote ethical skepticism and moral indifference that, Geach understandably believes, is morally harmful. This, in turn, could be most harmful both to the new skeptic and to those around him. As Beversluis [1974]<sup>29</sup> laments, because of Socrates’ epistemology, “the attempt to live the good life proves abortive at its very inception” (p. 334).

### **Results of the Charges**

If these three charges accurately show flaws in the Priority of Definition principle, then we have much to consider in our examination of Socrates. Does he, in fact, subscribe to this principle or are we misunderstanding the texts? If we do understand the texts correctly and he does subscribe to a Priority of Definition principle such as **PD**, then we have reason to question the value of much of his philosophy, because much of his philosophy would be grounded in a flawed epistemological view.

In the next chapter, we will return to the interpretations of Socrates’ epistemological view that we discussed in Chapter Two. By doing this, we hope to find an interpretation that successfully acquits Socrates of the philosophical charges raised in this chapter and resolves the textual issues raised in Chapter One. If we are successful in this work, then we will likely have found an understanding of him that makes his philosophical position sensible and clears the way for the wisdom of Socrates.

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<sup>29</sup> See n. 2.

## **Responding to the charges**

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In Chapter Two, we examined four general interpretations of Socrates' epistemological view. We considered two interpretations — the Received View and Irwin's View — that assert that he accepts a broad, straightforward Priority of Definition principle such as **PD** as the only path to Knowledge. We also discussed two interpretations — Nehamas' View and the New View — that held that the Priority of Definition was important to Socrates only in order for him to attain a certain high level of knowledge but that he could have other ideas about a moral property without knowing the property's definition.

Clearly, these different views offer different perspectives on whether Socrates is susceptible to the three charges that we outlined in the previous chapter. In this chapter, we will revisit each of the four views to learn how they approach the three alleged problems with a Priority of Definition principle. Following this study, we will be prepared, in the final chapter, to present our own analysis of Socrates' epistemological view.

### **The Received View — Socrates accepts the Priority of Definition, but the principle is flawed.**

As we discussed in Chapter Two, the traditional interpretation of Socrates' epistemological view holds that he accepts some Priority of Definition principle such as **PD**. Moreover, this view maintains that the principle should be understood in a straightforward way — he believes there can be no knowledge of a moral property's examples or qualities unless the knower first understands the property's definition. Many supporters of this interpretation also say that his acceptance of the principle prohibits him from using inductive reasoning to discover a property's definition because the principle maintains that, without knowledge of the relevant definition, examples of a property cannot be reliably identified and a definition induced from the use of such examples would be suspect.

Since it is clear that the Received View holds that Socrates accepts the Priority of Definition principle, our attention turns to the question of whether or not the principle is susceptible to the charges listed in the previous chapter. Most of the scholars of the last half-century who support this view, including Robinson, Crombie, Geach, and, for a time, Beversluis, agree that Socrates' epistemological view is susceptible to at least one of the three criticisms. However, as we examine the pertinent scholarly writings, we discover that different scholars level different charges against him, depending on the commentators' own epistemological views.

All of the Received View scholars who we have mentioned agree that Socrates is guilty of the first charge: he accepts a false Priority of Definition principle and therefore he does not recognize certain pieces of knowledge that he should be able to recognize. Geach gives the most energetic explanation for how we can recognize this supposedly Socratic principle to be false:

Let us be clear that [Socrates' epistemological view] *is* a fallacy and nothing better. It has stimulated philosophical enquiry, but still it is a fallacy. We know heaps of things without being able to define the terms in which we express our knowledge. Formal definitions are only one way of elucidating terms<sup>30</sup>; a set of examples may, in a given case, be more useful than a formal definition. (p. 371)

Socrates, Geach says, accepts an epistemological principle that common experience reveals to be flawed. For this reason, Geach and the others claim that Socrates is guilty of the first charge.

Some of the commentators who support this Received View also argue that Socrates is guilty of the second charge, that in accepting the Priority of Definition, he condemns himself to never gaining knowledge of the definitions he desires. According to these scholars, such definitional knowledge can only come through inductive reasoning from examples already known — which, they say, is prohibited by the principle. These scholars, in leveling this charge, are following the epistemological view championed by Wittgenstein, as we discussed in Chapter Three. According to Wittgenstein and others who share his view, knowledge of a property's definition can only be gained through consideration of instances of that property. However, they say, because Socrates accepts the Priority of Definition principle, he eschews consideration of examples, making it impossible for him to ever discover the definitions he desires. As Beversluis [1974] rhetorically asks, “Without recourse to cases and the ordinary meaning of words, how is the inquiry [into definition] even to begin?” (p. 332).

Among the supporters of the Received View, Geach is alone in advancing the third charge that Socrates' epistemological outlook could turn its adherents into moral skeptics who lose interest in ethical matters. However, any scholar who accepts the traditional view could advance this charge. When faced with a difficult — if not impossible — epistemic task, it would seem reasonable to assume that Socrates' followers could be led to such “morally deleterious” skepticism.

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<sup>30</sup> This passage suggests that Geach, similar to Wittgenstein (see n.1, Ch. 3), believes a Socratic definition is the same as a linguistic definition.

