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SOCRATIC SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND "KNOWLEDGE OF KNOWLEDGE" IN PLATO'S *CHARMIDES*

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More than any other early dialogue, the *Charmides* has consistently confounded Platonic scholarship.[1] The basic scenario is familiar enough, being common to most of the others as well. Socrates engages his answerers in the attempt to define some moral concept, in this case *sôphrosunê* or self-control, persuades them that every definition which they propose must be inadequate, and then concludes that he and they have proved their common ignorance. The *Charmides* has particular affinities with the *Laches*, where Socrates seeks to define courage, since both reach their climax by raising the possibility that the virtue in question might be defined as the knowledge of good and evil. Socrates ostensibly bypasses this possibility each time, but both dialogues conspire with the *Protagoras* and others to convey from Plato to his reader the implication that "knowledge of good and evil" is in fact, so far as it goes, the correct definition common to *all* virtues, and that Socrates tacitly concurs.

What baffles interpreters about the *Charmides*, however, is that Plato devotes the lion's share of it to the proposal that *sôphrosunê* be defined in terms of an even more peculiar and impossible-sounding sort of knowledge (*epistêmê*), namely "knowledge of knowledge." Why

[1] The *Chrm.* is, however, a much under-studied dialogue, and studied mostly in German. The following works will be cited in subsequent notes by author's surname only: J. Adamietz, "Zur Erklärung des Hauptteils von Platons *Charmides*," *Hermes* 97 (1969) 35–57; R. Dieterle, *Platons Laches und Charmides. Untersuchungen zur elenktisch-aporetischen Struktur der platonischen Frühdialoge* (Diss. Freiburg 1966); B. Effe, "Platons *Charmides* und der *Alkibiades* des Aeschines von Sphettos," *Hermes* 99 (1971) 198–208; W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 4 (Cambridge 1975); H. Herter, "Selbsterkenntnis der Sophrosune zu Platons *Charmides*," in *Festschrift Karl Vretska* (Heidelberg 1970) 74–88; E. Martens, *Das selbstbezügliche Wissen in Platons Charmides* (Munich 1973); G. Santas, "Socrates at Work on Virtue and Knowledge in Plato's *Charmides*," in *Exegesis and Argument. Studies in Greek Philosophy Presented to Gregory Vlastos* (= *Phronesis* Supp. Vol. 1 [1973]) 105–32; T. G. Tuckey, *Plato's Charmides* (Cambridge 1951). See Herter *passim* and Adamietz 38–39 for surveys of the older German interpretations, and Martens 121–27 for a more exhaustive bibliography.

should this apparently abstruse epistemological concept loom so large in Plato's scheme for a dialogue on one of his cardinal virtues? No consensus has emerged in answer to this question. Indeed, the most common interpretive strategy is to take at best a passing stab at it and to concentrate instead on analyzing Socrates' attack on "knowledge of knowledge" in isolation from its dramatic context, as if Plato were so preoccupied in wrestling with the concept for its own sake that we can determine its import for him as a philosopher without reference to how it functions for him as a dramatist or to its merits as a definition of *sôphrosunê*.[2] When subjected to modern logical vivisection in this kind of dramatic void, Socrates' arguments do indeed appear aimless and perplexing. But by following the implicit guidance given us by Plato as a dramatist, I hope to show that he designs these arguments so as to invest their conclusions about "knowledge of knowledge" with a dramatic import vital, not only to his conception of the kind of knowledge that constitutes *sôphrosunê* and the other virtues, but also to his assessment of the kind of self-knowledge that Socrates possesses. We shall find that Plato presents Socratic self-knowledge as falling radically short of the knowledge which is virtue, and the Socratic method of inquiry as being powerless to bridge the gap. Socrates' analysis of why "knowledge of knowledge" fails as a definition of *sôphrosunê* functions at the same time as an implicit dramatic analysis by Plato of the limitations of Socratic self-knowledge as a foundation for philosophic method, and of why Socratic dialectic is therefore an ultimately inadequate mode of philosophy.

Socrates, the narrator as well as the protagonist of our dialogue, first relates how he disposed of several attempts at definition by the well-bred adolescent Charmides, and then how he turned to face a more mature and less pliant answerer, Charmides' uncle Critias. After some preliminary skirmishing, Critias comes up with a proposal that seems at first blush rather promising, that *sôphrosunê* be defined as *self*-knowledge (*τὸ γιγώσκειν αὐτὸν ἑαυτόν*) in accord with Delphic Apollo's injunction to "know thyself" (164C7–165B4). In response, Socrates first presses him to specify a product of self-knowledge, starting from the premise that, since other kinds of knowledge make products, self-knowledge must make one as well (165C4–E2). Critias objects to this typically Socratic reliance on slapdash induction: "Your method of inquiry is faulty," he points out (*οὐκ ὀρθῶς ζῆτεις*: 165E3). Socrates has considered only his usual selection of examples from the realm of work-

[2] Studies marred by this tendency include Adamietz, Herter, Martens (esp. 39–53), Santas (esp. 121–29), and Tuckey (esp. 30–73). Cf. T. G. Rosenmeyer, "Plato and Mass Words," *TAPA* 88 (1957) 90–91: "the dialogue is concerned with matters of logic and definition, not with the good life"—always a dangerous dichotomy with Plato.

aday crafts or *technai*, and Critias takes him to task for being too quick to assume that all *technai* involve similar types of knowledge. The *technê* of self-knowledge, he claims, does *not* make products; and he cites arithmetic and geometry to show that such *technai* exist (165E3–166A1).

Whatever we think of this assertion about self-knowledge, Critias' objection to Socrates' logic is unanswerably correct,[3] and so the protagonist drops his demand for a product and demands instead an object for self-knowledge. He argues that even mathematical types of knowledge have objects, if not products, external to themselves; therefore self-knowledge must have an external object too (166A3–B6). "You're making the same mistake," Critias rightly points out (*τοῦτό ἐστιν ἐκεῖνο*: 166B7). For Socrates has once again tried to force him to make a premature inductive leap, assuming a similarity between species of knowledge where none necessarily exists.[4] Self-knowledge, according to Critias, is unique among knowledges in having itself as its object rather than an object external to itself (166B7–C6). It is the knowledge that knows itself, he declares (*αὐτὴ ἑαυτῆς*: 166C3)—and, he soon adds, it knows the other kinds of knowledge too (*αὐτή τε αὐτῆς . . . καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἐπιστήμων*: 166E6).

