SOCRATES' METHOD: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ELENCHUS

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Abstract

Western philosophy is based on Socrates' elenchus method of questioning, discussing, and judging what is right and wrong. Drawing on Plato's early conversations, Socrates uses the elenchus to judge the logic, consistency, and suitability of the people he talks to. Socrates doesn't teach; instead, he uses critical thinking to show where common beliefs are wrong. This makes people more intellectually humble and self-aware. This approach challenges wrong or unchecked beliefs and encourages more serious thought about right and wrong, knowledge, and living a good life. By looking at the elenchus critically, we can see that it has educational and moral value in encouraging critical thought, moral duty, and dialogue. But it seems to lack useful results, focuses on response without synthesis, and the way power works in Socratic questions all cause major philosophical problems. This study confirms that the Socratic method is still important in philosophy, education, and critical thinking, but it also acknowledges that it is not a perfect way to learn everything.

Keywords: Socrates, Elenchus, Socratic Method, Dialectic, Critical Inquiry, Moral Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

Few things in Socratic thought have gotten as much attention as "the Socratic elenchos." Even though the topic has gotten a lot of attention, no one can agree on what the elenchos really is. Gregory Vlastos's most famous and often-cited work on Socrates is a big reason why people are interested in "the Socratic method." In that work, he came up with the elenchos as a way to prove something, but it could only work if you assumed that Socrates had all of his moral beliefs in line with reality. Vlastos said that Socrates could come to the conclusion that all of his moral views were true based on these assumptions. Socrates knew that any correct conclusion that could be drawn from moral grounds that he believed would also be true. Vlastos said that this proved what he called "the problem of the elenchus": How could Socrates think that he had ever proven anything with an argument style that, rationally, only showed that the views Socrates brought up from his opponent were not consistent?

Although experts agree on a lot of things, Vlastos's understanding of the elenchos has not been accepted by all of them. After Vlastos's story, most of the research on the subject has tried to show how it falls short, and many other stories have been put forward. None of these has gotten much backing from other experts either, as the three papers we are now replying to show. They still don't agree on even the most basic things that make the elenchos unique. Benson says that the only thing an elenchos needs is what he calls a "doxastic constraint": the other person must believe that the premises of an elenchos argument are true. Benson

disagrees with Vlastos that Socrates had to accept the premises he used in his cases. He does this by citing strong textual proof. According to McPherran, however, Socrates' interpretation of the famous oracle to Chaerephon is elided. This is because the person who gave the oracle (Apollo or the Pythia) is not directly looked at, so none of the premises Socrates uses in his subsequent investigation can be said to meet Benson's one condition. Because of this, Socrates' desire to understand the oracle cannot be elenctic for Benson. But for McPherran, the actions of understanding can be seen as examples of elenchos. Carpenter and Polansky had given up on giving a general account of the elenchos.

We're not going to give long answers to any of the arguments above. Instead, we'll just give short explanations of why and where we don't fully believe the stories, even though, as we've already said, we find strong evidence against each author's point of view in the other authors' arguments. According to Benson, the so-called "problem of the elenchus" can't be fixed because the elenchus isn't and can't be a way to find new logical ideas or build moral theory. And McPherran seems more upbeat because he has good reasons to believe that Socrates can use logical arguments in helpful ways. He does, however, softly admit that the quality he finds in Socrates' interpretive conversations doesn't seem to be present in all elenctic arguments. He doesn't seem to agree with Benson when he says that "the elencho is a unique form of argument with unique features." Carpenter and Polansky say that the Socratic elenchos serves more than one purpose and can't be analyzed in a single way, which makes the picture even more complicated than McPherran's. Even less hopeful is our view of the project that has been the focus of so many experts. In short, we believe that there is no way to solve "the problem of the elenchus" or a single way to look at elenctic arguments because there is no such thing as "the Socratic elenchos." There are different ways that Socrates fights with people.