As we see, the supporters of the Received View assert that Socrates accepts a flawed Priority of Definition principle. Though there is no consensus among these scholars on whether he is guilty of all three charges, it is clear that, according to their interpretation of his epistemological view and their own conceptions of knowledge, he is vulnerable to assertions that his view is false, that it prohibits access to knowledge of definitions, and that it promotes a morally dangerous skepticism.

**The Irwin View — Socrates accepts the Priority of Definition, but the principle is not flawed.**

Irwin's notion holds that Socrates recognizes at least two intellectual states: a knowledge state where the pieces of cognition satisfy the Priority of Definition principle and a reliable belief state where ideas have proven trustworthy through various types of philosophic testing but the beliefs do not qualify as knowledge because they do not satisfy **PD** or another, similar principle. This view successfully absolves Socrates from all three of the criticisms mentioned in Chapter Three.

The first charge asserts that it is possible, and even common, for a person to have moral knowledge without his knowing the relevant moral definitions. Irwin's view would hold that this epistemological outlook is probably correct — if 'knowledge' is understood in the contemporary sense of "justified true belief." Contemporary epistemology allows that the necessary justification could be produced in several ways, not just through the process of deduction used as part of the Priority of Definition principle. Thus, knowledge, in the contemporary sense, is not necessarily the product of definition.

But Socrates uses the term 'knowledge' in a different sense that makes it dependent on the Priority of Definition, Irwin says. Because of this specific sense of the term, Socrates is not guilty of the charge leveled against him because it is far from clear that we can know "heaps" of this type of knowledge unless we first know definitions. However, Irwin would add, Socrates does recognize the existence of a second intellectual state of positive belief that is roughly equivalent to the contemporary sense of 'knowledge'. Pieces of cognition that fall under this state have been proven reliable, and even true, by means other than deduction from definition. In this way, Irwin might say, Socrates does allow that "we can know heaps of things," if by "know" we mean the contemporary sense of knowledge that is reflective of this second, lower intellectual state that Irwin says Socrates recognizes.

Irwin would also draw on this lower Socratic intellectual state to free Socrates from the charge that, because inductive reasoning is required to discover a moral property's definition, the Priority of Definition principle would produce an epistemological view where it would be impossible to gain any sort of moral knowledge. Socrates can use

inductive reasoning to discover the definition of a property, Irwin says, although this inductive reasoning would use reliable and true beliefs, and not knowledge, as the starting point for this induction. Irwin writes:

The [Priority of Definition] principle justified the search for definition; but if no definition can be found without ...examples, which depend[s] on a definition, the principle also makes the search futile and misguided.... [But] if he observes a distinction between knowledge and true belief, he avoids these objections; he can insist that without knowledge of what virtue is, we can still have fully justified beliefs about virtue and still allow us true beliefs to recognize examples of virtue. (pp. 40-41)

That is, Irwin argues that Socrates can use reliable and true beliefs inductively, in an effort to discover and test the definitions of moral properties.

Some epistemologists might call into question this method of gaining knowledge of definitions. They would argue that if the reliable and true beliefs used in the induction are not pieces of knowledge then it seems wrong to consider the product of the induction as knowledge.

Irwin does not address this issue, but we can offer two possible responses for him. One response would be that, though none of the individual true and reliable beliefs would qualify as knowledge, their cumulative support of the definition would provide enough epistemological “weight” to elevate the emergent definition as knowledge. A second response that Irwin could offer is to say that the definition qualifies as knowledge even though it is produced through induction from beliefs. This is because the definition explains why these beliefs are true, why certain instances are examples of a property, and why certain qualities belong to the property. That is, Irwin could say that the demonstrated explanatory power of the definition qualifies it as knowledge.

Turning to the third criticism, Irwin does not specifically address the charge but we can see that the two intellectual states that he ascribes to Socrates would free Socrates from Geach’s claim that his epistemological view is “morally deleterious.” While it is true that knowledge, in the sense that Irwin says Socrates understands the term, is likely not attainable, Irwin’s view does allow Socrates to say that people can and do gain reliable and true moral beliefs. Moreover, Irwin would point out that these beliefs can then be used in the pursuit of knowledge of definitions. In this way, the existence of moral truth would seem to be both real and important to Socrates’ followers, Irwin would say, and this would prevent them from losing interest in ethical matters. Because of this, Irwin would disagree that Socrates’ epistemological view, centered on the Priority of Definition, would be morally harmful.

### **Nehamas' View — Socrates does not accept the Priority of Definition**

According to Nehamas, Socrates does not accept a broad epistemological principle such as **PD**; instead, he merely believes that knowledge of the relevant definitions is necessary in order for a person to speak knowledgeably about a moral property in general or to knowingly recognize controversial or hard-to-identify examples and qualities of that moral property. Using this view, Nehamas' Socrates avoids the three criticisms listed in Chapter Three.

Concerning the first charge, Nehamas would agree that the Priority of Definition principle is false and that it is possible for people to have knowledge about moral properties without knowing the relevant definitions. Indeed, he would go so far as to say that Socrates shares this view and does, himself, possess moral knowledge — though his knowledge is only about non-controversial, easy-to-identify aspects of the properties. Nehamas would add that Socrates does believe that a person must know the relevant definitions if he is to have knowledge about the controversial and difficult-to-identify aspects. But, in holding this epistemological belief, Socrates would not be susceptible to the first charge.

