

Socratic Methods¹

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1. Introduction

Plato's *Gorgias* is haunted by his *Apology*. The clearest allusion is a little exercise in dramatic irony toward the end of Callicles' great speech, where he berates Socrates for wasting his time on philosophy when he could be acquiring the rhetorical and political skills necessary to ensure survival in Athens:

As things stand, if anyone should seize you, or anyone else of your kind, and arrest you and haul you off to prison on false allegations of wrongdoing, you must realise you'd be utterly helpless. You'd be in a daze, and gape, and have nothing to say; and when you got to court, even if you were up against a completely worthless and wretched prosecutor, you'd be condemned to death, if he chose to ask for the death penalty (*Gorgias* 486a6-b4).²

There are subtler allusions in the opening scene. Like the *Apology*, the *Gorgias* opens with references to a supposed masterpiece of oratory which has just been presented, but which Plato has pointedly neglected to present to *us*. In the *Gorgias*'s very first lines, Socrates explains to Callicles why he was not among the cream of the Athenian intelligentsia attending Gorgias's rhetorical masterclass: his friend Chaerephon had detained him in the market-place. According to Socrates' speech in the *Apology*, of course, it was Chaerephon's question of the oracle at Delphi – Is anyone wiser than Socrates? – that effectively detained Socrates in the market-place for the rest of his life, reproaching and interrogating anyone he came across – philosophising, as he claimed, at the behest of the god. Plato thus sets up in its opening scene the opposition that will dominate the *Gorgias* as a whole, between rhetoric, which Socrates here implicitly disparages by his lateness, and philosophy, which he practices in its stead, in obedience to a divine command.³

Now, suppose we press the question: What, exactly, is being opposed to rhetoric in this allusion? A natural answer would be: just what Socrates does in the market-place, which is what he urges others to do, and what he is shown practicing in the *Gorgias* and other 'Socratic' dialogues. It is the same activity at issue in all three cases: *philosophising* (or *dialectic*, or *practicing the elenchus*). This is what Socrates says the god has commanded him

¹ An ancestor of this paper was presented at the Oxford workshop in ancient philosophy in November 2008; I would like to thank the audience on that occasion for many helpful comments. Thanks also to Imogen Smith for helpful comments on earlier drafts.

² Cf 521c-d. Of course, Socrates is not depicted in the *Apology* as in a daze or gaping or having nothing to say, but Plato does present there the fulfilment of Callicles' core prediction, that a lifelong commitment to philosophy as opposed to rhetoric would leave Socrates ill-equipped for defending himself against malicious prosecution; and Callicles' words imply that Socrates would have fared better with the jury if he hadn't renounced rhetorical trickery (17b6-c5) and traditional techniques of manipulation, such as parading his dependents (34b7-35d8).

³ Cf Doyle (2006a), (2006b).

to do, what he urges others to do, what Plato elsewhere depicts him as doing – and what Callicles later dismisses as a waste of time.

Here we come up against an account which deserves (I think) to be called standard: the same “Socratic method” can be specified in three different ways:

- (A) what Socrates does in obedience to the god’s command
- (B) what Socrates thereby urges others to do, and shows them how to do by example
- (C) what Plato depicts Socrates as doing in the *Gorgias* and other ‘Socratic’ dialogues.

The basic idea is that Socrates’ procedure in obedience to the god functions as an example to others *because* it is the *same* procedure as he urges upon them. In fact, this account is *so* widely accepted that its acceptance is quite hard to document: what “goes without saying” tends not to get said. It is easily inferred, however, from very common techniques of interpretation that only make sense if it is presupposed. Scholars very often use Socrates’ accounts of his procedure in the *Apology* to guide their understanding of what Socrates is up to in ‘Socratic’ dialogues, for example; and they very often treat Socrates’ accounts in the *Apology* and his practice in ‘Socratic’ dialogues as equally good evidence for how philosophy or dialectic or the ‘elenchus’ are supposed to go.

Sometimes, however, the identifications are made explicit; (A) with (C):

Plato may well be offering in the *Laches* a paradigm case of *the method* Socrates describes himself as practicing in the *Apology*. . . Socrates says, at work here in the *Laches*, *precisely what we should expect him to say*, given his defence of *that practice* [sc his “method”] in the *Apology*. . . . The other early dialogues *further confirm* that the immediate and primary aim of *Socrates’ method* is testing the reputed knowledge of others. . . . In Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates maintains that his distinctive method is responsible for the informal and formal indictments levelled against him. We have seen that the *Apology and the other early dialogues* exhibit a structure of various aims of *this method*, whose centrepiece is the testing of the knowledge or expertise of individuals who have some claim to it. . . . Only in the *Apology* does Socrates furnish us with anything like a description of this method [sc the *elenchos*]. *In the other early Platonic dialogues, he practices it with a passion.*⁴

In the *Apology* Socrates claims that he goes around examining people to see whether they know what they profess to know and take virtue as seriously as they should. . . . Plato attributes to Socrates a specific method of argument and inquiry, and claims to represent this in the dialogues.⁵

(A) (and (C)) with (B):

...according to Socrates, *all* of us *should* do what Socrates does.⁶

Several passages in the *Apology* testify to Socrates’ view that others can and indeed should practice the *elenchos*. Socrates’ attachment to the *elenchos* may be greater than the

⁴ Benson (2000), 24, 26, 32; my emphases.

⁵ Irwin (1995), 7. Irwin cites *Laches* 187e6-188a3 as ‘bridging’ the self-description in the *Apology* and the method of the dialogues.

⁶ Brickhouse and Smith (1995) 10; their emphasis. Much of what Brickhouse and Smith say about the *Apology* and the ‘Socratic’ dialogues clearly presupposes an identification of (A) and (B).

attachment of others. He may be the only one who has been “commanded by the god” to practice it. But it is not restricted to him.⁷

...if Socrates’ announced goal [sc “to care for the souls of his fellows by convicting them of their ignorance and motivating them to take up the philosophical quest,” (34) as announced in the *Apology* – JD] is his only reason for living the life of a philosopher, why, in view of his universal (or all-but-universal) failure, does he continue to believe it is a worthwhile activity – *not to mention the highest form of human happiness?* Why does he not *abandon his divine mission* as a singularly hopeless and thankless task?⁸

We shall see that these identifications are ambiguous. I shall argue that, understood the one way, they are misleading, and understood the other way, they are false. Either way, they cannot underwrite those widespread techniques of interpretation that depend upon them. We may no longer assume that Socrates’ descriptions of his procedure in the *Apology* are intended by Plato to apply either to what he recommends (in following that procedure) everyone else do, or to what Socrates does in the ‘Socratic’ dialogues; nor can it make sense to draw upon those descriptions and the procedures enacted in the dialogues as mutually complementary evidence for a Socratic conception of philosophy or the ‘elenchus’, because they present us with crucially *different* sorts of activity.

First, however, I want to point out that Socrates in the *Apology* takes himself to have a different sort of *reason* to live the life he has lived from the reasons why people generally should do what he urges. It turns out that, given the prevalent Greek assumption of eudaimonism – that all intelligible action done for reasons must benefit the agent in some way – we can draw surprisingly strong conclusions about identity and diversity of action-type on the basis of the relevant agents’ reasons.

2. *The two necessities of the Apology*

In Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates describes in some detail a procedure he follows upon meeting people, which came to characterise his way of life. That way of life, he says, has alienated many of his fellow citizens who, misrepresenting it through ignorance or malice, have spread defamatory rumours about him. Socrates therefore seeks to explain his blameless reasons for living that way, having to do with the oracle at Delphi which, in answering the question put by his friend Chaerephon, indicated on behalf of the god that no-one was wiser than him. This baffled him, as he was convinced he had no knowledge of anything “fine and good” (*kala kagatha*). To get at the oracle’s enigmatic meaning by “refuting” its literal meaning, he publicly interrogated various of the many people in Athens thought, by themselves and by him, to have such knowledge. To his surprise he found they lacked it, and he concluded that the god had wanted to use him as an example:

What is probable, gentlemen, is that in fact the god is wise, and that in his oracular response he meant that human wisdom is worth little or even nothing. And he seems to refer to this man, Socrates, and also to make use of my reputation (*onomati*), *in order to make me an example* (*eme paradeigma poioumenos*), as if he were to say, “This man among you,

⁷ Benson (2000), 32.

⁸ Beversluis (2000), 34-5; my emphasis. *The highest form of human happiness* is a misstatement for ‘the precondition of any human good’ (see below), which identifies (B); Beversluis is therefore identifying (A) with (B).

mortals, is wisest: whoever, in just the same way as Socrates, has come to understand that he is in fact worth nothing as far as wisdom is concerned” (*Apology* 23a5-b4, my emphasis).