It is tempting to put all or some of these ways under one heading, "the elenchos," but this should be avoided because Plato's texts don't require it, and putting all of Socrates' different arguments under one heading only leads to the interpretive problems that we are used to seeing in the literature. Finally, we believe that the idea of "the Socratic elenchus" and the idea that there is a unique "problem of the elenchus" are both products of modern study.

The "Doxastic Constraint"

Benjaminson says that the only thing that a claim needs to be an assumption in an elementary argument is for the other person to believe it. Given this one condition, as Benson shows very clearly, it can't be that elenctic arguments prove any statement true or wrong. At most, they show that the other person's views are inconsistent, which means they don't know much. That being said, Benson knows that this one condition alone takes out a lot of Socratic philosophy and even whole early Platonic talks from the elenctic group. So, Benson doesn't look at the "speech of the laws in the Crito, most of the argument of the Apology [with the exception of Meletus's questioning], and the prologue of the Laches" when he talks about the elenchos. We're not sure that Benson's "doxastic constraint" really does rule out all of these, though: We don't see any reason to think that the laws' speech in Crito, for example, includes any principles that Crito would not happily agree with. To the contrary, Socrates' main points

about people's duties to follow the law come from the fact that he and Crito both agreed on the grounds.

Since the laws' argument contradicts Crito's claim that Socrates should run away, it also shows that Crito did not "speak well," or with knowledge, when he told Socrates to run away.

There is a bigger problem with Benson's method, though. The "doxastic constraint" says that no argument can be valid unless the other person actually believes the premises. But even though Socrates often tells his opponents that they can only say what they believe, he is also too ready to let them answer his questions without making any promises, or even to say things that they clearly don't believe. Socrates doesn't give up the argument in the Gorgias when Callicles stops giving answers that he is willing to claim as his own beliefs or when Thrasymachus does the same. He also doesn't seem to be bothered at all by Protagoras's argument from a point of view that he clearly disagrees with. Benson's analysis says that Socrates' conversations with these people may start out as elegant, but they stop being that way as soon as one of them doesn't meet the "doxastic constraint." We should think that these arguments stop being the "unique form of argument with unique features" that we connect with Socrates and start being more general. But Plato's Socrates doesn't say anything dramatic about this sudden change. He just keeps going and comes to the same conclusions every time.

The Problem of Truth in the Elenchus

Therefore, according to Benson's interpretation, it is illogical to believe that Socrates' pursuit of truth is accomplished by the use of electic argument. According to McPherran's view, on the other hand, which is primarily based on Socrates' endeavor to comprehend the oracle presented to Chaerephon, it is reasonable to assume that Socrates' rebuttals indicate a sincere and substantial attempt to discover the truth. In his argument, McPherran contends that an interpretative component might be situated inside an elenctic argument. For example, in the instance of the oracle, Socrates is provided with a claim (the oracle that no one is wiser than he is) that he considers to be unquestionably true; nonetheless, it is not a claim whose interpretation is in any way evident. In light of the fact that the truth of the claim can only be revealed to clear view via the accurate interpretation of that claim, and that erroneous interpretations have the potential to render the claim untrue, Socrates makes the commitment to correctly interpret the oracle. He does this by putting conflicting interpretations of the claim that is stated in the oracle to the test (in this particular instance, there are only two such competing interpretations), and he finds out to his reasonable satisfaction which of the competing interpretations works, which makes the oracle's claim true, and which does not work.

Nevertheless, as McPherran points out, this circumstance has a number of highly unique characteristics. For one thing, with regard to the assertion that was made by the oracle, Socrates believes that he has strong reasons to accept it as true because of its divine origin. When it comes to the majority of the assertions that Socrates takes into consideration from his mortal interlocutors, it is difficult to say that the same can be stated. In these other

instances, Socrates seems to believe that he has at least some cause to believe that the assertions that are important are not true, or at the very least, that there is nothing in the "authority" of those who are making the claims that offers any reason to accept them as an accurate representation of reality. Therefore, the interpretative understanding of the elenchos that McPherran proposes can only be applied to situations in which there is some other reason to regard the relevant assertion as being true. It may be sufficient for Socrates to discover some plausibility in the assertion; but, if this is all there is to it, then the success of Socrates' interpretative method will be built on nothing more than his intuitive feeling about the claim that is being questioned. After all, it is possible that Socrates' intuition was incorrect, and the correct way to understand the claim is the approach that discloses what is wrong with the claim, rather than some manner that would make the claim seem to be correct.