Nehamas likely would also agree that adherence to the Priority of Definition principle would prevent a person from gaining knowledge of moral definitions because inductive reasoning could not be employed to discover the definitions. However, Nehamas would add, Socrates voices no epistemological principle that would have him avoid using inductive reasoning. Moreover, the scholar would add, Socrates has access to, and often considers, many pieces of non-controversial, specific moral knowledge in his elenctic efforts to identify these definitions. This behavior and the lack of any textual support for ascribing a stronger principle to Socrates should be evidence enough that he is not guilty of this second charge, Nehamas would say.

He would similarly argue that Socrates eludes the third charge that his epistemological view would drive its adherents to ethical skepticism. Because Nehamas' view allows Socrates to hold some moral knowledge, Socrates would have no philosophical reason to become a moral skeptic. Moral knowledge is all around him (though, of course, access to general knowledge or controversial or tough pieces of knowledge may be very difficult to attain), and one surely cannot doubt the existence of knowledge that one already possesses, Nehamas would say. Socrates, himself, clearly never became a moral skeptic nor did he lose interest in ethical matters; instead, even at the very end of his life, he

remained highly motivated to pursue moral knowledge.<sup>31</sup> So, Nehamas would say, there is no reason to charge Socrates with accepting an epistemological principle that is “morally deleterious.”

Because Nehamas avoids attributing a broad Priority of Definition principle like **PD** to Socrates, his view easily frees the philosopher from the three charges. As Nehamas, himself, writes, “little, if anything, is wrong with Socrates’ view” (p. 277).

**The New View — Socrates accepts the Priority of Definition, but only for “expert knowledge.”**

Vlastos and the proponents of the New View assert that Socrates, in the dialogues, uses terms like ‘knowledge’ and ‘know’ in two distinct senses: one referring to expert knowledge and grounded on the Priority of Definition, and the other referring to lesser knowledge and justified through means other than definition. These scholars go on to explain that he possesses pieces of lesser knowledge but he aspires to expert knowledge that, unfortunately, may be beyond human grasp.

This epistemological view, which Vlastos claims is shared by most people, allows Socrates to escape the first charge that the Priority of Definition principle is false and that people can possess moral knowledge without knowing the relevant definitions. The supporters of the New View would point out that Socrates does recognize people can have such knowledge and, further, that he himself occasionally claims to have moral knowledge. But these scholars would add that these instances are merely examples of lesser knowledge that, though useful, is not as useful as expert knowledge because lesser knowledge cannot lead to countless other pieces of information in the way that expert knowledge can. Unfortunately, expert knowledge can only follow from knowledge of definition, these commentators would say, and though we humans may know “heaps of things,” we must admit that without this definitional knowledge we are unable to reliably and consistently discover the truth about controversial moral cases. Hence, these scholars would say, the first charge against Socrates is effectively refuted; he does allow that we can have knowledge without definitions even though the knowledge we would have is not the type of knowledge he desires.

Likewise, these supporters of the New View argue that Socrates is innocent of the second charge that his epistemological view prevents him from using induction to discover definitions. This group of scholars would point out that Socrates, as a possessor of lesser

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<sup>31</sup> Jim Klagge points out that Plato, who was heavily influenced by Socrates, never became indifferent to morality but instead used Socrates as an example to promote the moral education of students at the Academy.

knowledge, could use this knowledge to reason inductively in an effort to discover definitions. Hence, the commentators would say, Socrates clearly is not guilty of this second charge.

Some epistemologists might question whether expert knowledge can be produced from lesser knowledge. Scholars who support the New View respond to this question in two different ways, depending on how they understand the significance of definition in elevating expert knowledge above lesser knowledge.

Vlastos and Beversluis, who say that expert knowledge is superior because it is “certain,” might argue that because the definition and all knowledge derived from it is supported by the cumulative weight of all the pieces of lesser knowledge used to determine and provide evidence for the definition, this cumulative weight produces a level of knowledge that is higher than lesser knowledge. On the other hand, Woodruff and Brickhouse and Smith would say expert knowledge is superior because of its content and not its justification; by having full explanatory power over a moral property, the expert would be able, in all cases, to make reliable judgments concerning the property. They would further argue that higher knowledge can result from lower because the definitions are produced through philosophical reasoning about lesser knowledge. This “added ingredient” of philosophical reasoning, then, is what elevates expert knowledge above lesser knowledge.

All supporters of this New View would say that Socrates does not fall prey to the third criticism that his conception of knowledge could prompt his followers to become moral skeptics and lose interest in ethical matters. It is true, they would admit, that Socratic philosophers may grow skeptical of their ability to gain expert moral knowledge but this should not lead them to then believe there is no ethical truth at all — indeed, they likely already possess, and recognize that they possess, lesser moral knowledge. Granted, this knowledge lacks the philosophical significance of expert knowledge but it demonstrates that there are answers to moral questions and that ethical matters are significant. And with this recognition, a reasonable follower of Socrates should not be inclined to lose interest in ethical matters.

