In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates claims that:

> It is the greatest good (*megiston agathon*) for a human being to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing (*dialegesthai*) and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living (*Apol.* 38a1-7).

Socrates did not say that a life without definitions of ethical terms is not worth living; he said that a life without *dialogue* about our fundamental values is not worth living and that this is the greatest good for human beings.[1] Given that Socratic dialogue is typically result-less, the question is what is so good about dialogue? Is its value to be associated exclusively with its results – some answer, or definition, or is there value in the activity itself? If so, what kind of value is this and how does it relate to a life worth living? Those are the questions of this paper.

1. Dialogue: A Standard View

Dialogue is a distinctive practice in the Platonic dialogues; it is conceived as "asking and answering questions" (*Prt.* 335a9-c1, 336b8-d3; *Grg.* 449b-c; *Crat.* 390c, 398d; *Euth.* 290; cf. *Rep.* 515d5, 524e6, 526a, 528a5, 534d9), or as "refuting and being refuted" (*Grg.* 462a4-5; 447d4-5). An interlocutor proposes a thesis about the topic under discussion (some virtue), and a questioner elicits agreements to further claims which taken together contradict the original claim. Its form is typically characterised as refutational, or 'elenctic', dialogue.

Given this form, much scholarship is concerned with the logical aspects of dialogue and whether it can lead to truth, or (weaker) consistency. This has led to a focus on the *epistemic* and *instrumental* value of dialogue. This epistemic value might be captured as follows. Speech that proceeds dialogically, especially in the short question and answer mode prized by Socrates, is a more perspicuous way to convey information about one's mental

[1] As far as I am aware, the only scholar to take this claim seriously is Cooper (2007). Compare Fraenkel (2015).

contents, allowing a questioner to clarify a train of thought, and to ask questions when they do not understand. This enables them to "follow" (*Prt.* 335b) and to "scrutinize more clearly", as Socrates puts it (*Prt.* 329a-b). The benefit to the answerer is that through this process of trying to give an account of themselves, they can determine better the contents of their own mental states, including commitments of which they might previously have been unaware, which are brought to light by another's questioning. Since it operates by exposing contradictions in an interlocutor's own set of beliefs, this practice makes visible the link between an interlocutor's beliefs and the contradictory of their thesis.

To add *ethical* value to this epistemic value, scholars then typically take account of the fact that participants are 'discussing *virtue* every day'. This feature, coupled with the claim that correctly determining the nature of that ethical content is sufficient for virtue, is supposed to give dialogue its ethical value; in other words, what has come to be known as Socratic intellectualism. For if one supposes that all rational agents desire their own good, then once we determine what this good is, that is supposed to be enough to make us virtuous. If virtue is knowledge, then engaging in a practice which has the epistemic value outlined will also, and thereby, have ethical value.[2]

Characterised as such, there is the logic of elenctic dialogue on the one hand and then a question about how we hook that up to its professed aim of ethical improvement, which is typically done via the *content* of dialogue and the promise of definitional *results* bolstered by an intellectualist thesis about virtue. On such a view, one might be able to practice dialogue well or badly, but there is nothing *ethically* good about the practice itself. Dialogue is a value-neutral activity, which can deliver clarity on, and perhaps answers to,

[2] Penner (2000) 165: "if only we could discuss things long enough, if only we could understand what is best', Socrates seems to say, 'all would be well and all conduct would be virtuous'".

ethical questions and any ethical value is determined by the extent to which it delivers on that end.

This view, which is a relatively standard picture of Socratic dialogue, fails to capture the claim that dialogue is the greatest good*;* it is treated as an instrumental tool for the acquisition of some further end: knowledge of the virtues. Further, there is the obvious difficulty that definitional results are typically not achieved in the Socratic dialogues. If *all* the ethical value resides in some end product – a definition, which is not delivered, then how can it be the greatest good to engage in dialogue about the virtues every day (*Ap.* 38a)? There are responses to this problem. One might argue that repeated dialogue can *eventually* deliver such knowledge, or at least an *approximation* to such knowledge by generating a more consistent set of beliefs (Vlastos' elenctic knowledge), or tested true beliefs (as Irwin and Fine). On those kinds of responses, though, dialogue remains (1) ethically neutral and (2) an instrumental tool.