When it comes to the search for the truth, this seems to be a very unstable basis. On the other hand, how else would a search for truth be conducted by those who do not already have access to the truth, if not by looking for those explanations that seem to provide the most reasonable answers to the problems that we have? Without the approval of a higher power, who else except those who are uninformed are able to choose which of the competing responses would be considered the "most plausible"? On the other hand, a quite different issue seems to be more concerning.

Given the circumstances surrounding the oracle to Chaerephon, it is reasonable for Socrates to assume that the only two interpretations that are worthy of consideration are the ones that McPherran identifies. However, in order for Socrates to be able to make this assumption, he must also assume that Apollo's oracle utilized words in a manner that was at least somewhat like to the way that words are often used. However, this assumption seems to be unreliable when compared to the history of the Delphic oracle, which may be considered legendary: For instance, when the oracle said that Athens was protected by "wooden walls" during the Persian invasion, it scarcely made a reference to the sides of ships, despite the fact that Themistocles was able to successfully interpret it. Given that McPherran's Socrates seemed to have a much smaller pool of potential choices for proper interpretation, it is reasonable to be concerned that the pool of possibilities may be far greater. Even extremely clearly expressed and pervasive occurrences seem to be subject to a perplexing diversity of interpretations that are fundamentally plausible, as we ourselves are discovering with some academic discomfort.

The Many Purposes and Varieties of Socratic Argument

The Socraticelenchos revolve on rebuttal, say Carpenter and Polansky. Socratic cross-examinations seem to have multiple objectives, they note, even if this is their most glaring logical trait. There is a plethora of evidence in Plato's early conversations that supports this remark. Just look at all the claims that Socrates makes about his actions, as well as all the claims that others make about them that he implicitly agrees with. We have already attempted to survey some of these goals and demonstrate how Socrates' refutative argumentation could serve them in our earlier work. Other scholars who are not participating in this debate have also listed goals that Socrates seems to have and attempted to demonstrate how each of them could be reasonably pursued via refutative argumentation.

As Carpenter and Polansky note, "An embracing reflection upon all elenctic discussion does not appear [in Plato's dialogues]," and they claim that this is so "because Socrates has no single method of refutation or cross-examination". Instead, they say, Socrates styles his approach according to the individual requirements of the specific interlocutor or argument context. There can be no doubt that Socrates shapes his approach to suit what he perceives as the specific requirements or just deserts-of the interlocutor. Even Benson, who seeks to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for the elenchos, allows that "it is always ad hominem, in the sense that it is always directed specifically at an individual" and to concede this-unless we are to convict Socrates of producing very poor ad hominem arguments is surely to concede that he must to some degree shape his arguments to fit the specific blindness or perceptiveness, the prejudice or openness, and ineptitude or aptitude of distinct interlocutors. Given the great variety of interlocutors Plato's dialogues provide for Socrates, we should not wonder that we find enormous differences in the ways Socrates deals with them. With Euthyphro, he is haughty and ironical; with Meletus, he is aggressive and demanding; with Charmides, he is teasing and urbane; with Hippias, he is sarcastic; with Crito, friendly; and so on. Carpenter and Polansky conclude that in all of this difference of style there is no sense to be looking minimalistic ally for the thinnest of common logical strands, as Benson tries. But in fairness to Benson, nothing in what Carpenter and Polansky note refutes Benson's understanding about what is, after all, common to all of Socrates' particular refutations-or at least those in which the "doxastic constraint" is accepted and satisfied.