Of the four views of Socrates’ epistemological outlook that we have considered, three offer successful explanations for how he would avoid the three charges listed in Chapter Three. Only the traditional Received View depicts him as having an epistemological view that is significantly flawed. This distinction of the Received View is important because it adds to our suspicions about whether this type of interpretation is accurate; according to the Principle of Charity, we should be hesitant to ascribe a significantly flawed

philosophical belief to Socrates because it is doubtful that a philosopher of his standing would fall prey to such error. This, of course, does not mean that Socrates cannot have a flawed conception of knowledge but only that it should heighten our willingness to consider other interpretations before we resign ourselves to accepting the Received View as correctly depicting his conception of knowledge.

With this in mind, we can now turn to the final chapter of this thesis and offer our own interpretation of Socrates' epistemological view.

## **Towards Socrates' Epistemological View**

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So far, we have discussed four general interpretations of Socrates' conception of knowledge and its relationship to the Priority of Definition. As part of this discussion, we have considered how these interpretations would handle three philosophic objections that some scholars have raised against epistemological views grounded on a principle like **PD**. We have also examined how well these interpretations correspond to the Platonic texts.

In this final chapter, I will argue that Socrates' epistemological view is more sophisticated than is described by any of the four interpretations we have discussed. I believe that, instead of the one or two intellectual states that other scholars have ascribed to him, textual and philosophic considerations reveal that he recognizes three intellectual states: expert knowledge, lesser knowledge, and supported belief. Further, I believe that he does accept **PD** as the fundamental criterion for expert knowledge. However, I believe that his use of this principle does not subject his philosophy to the three criticisms that we discussed in Chapter Three.

In advancing this interpretation, I am, in a sense, marrying Irwin's View to the New View. I do this because I believe we need elements from both interpretations to adequately explain how the texts represent Socrates' conception of knowledge.

We will begin this chapter by briefly discussing why Irwin's View and the New View appear more promising than Nehamas' View and the Received View. We will then examine some of Socrates' claims about what he knows, what he does not know, and what beliefs he accepts but does not count as knowledge. We will then draw these claims together to show that they correspond to the three-part intellectual view that I ascribe to Socrates. Finally, we will discuss whether my view would be attractive to a great thinker like Socrates or is merely an ad hoc explanation of what is occurring in the texts.

If this final chapter succeeds, then we have both textual and philosophic reasons to ascribe my interpretation to Socrates.

### **Revisiting the Four Views**

In Chapter Two, we examined two interpretations, the Received View and Irwin's View, that each claimed Socrates accepted a broad, straightforwardly understood Priority of Definition principle. We also considered two interpretations, Nehamas' View and the New View, that asserted his demand for definition is not as straightforward as it is usually understood. It is my belief that, though none of these views can be fully discredited, we

should be more inclined to accept an interpretation that follows Irwin's View or the New View, and we should be hesitant to accept the Received View or Nehamas' View.

According to the Received View, Socrates firmly accepts a Priority of Definition principle such as **PD**. Further, he admits that he does not possess any moral knowledge because he does not know the relevant moral definitions. In Chapter One, we noted that there is considerable textual support for this view because there are many passages where he appears to state that such moral knowledge can only come from knowledge of definitions.

But we also pointed out that, despite his definition requirement, there are a few passages in the early dialogues where Socrates makes explicit claims to moral knowledge of properties whose definitions he seems not to know (e.g., **T22** - **T24**). He also shows extreme confidence in a number of positive assertions about moral matters (e.g., **T25** - **T30**). If Socrates is consistent in the application of his epistemological view, then the Received View cannot account for these passages. Indeed, these pieces of text appear to directly conflict with the interpretation. For this reason, we should doubt whether this view correctly explains Socrates' epistemological outlook.

We have further reason to be skeptical of this view because of the situation in which it places Socrates in relation to the three philosophical objections that we discussed in Chapter Three. If this interpretation is correct, then it seems very likely that he would be guilty of accepting a false epistemological principle, that this principle will render his search for definitions fruitless, and that the principle is morally deleterious.

However, it is unlikely that a philosopher of Socrates' stature would accept an epistemological principle with such problems. One of the fundamental rules of philosophical scholarship is the Principle of Charity, which asserts that a person should not be credited with holding a problematic philosophical outlook if there are other, viable outlooks that could be ascribed to him with equal plausibility. As we have seen in Chapter Four, the other three major scholarly interpretations advanced in the last half-century do not condemn Socrates to holding a flawed epistemological outlook. The Principle of Charity compels us to consider these other views before we resign ourselves to the Received View.

Nehamas' View asserts that Socrates does not accept a broad Priority of Definition principle. Instead, according to Nehamas, he believes the knowledge of definition is only required in situations where a person wants to speak knowledgeably about the general nature of a moral property, or where the person is attempting to discern a "tough case" where it is unclear that some instance exhibits a moral property or that a moral property features a specific quality.

As we noted in Chapter Four, this view would not subject Socrates to the three philosophical objections because it allows a person to have some moral knowledge without knowing the relevant definitions. Hence, the Principle of Charity would not dissuade us from accepting this interpretation.

However, as we discussed in Chapter Two, there are some textual problems with this view. While Nehamas is correct in saying that Socrates typically raises his definition requirement when he is discussing a tough case or the general nature of a moral property, there is one passage where he seems to intend that his definition requirement be understood in its broadest sense:

**T<sub>14</sub>** We should not have inquired whether or not Virtue can be taught until we had first asked the main question of what it is. (*Meno* 86d)

Moreover, Socrates appears to intend for his ignorance claims to be understood broadly, which further suggests that his definition requirement ranges over all moral knowledge and not just tough cases or general statements about a property. These pieces of text appear to raise problems for Nehamas' View.