I want to reject *both* of these claims. I reject the claim that dialogue is a value neutral practice, with ethical value entering the frame only via its *content*; and I reject the claim that dialogue is solely an instrumental tool to secure a valuable end product (a definition). I argue in favour of three positive claims: **Claim 1** is that dialogue is a value-laden practice. What we might be inclined to take as value-neutral norms, such as co-operation, a mutually accepted direction, checking whether a position has been understood before drawing inferences, and so on, exemplify values. This explains the prevalence of language which is more familiar from the ethical domain to describe the practice of dialogue in Plato's works. **Claim 2** is that because dialogue involves values in its activity, adhering to norms of dialogue can foster an orientation towards those values and virtuous behaviours simply insofar as its participants adhere (well and repeatedly) to the rules of the game. It is, in

other words, a practice in virtue.[3] Taken together, these claims relinquish the grip of the results driven focus on an elusive end product, which supposedly contains *all* the ethical value. This does not go far enough, though; it shows that dialogue is not an ethically neutral practice, but it may remain a tool. So, **Claim 3** attempts to defend the *megiston agathon* claim by arguing that dialogue is the greatest good because it is thinking aloud and the virtues are virtues *of* thinking.

2. Dialogue and Value

To grasp how value enters the frame, consider the following. Dialogue is the way in which Socrates examines himself and others, which is not conceived in separation from searching for an account of some ethical term. This is conducted in the form of an examination of someone's beliefs about the matter, and since the matter concerns those beliefs they live by, this ends up being an examination of 'their present manner of life (*La.* 187e–188b). Dialogue in the form of short question and answer is an effective form of examination because it allows a questioner to follow each step and to scrutinize clearly. Whilst it is possible to engage in dialogue with oneself, question and answer with another person enables the sharing of insights and ensures a degree of accountability which is not guaranteed when engaged in dialogue alone. Since question and answer optimally requires two persons, dialogue is a *plural* practice and involves a relation with another party. It is *relational* in the sense that one cannot have two persons in the one dialogue, any more than two singers in the one chorus, unless those persons are suitably related to each other.

[3] Compare Gonzalez (2014) who draws attention to 'the virtues of dialogue' in the *Protagoras*.

Attending to the fact that dialogue is a discursive *relationship* enables us to appreciate how value enters the frame. Consider, first, the importance of collaboration. For dialogue to function as such, participants must be engaged for common purpose in pursuit of a common good, specified as clarifying the issue at hand, or trying to get at the truth of the matter. This sense of common endeavour provides a mutually accepted direction which shapes the practice so that questions are not purely rhetorical, as if one party is beginning a speech, nor are they employed to secure a private good, such as argumentative victory; they are employed for the business of holding each other to account if what is stated 'isn't true'.

Participants work together and exchange views to determine whether these are consistent; for consistency is an indication of how one stands in relation to the agreed goal. A sense that the parties are competing together, "to make clear the matter we are discussing", rather than competing with each other, ensures the appropriate argumentative uptake when errors are exposed (*Grg.* 457b-c). If one values victory more than truth, then they are liable to "lose their tempers, and think the other is speaking out of malice, trying to win an argument rather than investigating the subject put forward for discussion" (*Grg.* 457c). The importance of collaboration is emphasized by the repeated deployment of *koinonein* and cognate terms in the dialogues. Let us call community **Value 1**.[4]

This community in *logos* is constituted by sharing, as each takes turns "asking and answering questions". This ensures that neither party dominates; as Socrates puts it to Polus: "if you made long speeches and weren't willing to answer the question asked, wouldn't it be hard on me if I'm not allowed to go away and not listen to you?" (*Grg.* 461e). No party should take more than their share, hence the fondness for 'brief speech' (*brachulogia*), which

[4] See the use of *koinonein* and cognate terms in the *Laches* (179b5; e6; 180a5-7); *Gorgias*: participants search "in common" (498e10), towards a "common good" (*koinon agathon*, 505e4-6; 502e6-7; cf. 527d2-e5; *Chrm.* 166d2).

enables participants to follow a line of argument and subject it to scrutiny. The division of roughly equal shares is not governed by strict arithmetical equality; sometimes it is not just permitted, but required, to extend oneself if one of the parties does not understand and cannot make "use" of the answer (*Grg.* 465e5), answers must be 'given their discursive due' which is determined by the degree of use that can be made of them in argument.

Sharing, equality and reciprocity are seen in the back and forth of question and answer and in taking turns as questioner and answerer. These features explain a second characteristic of dialogue, indicated by the prevalence of friendship terms to characterise dialogue; for sharing, equality and reciprocity are key characteristics of ancient Greek notions of friendship. Call friendship **Value 2**.[5]

Dialogical relations are relations without domination, and friendship is the recognition each gives to the other as an equal, such that one will engage in reciprocal sharing. The dialogical relationship manifests the equality characteristic of friendship insofar as each takes their turn, each has a roughly equal share of speaking time, and each has their proposals subjected to the proper scrutiny. This equality of standing does not mean that all opinions have equal weight; as Prodicus puts it in the *Protagoras*: one should "listen to both [speakers] alike, not giving equal weight to each, but rather giving more weight to the wiser and less to the less wise" (337a).