Socrates concludes that the god intends him to serve as a paradigm human being (*paradeigma*), in virtue of the very activity by means of which he sought to interpret the oracle; that is, asking questions about ‘fine and good’ matters – specifically, now, how one should live one’s life. (I shall refer to this question as *the Question*.) If he can convince anyone that they aren’t wise, Socrates will have removed from their souls a great obstacle – a complacent assumption of knowledge – to the very inquiry, into the Question, in which imitation of Socrates consists. They will have come to an appreciation of their own ignorance “in just the same way as (*hōsper*) Socrates” – that is, by addressing the Question – for Socrates was not shown *by the oracle* that he was not wise: he *already knew* this by the time of Chaerephon’s visit to Delphi.⁹ So Socrates’ defence of his way of life, against charges which include impiety, is that it was necessary obedience to a command of the god, as he makes clear in his most detailed account of his procedure:

...If you [sc the jury] said to me, “Socrates, ...we acquit you, but on one condition: that you spend no more time in this investigation, and stop philosophising; and if you’re caught still doing this, you shall die” – if you were to acquit me, as I say, on these terms, I would say to you, “Men of Athens, I have nothing but respect and affection for you, but I will obey the god rather than yourselves, and as long as I draw breath and am able, I will not stop philosophising and exhorting you,... (29c5-d5)

He must obey the god even if he knows it will lead to his death. The content of the command is summarised under two headings: to *philosophise* (*philosophôn*) and to *exhort* (*parakelenomenos*).

“...and pointing out the following *as usual* to any of you I come across, with these *familiar* words, ‘Good sir, you are an Athenian, from the greatest city with the best reputation for wisdom and power: aren’t you ashamed to be preoccupied with accumulating as much wealth as possible, and reputation and honour, while you don’t care or worry about wisdom or truth, or making your soul as good as you can?’... (29d5-e3, my emphasis)

Socrates here describes his *habitual* activity in obedience to the god. His usual exhortation consists in the first instance of pointing out the shameful contrast between appearance (Athens has the highest reputation, is *endokimôtatês*, for wisdom and power) and reality (the interlocutor doesn’t care about the state of his soul – that is, he ignores the Question – seeking instead what has inferior or dubious value).

“And if any of you disputes this and says he does care, I won’t just let him walk off, or leave the spot myself, but I’ll question him and test him and cross-examine him (*all’ erêsomai auton kai exetasô kai elengxô*);... (29e3-5)

The implication here is that if the target doesn’t dispute his allegation – that he doesn’t care about the Question, but is preoccupied with unimportant matters – Socrates will move on, letting his reproaches stand; presumably his duty would in that case have been

⁹ This knowledge is presupposed by an important part of what the oracle turns out to have meant by saying that no-one was wiser than Socrates, and is expressed by Socrates’ bafflement at Chaerephon’s report: “When I heard this I wondered, “Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle? *I am well aware that I am not wise at all*; so whatever does he mean by calling me the wisest?” (21b3-6, my emphasis). My summary account here of Socrates’ interpretation of the oracle is defended in detail in Doyle (2004).

fulfilled. This will be at most a minority of cases, since on Socrates' account all those he questioned in the course of interpreting the oracle (a politician, some poets, some craftsmen) were convinced of their wisdom about important ("fine and good") matters, which certainly include the Question; and the baselessness of their conviction¹⁰ confirmed what Socrates eventually took the oracle to imply: that his awareness of his own ignorance about such things was the exception rather than the rule. Socrates' immediate purpose in cross-examining the typical interlocutor, who protests in the face of Socrates' initial reproaches that he does care about the Question, seems to be to test the truth of the target's protestation; presumably he is also serving as an exemplar (*paradeigma*) and indicating how self-examination should be done. The procedure is coercive: Socrates won't let the interlocutor get away.¹¹ If the questioning reveals, as it usually does, that the target, for all his protests to the contrary, has neglected the Question, he is in for further reproaches:

"...and if he seems to me not to have virtue (*aretê*), but persists in claiming to have it, I'll reproach him for spending least time on the most important things, and spending most on worthless things (29e5-30a2).

Socrates clearly understood the necessity attaching to his obedience to the authoritative command of the god as a *duty*; call this *the Duty*. He speaks of the god's command, and so the Duty to obey it, as applying to him alone; or, at least, he certainly does not think of it as at all general:

"This is how I'll treat anyone I come across, young or old, foreigner or citizen, but especially the citizens, because you are that much more kin to me. Make no mistake: *this is what the god orders me to do; and I think you have no greater benefit in the city than my service to the god* (30a2-7; my emphasis).

He nowhere suggests that he is the city's greatest benefactor in virtue of supplying goods which everyone else is under a similar obligation to supply – as if he came out top in a city-wide competition ordained by the god. On the contrary, he repeatedly implies that his status as god's gift is unique, as when he eudaimonistically appeals to the jury's self-interest:

Make no mistake: if you kill the sort of man I say I am, you will not harm me more than yourselves.... So now, gentlemen of the jury, I am far from making a defence on my own behalf, as might be thought, but on yours, to prevent you from committing a terrible blunder in your treatment of the god's gift to you, by condemning me; for *if you kill me, you won't easily find another like me* (30c6-8, d5-e2).

Perhaps the clearest affirmation of this uniqueness is the famous simile of the gadfly:

This will sound a bit absurd, but I have actually been attached to the city by the god, as if to a horse, great and noble, but also rather sluggish on account of its size, and needing to be stirred up by a gadfly. It seems to me that the god has attached me to the city for this sort of reason, and I won't stop stirring you up, and persuading you, and reproaching each

¹⁰ Socrates qualifies this judgement: the craftsmen do turn out to know many fine things (22c9-d4); but their pretensions to further knowledge meant that their overall condition was still unenviable (22d4-e5).

¹¹ Of course, the procedure is not *physically* coercive. Presumably Socrates means that his target won't be able to avoid interrogation without incurring the sort of social cost involved in walking away while someone is talking to you.

and every one of you the whole day long, wherever I'm in your company. *It won't be easy for another man of this sort to take his place among you, gentlemen*; and if you believe me, you'll spare my life. (30e2-31a1; my emphasis).

The horse benefits from the gadfly because it's bad to be sluggish; so Socrates' fellows benefit from him because he removes a bad condition – presumably, what inhibits the activity he urges them to: that is, a complacent assumption of knowledge which disinclines them to think about the Question. The image requires us to think of Socrates' Duty as unique to him, arising from a divine command uniquely addressed to him: the gadfly's target is *a horse*, not a slumbering swarm of other gadflies.¹²

Equally clearly, he conceives of this Duty as absolute:

If a man has positioned himself somewhere because he thinks it best, or because he's been put there by a commander, my view is that he should stay there and take his chances, and ignore everything – death *or anything else* – except disgrace. Now, I remained at my post and risked my life like anyone else when I was stationed at Amphipolis, Potidaea and Delium by those commanders you appointed over me, men of Athens. Wouldn't it be outrageous of me to abandon my post, out of fear of death *or of any other consequence whatever* (*phobêtheis ê thanaton ê all'hotioun pragma*), when it's the god who stations me, as I believe and understand, ordering me to live as a philosopher, examining (*exetadzonta*) myself and others? That would be outrageous, and in that case you really would be justified in bringing me to court for not believing in gods, disobeying the oracle, fearing death and thinking myself wise when I'm not (28d6-29a4, my emphases).

It's not a matter of *weighing*, on the one hand, the good of avoiding death or any other harm against, on the other, the good of complying with the order of the god. Rather, the divine command is an unconditional requirement: it's not that it outweighs those other considerations – it renders them strictly irrelevant, in the sense that *no* amount of that sort of unpleasant burden (eg “even if I were to face death many times”, 30c) *could* make it anything other than obviously wrong to disobey the god. Nor is it just that *these* happen not to be the sorts of consideration that can be weighed in the same scale as the divine command – there could be no such considerations. Nowhere in the *Apology* does Socrates entertain the possibility that any consequence, whether hoped-for or feared, might make it licit, or even intelligible, to disobey a command of the god.

Nevertheless Socrates understands this unconditional obedience to the god as a requirement of self-interest and virtue. Nowadays ‘virtue ethics’ is thought of as an alternative outlook to ‘absolutism’ (or ‘deontology’), just as it is an alternative to consequentialism¹³; and absolutist views in ethics, partly because of their association with Kantian conceptions of things, are thought of as opposed to egoistic accounts of motivation. Socrates' stance in the *Apology* shows that both of these thoughts are mistaken: like virtually all Greek ethicists, he is both a eudaimonist, and so a sort of

¹² See also 31a5-7: “...You might easily kill me, in which case you would sleep for the rest of your days, unless the god cared enough to send you someone else.” Socrates also envisages others taking on something like his role when he prophesies after he has been condemned to death: “There will be more people to cross-examine you, whom I have held back until now, and you didn't notice; they will be even more irksome, because younger, and you will find them even more irritating” (39c8-d3). If he means that they will intelligibly do just what he has been doing, then consistency would require him to affirm, if pressed, that the god has issued the same sort of command to them; see below.