Nehamas can argue that, even in these passages, Socrates is still referring only to certain pieces knowledge that are difficult to obtain. But this argument appears strained; it seems more appropriate that we accept Socrates' broad claims at face value than to reinterpret them as Nehamas wants. Because of this, we have reason to be skeptical of this view but we cannot fully discount it. Instead, we should be inclined to consider other promising interpretations before embracing Nehamas' View.

Like Nehamas' interpretation, Irwin's View and the New View do not subject Socrates to the three philosophic objections we discussed in Chapter Three. This is because both of these views claim that, when Socrates asserts his Priority of Definition principle, he is talking of expert knowledge, which is significantly different from the knowledge discussed in the charges. Because of this understanding, the two views would not receive a negative review from the Principle of Charity.

The only objection we found to these two views is that each seems unable to account for some pieces of text. Unlike the textual problems that plague Nehamas' View and the Received View, these passages do not appear to contradict Irwin's interpretation or the New View, but they do suggest these interpretations are incomplete.

Irwin's View holds that Socrates accepts a broad Priority of Definition principle for knowledge but, Irwin points out, Socrates uses the term 'knowledge' in a sense that is different from how contemporary epistemologists use the term. Irwin further argues that Socrates recognizes an intellectual state of reliable beliefs that do not require the

knowledge of definitions but, for that reason, Socrates does not consider these beliefs to be knowledge. Instead, Socrates' many statements of positive moral doctrine are reliable beliefs, according to Irwin, while his professions of ignorance spring from his recognition that he has no knowledge of the definitions of moral properties and, thus, he cannot claim expert knowledge.

Irwin's View is quite successful in explaining Socrates' ignorance claims and his confident moral assertions. However, the interpretation does face some textual difficulties. The most significant problem concerns passages where Socrates explicitly claims to possess some piece of moral knowledge, yet he does not appear to possess the relevant definitions. These passages lead us to question how, in Irwin's View, Socrates can make such knowledge claims if he believes that all moral knowledge must come from knowledge of definitions.

Irwin experiences an additional problem when we attempt to determine whether the supported beliefs that he attributes to Socrates are always dependable. At one point in his writings, Irwin refers to these ideas as "true beliefs," which, it would seem, means these beliefs will not prove false. But Socrates, himself, admits that, for all he knows, some of his most strongly defended beliefs can still prove false (see *Gor.* 508e-509a, *Cr.* 46c). In this way, it does not appear that Socrates has the appropriate level of confidence in these beliefs if, as Irwin says, Socrates recognizes that the beliefs are true.

Hence, Irwin's view seems incomplete in two ways: it does not satisfactorily explain how Socrates can make the explicit knowledge claims that appear in the early dialogues and it does not tell us whether the supported beliefs that Socrates supposedly holds are, in fact, always reliable.

The New View asserts that Socrates recognizes two different types of moral knowledge: expert knowledge that stems from knowledge of definition, and lesser knowledge that is produced in some way other than through the knowledge of definitions. Hence, this view is similar to Irwin's because it holds that Socrates recognizes two intellectual states.

Also like Irwin's View, the New View accounts for Socrates' many positive moral claims by identifying them as something other than expert knowledge. In this case, New View proponents claim Socrates recognizes a second, lower state of knowledge that these claims exemplify. Using this concept of lesser knowledge, the New View allows for Socrates to accept a Priority of Definition principle yet also permits him to hold some knowledge of moral matters even though he does not know the relevant definitions.

However, this move also exposes the New View to some textual difficulties. As we have already noted, Socrates often endorses a positive moral doctrine but then admits he is not fully confident in the reliability of the claim. In both the *Crito* and *Gorgias*, he notes

that the doctrines he fervently supports can still prove false. If this is so, then these claims hardly seem to qualify as any sort of knowledge, including lesser knowledge; at best, these claims are simply well-supported beliefs. Hence, the New View appears to make an inappropriate move when it classifies all Socratic positive doctrines as lesser knowledge. It thus seems that this interpretation needs to offer a different explanation for some of Socrates' moral assertions.

A second, related problem with the Vlastos and Beversluis versions of the New View emerges when proponents of this interpretation discuss how lesser knowledge is attained. While different scholars provide contrasting lists of the sources of this knowledge, they all seem to agree that one source is the elenchus. Yet, the early dialogues do not show Socrates ever gaining any moral knowledge from his conversations; at best, he only gains positive moral beliefs that he then says are well-supported but cannot be recognized as knowledge or even as true beliefs (again, see *Gor.* 508e-509a, *Cr.* 46bc). It thus seems that these versions of the New View wrongly recognizes the elenchus as a source for any type of knowledge.