Whatever else Socrates may be up to won't change the implications of the "doxastic constraint" so long as Hippias speaks just what he thinks and Socrates uses only Hippias in his arguments. There may be a wide range of interlocutors and arguing contexts, yet Benson may be totally correct on the characteristics of an elenctic debate.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To evaluate the Socratic elenchos critically as a cohesive philosophical approach in view of varying academic interpretations.

2. To examine Gregory Vlastos's theory of the elenchos as a means of moral evidence, emphasizing elenctic justification and moral consistency.

METHOD

One approach to philosophical investigation is the Socratic method, which is often referred to as the elenchus. This approach is characterized by the use of methodical questioning and logical examination. Socrates examines the definitions and beliefs that his interlocutors provide by means of a sequence of questions that have been carefully crafted in order to ascertain whether or not these definitions and beliefs are compatible with other statements that they acknowledge as being true. Instead, than presenting his own ideas, Socrates guides people through the process of examining the consequences of their beliefs, which often reveals inconsistencies and exposes false claims to knowing. Discovering ignorance,

elucidating ideas, and encouraging deeper self-examination as a crucial step toward actual comprehension are the primary goals of this technique, which operates mainly as a critical and refutative tool.

The Socratic Method of Inquiry

The manner in which philosophical investigation ought to be carried out is a key issue that every individual ought to address themselves at least during the course of their lifetime. Socrates, the first great philosopher, is credited with saying that "the life that is not examined is not worth living." There is a technique of inquiry or examination that he devised that is known to us as the Socratic technique. This approach is also known as the method of elenchus. With its origins in Greek, the term "elenchus" may be translated as "examination," "test," or "logical refutation." The way of refuting an argument is to first bring out the ramifications of a given definition or belief, and then to demonstrate that the belief is in direct opposition to a maxim that was previously accepted. This is accomplished by Socrates via a sequence of questions that are designed to demonstrate that the one being questioned does not genuinely know what they are talking about since they are compelled to contradict themselves.

By reading about Socrates using his technique of investigation, or more specifically Plato's writing about him doing so, one might glean a few questions about the subject. To begin, what exactly is this approach that Socrates uses, and how does he go about putting it into practice on other individuals? In what ways do the many individuals with whom he engages in conversation react to this process of examination? And lastly, what is the purpose of the Socratic Method, is it effective in accomplishing these goals, and does it eventually benefit either the individual who is being questioned or Socrates himself?

It is possible to translate the Greek word elenchus as "test" since that is exactly what Socrates is doing; he is putting the definition of a word or idea that has been provided by other people to the test in order to see whether or not it is compatible with premises that have been previously accepted as being actual. Socrates does this by asking a series of questions that are designed to elicit the true meaning of the individual's definition.

Practical Application of Socratic Refutation: Protagoras's Case

The purpose of these questions is to demonstrate that the individual being examined, who believes that he is knowledgeable about anything, is in fact ignorant of anything. And after I had examined him and had a conversation with him...Despite the fact that he seemed to be intelligent to many others, particularly to himself, I believed that he was not. My next step was to demonstrate to him that he believed he was smart, but in reality, he was not. This is the conclusion that Socrates arrives at with almost all of the individuals who he comes to question about anything that they claim to have knowledge about (Protagoras, Gorgias, Meno, and so on), but the way that he arrives at this conclusion is by asking questions. In the Protagoras, Socrates poses the following question to Protagoras, a Sophist: "Exactly how will he (Hippocrates) go away a better man, and in what ways will he make progress each and