¹³ See Foot (1985).

egoist, about rational motivation, and a ‘virtue ethicist’, in that he habitually thinks and talks about ethics in terms of virtue as a fundamental category. Yet he is also an absolutist, in that he thinks that certain sorts of act are not to be done no matter what else may be true of them and the contexts in which they might be contemplated: for example, disobeying a command of the god would be such a sort of act. (*Harming anyone* would be another, according to what he says in the *Crito* (49c2-6).)¹⁴ The way these three theses, of eudaimonism, virtue ethics and absolutism, get combined in Socrates’ outlook is not that complicated: the absolute prohibition on disobeying the god is a requirement of the virtue of piety, and the virtues in turn are the qualities of soul that one needs in order to be good at being a human being, so that it could never make sense to make oneself less virtuous, which is what one would be doing by violating a requirement of piety, such as obedience to the god. Socrates is no exception among the Greeks in this regard: the important idea, that certain virtues are partly ‘deontologically structured’, so that certain sorts of action automatically count as vicious and not to be done, is a common idea in ancient ethics (eg Aristotle’s account of justice).

Socrates therefore presents his way of life – his reproachful and interrogative way of interacting with his fellows in Athens – as determined by his absolutely unconditional Duty to obey a command of the god, revealed in the oracle to Chaerephon and in all sorts of other dreams and signs (33c4-8), addressed to him alone. Just because only Socrates has been commanded by the god to do these things, however, it does not follow that no-one else is required to do them, or even that anyone else is *not* required to do them; for it is always possible that what Socrates must do under the supernatural necessity of divine command, others must do under some other necessity.¹⁵ (Not just others, either, but Socrates too, if *everyone* is under the necessity; so that in his case what he does would be overdetermined – required by the god, but also by whatever requires it of human beings as such.) After all, Socrates calls what he does *philosophy*, and he certainly seems to be trying to get other people to do philosophy as well, and partly by telling them – sincerely, so far as we can tell – that this is something they *should be doing anyway*. This is indeed how the matter has generally been seen, in part because it seems to fit so well with the idea of Socrates functioning as an example (*paradeigma*, 23b1): he does publicly, prominently, what he thereby urges everyone else to do; he is required to do it by divine command – but why does he think *everyone* is required to do it?

Mark McPherran has argued that Socrates implies that it is the same sort of necessity by which he and human beings in general must philosophise: that is, a duty of piety. His starting-point is Socrates’ well-known claim that virtue – what is sought in investigating the Question – is the key to human well-being:

I go around doing nothing but persuading you, young and old alike, not to care about your bodies, or wealth, in preference to – or even as much as – ensuring that your soul is in the

¹⁴ What Socrates says at *Apology* 28d, at *Crito* 49c and in many other places, make it mysterious how N Reshotko could have concluded that *rejection* of the idea of “universal moral principles” is a cornerstone of Socratic thinking (*Reshotko* (2006), x *et passim*). (She seems to mean “universal ethical principles,” of exactly the sort Socrates endorses here; that is, she does not intend a version of the Anscombe-Williams view that talk of morality among the ancient Greeks, as opposed to ethics, is often anachronistic.)

¹⁵ My distinction between the natural and supernatural is only supposed to mark the difference between the respective ‘realms’ of mortals and gods, whereby the latter is not subject to certain prominent necessities that govern the former: illness and death, for example, and all the other limitations of continuous embodiment.

best possible condition, saying, “Virtue doesn’t come from wealth, but it is virtue that makes wealth and everything else good for men” (30a7-b4).¹⁶

This does not yet establish a general duty or obligation to philosophize, says McPherran:

After all, in his concern for everyone’s welfare (31a), the god may have ordered Socrates to go to great lengths to urge others to philosophize precisely because others do not actually have this sort of duty – or inclination – to engage in it. For their own good people might require the special prodding to philosophize... which Socrates provides in obedience to the god: just as a parent might have a paternalistic duty of assistance to urge his children to do *x*, where they themselves do not possess the same duty to do *x* possessed by the parent. Hence, the ascription to Socrates of a belief in a general obligation to philosophize is in need of justification.¹⁷

McPherran therefore postulates on Socrates’ behalf a general duty to philosophize deriving from the virtue of piety in order to provide this justification. Here is one of his derivations: “[S]ince the gods (for Socrates) are wholly good, it is a compelling hypothesis that they desire our happiness. Since philosophical activity... aims at the production of this, and since our service to the gods would seem to call for us to satisfy their desires, philosophical practice is thus pious.”¹⁸

One might worry that Socrates never anywhere says this, or anything like it, or talks in terms of “satisfying the gods’ desires,” or mentions that the gods want us to be happy.¹⁹ But the more interesting question is *why* he doesn’t. The answer emerges from consideration of further difficulties with McPherran’s account: (i) the structure of the explanation he posits and (ii) his effectively ascribing to Socrates and his contemporaries a conception of *duty* or *obligation* that they, and also Plato, could not have had.

(i) On this conception of piety, whereby everyone has a duty of piety to philosophize, piety cannot be an interestingly common basis shared by Socrates’ duty and everyone else’s. To say that Socrates’ duty is one of piety is to allude to the publicly announced events surrounding Chaerephon’s question of the oracle at Delphi, and Socrates’ eventual interpretation of the oracle as issuing a divine command. Socrates’ activity is motivated by self-interest, as on his (typically Greek) view all intelligible activity must be, but this motivation can only be explained in terms of piety: piety is a virtue and it is necessarily in one’s interest to act in accordance with virtue. In the case of the general public, on McPherran’s own account, the order of explanation is reversed: their philosophical activity may be called pious, but only because it promotes their well-being which, according to McPherran’s (wholly unsubstantiated) assumption, the gods may be presumed to be thought by Socrates to desire on our behalf. On this assumption, to call the general necessity an “obligation of piety” is not to distinguish it from the necessity that attends any human action that prevents self-harm or promotes well-being – which is to say, on the eudaimonistic assumptions standard among the Greeks, any well-thought-out human action whatever. This conception of piety therefore makes no real contribution to our understanding of the requirement to philosophize.

¹⁶ Translation after Burnet (1924), 204. On this crux in the *Apology*, see Burnyeat (2003).

¹⁷ McPherran (1986), 541.

¹⁸ McPherran (1986), 544.

¹⁹ The expression *kêdomenos humôn* (lit “caring for you”) at 31a7 does not show that the god has a “concern for everyone’s welfare,” but only that if the god did send anyone else to replace Socrates, then he *pro tanto* cared for mortals.

Further, on McPherran’s view, philosophizing – investigating the Question – is *doubly* good: as making us happy through the provision of virtue; and as making us happy *again* through the provision of the specific virtue of piety, which comes from pleasing the god by making ourselves happy in the first place. But why stop there? Why doesn’t this second dose of happiness give rise to a third? There is no reason why our happiness shouldn’t be approved of by the god, and so augmented by an extra glow of piety, merely because the happiness so approved derived from the divine imprimatur bestowed on a third happiness conceptually prior to *it*. In this way investigation of the Question, and any other direct contribution to our wellbeing, straightaway give rise to an infinite sequence of such contributions, generated by the extremely fortunate mechanism whereby any portion of happiness is automatically magnified by the piety that arises from the god’s approval of it.

(ii) Better, we may think, not to take the first step down this road. And isn’t the answer to our question actually implicit in McPherran’s starting-point? That is, doesn’t the necessity Socrates imputes to the human attempt to answer the Question derive *directly* from the connection between virtue and well-being, rather than via a specific requirement of piety? This may seem to suggest that Socrates thinks, implausibly, that we have a direct *duty to be happy*. Although that thought is indeed implausible, we should not conclude that it cannot be a fact about human well-being that human beings *must* philosophise; for duty is not the only form of ethical necessity, and the habit of thinking about ethics primarily in terms of duty is anyway alien to the Greeks.²⁰ There is also, for example, the necessity imposed on human beings by the natural conditions of human life: a version of the sort of necessity discussed by Aristotle, that attaches to that *without which* some good will not be possible or some evil cannot be averted²¹ – in this case, the good is the ultimate one of a life worth living; so the evil is that one’s life may be a waste of time, for “*the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being*” (*Apology* 38a5-6). This is in fact the *only* sort of necessity ascribed by Socrates to general human philosophizing in the *Apology*. He *nowhere* talks of people having a *duty* to philosophize over and above this sort of necessity, and one reason for this is the very basic reason that there is no Greek word for duty in this generic sense.²² Yet even if there were, it is hard to see what the idea of a duty to philosophize could add, by way of reasons for action, to the claim that no life that did not involve philosophizing could be worth living. What more reason could anyone want? And who is going to be moved by thoughts about duty, if they don’t care whether their life is worth living?²³

The necessity in question, then, is imposed by the natural conditions of human life, in such a way that nothing worthwhile can be done *unless* one addresses the Question. The term for this sort of necessity is *need*²⁴: let us call it *the Need*.