Unlike the Received View and Nehamas' View that appear to suffer from fatal textual and philosophic problems, the most significant problems that we find with Irwin's View and the New View suggest that these two interpretations are merely incomplete. Irwin's View needs to offer an account for Socrates' explicit claims to knowledge. The New View must explain the nature of Socratic positive beliefs that apparently are neither expert nor lesser knowledge. In a sense, each interpretation could be rendered unproblematic by incorporating the key feature of the other interpretation: if the New View recognized beliefs that Socrates would consider intellectually well-supported, but not beyond suspicion of being false, it would be much more acceptable, whereas if Irwin's View allowed for lesser knowledge, it would be more effective. It thus appears that an effective interpretation of Socrates' epistemological outlook would result from a merging of these two views. In this way, Socrates would be understood to recognize expert knowledge that is rooted in the Priority of Definition, lesser knowledge that does not require the knowledge of the relevant moral definitions, and reliable belief that is justified but may prove false.

With this in mind, let us briefly revisit some of the pieces of text to see if such a three-part conception of cognition connects well with what Socrates says.

### **What Socrates Knows**

As mentioned in Chapter One, there are a few passages in the early dialogues where Socrates explicitly claims to have knowledge. Here are some of those passages:

- T22** I knew that [good men are not unjust] long ago. (*Eud.* 296e)
- T23** For injustice is ignorance; no one could still not know this. (*Rep.* I, 351a)
- T24** But I know that it is evil and disgraceful to do injustice and to disobey one's superior, whether he is a god or man. (*Ap.* 29b)
- T34** [I will never recommend] things which I know are evil [such as punishing a just man]. (*Ap.* 29b)
- T35** He knows that, for a wicked (μοχθηρῶ) man, it is better not to live, for such a man must live miserably. (*Gor.* 512b)

In each of these passages, Socrates advances claims of moral knowledge. If my Chapter One argument supporting the ascription of **PD** succeeds, as I believe it does, then the principle should be operative in these claims. But, as we also noted in that first chapter, he never explicitly claims to have knowledge of such properties as Injustice and Wickedness, and there is little reason to believe he would know these definitions since he repeatedly explicitly claims not to know the definitions of these properties' opposites, Justice and Virtue. So, the texts leave us with a question that we seem unable to answer: how can Socrates make these knowledge claims if he does accept **PD** but does not know the relevant moral definitions?

Despite the fact that the texts show that he considers these claims to be knowledge claims, it appears that Socrates, himself, is not very impressed with this knowledge. Despite the fact that he clearly believes he knows these things, he repeatedly claims to know nothing (*Ap.* 21b, *Rep.* I, 354b) or, at least, to be utterly lacking of significant knowledge (*Eud.* 293b, *Meno* 98b). Hence, it appears that, because he cannot use knowledge of the relevant definitions to gain these pieces of knowledge that he believes he possesses, he really does not consider these ideas to truly be knowledge in the philosophical sense that he uses the term "knowledge."

From these passages, we can see that Socrates does know some things even though he apparently does not possess the relevant moral definitions. However, despite his knowledge, he still professes that he does not know anything or, at least, anything of value. These apparently contradictory sentiments strongly suggest that Socrates does, in fact, recognize two types of knowledge and one of these types of knowledge — which we are calling "lesser knowledge" — can be gained without the knowledge of definitions. He apparently does possess some lesser knowledge but he values it so lowly that he often does not even credit it as knowledge.

### **What Socrates Does Not Know**

In the early dialogues, Socrates often points out what he does not know. Here are just a few of his admissions of ignorance:

- T<sub>9</sub>** How can we consider ourselves friends — and I do consider you a friend — when we have not been able to discover what friendship is? (*Ly.* 223b)
- T<sub>13</sub>** You must think I am someone blessed by the gods to know whether Virtue can be taught or how it is attained. In truth, I am far from knowing whether or not it can be taught — indeed, I do not happen to know what Virtue, itself, is... How can I know a quality of something when I do not even know what it is? Do you suppose that somebody who does not know who Meno is could know whether he was handsome or rich or well-born or the reverse? Is that possible, do you think? (*Meno* 71a-71b)
- T<sub>19</sub>** It is our inability [to explain the nature of Justice] that is at fault [for our unsuccessful discussion]. (*Rep.* I, 336e)
- T<sub>20</sub>** Why, my dear fellow, I said, how could anyone answer you [about what Justice is] if [like me] in the first place he did not know [what Justice is]? (*Rep.* I, 337e)

These four passages echo Socrates' frequent lament over his lack of moral knowledge. Moreover, they show why he believes he cannot achieve this knowledge: he does not possess knowledge of the relevant moral definitions that he thinks is necessary and fundamental in order for him to know other pieces of moral knowledge. It thus seems clear that the knowledge he wants is grounded in the definitions of moral properties, as is illustrated by the principle **PD**. We are calling this type of knowledge “expert knowledge.”

It appears that the difference between expert knowledge and lesser knowledge is their relation to definition. Expert knowledge can only follow the discovery of the definition of the relevant moral property, and, as we discussed in Chapter One, Socrates believes that once this definitional knowledge is gained, a lot of other information about the moral property can then be derived. Lesser knowledge, on the other hand, comes from sources other than expert knowledge and cannot be used, as expert knowledge can, to gain lots of other information on the property.

Nowhere in the dialogues does Socrates explicitly recognize this dichotomy of knowledge. Our ascription to him of these two types of knowledge comes from our belief that his discussions of what he knows and what he does not know.