Critias thus shifts from "knowledge of *oneself*" (*ἑαυτοῦ*: 165C7, E1) to "knowledge of *itself*" (*ἑαυτῆς*: 166C3, E6), and to understand why Plato makes him do so is certainly the key to understanding the role of the latter expression in the dialogue. However, Plato's motive as a dramatist for introducing the new expression must be distinguished from the motive which he attributes to Critias, just as Plato's motive for having Socrates attack it will turn out to be different from the motive which he attributes to Socrates. By "know thyself" Apollo did not, of course, mean "acquire knowledge of knowledge," and Plato makes Critias seem driven to his obscure reformulation on the spur of the moment under dialectical pressure from Socrates, more from a desperate sophistical ingenuity than because he knows what he means. But a number of commentators have therefore puzzled inordinately over what *Plato* means, taking the twists and turns of Socrates' subsequent refutation to indicate doubts or befuddlement on Plato's part as to whether knowledge can exhibit "self-reflexivity."[5] We shall find, however, (1) that Plato radi-

[3] Cf. Santas 118, Guthrie 168.

[4] Santas 118–19 agrees that Critias' first protest against Socrates' requirement of a product is "correct" but then turns around and criticizes him here for "violating Socrates' requirement" of an external object.

[5] E.g., Dieterle 217–20, Effe 204–8, Guthrie 169 and 174, Herter 74 and *passim*, Martens 48–53, Rosenmeyer (above, note 2) 90, Tuckey 42–49 and App. 1. See Effe 204, note 5 and Tuckey 33–37 for other scholars who puzzle about Plato's "strange confusion" (Tuckey 34). Santas 119, note 12 offers a modicum of clarification as to the intelligibility of Critias' shift.

cally distances himself from his protagonist's doubts about the possibility of knowledge of knowledge; (2) that, while Critias may be grasping at straws, Plato has a carefully premeditated motive for making him grasp at this straw in particular; and (3) that, although his *characters* may be confused about what sort of self-knowledge "knowledge of knowledge" can be, Plato provides his *readers* with an unmistakable clue as to what sort we are to take it to be—namely, Socratic self-knowledge.

He drops the clue immediately after Critias first asserts that self-knowledge is the knowledge that knows itself. In refusing to grant that self-knowledge must have an external object, he accuses Socrates of being well aware that his inductions are illegitimate and of deliberately trying to win the argument without regard for the truth about the subject under discussion (ἐάσας περὶ οὗ ὁ λόγος ἐστίν: 166C3–6). Socrates replies that his refutations are primarily designed to test himself "out of fear that I might think that I know something that I do not" (166C7–D2) and that, although he is testing others as well, he does so in hope of making the truth become clear for the good of all men (ἀγαθὸν ... πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις: 166D2–6). This response serves to remind the reader of Socrates' chief claim to wisdom as Plato presents him, that in a world full of people who think they know what they do not, Socrates alone knows that, like everyone else, he knows nothing. It also reminds us that Socrates seeks positive knowledge of the truth as the objective of his brand of dialectic, although the invariable result of Socratic method as Plato presents it in the early dialogues is merely the exposure of the answerer's ignorance and a reaffirmation by Socrates of his own.

Socrates' self-defence here does not deny that his inductions were fallacious; rather, he pleads innocent to the charge of *deliberate* fallacy by insisting on the integrity of his self-testing search for truth. His innocence here will prove important later. At any rate, he succeeds in getting Critias to continue the discussion. For he combines his self-defence with the admonition to stop worrying about who is being refuted, as if dialectic were a competitive debate with winners and losers, and to concentrate instead on the merits of the thesis being tested, no matter who propounded it (166D8–E2). As he often does with his more sophistic answerers and as he already has with Critias at 165B7–C1, Socrates here appeals to his conception of dialectic as a cooperative, mutually beneficial enterprise in which each partner is grateful to the other for refuting him since, by disabusing one another of false beliefs, both progress along the road to knowledge.[6] To his credit, Critias concedes that Socrates' approach to dialectic is "reasonable"

[6] Cf. *Chrm.* 165BC, 166CD; *Laches* 190B, 196C, 198B, 199A, 200E; *Prt.* 361D; *Meno* 80C; and especially *Grg.* 457D–459B and 470C.

(μέτρια: 166E3).[7] He then proudly restates his thesis, and Socrates suggests an addendum: knowledge of knowledge would also be knowledge of ignorance both in oneself and in others, such that its possessor would be able to determine by inquiry (ἐπισκοπεῖν) whether he or anyone else has knowledge or merely thinks that he knows what in fact he does not (166E7–167A7). Critias readily accepts this suggestion.

The clue which Plato plants for his readers in this exchange is plain to see. He wants us to identify the Critian conception of self-knowledge with the kind of self-knowledge which Socrates alone among all men possessed, the knowledge of his own ignorance. Further, the *technê* by which Critias' putative knower of knowledge would test knowledge-claims is to be identified with Socrates' own dialectical method, the elenchus. A number of commentators have acknowledged the presence of this clue from Plato.[8] However, no one has yet solved, and few have even pursued, the problem which now arises as to how to assess its significance.[9] The problem has defied solution because Plato's clue makes the rest of the dialogue irreconcilable with a traditional assumption which has governed Platonic scholarship, especially in its Anglo-American form, with an almost universal iron grip—the assumption that Plato presents his Socrates as a consummate philosopher practising a method which accords with Plato's own methodological ideal. The difficulties created by this assumption for interpreters of the *Charmides* have always been compounded by the related mistake of assuming that Plato presents Socrates here as the ideal embodiment of *sôphrosunê*.[10]

This traditional view cannot cope with the identity which Plato implies between Socratic self-knowledge and Critias' "knowledge of knowledge" because it renders us incapable of answering the question why he would make his protagonist proceed to refute the identity of this type of knowledge with *sôphrosunê*. As we shall see, the gist of Socrates' refutation is, first, that *sôphrosunê*, like all virtues, is the knowledge of good and evil; secondly, that knowledge of knowledge is a radically distinct and lesser type; and, thirdly, that the *technê* of inquiry which is based upon the latter type is incapable of ever reaching the former. Now

[7] Scholars are too quick to assume that Socrates' contempt for Critias represents Plato's attitude as well at every turn: e.g., Santas 108, Tuckey 23–25.