²⁰ See Anscombe (1958), and Williams (1985), especially chs 1-3, 10.

²¹ *Metaphysics* Δ, 1015a22-26; see Anscombe (1978), ??.

²² Cf Bernard Williams (1985), 16. Strangely, McPherran seems to half-acknowledge this point: “[W]hen I attribute to Socrates the belief in a ‘general duty’ or ‘obligation’ to do philosophy, I mean only to claim that Socrates believed that most people of the age of reason ought to – *prima facie* – do philosophy, that doing philosophy will benefit them and ought generally to be preferred over other activities, and that philosophizing is virtuous...” ((1986), 555-6, n1).

²³ I do not deny that someone who doesn’t *believe* their life is worth living may be moved by thoughts about duty – eg a duty not to commit suicide (cf *Phaedo* 62b-c, and Kant (1997), 11).

²⁴ “Need” here is then being used in its “non-elliptical” (and primary) sense, as helpfully distinguished by David Wiggins from the sort of need that is conditional on some purpose one

Socrates' activity is beneficial because he persuades everyone else, and shows them how, to do something that meets this most basic human Need. Trying to answer the Question, and so attending to the state of their souls – which is what Socrates urges them to do – is the absolute precondition of any other genuine good they may hope to attain.

What do I deserve to have done to me or to pay, just because I wouldn't keep quiet throughout my life...? ...I went to each of you privately, to confer what I call *the greatest benefit* on you, by trying to persuade each of you to give priority to how he may be as good and as wise as possible rather than to any of his other projects, and to the city itself rather than to any of the city's projects, and to be concerned with other things in the same way – what then do I deserve to have done to me for being such a person? Something good, men of Athens, if I have to propose a sentence I truly deserve; and the sort of good that would be appropriate for me besides. So: What is appropriate for a poor man *who benefits you*, and needs leisure to exhort you (*epi tēi humetera; parakeleusei*)? Nothing is more appropriate than that such a man should be fed in the town hall, men of Athens; this is much more appropriate for him than for your Olympic victor in the horse or chariot race. *For he only makes you feel happy (eudaimonas dokein), whereas I make you really happy* – and he doesn't need feeding, but I do! (36b5-6, c3-e1, my emphases)

The unparalleled benefit Socrates claims he has provided to the city in doing the god's bidding is *eudaimonia* – happiness (or well-being) itself; or, at least, its most basic precondition. Since, as a eudaimonist, Socrates supposes that a good reason to do something just is that thing's contributing to one's *eudaimonia*, he presumably understands the benefit he confers to be something they have the strongest possible reason to want: what he persuades them to do is something that, in the most direct and fundamental way possible, they have reason to do anyway. Heeding his own admonitions, on Socrates' view, is the only chance anyone has of attaining any genuine good whatsoever.

Why should this be? Why does Socrates insist that unless I address the Question, “How should I live?”, my life cannot be worth living? He does not say much about this in the *Apology*. Various answers and parts of answers may be extracted from other dialogues; but it may be worth pointing out a feature of the Question that Socrates doesn't mention. For a human being faced with the prospect of *living a life*, the one inescapable question is: *How* should I live this life? This is the one inescapable question because it is the only question that gets answered by being ignored. To try to ignore the question seems, implicitly, already to endorse an answer, precisely in the way one lives; and that answer is: *unreflectively*.²⁵

may happen to have. Many human beings may never recognise their Need to address the Question (this is precisely Socrates' complaint), nor many other needs besides, but, like all needs of this sort, its status as a need depends not upon its being noticed, but entirely upon its being necessary for the avoidance of harm (see, again, Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Δ, 1015a22-26). “[I]t is precisely the fact that such avoidance is not a controversial purpose that lends needs claims their *prima facie* special practical and argumentative force” (Wiggins (1987), 9). All this applies *a fortiori* in that the harm Socrates urges people to avoid by engaging with the Question is – he, at any rate, is convinced – the worst harm that could befall anybody.

²⁵ Most philosophers nowadays think that metaphysics – the study of ‘the fundamental nature of reality’ – is at the centre of philosophy. The question “How should I live?” belongs to ethics (broadly conceived), which is generally *not* considered to be the most important branch of philosophy. The idea seems to be that figuring out what the world is like is a more fundamental enterprise than figuring out how to live in it. Yet ‘figuring out what the world is like’ *presupposes* an answer to the question “How should I live?” – or part of an answer: “I should spend some of my time figuring out what the world is like.” After all, if scientists and philosophers concluded that

Yet there is a danger here of moving too fast to the Socratic conclusion. In particular, we cannot assume that the only distinctive way the uniquely human capacities for reflection can shape a human life is via a self-conscious investigation into the Question. For there do seem to be forms of practical wisdom that are essentially inarticulate:

[Levin] did not consider himself wise, but he could not help knowing that he was more intelligent than his wife or Agafya Mikhailovna, and he could not help knowing that when he thought about death, he thought about it with all the forces of his soul. He also knew that many great masculine minds, whose thoughts about it he had read, had pondered death and yet did not know a hundredth part of what his wife and Agafya Mikhailovna knew about it. Different as these two women were,... they were perfectly alike in this. Both unquestionably knew what life was and what death was, and though they would have been unable to answer and would not even have understood the questions that presented themselves to Levin, neither had any doubt about the meaning of this phenomenon and looked at it in exactly the same way, not only between themselves, but sharing this view with millions of other people. The proof that they knew firmly what death was lay in their knowing, without a moment's doubt, how to act with dying people and not being afraid of them. While Levin and others, though they could say a lot about death, obviously did not know, because they were afraid of death and certainly had no idea what needed to be done when people were dying.²⁶

To resume and summarise the main line of argument: if McPherran is mistaken, and Socrates has a distinctive reason (the Duty) to spend his life in the way he describes in the *Apology*, this does nothing to invalidate the widespread (perhaps unanimous) view among scholars, that he urges others to do the very things (in particular: practicing “the elenchus”) that constitute the way of life set out in the *Apology* (the identification of (A) with (B) above); for different people may have different reasons for doing the same thing. To preserve the identification, the standard account must retreat at this point to the ‘overdetermination’ view mentioned above: what Socrates does in obedience to the god’s command (that is, in fulfilment of the Duty) would be, on this view, what all men already have overriding reason to do (that is, to meet the Need), so that in Socrates’ case alone his doing it is required by both supernatural and natural necessities – the Duty and the Need – either of which would suffice alone.²⁷

Nevertheless, what Socrates does in obedience to the god’s command cannot be simply what he urges others to do, and Socrates himself makes this very clear. If what Socrates does were simply what he urges others to do, then he would still have overriding reason to do it even if he hadn’t been commanded by the god, as he would still be meeting a (or *the*) fundamental human Need; but his demonstration that he has been commanded by the god depends entirely

their lives would go better if they didn’t bother trying to figure out what the world is like, they wouldn’t bother trying to figure out what the world is like. None of this is to deny that there are other dimensions of assessment on which metaphysics is more fundamental – most plausibly, when understood as expressing the aspiration to give an account of ‘how things are *anyway*’, ie independently of human concerns.

²⁶ Tolstoy (2001), 496. Compare Socrates in the *Laches*: “And presumably if we know something, we’re in a position to say it?”

²⁷ “...according to Socrates, *all* of us *should* do what Socrates does” (Brickhouse and Smith (1995), 10. “Several passages in the *Apology* testify to Socrates’ view that others can and indeed should practice the elenchos. Socrates’ attachment to the elenchos may be greater than the attachment of others. He may be the only one who has been “commanded by the god” to practice it. But it is not restricted to him” (Benson (2000),32).

upon his claim that if he hadn't been commanded by the god, his conduct would make no sense:

As a result of this investigation [sc into the supposed wisdom of others], gentlemen of the jury, there arose a great deal of hatred against me, and of a kind which is most difficult to bear, since it gave rise to all sorts of slander, and I acquired a reputation for being wise. For on each occasion the bystanders thought that I myself was wise about whatever I was cross-examining the other person about... Even now I continue this investigation *in obedience to the god*... Because of this occupation, I don't have time to deal with any public affairs worthy of the name, or even with my personal concerns, and I live in great poverty *because of my service (latreian) to the god* (*Apology* 22e6-23a5, b7-c1; my emphases).

...you're well aware that what I said earlier is true, that I'm intensely hated by many people. This is what will convict me, if anything will; not Meletus or Anytus, but the slanders and resentment of the many. This has certainly convicted many other good men, and I think it will carry on doing so. There's no danger that it will stop with me (28a4-b2).