The point is this: terms for community and friendship are so prevalent in the Socratic dialogues because a dialogue is constituted by two or more persons, who operate together

[5] *Prt.* (337a); *Meno* (75d). Socrates' friendly orientation towards participants in the *Gorgias* (465d, 466c7, 466d, 471a3, 473a3, 479d7; 487b1; 500b6, 507a3, 519e3). Sharing, equality and reciprocity are crucial: participants can take the role of questioner and answerer: *Crat.* 390c; *Ion* 538de; *Rep.* 534d. Socrates offers to change roles at *Alcib.* 1 114b; *Prt.* 338d, 347b, 348a; *Grg.* 462b. Socrates encourages interlocutors to refute him (Polus: 467a8-b2, 469c8, 473b7; Callicles 482b2, 506c1-3, 508a8-b3 and 505e4-506a7).

to form a community (*koinonia*) of equals in speech, which is structured by the sharing, equality, and reciprocity, characteristic of friends. *These values are built into the form of the practice.*

A dialogue is also something that exhibits a certain order, which supports the commonly agreed goal. Socrates urges participants to proceed "in an orderly way" and encourages questions to be put "in the right order". If participants answer just what is asked (*Grg.* 448d) and "complete [their] answers in the terms of the question" (451a), this enables the questioner to determine whether things said harmonise (*sumphonein*) with what was said previously, in other words, whether there is agreement, or consistency, between ideas. This is how participants execute their common truth-seeking goal. Fitting parts of an argument together in this way is characterised as a way to establish order and arrangement (*taxis* and *kosmos*). Orderliness (*kosmiotes*), then, is **Value 3**.

Consider next the importance of making fair suppositions and not "[snatching] at one another's meaning on the basis of guesswork" (454c1-5), which is repeatedly characterised in terms of *justice*. When Socrates attends to Gorgias' account of rhetoric, for example, he checks that he has understood the position before exploring whether it "harmonizes" with things said before; Gorgias confirms: "Your belief is correct and your supposition *just*" (*dikaios*, *Grg.* 451a). The questioner must attend to what is really meant when a proposal is offered because it may be the case that "your answer is correct and I don't understand your meaning". This enables a "*just* reckoning" (*dikaion logon*, 504e). Consider a further invocation of justice, after the refutation of Gorgias. When the argument has been made explicit and a contradiction exposed, Polus objects and is invited to "put them straight", which means "if anything has been agreed which was wrongly agreed, [he

should] take back whatever [he] want[s] to take back", as long as lengthy speech-making is held in check; this is *just* (*dikaios*, 461d2). Justice is **Value 4**.

As the *Theaetetus* explains (167e-168b), justice in argument is important: clear and explicit argumentation, which determines whether participants agree to each step, and allows them to retract statements, enables participants to take responsibility for a contradiction, rather than seeing themselves as "tied up" and "muzzled" (as Polus does, *Grg.* 482e1-2) by the "bullying" questioner (505d4-5: Callicles). A questioner must show that they have understood what is really being said, and the answerer must acknowledge that the position under scrutiny is an accurate expression of their position.

Participants must also be capable of keeping within bounds in discussion, so that the position can be clarified to enable a "just reckoning"; they must learn to restrain desires that interfere with their ability to concede when required. Socrates chastises Callicles in the *Gorgias* for being unable to undergo *the very thing the argument is about*, when he refuses to accept the conclusion of an argument; the very thing the argument is about is the discipline that instils moderation (505c3-5). Here Socrates makes explicit that relationship between adhering correctly to the norms of dialogue and its *content*. Moderation is **Value 5**.

Compare the *Theaetetus* (210c). At the end of the work, when Theaetetus' proposals have failed, Socrates says: "If after this you ever undertake to conceive other thoughts, Theaetetus, and do conceive, you will be pregnant with better thoughts than these by reason of the present search, and if you remain barren, you will be less harsh and gentler to your associates, for you will have the wisdom not to think you know that which you do not know." The conversation has ended without the definition sought, and yet it has fostered

moderation. Socrates' remarks suggests that he sees it as a success from an ethical point of view.[6]

The *Laches* and the *Meno* add the virtuous behaviour of courage (*La.* 193e1-194a5; *M.* 86b7-c2). To hold one another to account in dialogue, participants must be willing to venture claims when they are unsure, examine alternatives to popular or authoritative beliefs, seek out arguments that might refute their position, and persevere until they are convinced that they are mistaken. These behaviours are repeatedly characterised in the dialogues as courageous.[7]