Further, the dialogues do not indicate what is the source of lesser knowledge. Socrates never says how he knows the things that he says he knows, but it does seem clear from his ignorance claims that his knowledge could not come from knowledge of the relevant definitions. Because the texts are silent on the source of his lesser knowledge, we are left

to speculate on how he secures this knowledge. It may very well be possible that these ideas are derived in the same ways that contemporary epistemologists speculate that knowledge is derived — by finding sufficient justification to show that we can have full confidence that some belief is true.

The distinguishing of two types of Socratic knowledge, clearly, is the product of the New View that we discussed in Chapter Four. Socrates aspires to expert knowledge that comes from the knowledge of definition, but he already possesses, and is relatively uninterested in, lesser knowledge that is not produced from the knowledge of definition. However, as we will soon see, these two types of cognition are, apparently, not the only intellectual states that he recognizes.

### **What Socrates Believes but Does Not Know**

Besides the explicit knowledge claims discussed above, Socrates makes a number of positive assertions but he does not credit these assertions as knowledge. Here are two examples of these claims:

**T<sub>6</sub>** These ideas, which were shown to be as I stated them some time earlier in our previous discussion, are buckled fast and clamped together — to put it somewhat crudely — by arguments of steel and adamant. (*Gor.* 508e-509a)

**T<sub>36</sub>** I cannot, now that this has happened to us, discard the arguments that I used in advance, but they seem to me to be as strong now as they were before, and I revere and honor these same ones as before. And, unless we can bring forth better ones now, be assured that I will not give way to what you say. (*Cr.* 46bc)

In these two passages, Socrates points to the lengthy arguments just completed in the *Gorgias* and *Crito* as evidence that there is reason to have confidence in his beliefs about the value of Justice and the righteousness of his decision not to escape punishment. However, despite the “steel and adamant” arguments in support of these beliefs, Socrates, himself, admits the possibility that they can “move around” and prove untrue.

We must wonder, then, what sort of ideas these claims represent. Clearly, they are not pieces of knowledge, because Socrates would scarcely consider a belief to be knowledge if that belief could later prove false.

It would thus seem that these beliefs are simply as we have described them: supported by argumentation but not proven true by deduction from the relevant moral definitions or in some other way. Hence, these ideas, which we are calling “supported beliefs,” do not qualify as either expert knowledge or lesser knowledge.

It may be possible for a supported belief to be elevated to the level of lesser knowledge if we are correct that Socrates would recognize lesser knowledge as belief that has

somehow been shown to be fully reliable. However, even if these beliefs would qualify as lesser knowledge, he would still not consider them to be real knowledge — or, as we are calling it, expert knowledge — because they are not secured by the relevant moral definitions and because they cannot be used in the same way as expert knowledge to secure lots of new knowledge about the moral property.

These passages reveal that, though Socrates does not consider himself a moral expert, he has apparently given considerable thought to moral matters and has developed a number of strongly held beliefs that he follows. Further, it seems that, as part of his philosophic activity, he continues to subject these beliefs to testing. Hence, Socrates is clearly not a moral nihilist or skeptic and his philosophic activity provides him with useful ideas.

### **Firey's View**

The epistemological outlook that I am attributing to Socrates thus recognizes three different intellectual states: expert knowledge that is the product of knowledge of the relevant moral properties, lesser knowledge that is comprised of true beliefs whose veracity is secured in some way other than through the use of definitions, and supported beliefs whose truth is not secured, but reasoning or other factors suggest these beliefs are dependable.

Socrates aspires to, but never appears to achieve, expert knowledge. He often speaks as though only this type of cognition merits consideration as knowledge and he repeatedly says that only such definition-supported knowledge can ever be asserted with the confidence of an expert. Further, as we discussed in Chapter One, he especially values this type of knowledge because its holder is a moral expert who can use the knowledge of definition to gain lots of information about the moral property. It is this type of knowledge that he has in mind when he makes his demand for definition and when he declares that he is ignorant.

Socrates does occasionally claim to have knowledge, but these instances appear to be cases of lesser knowledge where the pieces of cognition are secured by some means other than through definition. It is these pieces of knowledge that he admits having when he says that he know “many things, but they are all insignificant” (*Eud.* 293b).

Finally, he recognizes and acts in accordance with a number of ideas that are supported beliefs — ideas that have somehow been supported but have not been secured either through the knowledge of relevant definitions or through some other means. He has these reliable beliefs in mind when he talks of notions that he lives by and that seem to be

“buckled fast and clamped together... with bands of steel and adamant,” but which still could prove false.

I believe this three-part intellectual view makes sense of Socrates’ many comments concerning what he knows, what he does not know, and what he believes. Moreover, most of his positive moral claims fall neatly into the lower two tiers of lesser knowledge or supported belief. In this way, he can justifiably claim himself to be truly ignorant because he does not possess the expert knowledge that he reveres and to which he aspires.

### **Is Firey’s view philosophically viable?**

From our discussions in this chapter, we see that the view I am advancing does effectively explain Socrates’ activities and statements in the early dialogues. But we must wonder if this interpretation is merely an ad hoc explanation of what occurs in Plato’s writings or if it offers an epistemological outlook that Socrates would find acceptable.

I believe the best way to answer this question is for us to ask ourselves if this three-part view makes sense to us, as philosophical thinkers not unlike Socrates. I believe that, not only does this view seem reasonable to us, but that many of us share this epistemological outlook.