I am just the sort of person that the god would give to the city, as you might realise from the following: it *doesn't look like human nature*, for me to have neglected all my affairs, and to put up with *the neglect of my personal interests* for so many years now, *always acting in your interest instead*, going to each of you in private like a father or an elder brother, to persuade you to care about virtue. Now, if I was deriving some benefit from doing these things by taking payment for these exhortations, *there would be some sense in it*; but now you can see for yourselves that my accusers, for all the shamelessness of their other accusations, could not be quite so brazen as to provide witnesses to say that I ever made any money, or asked for any. But I believe I can provide sufficient witness for the truth of what I'm saying: namely, my poverty (31a7-c3; my emphases).

Socrates is here adducing evidence that his way of life really has been in obedience to a divine command: otherwise, he says, his behaviour *wouldn't make any sense*. According to standard Greek eudaimonism, to which Socrates and presumably his audience subscribe, action is intelligible insofar as the agent (intelligibly believes he) gets something out of it. If Socrates has been commanded by the god to live a certain kind of life, it makes sense for him to obey because disobedience to the god is necessarily self-harming, because contrary to the virtue of piety; but if he has not been so commanded, then the activities that *would* have been explained by reference to divine command become unintelligible, because *they* are now self-harming, in that they have deprived him of wealth and reputation.²⁸ Socrates' argument would itself not make any sense if what he did in

²⁸ Two objections: (i) Socrates doesn't think that wealth and reputation are real goods, so he can't think that being deprived of them is really harmful. (ii) Even if there are harms attendant upon obeying the god, might they not be outweighed by compensating benefits – the crucial benefits that come from concerning oneself with the Question?

Responses: (i) on this account Socrates would not here be telling the truth, as he emphatically said he would (17b7-8; cf [reference removed for anonymous review]); and anyway a good case can be made for Socrates' taking in the *Apology* the position that they are *conditional* goods – the condition being that the agent also be concerned with the Question (cf (Burnyeat 2003)) – as, I claim, it is possible to be so concerned *without* doing those things distinctive of Socrates' obedience to the god – just as Socrates is so concerned in the *Gorgias* and possibly other Socratic dialogues (see below, section 3). (ii) (a) this would invalidate Socrates' argument – his behaviour would *after all* make sense even if it hadn't been commanded by the god; (b) the behaviour distinctive of Socrates' obedience to the god is not *necessary* for those benefits, because that behaviour goes beyond merely concerning oneself with the Question. A non-proselytising concern with the Question, as manifested by Socrates in the *Gorgias* and possibly elsewhere, suffices for the benefits.

obedience to the god were simply what he urged upon others as something they, *qua* human beings, had an automatically overriding reason to do anyway. For then the god's command would make no distinctive contribution to an explanation of why Socrates lived the life he did. Conversely, if he were urging others to follow exactly the procedure he describes himself as following in the *Apology*, he could not consistently claim that they have an overriding reason (the provision of the necessary precondition of a life worth living) to do as he urges because, since they *haven't* been commanded by the god, it makes no more sense for them to do this than it *would* make for Socrates to do it if *he* hadn't been commanded by the god.

In fact, if Socrates' way of life were overdetermined in this way by the supernatural Duty and the natural Need, we (and the jury) could no longer understand the most distinctive and effective features of Socrates' defence. For that defence is rooted in a deep irony: Socrates stands accused of impiety, but it is the requirements of, precisely, piety (Socrates' Duty) that necessitated the way of life that led to the accusation. On the overdetermination view, this deep irony becomes, at best, rhetorical window-dressing: an equally adequate explanation of Socrates' way of life can be found in the Need, which afflicts Socrates as much as any human being. The whole oracle story becomes superfluous: why would Socrates not account for his way of life simply by invoking that fundamental and universal Need to concern oneself with the Question?

At this point, an advocate of the standard account may protest that there must be *something* to the overdetermination view, since Socrates himself plainly describes what he does in obedience to the god and what he urges others to do in the same terms: he calls both *philosophy*. We must bear in mind (such an advocate may be imagined as counselling) the distinction Socrates himself draws (29d5, quoted above), between the two components of the divine command: *philosophising* (*philosophôn*) and *exhorting* (*parakeleuomenos*). This distinction allows us to preserve the core of the overdetermination view while avoiding the mysteries I have claimed it generates. What is overdetermined by the dual necessities of Need and Duty is Socrates' practice of *philosophy* (or 'the elenchus'); but what has got Socrates into trouble, which he seeks to explain by appeal to the divine command of Delphi, is his ceaseless exhorting which, as he himself describes it, cannot but have given rise to a great deal of alienation and resentment.

After all (we may think of our opponent as continuing), surely Socrates compares himself to a gadfly because *he bugs people*. It may be a bit annoying to be asked baffling questions about one's own supposed expertise, but someone who goes around telling people repeatedly that they should be worrying more about living better lives, and then purporting to expose as liars anyone who claims they already do worry about it – that person is *bugging people*. So insofar as the gadfly image is supposed to help explain why Socrates risks being executed (remember that the half-awake person lashes out, 31a3-5), the suggestion would appear to be that it was his exhortation, exposure and reproach that really incurred people's animosity.

While there is certainly something in this, it cannot be maintained that Socrates' exhortations and reproaches are the sole cause, in his eyes, of his predicament in the *Apology*. The standard account has it right that Socrates sums up his way of life – as well as the activity he urges upon others – as *philosophy*; and it is under just this description that he considers his way of life to have contributed to his indictment. The post at which the god has stationed him requires him to live *as a philosopher, examining himself and others* (*philosophounta me dein zên kai exetadzonta emauton kai tous allous*; 28e5-6, quoted above); it is

as understood in this way, amongst others, that his mode of life was not to be abandoned through fear of death. In his imaginary scenario of conditional liberation, which he says he would reject, the condition the Athenians place upon him is that he stop *investigating* and *philosophising* (29c7, quoted above). None of this is really intelligible unless the specifically *philosophical* component of what (he thought) the god had commanded endangered his life, and played a role in his indictment. Further confirmation can be found in the oracle story itself. The unpopularity and slander Socrates first complains of arose from his questioning as a means of interpreting the oracle (22e6-23a5, quoted above). His interpretative questioning was unaccompanied by any of the exhortation and reproach he later went in for at (as he thought) the god's behest, for he had no conception of any such divine command until *after* the interpretation of the oracle at which his initial questioning aimed.

All this presents us with a new difficulty. If what I have said so far is correct, then Socrates' reasons for living his life as he has (stemming from the Duty) differ from the reasons (stemming from the Need) everyone has for doing as he urges. Furthermore, even the specifically philosophical component of Socrates' characteristic procedure as described in the *Apology* cannot be simply what he urges others to do, since the former would be self-harming in the absence of a divine command, while the latter is beneficial although not commanded by the god. Yet, as we have acknowledged, the standard account is right to insist that what Socrates urges upon others, no less than what he practices himself, is *philosophy*. So those who heed Socrates' admonitions must be *doing the same thing as Socrates* after all.

If we are to see how all this is nevertheless consistent, we can no longer postpone consideration of the logical complications involved in the idea of one person *doing the same thing as* another. Notice that in a broad sense Socrates counts as doing the same thing as anyone who heeds him simply in virtue of *conversing with people*. What matters is not whether there are descriptions, such as *conversing* or *philosophising*, that apply equally to the two cases (there are clearly very many such). What matters is whether, simply in virtue of doing the least that Socrates requires in his exhortations and reproaches, other people necessarily count as fulfilling the philosophical part of what the god (as he thought) required of Socrates. I have sought to show that they can't count as doing this, because if they did, they couldn't benefit from it, any more than Socrates could, absent his divine command. So if Socrates and those who heed him are all philosophising, Socrates must be philosophising *in a different way* from the others. We have to distinguish Socratic philosophising which, if it were not his Duty, would harm him, from the philosophising he urges upon others, which not only doesn't harm them, but meets the most fundamental human Need.

Our difficulty, however, becomes more acute when we recall that Socrates describes himself as functioning as an example (*paradeigma*, 23b1) for others. Surely he therefore intends others to *imitate* him. How can what others do in imitation of Socrates differ in any significant way from the conduct Socrates intends as their model? Mustn't they all be doing fundamentally the same thing after all?