[8] E.g., Adamietz 44, Guthrie 163, Martens 52, Santas 120, Tuckey 40 and 66, and M. J. O'Brien, *The Socratic Paradoxes and the Greek Mind* (Chapel Hill 1967) 123.

[9] Guthrie contents himself with the vague remark that Plato is "perplexed" about the implications of "the Socratic code." Santas 120 remarks that the clue is "worth noticing" but proceeds to make nothing of it in the belief that the parallel applies only to Critias' "knowledge of oneself" and not to his "knowledge of itself." But this ignores the fact that the clue *follows* Critias' shift to the latter expression and immediately precedes its elucidation. Cf. note 11 below.

[10] E.g., Tuckey 95–104, Guthrie 170, O'Brien (above, note 8) 124–25.

if Socrates possesses knowledge of knowledge but not of good and evil, then according to this refutation he lacks *sôphrosunê* by his own standard. And if Socratic elenchus is the *technê* of knowledge of knowledge, it could never enable him to attain *sôphrosunê* by that standard. In the past, those commentators who have noticed the clue at all have still flown in its face by arbitrarily supposing that Socrates' self-knowledge is to be identified with the knowledge of good and evil instead of with knowledge of knowledge.[11] This preserves the fixed idea that he must be Plato's ideal *sôphrôn* and philosopher, but at the cost of allowing it to dictate an interpretation which the dramatist's clue to us clearly discountenances. A few general observations may prove useful in preparing us to face up to the clue's natural implications.

Socrates is of course a paragon of virtue by comparison to everyone else in the dialogues. But he conceives of the level of virtue that he has attained as being an unsatisfactory half-way house, founded merely on true beliefs and not on knowledge.[12] Although he stands by those beliefs unshakably in the elenchus and the conduct of his life, his search for moral knowledge is informed by the urgency of his conviction that knowledge alone, not mere belief, is strong enough to overrule the passions that pull human nature toward vice.[13] Thus we shall find the *Charmides* (to say nothing of the *Republic*) concluding that the knowledge of good and evil is the only reliable basis for a well-run society. Socrates' repeated professions of ignorance are therefore neither ironical nor self-satisfied;[14]

[11] The most extensive efforts of this kind are those of Tuckey (81–87) and Martens (53–58, 73–77, and 82–84). The latter argues that the only kinds of knowledge of knowledge which are criticized are "knowledge of craft-knowledge" and sophistical claims to "Alles-Wissen," both of which he contrasts with Socrates' supposed "self-knowledge of the good." Cf. my objection in note 9, above, to Santas' more economical effort to exempt Socratic self-knowledge from the critique of Critias' conception.

[12] For this distinction between the strong sense of knowledge which Socrates desiderates and the true beliefs to which he nevertheless adheres, see esp. G. Vlastos (ed.), *The Philosophy of Socrates* (New York 1971) 9–12; and T. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford 1977) 39–42 and 62—although both, especially Vlastos, suggest (mistakenly, in my view) that Socrates conceives of knowledge as unattainable.

[13] On the power of knowledge to withstand desires, in contrast to the vulnerability of beliefs to being overruled or overturned by them, see esp. *Prt.* 352AD with G. Vlastos, "Socrates on *Acrasia*," *Phoenix* 23 (1969) 71–73, and N. Gulley, "Socrates' Thesis at *Protagoras* 358B–C," *Phoenix* 25 (1971) 119. Gulley rightly disagrees with the main thrust of Vlastos' article, but both concur in seeing that Socrates contrasts the power of moral knowledge as a motivating force with the weakness of even true moral beliefs against immoral desires. In *Rep.* 4–6 Socrates acknowledges that true-belief morality is the most that can be expected of most people but still desiderates moral knowledge for society's rulers, just as in the early dialogues he desiderates it for himself. Cf. the contrast in the *Phd.* (esp. 68C–69C and 82AC) between philosophic and demotic virtue.

[14] On the sincerity of Socrates' professions of ignorance see Irwin (above, note 12) 39–40 and the many passages he lists.

nor are they incompatible with the confidence in his own moral wisdom which he displays in such dialogues as the *Apology* and the *Gorgias*. He realizes that in knowing his own ignorance he has morally as well as intellectually advanced beyond other men. Nevertheless, he is certain that he has not advanced far enough, and the commitment which he expresses to Critias, that of trying to gain the knowledge that is virtue through elenchus for the good of all mankind, is in dead earnest.

Plato uses his protagonist, then, to imbue his readers with the Socratic convictions that philosophy must attain this knowledge and that Socrates' own level of virtue, based merely on true belief, admirable though it is by comparison to the corruption of the society around him, is nevertheless insufficient to effect man's moral and political salvation. But what Plato's protagonist does not realize is the impotence of his elenchic method to attain the requisite knowledge of good and evil. Accordingly, the lesson of the *Charmides* for its readers is that if philosophy is ever to reach its imperative goal the limitations of Socratic self-knowledge, and of the method based upon it, must be overcome.

In order to appreciate how Plato intends to have this implicit lesson emerge, we must first draw a distinction which we take for granted with any other great or even competent dramatist, but to which the preconception of Socrates as Plato's ideal hero has tended to blind us in the dialogues—that is, the distinction between the dramatist and his protagonist and, in consequence, between what Plato as a dramatist is trying to convey to us as his audience and what he presents his protagonist as trying to convey to fellow-characters. Too often the conception of Socrates as Plato's ideal leads interpreters—particularly those of the Analytic stripe but also most of those who lay more stress on the dramatic aspects of the dialogues—to assume an identity between the two. The tendency is to take Plato to be writing in order to urge upon his readers the same arguments and conclusions that Socrates urges upon his fellow-characters. Socrates' philosophical objectives in regard to them are thus identified with Plato's own in regard to us, and the state of Socrates' philosophical progress in any dialogue is presumed to be identical to the author's.