every day that he spends with you?" In addition, Protagoras asserts that he instructs men to become more responsible members of society. As a result, Socrates questions whether or not this particular skill or trade can in fact be taught in any way. Over the course of the remaining portion of their conversation, Socrates and Protagoras engage in a discussion over the extent to which citizenship or virtue may be taught. At the same time as Protagoras continues to assert what virtue is and how it may be taught, Socrates refutes these assertions. He does so not by expressing his viewpoint, but rather by calling the assertions into question and pointing out the contradictions that Protagoras has made. By compelling Protagoras to contradict himself and pointing out inconsistencies in Protagoras's arguments, Socrates is able to disprove the assertions that Protagoras has made on virtue. There is a dissonance between the two assertions; they do not have a harmonious relationship with one another. The fact that Protagoras is being questioned and, to be honest, prodded by Socrates demonstrates that he is simply giving the impression of being knowledgeable. Protagoras, and really all sophists, are skilled in oratory, which is public discourse with the purpose of convincing people who are listening, rather than really teaching them anything that they claim to know. This ability makes it feasible for them to perform this appearance. At the conclusion of the conversation, there is no conclusion made on whether or not virtue is a trait that can be taught; the only thing that is established is that Protagoras is unable to teach it, and Socrates just exits to go to another appointment.

In the grand scheme of things, Protagoras does a good job of accepting the reality that he is not a teacher of virtue. In several of the other dialogues, Socrates demonstrates to a person who believes they have understanding that this behavior does not really result in the person being upset. Even Socrates is aware that he is engaging in this behavior. It appeared to me that the same thing happened when I approached another guy, one of those who was regarded to be smarter than the first, and as a result, I began to be detested by that man as well as by a great number of other people. Anyone who is reading the dialogues and does not have a complete understanding of Socrates and his approach to inquiry may see that the manner in which Socrates engages in conversation with his fellow Athenians is likely to be perceived as irritating by the individual with whom he is conversing. In spite of the fact that I am hunting for a single virtue, I have discovered that you possess a whole smarm of them, Meno. It seems that I am in luck.

However, despite the fact that this sentence seems to be somewhat condescending toward Meno, he manages to handle it rather well. When Socrates and Polemarchus are having a discourse on the nature of justice in the Republic, Thrasymachus, who has been holding his tongue, abruptly interrupts the argument. This is not an unusual occurrence. "Socrates, what kind of rubbish that you two have been talking about?It is not enough to just raise questions and then argue against the answers if you are sincerely interested in understanding what justice is. In spite of the fact that Thrasymachus has grown weary of Socrates and his technique of inquiry, he soon finds himself falling prey to it himself. This is because he wants to assert that he is knowledgeable about justice, but it is subsequently shown that he is not. In addition to the fact that he is tough to nail down in an argument, people get angry with

Socrates because he demonstrates that others are mistaken on things that they believe they know while in fact they do not know this.

Socrates' Wisdom and the Objective of the Elenchus

The residents of Athens are often irritated by Socrates' actions, which include practicing his technique of inquiry, creating enemies, and overall being obnoxious. It was declared by the oracle at Delphi that Socrates was the wisest person in the world, and he took into consideration this statement. As a result of Socrates' own reflections on this revelation, he arrived at the realization that, given the fact that he honestly believed that he knew nothing, this was, in and of itself, a kind of wisdom, since the oracle could not possibly be false. Although this may be a byproduct of the Socratic Method, he does not truly want to humiliate or irritate the individuals he is interrogating. Instead, he wants to assist the residents of Athens in comprehending that the things they believe they know are not true, and he is bringing them this piece of information in order to help them grasp this. Socrates did not claim to know something that he did not know; rather, he was aware of the fact that he knew nothing. This was a modest piece of knowledge, and since no other man could confess this, it indicated that Socrates was the smartest man there. When considered in this context, the style of inquiry that Socrates used may be analyzed in two distinct ways. The first thing to note is that he had a general belief that he did not know anything, and he actively sought out others who claimed to have expertise in order to acquire some understanding on a certain subject. On the other hand, Socrates desired for other people to acquire the knowledge of not knowing as well, and he wanted to demonstrate that they did not know in order to assist them in coming to terms with reality. In any case, Socrates is interested in enhancing his own life as well as the lives of others via the use of his technique of inquiry.