The answer is that they need not, because the idea of serving as an example, like the idea of one person doing the same thing as another, is not straightforward. Consider the TV chef demonstrating how to make *boeuf bourguignon*. Is the viewer who goes on to try the recipe himself doing the same thing as the TV chef? Typically not, for two very different reasons. First, the exigencies of television production entail that very often a chef

demonstrating how to make *boeuf bourguignon* does not, as any part of the process, succeed in, or even aim at, actually making *boeuf bourguignon*. And secondly, even if the chef is cooking in real time, someone simply instructed to do exactly the same thing may well begin by trying to book a TV studio. The basic point is familiar from Wittgenstein: talk of functioning as an example, like talk of doing the same thing (or something different) can only get a grip if we presuppose a great deal of easily-overlooked stage-setting. The bare concepts of example and sameness of deed are powerless by themselves to determine in given cases what is to *count* as following someone's example, or as doing the same thing as they have done. It is the surrounding circumstances and a host of background assumptions and expectations that ensure, for example, that the TV chef may count as an exemplar of the making of *boeuf bourguignon* even though he does not actually make *boeuf bourguignon*, and that the viewer who follows his example may be very far indeed from simply reproducing his bodily actions.

These examples make it clear that Socrates may rightly describe himself as philosophising and serving as an example even though what he does differs radically in crucial respects from what he urges others to do by way of following his example. And in fact there must be such radical differences, since (to repeat) what Socrates does in setting his example would harm him if he had not been commanded by the god to do it, while what he urges upon others cannot fail to benefit them even though they have not been so commanded. It remains to identify the differences.

The natural place to start looking is among those features of Socrates' procedure which, like the chef's TV cameras, are required for it to function as an example. Chief among these is Socrates' role as questioner. Socrates cannot present a paradigm of philosophical discussion by playing the role of *answerer*. He has to ask questions to initiate the exchange, and he has to carry on asking them to shape the conversation into an example of the sort of activity he is urging upon others. A passage in the *Gorgias* (to which we shall return) illustrates the point: he tries to get Polus to ask the right questions, but in the process the role of questioner inevitably devolves upon him once again (462b1-464a1). This is simply a consequence of Polus's cluelessness. Socrates does not mean to convey that only the questioner is engaged in philosophy: no more does the TV chef, that the true cook must work in a studio.

Since people are generally reluctant to engage in the sort of scrutiny Socrates urges upon them – this is why he must exhort and reproach them – he cannot construct effective examples of philosophical exchange if he relies upon his interlocutors' unforced consent.²⁹ Thus, as we have seen, his procedure is coercive (*Apology* 29e3-5). Like the rule that he ask the questions (and like the chef's cameras), the coercive nature of his procedure is no part of his activity understood as what he wants others to emulate; it is rather a necessary condition of there being such a thing as an activity susceptible of emulation in the first place.

We have identified two features of Socrates' procedure, then, which are not shared by the activity he urges upon others. Yet we may still affirm that Socrates functions as an example, in that he wants others to do *what he does*, ie philosophy; and the reason this is all consistent is that the two features – the rule that Socrates ask the questions and his coercion of the interlocutor – belong not to the content of the example Socrates is trying

²⁹ I refer here to consent to the interrogation itself, that is; not to assent to any of the propositions at issue in the course of it, which of course must be given freely.

to set for others, but to *formal* conditions on Socrates' being able so much as to convey any exemplary message at all. Are these aspects any help in explaining how the specifically philosophical component of Socrates' procedure contributed to his alienation from Athens? It would seem so: they are surely crucial to what makes Socrates a *philosophical* (as opposed to a merely hortatory) gadfly. They are necessitated by Socrates' Duty to set an example rather than the universal Need to follow it: so although they made Socrates' procedure one that would have harmed him if it had not been commanded by the god, they are no part of what he enjoins on others, which he may therefore consistently maintain is to their benefit.

As I mentioned at the outset, it is generally believed that Socrates follows 'the procedure of the *Apology*' in the 'Socratic' dialogues. We can now see that this is an ambiguous claim, because it turns out that there are two procedures – two different ways of doing philosophy – in the *Apology*: Socrates' way of life, motivated by his Duty to obey the god, who has commanded him to set an example to others (call this *missionary philosophising*), and the philosophical activity, which consists of following that example, and which Socrates urges upon others as meeting the Need – that is, as benefiting them in the most fundamental possible way (call this *lay philosophising*).

The question may be raised: if it is so clear that there are these two procedures in the *Apology*, why has no-one noticed this before? If I may briefly speculate: (i) The ideas of functioning as an example, and of one person *doing the same thing as* another, although (as I have argued) they operate in a rather complicated way, wear a deceptive aura of simplicity, so that the identification of (A) and (B) is thought of as obviously following from the fact that Socrates' philosophising is exemplary – or rather, its obviousness is a matter of its not being much *thought of* at all. (ii) Since the pioneering work of Vlastos, Robinson and others, there has been something of a monomaniacal preoccupation with 'the Socratic elenchus', where this has been thought of as the abstract structure of Socratic philosophy (common, in our terms, to missionary and lay philosophy). This has focused attention on the content of what Socrates as *paradeigma* is trying to convey, to the exclusion of what I have called formal features of his procedure, and so encouraged the assumption that there is a strongly unitary concept that answers to (A), (B) and (C). (iii) Ethics in the modern period (Kantianism, consequentialism; the tradition of Hobbes is an exception) has tended to suppress eudaimonism as a fundamental assumption; this has made us instinctively reluctant to take Socrates at his word when he says that his conduct wouldn't make sense if it hadn't been commanded by the god, as we tend to think of 'pure altruism' as an ethical ideal rather than a conceptual impossibility.³⁰

In the face of the ambiguity of 'philosophising' between (A) and (B), then, the standard supposition that the 'Socratic' dialogues show Socrates following the 'procedure of the *Apology*' needs to be clarified: which of these two procedures (if either), lay or missionary, is Socrates portrayed as following in the Socratic dialogues? (That is, given that (A) and (B) are distinct, may either be identified with (C)?) If we return to the *Gorgias*, whose connections to the *Apology* we began by investigating, we shall see that Socrates *cannot* be understood as there following the missionary procedure he ascribes to himself in the *Apology*.

³⁰ See Anscombe (1958).

3. *The single necessity of the Gorgias*

Let us start with the rule that Socrates ask the questions. Who initiates the *Gorgias*'s first philosophical investigation, into Gorgias's way of life? Anyone who has to check the text may be surprised to find that it is not Socrates but *Chaerephon*, in an unnoticed peculiarity of the opening scene:

SOC: Ask him [sc Gorgias], Chaerephon.
CHAER: Ask him what?
SOC: *Who he is (hostis estin)*.
...
CHAER: ...I'll ask him. Tell me, Gorgias... (447c9-d1, d6).

Why on earth does Plato orchestrate things this way? I suggest he is signalling right at the outset that Socrates does not conceive of himself as having a uniquely interrogative role in this dialogue, by contrast with the procedure he describes in the *Apology*. The point is expanded in the response to Chaerephon, when Polus insists upon answering on Gorgias's behalf:

CHAER: Tell me, Gorgias: is Calicles here speaking the truth when he says that you profess to answer anything anyone asks you?
GORG: It's true, Chaerephon. I made the same profession just now, actually; and I must say that no-one's asked me anything new for a long time.
CHAER: Then I'm sure you'll have no trouble answering us, Gorgias.
GORG: Now's your chance to try and see, Chaerephon.
POL: Listen, Chaerephon, do try asking me, if you don't mind. I'm sure Gorgias is all talked out – he's just been through a lot.
CHAER: What's this, Polus? Do you think you can answer better than Gorgias?
POL: Who cares, if I answer well enough for you?
CHAER: Fine... (447d6-448b2).

Plato is showing us something about Polus's character, of course, and in the light of the subsequent dialogue, we can see that he is also gesturing toward a defect in the typical attitude of the devotee of the 'rhetorical life': persuasion, not truth, is the ultimate aim of discussion. There is yet a third point, brought out by Chaerephon's acquiescence: in a way, it *doesn't* matter which of those present makes what contribution, because it is in the nature of communal dialectic that any benefits be available to all the participants equally.³¹ This will turn out to be important for our understanding of Socrates' conception in the *Gorgias* of the purpose of dialectical activity and the sorts of reason the participants – himself included – may intelligibly have for engaging in it.

Of course, Socrates does ask most of the questions in the *Gorgias*, but this is merely a reflection of his supreme dialectical skill. The missionary procedure he describes in the *Apology* does not merely require that he ask the bulk of the questions: it is simply *his interrogative procedure*, and so it presupposes that he will be the questioner. It is nowhere implied that he could obey the command of the god by *answering* others' questions. As we shall see, Socrates in the *Gorgias* views all the discussants, himself included, as being fundamentally 'dialectically equal', in that the ground rules of the discussion do not themselves accord special prerogatives to any one participant – although the more skilful (Socrates, Calicles) may exert more *de facto* influence on the shape of the conversation. In

³¹ Cf 470b11-c3: "POL: Answer this one yourself, Socrates. SOC: All right, Polus; I'll say it, if you'd rather hear it from me..."

the *Apology*, by contrast, Socrates' procedure marks him out as playing a special role *in principle*, as befits his special status as agent of the god. He is distinguished, in other words, as the dealer (whatever his competence) is distinguished in blackjack, whereas the distinction he enjoys in the *Gorgias* is earned, as by exceptional card-play.