According to my hypothesis, by contrast, Plato maintains a sharp critical distance from his protagonist and enables his reader to share this authorial perspective. While Socrates thinks he is merely testing yet another proposal for defining *sôphrosunê*, Plato dramatizes his effort in such a way as to convey to his reader an implicit critique of the limitations of Socratic self-knowledge as a basis for philosophic method, a critique which lies beyond his protagonist's understanding. By juxtaposing Socrates' self-defence with Critias' introduction of knowledge of knowledge, he tries to alert his reader to the dramatic implications to be found in Socrates' subsequent analysis of the latter. But these pass from

the dramatist to his reader along lines of communication which run over the heads of all the characters in the drama, protagonist included.

We are now in a position to examine in turn the three main divisions of Socrates' attack on knowledge of knowledge:

(1) knowledge of knowledge cannot possibly exist (167A–169C)
(2) if it could exist, it would not be *sôphrosunê* (169D–172C)
(3) if it were *sôphrosunê*, then *sôphrosunê* would not be beneficial (172C–173D).

In stages 2 and 3, then, Socrates assumes for the sake of argument that the conclusion reached in the previous stage may not be valid. Even with these concessions to Critias' definition, the conclusion of stage 3 entails for Socrates that "knowledge of knowledge" cannot be *sôphrosunê*, since it is axiomatic for him throughout the dialogues that virtues must always be beneficial—an axiom which he reaffirms in the *Charmides* at 164BC, 169B, and again at length in his closing speech (175A–176A). Thus any definition which makes a virtue non-beneficial or not always beneficial must be false.

In stage 1 the argument is of the same inductive type that Socrates used in trying to get Critias to specify a product and object. He infers the non-existence of knowledge of knowledge from the fact that none of the senses exhibits this self-reflexive capacity—there is no seeing of seeing or hearing of hearing, and so on (167C4–168A11). Nor do relational properties such as greater and lesser exhibit it (168B1–D3). Now Plato has carefully equipped the reader to rebut this argument for himself. For we can see that Critias should object, just as he has twice before, to Socrates' faulty habits of induction. Knowledge of knowledge need not necessarily be similar to the senses or anything else in respect of self-reflexivity any more than it need be similar to other kinds of knowledge in respect of products and objects. Critias misses the boat this time, however, and so Socrates' mistake escapes the notice of both characters. Socrates himself suggests that there might after all be a class of self-reflexive entities but doubts whether knowledge could belong to it even so (169A1–7). As a result, both characters are reduced at the end of stage 1 to perplexity as to how knowledge of knowledge could possibly exist.

This episode establishes that Socrates, like Critias, is unaware that this sort of self-knowledge exists already in Socrates himself and that Critias is in the process of acquiring some modest share of it through having his ignorance about *sôphrosunê* exposed. The effect is reinforced in retrospect by Socrates' earlier assurances that his first two inductive fallacies were not deliberate. For his sincere assumption that all types of knowledge must have a product and/or an external object shows that he assumes the same of his own self-knowledge and that he therefore would not recognize his own in a putative type of knowledge which has

neither and whose very existence is therefore dubious in his view.[15] Moreover, the terminology in which the knower of knowledge is described, together with the extreme abstraction of the whole refutation, serves further to prevent Socrates from recognizing himself in the description. When he said that he tests himself to make sure that he does not think he "knows" what he does not, he uses (as always in this connection) the ordinary verb εἰδέναι (166D2). But when he and Critias talk of knowledge of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη ἐπιστήμης), they are postulating a science or *technê* of testing for knowledge of other sciences or *technai*, as will become clear.[16] Now Socrates can attribute *epistêmê* to craftsmen in other fields. But in believing that he "knows" (εἰδέναι) that he knows nothing, he believes that he lacks *epistêmê* altogether, as he states in the *Apology* (ἐμαυτῷ γὰρ συνήδη οὐδὲν ἐπισταμένῳ *Ap.* 22C9–D1). Thus in stage 1 Plato has established the distance between himself and his protagonist which he will exploit in stages 2 and 3 to analyze Socratic self-knowledge for his readers, while Socrates will be merely trying to force Critias to abandon the idea that *sôphrosunê* could be a science of self-knowledge which, so far as Socrates is aware, may not even exist in the first place.[17]

Plato now gives his protagonist a dramatic motive for pursuing stages 2 and 3, as Plato wants him to do for his own very different reasons. Critias has refused to accept the conclusion of stage 1 even though he has failed this time to catch the characteristic inductive fallacy on which Plato presents it as resting. Socrates as narrator observes that Critias' motive was his competitive sense of shame at losing the argument (169C3–D1). As we saw, Socrates considers this approach to dialectic counter-productive. Nevertheless, in his desire to convert his sophistically oriented answerers to the non-competitive spirit of elenchus, he cannot rest content until he not only refutes his answerer's

[15] Tuckey 31–32 and Martens 46 both seem to assume (though both are vague on the point) that Socrates knew these assumptions to be false. However, such a view ignores the force of Socrates' self-defence against the charge of fallacy (discussed above) and results from a failure to question the assumption that Plato must always be presenting Socrates as infallible.

[16] Hence the consistent use of the technical terms ἐπιστήμη and ἀνεπιστημοσύνη for the objects of this science: 166E7, 167C1–2, 169B6–7, 170A10, 170B1, 171C4–5, 172B2–3, 173D1–3, 174D4–5, 174E6.

[17] Adamietz 45–46, by contrast, thinks that Plato takes these arguments to prove that knowledge of knowledge is impossible, despite the fact that not even Socrates claims that much. So too Dieterle 241–43 and (in a modified form) Martens 57–68. A different kind of confusion generated by the failure to distinguish Plato from Socrates on this point is exemplified by Santas 128, who argues that *Socrates* does not intend his arguments even to cast doubt on the possibility of knowledge of knowledge because *Plato* later seeks such knowledge in the *Tht.* Keeping dramatist and protagonist distinct, we can say that Socrates *does* take his argument to count while Plato presents him as mistaken.

thesis but also compels him to *admit* its refutation and thus to acknowledge his ignorance. Hence Socrates now decides to grant for the sake of argument that knowledge of knowledge might exist after all, and he proceeds to stage 2 of his attack.