When reading Plato's dialogues on Socrates, it is essential to keep this in mind since, despite the fact that he may seem to be conceited or egotistical at times, he is, in reality, merely attempting to assist his fellow Athenians. The individuals who are upset with Socrates because they were shown to be incorrect (and this is still true today if you try this approach out on someone and make them understand that their previously held view is defective in some manner) fail to remember that the goal is to learn, not to be correct. No one ever expresses gratitude to Socrates for demonstrating to them that what they believed was fundamentally incorrect. despite the fact that they are now in a better position since they no longer believe in something that is without foundation or claim to have knowledge that they do not possess. The citizens of Athens decide to put Socrates to death rather than expressing gratitude for the service he has provided to the community (Socrates goes even farther in the Apology and requests for admission to the Prytaneum for the rest of his life). On the other hand, people need to express their gratitude to him since all that Socrates is doing is assisting them in acquiring a little bit of wisdom. The ability to acknowledge that a personal view about anything could in reality be incorrect is not something that is simple for the majority of people to do, if it is even feasible for them to concede that such a thing is even conceivable at all. When Socrates was strolling through the streets of Athens thousands of years ago, this principle is just as relevant now as it was then.

Plato's account of Socrates and the things that he said may at times be perplexing to contemporary readers, particularly those who have had some previous instruction in philosophy. Every once in a while, we find ourselves wondering why the individual being questioned by Socrates did not just say this instead. As an example, Socrates questions him in the Gorgias, "Since he teaches people who come to him (Gorgias) to be better orators (able to persuade with speech), what about people who come to him who are corrupt?" Does he instruct them on how to get other individuals to behave in a similar manner? Rather of just stating, "Yes, in that case they would be better at persuading others to be bad," Gorgias might have replied, "Yes, in that case they would be better at this." Protagoras, on the other hand, wants to assert that he really educates others to be virtuous. On the other hand, as was said before, Socrates arrives at the conclusion that he is unable to assist individuals in becoming more moral. There is no such packaged argument that can be carried away from the Socratic dialogues, in contrast to the majority of contemporary philosophical literature, which allow the premises and conclusions to be cleanly pulled out from the premises. This is what should be gained from the reading. If this were the case, then the dialogue between Protagoras and the other characters would just teach us that Protagoras was incapable of teaching virtue. This discourse would not exactly be considered intellectually fascinating or significant. The Socratic technique itself is what should be taken away from the Socratic dialogues rather than the dialogues themselves. This does not only mean questioning the views of other people; rather, it also means evaluating one's own thoughts to determine if there are any contradictions or inconsistencies in order to live a life that is, in the words of Socrates, worth living.

CONCLUSION

This research has investigated the Socratic method, also known as the elenchus, as a key style of philosophical inquiry. The investigation has drawn upon the conceptual underpinnings, practical application, and academic interpretations of the Socratic method. To begin, the inquiry has shown that the elenchus is basically a technique of critical questioning rather than doctrinal teaching. This is because the Socratic stress on the investigated life is the starting point for the investigation. At the same time as he challenges claims to wisdom and encourages intellectual humility, Socrates reveals contradictions in popularly held beliefs by means of logical investigation and rebuttal. The investigation of the process itself indicates that the elenchus functions by comparing definitions and beliefs to other accepted premises, which often results in interlocutors coming to a conclusion that is contradictory. By use of Socratic dialogues, and more specifically via interactions with characters such as Protagoras, this technique demonstrates the disparity that exists between the outward appearance of wisdom and the actual comprehension of the subject matter. The Socratic method of asking does not provide definitive solutions; rather, it keeps questions open-ended and places an emphasis on inquiry rather than conclusion. In the end, the Socratic method is effective not because it yields conclusive facts but rather because it transforms the way philosophical investigation is carried out. Through the cultivation of awareness of ignorance and the encouragement of the ongoing search of wisdom, it is beneficial to both the interlocutor and Socrates himself when it is done.

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4. Benson, 105. Vlastos calls this "the 'say what you believe' requirement" (ibid., 7).
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