The opening scene conflicts equally sharply with that other feature that distinguished Socrates' method in the *Apology* from the method he there urges upon others: his readiness to coerce his interlocutor if that should be necessary for the performance of his Duty (*Apology* 29e3-30a2, quoted above). Consider how Socrates first broaches the possibility of a philosophical discussion – a long way from the stern, imperious attitude of Socrates' self-description in the *Apology*:

CAL: Is Socrates keen to hear Gorgias, Chaerephon?

CHAER: That's exactly why we're here.

CAL: In that case, come back to my place whenever you like. Gorgias is staying with me, and he can give you a demonstration.

SOC: That's very good of you, Callicles; but *would he be willing* to enter into discussion with us? I want to find out from the man himself what the power of his art consists of, and what it is he professes and teaches. Let him give the other demonstration another time, as you say (447b4-c4; my emphasis).

Yet the opening scene provides only hints and suggestions. Plato goes so far out of his way throughout the main body of the *Gorgias* to distance Socrates both from any claim to special status as questioner, and from any inclination to coerce his interlocutors, that it may seem mysterious how the conception of 'Socratic' dialogues as enacting Socrates' missionary procedure in the *Apology* ever gained such wide currency. Since it would take far too long to canvass all the evidence, I shall confine myself to a representative sample from each of the three main conversations.

The conversation with Gorgias, like those with Polus and Callicles, is interrupted by a 'time-out', in which Socrates steps back from the discussion at hand and reflects upon the nature of the dialectical method (457c-458e; cf 471d-472c (Polus) and 486d-488b (Callicles)). Here Socrates observes that discussions of the sort they are engaged in frequently end acrimoniously, and worries that the problems he is about to pose concerning what Gorgias has said may bring their discussion to a similar end, if Gorgias makes the common assumption that his interrogator's main goal is to get the better of him. Everything turns on whether Gorgias shares Socrates' attitude to discussion which, at least in Socrates' own description, remains a sublime philosophical ideal:

SOC: ...I'd be glad to go on questioning you, if you're the same sort of person as myself; *otherwise, I'd rather let it go*. And what sort of person am I? I'm the sort who's *glad to be refuted* if I'm saying anything that's not true, and glad to refute if anyone else is – and no less glad to be refuted than to refute. In fact, *I consider being refuted a greater³² good*, inasmuch as it's a greater good to be rid of the greatest evil oneself than to rid another of it. You see, I think there's nothing so bad for a person, as false belief about the subject of our current argument. If you're telling me you're this sort of person too, let's carry on with the discussion. But *if you think we should drop it, let's have done with it straight away and abandon the argument* (458a1-b3).³³

³² Plato's emphasis on *greater* (*meizon* first word in its clause); other emphases here are my own.

³³ See also 506c1-3: SOC [to Callicles] "If you refute me, I won't be annoyed with you as you were with me, but you shall be recorded in my memory as my greatest benefactor."

This is clearly at odds with both of the features that distinguished the missionary procedure in the *Apology*. Socrates cannot very well welcome the prospect of being refuted himself if his own dialectical activity is confined to asking questions; and his unwillingness to coerce his interlocutor into taking part in the discussion could not be more plain.

Nevertheless, although Socrates' abdication from the role of questioner is envisaged in the conversation with Gorgias, it is not enacted there: like book I of the *Republic* and the first conversation of the *Meno*, this discussion seems to be a pastiche of the 'Socratic' or 'elenctic' dialogue, upon which the subsequent conversations may be seen as (*inter alia*) a kind of critical commentary. Elenctic orthodoxy is quickly and explicitly abandoned in the conversation with Polus: "Well then, which do you want to do right now: ask questions or answer them?" asks Socrates. "All right," replies Polus; "you answer me, Socrates" (462b1-3). Notice also the attitude Socrates expresses right at the start of that conversation, in response to Polus's enraged interruption of the conversation with Gorgias:

SOC: I'm willing to take back anything you like, if anything [Gorgias and I] have agreed upon strikes you as wrong, on just one condition.

POL: What condition?

SOC: That you rein in your tendency to make long speeches, which you tried to indulge earlier on.

POL: What? I'm not to be allowed to say as much as I want?

SOC: It would certainly be appalling treatment, my good friend, for you to arrive in Athens, where there is more freedom of speech than anywhere else in Greece, only to find that you're the only one here to be denied this privilege. But look at the other side of the story: wouldn't it be equally appalling if you're making a long speech and refusing to answer questions put to you, and I'm not allowed to get away out of earshot? (461d2-462a1)

This is one of Socrates' best jokes; but the contrast with the *Apology* is so marked that we may suspect it seriously meant too: "...I won't just let him walk off, or leave the spot myself, but I'll question him and test him and cross-examine him..." (29e4-5). There is a similar contrast in Socrates' request of Callicles at 489d7-8: "Please conduct my education more gently, or I shall give up attending your school."³⁴

Socrates does not merely renounce any special status as questioner in the conversation with Polus: it is clear that he sees himself and Polus as enjoying a symmetrical status as (formally) equal partners in the dialectic, in the sense that they are equally at liberty to develop their own positions and interrogate each others'. Concerning his taxonomy of the *tekhnai* and the "knacks" that impersonate them, he says "If you dispute any of these points, I'm prepared to defend my position" (465a6-7); he justifies his own long speech by appeal to Polus's incomprehension at his briefer account and reciprocally invites Polus to set out his answers at greater length if he (Socrates) finds them unclear (465e1-466a3); he also invites Polus several times to refute him (eg 467a8-b2, 469c8, 473b7).

The abandonment of the missionary method of the *Apology* is most pronounced of all, however, in the conversation with Callicles. Socrates tells Callicles to refute his claim that wrongdoing and impunity are the greatest of harms for the perpetrator (482b2); and he commends Callicles on having the qualities of a good interlocutor; which is to say, one

³⁴ Translation after Dodds (1959), 287 *ad loc.*

whose partnership in dialectic will lead to the truth: “You see,” he says, “I come across a lot of people who aren’t capable of *interrogating me* because they’re not wise like you” (487a3-5, my emphasis; the word I have translated as “interrogating” is *basanidzein*, which has even harsher connotations than *elenkhein*: a standard meaning is *to question under torture*.) Notice the implication that Socrates habitually submits himself to interrogation. We have seen that he asked Polus to question him and “prove him wrong,” and he issues similar invitations to Callicles (eg 506c1-3, 508a8-b3); but in this final conversation, in the face of Callicles’ refusal to co-operate, Socrates’ role as answerer takes a new, more surprising and problematic form: he is driven to *answering his own questions*:

SOC: And then what about what arises in the soul as a result of order and proportion? Try and find a name to call this, as in the other case.

CAL: Why don’t you say it yourself, Socrates?

SOC: Well, I will answer, if you prefer it (504c1-5).

CAL: What a bully you are, Socrates! If you take my advice, you’ll leave this subject alone, or discuss it with someone else.

SOC: Who else would be willing? We shouldn’t leave our argument incomplete, you know.

CAL: But couldn’t you finish the argument yourself – by making your own speech, or answering your own questions?

SOC: And take on the task Epicharmus describes: “I’m to suffice by myself for what two men were saying before”? It looks as though that’s how it’ll have to be after all (505d4-e3; cf also 519d5-e2).

Socrates’ procedure in the *Gorgias*, then, differs from the missionary philosophising he ascribes to himself in the *Apology*, in that he relies on the uncoerced participation of his interlocutors, and (at least after the conversation with Gorgias) does not see himself as having a special interrogative role in the proceedings. But this is precisely how the ‘lay philosophising’ Socrates describes himself in the *Apology* as urging upon all human beings differs from missionary philosophising, too; so we are naturally led to the hypothesis that the procedure of the *Gorgias* simply *is* lay philosophising. The remaining feature of the missionary/lay distinction was *motivation*: supernatural Duty *versus* natural Need. The command of the god, of course, is nowhere mentioned in the *Gorgias*; but can we discern anything by way of positive reason for the participants’ dialectical activity there, on Socrates’ conception of it? It turns out that we can discern plenty. Consider what Socrates goes on to say as he assumes the ‘task of Epicharmus’:

Let’s adopt this method [sc Socrates answering his own questions] by all means. My view is that we should all be eager for victory in the struggle to find out what’s true and what’s false in the subject we’re talking about; *it’s a good common to all that this should become clear*. So I’ll go through the argument as it appears to me; but if it looks to any of you as though I’m getting myself to agree to things that aren’t true, you must seize upon these points and try to refute them. I won’t be speaking as one who knows anything much at all, you see; rather, *I’m a seeker in common with you*. So if there proves to be anything in what the dissenter says, I’ll be the first to give way to him. I say this, of course, on the assumption that you think we should bring the argument to a conclusion; if you don’t want to do this, let’s give it up immediately and go our separate ways (505e2-506a7; my emphases).