His objective in stage 2 is to persuade Critias that, even if it can exist, knowledge of knowledge cannot be *sôphrosunê*.[18] To this end he argues that the benefits conferred by such knowledge would be merely marginal, expecting Critias to agree that, whatever *sôphrosunê* is, it must be more beneficial than that. According to Socrates, knowledge of knowledge would not enable anyone to acquire any other kind of knowledge, such as medicine. For medical knowledge can be acquired only through medical training, and so it is with the other crafts or *technai* as well (170B12–C5). Moreover, if one were already a doctor as well as a knower of knowledge, his knowledge of knowledge would tell him only *that* (ὅτι) he possesses some additional type of knowledge; but it would be by virtue of his medical knowledge that he would know *what* (ἅ) he knows in addition, namely medicine (170A6–D3). And if he possessed *only* knowledge of knowledge, he would know nothing except *that* he knows nothing (170D1–3).[19]

Thus anyone who knows medicine or any other *technê* may or may not possess knowledge of knowledge in addition. But what benefit does knowledge of knowledge confer upon him? A number of readers go astray by supposing that he needs knowledge of knowledge in order to "know that he knows" medicine, but Socrates nowhere suggests the possibility that anyone could know something *without* knowing that he knows it.[20] He does express what the *absence* of knowledge of knowledge would mean, although in a seemingly paradoxical way: the doctor who does not possess it knows nothing about "medical knowledge" (ἰατρικὴ ἐπιστήμη: 170E12–171A1). What Socrates means should be clear. A doctor who knows medicine but lacks knowledge of knowledge will know nothing about the nature of knowledge as such and therefore nothing about medical knowledge *qua* knowledge.[21] Now at 172B Socra-

[18] Socrates declines to dispute Critias' claim that to possess knowledge of knowledge is to possess self-knowledge (169E6–8). Adamietz 43 takes his demurral here as a "protest" against Critias' conception of self-knowledge. This may be true of *Socrates*, but Adamietz assumes that it must also be true of Plato. Instead, it would be another device by which Plato dramatizes his protagonist's lack of awareness that his own self-knowledge is under scrutiny.

[19] Socrates says here simply that the knower of knowledge would know only (a) that (not what) he knows and (b) that (not what) he does not know; but if there is nothing "that" he knows apart from knowledge of knowledge, it follows from (a) that he would know (only) that there is nothing "that" he knows.

[20] E.g., Santas 121–22 supposes that without knowledge of knowledge a knower of *X* would "think but not know" that he knows *X*. Cf. Adamietz 49 and Effe 206.

[21] Cf. Dieterle 259–61 and Santas 125, note 16: knowledge of knowledge is "the knowledge of the Socratic definition of knowledge," although curiously Santas wants to confine

tes states that a doctor who did possess knowledge of knowledge would be much better than one who did not at testing claimants to medical knowledge. As a knower of knowledge, then, he would possess some kind of criterion by which he could test any medical knowledge-claim—not for the truth of its medical content (that he would judge by the criterion of his medical knowledge) but to see if it meets the requirements of knowledge as such. This criterion could also be applied by such a doctor to knowledge-claims about *technai* other than medicine, but in those cases he would have no way of determining *what* (ἅ) a genuine knower of the *technê* knows, since the doctor would not know it himself. He could only determine *that* (ὅτι) the claimant is, or that he is not, a knower of something or other. For Socrates lays it down as a general principle that no knower can test other people for any particular kind of knowledge other than the one or ones which he himself possesses: he can test only for his own *homotechnoi* (174C4–9).

It follows that an inquirer who possesses only knowledge of knowledge, when confronted with claimants to knowledge in any other *technê*, can test them only for two things: whether they possess any knowledge at all and, if the answer is yes, whether they possess knowledge of knowledge in particular. If he were to examine "someone who claims to know something" other than knowledge of knowledge, he could not determine whether that person knows *what* he claims to know, for example, medicine. All he could tell would be *that* the person does indeed know something or other (170D5–9). Thus, Socrates continues, the knower of knowledge could not distinguish the doctor from the quack; to do this he would have to possess the knowledge of medicine himself (that is, the "what" of medical knowledge) in addition to his knowledge of knowledge (170E1–171C9).[22]

He is therefore subject to the same limitations as the "peirastic" inquirer in Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations* (172A21–B1), a passage in which Aristotle clearly has Socrates in mind but which, so far as I know, has not been used to help interpret the *Charmides*. Aristotle's peirastic *technê* tests those who claim knowledge of other *technai* like medicine, but not by examining them about the technical propositions peculiar to each craft (*οὐκ ἐξ ὧν οἶδεν οὐδ' ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων*: *SE* 172A25). Rather, the peirastic tests for knowledge of what Aristotle calls "the common principles" (*τὰ κοινά*). Anyone who knows any *technê* knows the *koina* (*πᾶσαι γὰρ αἱ τέχναι χρῶνται καὶ τοῖς κοινοῖς τισίν*: 172A29–30). Thus, if a professed doctor lacks knowledge of the *koina*, this proves that he cannot know medicine or anything else (*μὴ εἰδότα δ' ἀνάγκη ἀγνοεῖν*: 172A27).

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this to the expression *ἐπιστήμη ἑαυτοῦ*, as if this denoted a different kind of knowledge from Critias' "knowledge of itself and of the other types of knowledge." Cf. note 9, above.

[22] Cf. Santas 127 and Herter 75.

But the peirastic knows the *koina* and *nothing* else. Aristotle at first calls him loosely a "non-knower" (μὴ εἰδώς τις: 172A23), reminding us of Socrates, but a few lines later he qualifies this. The peirastic does have an *epistêmê*, but it is knowledge "of nothing in particular" (οὐδενὸς ὡρισμένου ἡ πειραστικὴ ἐπιστήμη ἐστίν: 172A28), i.e., of nothing but the *koina* and the craft of testing for knowledge of them.