We often talk, as philosophers, of our desire to “really know” certain moral truths. I take it that, by this, we mean that we wish we possessed fundamental knowledge of morality — including knowledge of the nature of moral properties — that we could then use to derive other moral truths and that could then be applied to everyday ethical dilemmas.

But, alas, we are just like Socrates — we seem unable to ever firmly grasp this fundamental knowledge. We admit that we share his condition and that despite our philosophical efforts, it is almost certain that we will never achieve expert knowledge of moral subjects.

Even though we realize we will never achieve moral expertise, we do admit that we possess some moral knowledge. This knowledge is not as philosophically rich as definition-supported knowledge. Indeed, it typically has little more significant philosophical content than the near-truisms that Socrates professes to know in **T22-T24**. But, for as paltry and lesser as this moral knowledge seems, we are confident that we know it.

We also hold a number of moral beliefs — some of them quite elaborate and well-supported — that we adhere to confidently but we do not consider to be instances of either expert or lesser knowledge. Instead, despite our reasons supporting these beliefs,

we continue to treat these beliefs with suspicion and, in our best philosophical moments, we subject them to intellectual scrutiny.

I take it that if I am correct in saying that many philosophical thinkers intuitively accept this epistemological view, then it is quite possible that Socrates would also accept it. Further, because this view effectively makes sense of the passages from the dialogues where he discusses his epistemological outlook and his epistemic state, there also is textual support for the view I present. This does not, of course, mean that I have proven that Socrates does hold this three-part view but, in light of our discussion throughout this study, we appear to have reason to be confident in this interpretation, especially in comparison to the four scholarly interpretations that we have discussed at length.

## CONCLUSION

### **Final Remarks**

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In this study, we have considered the textual evidence for the ascription of a Priority of Definition principle to Socrates. As part of that analysis, we used the texts to formulate our own version of this principle, which we have called **PD**.

We then considered four recent interpretations of the significance of the Priority of Definition in Socrates' epistemological outlook. These recent interpretations include the Received View that holds that he believes he must know the relevant definitions in order to possess any moral truth, Nehamas' View that Socrates believes knowledge of definition is only necessary for when a person wants to speak knowledgeably about a difficult moral situation or talk generally about a moral property, Irwin's View that moral knowledge can only come from knowledge of definitions but Socrates can still steadfastly accept some moral beliefs, and the Received View that Socrates recognizes two types of knowledge, one of which is rooted in the knowledge of definitions.

Following that discussion, we examined three philosophical problems that some philosophers have ascribed to the Priority of Definition principle and we considered how, according to the four interpretations, these problems would affect Socrates.

Given both textual concerns and philosophical issues stemming from the Principle of Charity, we decided that there is reason to be skeptical of each of these four views. With this in mind, we set out to create our own interpretation of his epistemological view and we ultimately advanced a notion combining the idea that Socrates recognizes a distinction between the intellectual states of knowledge and supported belief and the idea that Socrates uses the term 'knowledge' in two distinct ways.

By re-examining the texts, we found that there is good reason to accept both of these distinctions. He talks of moral beliefs that he accepts — some of which are “held fast... with bonds of steel and adamant” — but he refuses to consider these beliefs as knowledge and he repeatedly asserts his ignorance of moral knowledge that, he says, is the product of his lack of knowledge of definitions. Despite these ignorance claims, he does occasionally make explicit knowledge claims and he often makes confident, positive moral claims.

It thus seems reasonable, given these passages, to ascribe to Socrates an intellectual view that recognizes a type of moral knowledge that is the product of definition, a second type of knowledge that is produced without knowledge of definition, and a state of supported belief that appears to be reliable but does not merit being described as “knowledge.” We dubbed the definition-based knowledge “expert knowledge” and

explained that this is the cognitive state that Socrates hopes to achieve but believes may be beyond mortals' ability to attain. The second type of knowledge we labeled as "lesser knowledge" and we noted that, though Socrates apparently holds some pieces of this type of cognition, he places little value in them and he often does not consider them to be "real" knowledge. We also decided that, besides some lesser knowledge, he has come to depend on a collection of moral beliefs. These beliefs, it seems, has some sort of philosophic support that leads us to dub them "supported beliefs."

This epistemological view, when ascribed to Socrates, seems to correspond well with the early Platonic texts. Moreover, it appears to resolve textual issues that are problematic for the four scholarly views that have been advanced over the past half-century. Most importantly, this view seems to us to be a very reasonable epistemological outlook for a moral philosopher to hold. These characteristics suggest that we have reason to have confidence in the view I have offered.

Of course, these characteristics do not mean that we can, with full confidence, declare that Socrates does embrace this view. Further analysis of the texts is required before such an embrace can be made. But now we have a viable alternative to the four scholarly views that we have decided are problematic and incomplete.

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VITA

## **Thomas Anthony Firey**

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Firey has worked in Philosophy as a teaching assistant at Virginia Tech and later as an adjunct instructor at New River Community College. He found these employment opportunities to be greatly satisfying and hopes to do similar work in the future.

His life's goal is to find ways to employ philosophical thinking to solve political and social problems. He also wants to communicate this thinking with a large audience and to provoke philosophical discussions among the general public.