Again, we see a fundamental symmetry in Socrates’ conception of the communal activity, even as he contemplates continuing with the argument alone: nowhere in the *Gorgias* does he ascribe to himself any reason for taking part in the discussion that he doesn’t see as applying equally to the other participants. Everyone bears a curious relation to everyone else of simultaneous conflict and co-operation: so long as objections are

motivated by a concern to discover the truth and not by a mere desire to win the argument (remember the sublime philosophical ideal), this controlled conflict may be expected to maximise the chances of discerning the truth. There is a structural similarity to an adversarial legal system, with the difference that in the philosophical case, the adversaries must themselves be aiming at the very truth the process is designed to disclose, if it is to have any prospect of success:

CAL: Do you want me to agree with you?

SOC: If I seem to you to be speaking the truth (516c8-9).

The goal – truth – is the same for everyone; and the truth in question concerns the most important matter there is.³⁵ Plato gives this a very pronounced emphasis, as he has Socrates virtually repeat himself to each of the three interlocutors in turn: to Gorgias:

You see, I think there's nothing so bad for a person, as false belief about the subject of our current argument (458a8-b1);

to Polus:

It turns out that the subjects of our disagreement are no small matters, but pretty much what it's most admirable to know about and most shameful to be ignorant of: they amount to knowledge or ignorance of who is happy (*eudaimôn*) and who is not (472c6-d1);

and to Callicles, twice:

And this is the finest of all inquiries, Callicles, into the very things you said I was wrong about: what sort of man one should be, and how much of what sort of thing is needed for this, in old age as well as in youth (487e7-488a2);

For you see that the subject of our arguments is – well, what should even a man of small intelligence concern himself with rather than this? – I mean, how one should live (500c1-4).

It is clear that in all four cases Socrates is referring to the Question.³⁶ (It is a commonplace in the Socratic dialogues that the *eudaimôn* and the person who lives as he should are one and the same – indeed, this is an entailment of standard Greek eudaimonism.) The same subject of discussion persists through all three conversations, and it is the very subject that defines lay philosophising in the *Apology* – the Question. All the discussants in the *Gorgias* have the same reason for discussing the subject, and it is the very reason Socrates ascribes to all human beings in the *Apology* – that such discussion aims at the most advantageous form of knowledge there is. And in spite of the eschatological myth that concludes the *Gorgias*, through most of the dialogue it is clear that the advantage in question is to be understood in terms of the natural conditions of human life. In other words, Socrates conceives of the discussion in the *Gorgias* as rationally motivated by the Need. We may conclude, I think, that Socrates conceives of

³⁵ It is therefore absurd to suppose that Socrates deliberately dissimulates in the *Gorgias*; this would be to strike at the foundation of the enterprise as he conceives it. See McTighe (1992), especially 280-281, and Weiss (1985, 1992); cf Doyle (2007).

³⁶ According to the question Socrates gets Chaerephon to ask Gorgias, the subject of the first conversation is *who Gorgias is*. On why this is nevertheless a way of posing the Question, see Doyle (2010), 2-8.

this discussion as lay philosophising. Philosophy was subject to two necessities in the *Apology*; here, there is only one.

I regard this as further evidence for my claim in section 2 above that there is such a thing as lay philosophising (earlier understood in the case of the *Apology* as the activity Socrates urges on all human beings, which differs in some respects from his missionary activity). In fact, the *Gorgias* gives us if anything clearer, more detailed and less controvertible evidence for the nature and reality of lay philosophising than the *Apology*. I only first specified the concept as *what Socrates urges upon others in the Apology* (as opposed to *what gets enacted in the Gorgias*), because it was clearer to introduce it by contrast with missionary philosophising. That aside, the argument could have been run in the opposite direction: I could as easily have begun with the method of the *Gorgias* as Socrates conceives it, shown that it doesn't match Socrates' way of life as described in the *Apology*, and made a case for the other ('lay') procedure of the *Apology* as answering to what is enacted in the *Gorgias*.

4. Conclusions

We have seen that a fair amount of what is said about the Socratic dialogues has certain false presuppositions, which include the simple identification of what Socrates describes himself in the *Apology* as doing in obedience to the god's command (A) with what Socrates thereby urges others to do (B), and the further simple identification of these with what Plato depicts Socrates as doing in other 'Socratic' dialogues (C). These identifications depended for their plausibility on over-simplified conceptions of *functioning as an example* and *doing the same thing as someone else*. The identifications are false, because there are *formal* features of (A), which are necessary to its functioning as an example, but which are not shared by (B), although (B) has the same content, which is what (A) conveys. These formal features include *but are not necessarily confined to* Socrates' special role as questioner and his readiness to coerce his interlocutor. The different activities (A) (*missionary* philosophising) and (B) (*lay* philosophising) were seen to be undertaken for correspondingly different reasons. Given eudaimonism, the different reasons must amount to different goods gained by the agent; the different goods are in turn explained by reference to the dramatic difference in the situations of Socrates and human beings in general. Socrates thinks he has been commanded by the god to function as an exemplary philosopher, urging philosophy on others; but he also thinks that what he urges on others is in their best interest. Socrates' reason for philosophising is the supernatural Duty of piety to obey a divine command; human beings' reason for philosophising is the fundamental Need, rooted in the natural human condition, to live an examined life. Socrates' argument for the truth of the oracle story is that if the god had not commanded him, his way of life *wouldn't have made any sense*. This is how we first knew that (A) could not be simply the same activity as (B): if all Socrates was doing was what he urged upon others, then it would have made sense even if he hadn't been commanded by the god. But this isn't all he was doing; and his actions wouldn't have made any sense without the god's command because the extra component, the formal features essential to his functioning as an example, which do not belong to the exemplary content he is trying to convey, would count as self-harming (because alienating) if he had not been commanded by the god. Since he has been commanded by the god, he is not harmed by alienating others because it can never be self-harming to be pious, and piety requires obedience to the god. Other human beings may philosophise free from the alienating formal constraints to which Socrates was subject, and to philosophise in this way is the precondition of any other human good.

If (A) and (B) are distinct to this extent, may either be identified with (C)? We can only answer this dialogue by dialogue. The *Gorgias* was chosen as a test case, partly because it contains more pronounced and numerous allusions to the *Apology* than any other Socratic dialogue. We saw overwhelming evidence that the procedure of the *Gorgias*, as Socrates conceives it, is lay philosophy. The exemplary aspect of missionary philosophising entails certain distinctive formal features not shared by lay philosophising, such as Socrates' special role as questioner, his readiness to 'coerce' his interlocutor – and, for all we have seen, any number of other such features besides. The other Socratic dialogues remain open questions, but the case of the *Gorgias* is enough to show that we may not assume, as so many have, that the way of life Socrates ascribes to himself in the *Apology* may be used as straightforward evidence for what he is up to in Socratic dialogues, nor that those dialogues may shed any direct light on that way of life. More specifically, we must abandon the central working hypothesis of what might be called 'the strong programme in Socratic Studies': that the Socratic dialogues are *windows on a single intellectual world*. Socrates' procedure in the *Gorgias* is flatly incompatible with his way of life as described in the *Apology*: by the standards of that way of life he is neglecting his divine mission in making the discussion depend upon the free participation of the discussants.³⁷ It is presumably not Plato's intention in the *Gorgias* to present an *impious* Socrates³⁸; rather, the process of abstracting the character of Socrates from the specific procedural and doctrinal commitments of the *Apology*, which no-one will deny is underway in later (eg Form-involving) dialogues, has already begun.

What of the *Gorgias*'s opening allusion to the *Apology*, with which we began? Chaerephon detained Socrates in the marketplace, so it is missionary philosophy that is invoked. This may seem odd, given the *Gorgias*'s otherwise exclusive preoccupation with lay philosophy. Yet this is a context in which that distinction is unimportant. The fundamental conflict in the *Gorgias* is between philosophy and rhetoric,³⁹ where the former is distinguished above all by its unconditional commitment to truth. But the two forms of philosophy share this commitment. Although he conceives of the participants as playing formally identical roles, in taking the fight to the orators Socrates shows himself still a missionary at heart.

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³⁷ For all I have said here, the 'strong programme' may still be intact if the *Gorgias* is excluded from the 'Socratic' group of dialogues; but the most conspicuous advocates of the programme (Vlastos, Brickhouse and Smith) refuse that option, and in fact tend to see the *Gorgias* as an especially important source for 'Socratic' method and doctrine.

³⁸ Here I respond to a question put to me by Imogen Smith.

³⁹ See Doyle (2006b).

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