It follows that the peirastic, like the *Charmides*' knower of knowledge, cannot test for knowledge of any particular craft other than his own, but only for his *homotechnoi*, and that he cannot distinguish a doctor from a quack. The genuine doctor will pass a peirastic test for knowledge of the *koina*, demonstrating that he does indeed know something or other. But the peirastic has no warrant within the confines of his craft for concluding that his answerer is therefore a doctor. For, although one who does not know the *koina* knows nothing, yet, as Aristotle says, "nothing prevents" the possibility that one who does know them might nevertheless be ignorant of the craft he claims to know: ἃ [*sc.* τὰ κοινὰ] εἰδότα οὐδὲν κωλύει μὴ εἰδέναι τὴν τέχνην: 172A26–27).

Now imagine the peirastic's dilemma when confronted by a quack. The quack might be one of two kinds: he might be pretending that he knows medicine, knowing that he does not know it; or he might really believe that he knows medicine, not knowing that he does not. Socrates explicitly distinguishes these two kinds of quack in the *Charmides*: μὴ ἐπιστάμενον, προσποιούμενον δὲ ἢ οἰόμενον (171C7). But in either case the quack might pass the test if he knows anything other than medicine (as, for example, the pretender's knowledge of his ignorance might indicate knowledge of knowledge). In that case, the peirastic could not tell the quack from the doctor, since for all he knows the quack might know the *koina* by virtue of knowing medicine. And yet, even if either type of quack should fail the test, the peirastic still could not distinguish him in respect of *medical* knowledge from the true doctor who passed it. For, as far as he can tell within the confines of his craft, "nothing prevents" the possibility that what the doctor knows is something different from the *technê* that he claims to know.

We are now in a position to apply the limitations of Aristotle's peirastic and Critias' knower of knowledge to Socrates. In testing moral knowledge-claims with his elenchic craft, he too can test for knowledge of knowledge, the Socratic self-knowledge of what one knows and does not know. In the world of the dialogues, where no one but Socrates possesses that knowledge, this means in practice that he can expose his answerers' lack of it by revealing that they think that they know what they do not. However, Socrates believes that he can also apply his *technê* to knowledge-claims about a *technê* other than itself, that of virtue, to test not just if they represent knowledge as such, but also if they repre-

sent knowledge of virtue. And what is more, he hopes that he can even *attain* knowledge of virtue in this way. According to his own account of the *technê* of knowledge of knowledge, he must be mistaken; and indeed Plato enables us to see that he is.

Socrates does have a criterion for testing knowledge-claims about the *technê* of virtue which corresponds to Aristotle's criterion of the *koina* for testing knowledge-claims about *technai* in general[23]—namely, the Socratic axiom that virtue must always be beneficial. Socrates assumes that all moral truths must harmonize or logically cohere with this criterion. We saw that he draws a firm distinction between his moral beliefs and moral knowledge. But he feels entitled to use this particular belief as a criterion of knowledge because he is sure that all men hold it in common. Indeed, his elenchus operates on the principle that all men hold it so deeply that they will reject any other belief they hold if it proves inconsistent with his axiom. Thus, for example, not only Critias' knowledge of knowledge but also Charmides' proposals are rejected because they would make *sôphrosunê* either not beneficial enough or not always beneficial; and all the definition-hunting dialogues follow the same pattern.[24] In dialogues like the *Gorgias* and *Republic* 1, where Socrates confronts answerers like Callicles and Thrasymachus who in one form or another deny that virtue is beneficial, his whole effort is directed not toward persuading them that his axiom is true but toward forcing them to realize and admit that they *already* believe in it deep down, despite their denial, just like everybody else.[25]

However, Plato also has Socrates repeatedly insist that we cannot *know* anything about what sort of thing (*poion*) a virtue is (e.g., that it is beneficial) until we know *what* (*ti*) it is (i.e., until we know its definition).[26] Plato clearly intends us to accept this *ti*-before-*poion* principle of the order in which knowledge of virtue must be acquired. Therefore Socrates' conviction about the *poion* of virtue, that it must be a beneficial sort of thing, while we are to accept it as a true belief, is nevertheless not knowledge so long as he lacks knowledge of the *ti* or "what" of virtue, no matter how conclusively he proves that all men are bound to

[23] Tuckey 66–69 suggests (perhaps rightly) that Socrates' method enables him to expose ignorance in non-moral fields of which he is ignorant as well, as in the case of Ion's claim to be a master of generalship in the *Ion* (541 B.C.). But Socrates does not so much refute that claim as laugh it off.

[24] Cf. Irwin 38–51, and C. Kahn, "Drama and Dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1983) 112–16.

[25] I demonstrate this in detail for the *Grg.* in a forthcoming paper in the *Independent Journal of Philosophy*.

[26] E.g., *La.* 189E–190A; *Prt.* 360E–361A; *Meno* 71AB, 86DE, 95B, 100B; *Rep.* 1.354AB. Cf. R. Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic* (Oxford 1953²) ch. 6; and R. S. Bluck, *Plato's Meno* (Cambridge 1964) 210–13.

share that belief. Thus, at the end of *Rep.* 1, Socrates criticizes himself for attempting to reach the knowledge that justice is a beneficial sort of thing before he has established its definition, and at *Grg.* 508E–509A he affirms that, although his arguments that *sôphrosunê* must be beneficial are irrefutable, nevertheless he does not *know* that his conclusion is correct.

But this *ti*-before-*poion* principle is clearly at odds with Socrates' use of his axiom as a criterion of knowledge. For, on the one hand, since his criterion concerns the *poion* of virtue, it cannot be transformed from true belief into knowledge until knowledge of the *ti* of virtue is attained. On the other hand, so long as his criterion remains merely a true belief, this is the highest status which consistency with it can confer upon any definition of the *ti*. To demonstrate that a definition is *in*consistent with the criterion is to demonstrate that it represents a false belief. Conversely, however, a demonstration of consistency would only show that, like the criterion, it represents a true belief. The consistent definition could count as knowledge only if the criterion itself counted as such. Thus Socratic method is trapped by Socrates' own *ti*-before-*poion* principle in a dilemma from which it lacks the resources to escape. His *poion*-belief in the benefit of virtue is his method's cardinal criterion of knowledge, but it cannot produce knowledge about the *ti* of virtue until it counts as knowledge itself; and yet, being a *poion*-belief, it cannot count as knowledge until knowledge about the *ti* is somehow produced. Thus the most that the elenchus can do is to multiply our stock of true beliefs, leaving our capacity for virtue stranded on the shaky ground of *doxa* rather than the solid foundation of *epistêmê*. But Plato presents his protagonist as unaware that Socratic elenchus is doomed to this dead end in its pursuit of knowledge.

Nevertheless, while Socrates cannot test for or produce knowledge of the *technê* of virtue any more than the peirastic can do so for any *technê* other than his own, the Socratic criterion can, like the *koina* of the peirastic, test for and produce the knowledge proper to its *technê*, knowledge of knowledge. To illustrate this, consider "virtue is the knowledge of good and evil," the only definition produced from the elenchus which could pass the test for harmony with "virtue is always beneficial." As such it marks the highest level of true belief glimpsed in the early dialogues, and nowhere do they suggest that the elenchus has lifted Socrates any higher. Confronted by an answerer claiming to know that virtue is anything less than the knowledge of good and evil, Socrates can show him that his claim is inconsistent with their common belief that virtue must always be beneficial. In other words, this belief serves as a criterion for knowledge of knowledge: by claiming to know something that fails to meet it, the answerer has shown that he lacked knowledge of his own ignorance. Now Socrates has discovered through testing

himself that "the knowledge of good and evil" does meet his criterion. But to be sure *that* (ὅτι) all virtues must be the knowledge of good and evil is merely to know one's ignorance of *what* (ἅ) the virtues are so long as one lacks the knowledge of good and evil itself. Thus the most that the elenchus has done even for Socrates is to produce mere knowledge of knowledge in him—the knowledge *that* he lacks a sort of knowledge about which he does not know *what* it is. In an attenuated sense, of course, he does know what it is, namely the knowledge that is virtue. But in the relevant stronger sense he cannot know what it is—what this knowledge consists in—unless he can reach the knowledge of what good and evil are. And Plato now proceeds in stage 3 to dramatize the inherent inadequacy of the elenchus as a vehicle for reaching it.

At the end of stage 2, Critias still fights shy of admitting the defeat of his definition (172A7–C3). Thus Socrates moves on to stage 3, saying that "if you want" he will assume for the sake of argument that knowledge of knowledge might after all have the power to determine "what" people know and do not as well as the fact "that" they do or do not know something or other. Stage 3 entertains the possibility that, if so, then knowledge of knowledge might be *sôphrosunê* after all (172C4–D5).

Socrates rejects the possibility by describing a "dream" (173A7), conjuring up a society in which the rulers are knowers of knowledge who can tell "what" each of their subjects knows and can therefore assign every function in the society to those who have the appropriate knowledge, preventing anyone who lacks medical knowledge, for example, from practising medicine (173A7–C7). Such rulers would know "what" a quack does not know only in the same attenuated sense in which Socrates knows "what" his ignorance is about. They know "what" the quack is ignorant of (medicine), but without knowing what that knowledge consists in, just as Socrates knows "what" he is ignorant of (the knowledge that is virtue), but without knowing good and evil. Thus Plato wants us to realize that the rulers possess a "dream" version of Socratic self-knowledge. But Socrates, unaware of this, shows that even if such a society could be realized, it would not necessarily be run in its own best interests. For, even if the rulers could tell the doctor from the quack and refused to license the quack to practise medicine, they would not know how to ensure that the doctor practises medicine beneficially (173C7–D5).

When grilled as to what sort of knowledge *would* enable them to ensure this (173D8–174B9), Critias eventually blurts out that it must be the knowledge of good and evil (174B10). Socrates seizes on this in the conviction that Critias must be right and reproaches him for "hiding" the truth up till now (174B11–C3). Of course, no reader can doubt that it is Socrates who has possessed this insight all along and that his hidden

objective in stage 3 has been to drive Critias toward it.[27] And no reader can fail to see the inference which Plato would have him make at this point, namely that it is the knowledge of good and evil which must be *sôphrosunê*, not the knowledge of knowledge. However, instead of having Socrates lead Critias on to this inference too, Plato has him argue that, since the knowledge of good and evil is the one kind of knowledge which benefits us and since *sôphrosunê* is instead the knowledge of knowledge, therefore *sôphrosunê* is not beneficial (174C3–175A8).[28]

To the reader this line of reasoning seems at first gratuitously perverse. We are tempted to reproach Socrates for trying to deflect Critias away from the truth instead of directing him toward it. And indeed Socrates proceeds to blame himself (175A9–D5): I must be a defective inquirer, he says, since if I were any good we would not have ended up with such a "hybristic" conclusion. And yet his reasons for this self-reproach seem as perverse as the conclusion that prompts it. For he suggests that the argument went astray *despite* the fact that at stages 2 and 3 they "generously" and "amiably" granted the conclusions which the previous stage had ruled out. Nevertheless, he complains, our *logos* has proven ungrateful and "contemptuous of the truth."

Of course, the reader can see that the *logos* went astray *because* Socrates consistently refused to reject Critias' theses and not despite that fact. At stage 2, Socrates granted that knowledge of knowledge might exist, though stage 1 seemed to him to prove that it may not, and at stage 3 he had granted that it might give us knowledge of the "what" as well as the "that" of people's knowledge, although stage 2 seemed to him to suggest that it cannot. Lastly, at the end of stage 3 itself, the conclusion that *sôphrosunê* cannot be beneficial resulted merely from his failure to follow his own most fundamental belief, that virtue is always beneficial, and to reject Critias' thesis that *sôphrosunê* is knowledge of knowledge. All along, then, he has allowed the *logos* to be governed by Critias' refusal to abandon his position, although, as we saw, he knows that this refusal is merely the result of Critias' competitive sense of shame. Surely, we might suppose, Socrates is therefore being ironical in blaming himself instead of Critias; and indeed his closing speech is traditionally read as a *locus classicus* for Socratic irony.

On my reading, by contrast, Plato would have us take Socrates' frustration at his failure seriously. In order to expose his answerer's ignorance in a way that will confer knowledge of knowledge upon him,

[27] Cf. Tuckey 77.

[28] Irwin (above, note 16) 88 "analyzes" stage 3 as if Socrates had actually completed the argument as Plato implies that *we* should complete it—with the conclusion that *sôphrosunê* is the knowledge of good and evil—thereby totally misrepresenting both the text and the means by which Plato communicates this conclusion to us.

Socrates must not merely demonstrate to his own satisfaction that a knowledge-claim is inconsistent with his criterion. He must induce the answerer first, if necessary, to accept the criterion; secondly, to admit the disharmony; and, thirdly, to reject his knowledge-claim—in short, to admit his ignorance. Thus the Socratic craft demands that both the premises and the conclusions of any refutation be subject to the answerer's approval and that he have the final say (or silence) as to its success or failure. Arguments such as those of stages 1 and 2 which fail to induce a voluntary admission of ignorance must be abandoned as unsuccessful, whatever Socrates or anyone else might think of them. And as for stage 3, Socrates has no warrant—within the confines of his craft—to conclude that *sôphrosunê* must be knowledge of good and evil so long as Critias refuses to surrender his claim that it is knowledge of knowledge.

From this, another reason why Socrates' craft can produce no knowledge of any craft other than itself should be evident. For the very principles which are essential to its power to produce knowledge of knowledge—such as the principle that all premises and conclusions are subject to the answerer's approval—render it impotent to produce any other kind. Suppose that Critias *had* admitted his ignorance (as, for example, Charmides, Polus in the *Gorgias*, and Polemarchus in *Republic* 1 are all more or less willing to do). Even then, with a willing partner in his search for knowledge, Socrates' elenchus is necessarily doomed. For he can no more attain knowledge of the *technê* of virtue by practising the *technê* of knowledge of knowledge in partnership with an answerer who has confessed his ignorance of virtue than a would-be doctor could attain the knowledge of medicine by practising it in partnership with a self-confessed quack.[29] Not even a genuine doctor could train medical students by the method of knowledge of knowledge, for he could not allow them to dictate what medical premises and conclusions they will accept.

Thus Socrates' explanation of his failure in the *Charmides*—that he failed *despite* the fact that he allowed Critias' positions to stand after they had been refuted to Socrates' own satisfaction—is not to be taken as ironical. For he has merely been following in good faith the cardinal principle of his *technê*, and he is under the illusion that it is the *technê* by which moral knowledge can be attained. Hence he gets frustrated at himself as a bad practitioner of that method when it fails, as it must, to reach the knowledge that is virtue, and particularly when, as in the

[29] Contrast Tuckey 95: knowledge of good and evil is something that "Socratic elenchus alone can provide." For a similar view see Martens 82–83: the elenchus produces "self-critical knowledge of the good" as distinct from "self-critical knowledge of craft-knowledge" (cf. note 11, above).

Charmides, it fails even to confirm his deepest conviction, that virtue must be the most beneficial kind of knowledge. Even in the *Laches* he manages at least to confirm that: the only reason that "knowledge of good and evil" is rejected as a definition of courage there is that it seems to be true of all virtues, not just of courage in particular. However, it is dramatically appropriate that Socrates' failure should be especially striking in the *Charmides*: the argument of the dialogue suggests why Socratic method must fail to reach knowledge of the "what" (*ti*) of virtue (knowledge of good and evil) while at the same time dramatizing its consequent failure to reach knowledge of what sort (*poion*) of knowledge this is (the most beneficial sort).

In short, while Socrates, despite his self-reproach, may be a perfect practitioner of the method of knowledge of knowledge, his sense of failure is nevertheless well-founded. Even his "dream" society, run entirely and only in accord with his "dream" version of knowledge of knowledge, would be devoid of the knowledge of good and evil and therefore be impotent to ensure its own well-being.[30] Here Plato implies that even if Socratic method is practised to perfection and achieves its greatest conceivable success, it would still leave us short of philosophy's imperative goal. Socrates does grant that the knower of knowledge will be a quicker learner of different types than a student who lacks it, and that, having acquired them, he will be a more proficient tester for *homotechnoi* in those other fields (172B1–C3).[31] On top of the moral benefit of knowing one's own ignorance, these additional intellectual benefits are not negligible;[32] Plato is not out to denigrate Socratic self-knowledge, only to point up its methodological limitations. By pointing them up, however, he tries to instill in us a share of his own felt need for a different method of dialectic with the power to succeed where Socrates had failed.

[30] Santas 131 argues that a society run by knowledge of knowledge would be "at least as beneficial" as one run by knowledge of good and evil, since the former would govern the latter as well as the other kinds of knowledge. This is the substance of Critias' objection at 174DE to Socrates' denial that such a society would be run beneficially. But, like Critias, and as Socrates' response clearly implies, Santas thus misses the whole point of the "dream"-passage, which is to imagine what a society would be like if it were run by knowledge of knowledge *without* knowledge of good and evil, in order to emphasize the political need for the latter and the problem of how to acquire it. For the reason the "dream" society lacks knowledge of good and evil is that knowledge of knowledge by itself is incapable of acquiring it.

[31] Tuckey 68 mistakes this for a new conception of knowledge of knowledge; but it merely qualifies the charge of uselessness against the same one.

[32] Thus Adamietz 56 misrepresents Plato's implied assessment here by saying that he suggests that knowledge of knowledge is "ohne wirklichen Wert." Even Critias is sensible of having derived some benefit from his ordeal, as his closing admonition to Charmides to keep Socrates' company suggests (176B).

Plato dramatizes a number of other reasons for Socrates' failure, both in the *Charmides* and elsewhere;[33] and in his middle and late dialogues he dramatizes the principles of a reformed or "Platonic" dialectic. But these are subjects requiring separate future treatment.[34]

[33] There is much to say about the *Charmides* itself with respect to how Socrates' treatment of Charmides himself illustrates the weakness of the elenchus as a tool for gaining positive knowledge.

[34] I presented a brief sketch of this paper at the 1984 APA Annual Meeting in Toronto and profited from the comments of that audience. I would like to register special thanks for encouragement and criticism to David Furley, Brad Inwood, and Leonard Woodbury.