We should not neglect piety, of course. Socrates' philosophical mission is cast as a service to god (*Apol.* 23c1, 20e). Becoming aware of the wisdom one lacks and gaining a clearer sense of what it would take to substantiate professions to wisdom, pairs humility with aspiration, which may (for a Greek thinker like Socrates) lead to the divine. For, if there is such a thing as having wisdom, there must be those who are in possession of it; since no human is in such a state, one might come to the conclusion Socrates calls "probable", in the *Apology*, which is that "the god is wise and human wisdom is worth little or nothing" (23a6). This is to become aware that the wisdom that one seeks and lacks "is known to no one, except the god" (*Ap.* 42a).

This combined evidence suggests that there are values built into the very operation of dialogue, which can be seen by attending closely to its norms. By norms, I mean simply

[6] Compare *Sophist* 230b4-e3.

[7] *Charmides* (160d-e): "Tell me, well and bravely what does [temperance] appear to you to be? [Charmides] paused and looking into himself very manfully said [the following]. Compare the *Euthydemus* (275d7-8), "Take heart… and answer boldly whatever seems right to you". Compare the *Republic*. Adeimantus is concerned that Socrates neglects a topic of importance out of fear (449c2-3; 450c9-c2); for [as Socrates puts it] "to speak when one is not confident and is still investigating is fearful and dangerous". Socrates should "take courage (θαρρήσας) and speak" (451b1-4). *Tht.* 145c.

that participants *ought* to inquire with another because this is how holding oneself and others to account best takes place. And if they are working with another as a partner and helper, they *ought* to collaborate, so that the discussion can have a mutually agreed direction, and each takes turns in question and answer, making a conversational contribution as required by the task at hand. Participants *ought* to maintain sequential ordering and relevance to enable them to follow an argument and make fair suppositions. Participants should not encroach on each other's speaking time, but keep within bounds in discussion. Participants *ought* to tell one other what they really think insofar as they are examining the truth of the issue and not just the social mores of the age; and participants *ought* to be able to sustain a position in argument in the face of opposition, so that it can be tested thoroughly. When a consistency is exposed, participants *ought* to concede. Participants *ought* to inquire with respect, or better, with reverence, for the epistemic norms of the practice (giving reasons for a claim and avoiding inconsistency), which expose how far they fall short of the standards to which they aspire. And so on. Though we are inclined to characterise these as value-neutral norms, adhering to them involves values and virtuous behaviours we consider to be ethical: community, friendship, orderliness, justice, moderation, courage and piety.

The beauty of this practice is that the normative force of these requirements is drawn simply from attention to what we owe partners in dialogue. They are grounded in the fact that a dialogue is a plurality and one cannot have two or more persons in the one dialogue, any more than two or more singers in the one chorus, unless those persons are suitably related to one another; *dialogue is a discursive relationship*. And once one has agreed to collaborate, then one *ought* to proceed in the manner just outlined – with courage, restraint and justice; and so on. If one is willing to play, that is just how it works.

Indeed, it is an assumption made in many dialogues that one simply cannot have a sense of common purpose – of the kind that is essential to Socratic dialogue - without virtuous behaviours such as justice and moderation. As Socrates puts it in the *Gorgias*:

> A person [who is disorderly and lacks moderation and justice] could be friend neither to any other human nor to god. He would be incapable of feeling any sense of community, and there can be no friendship (*philia*) for someone who has no sense of community (*koinonia*) (*Gorgias*, 507d-e; compare *Prt*. 322c; *Rep*. 351d-e).

Two points of clarification. The claim is not that participants need to adhere to ethical norms *in addition to* epistemic norms such as giving reasons for a claim, using explicit argumentation, proceeding in an orderly way, and so on; *in dialogue, these are not independently constituted*. The point is that by adhering to (what we consider to be epistemic) norms in dialogue, one is involved in a value-laden practice. There is something sneaky going on here: one agrees to engage in question and answer with Socrates and ends up implicated in the ethical universe under discussion simply by having the discussion!

Participants do not always adhere to these value laden norms of the practice, of course. When they fail to do so (as in the *Gorgias*), dialogue breaks down, which suggests that these value involving norms do not just regulate the practice; they *constitute* the endeavour as dialogue, such that without adhering to them dialogue cannot function, properly speaking, as such. So, the claim is not just that dialogue can be done well or badly, and when it is done well it is done with the virtuous behaviours identified; there is a way to do everything well or badly, of course, so that would not tell us anything about dialogue in particular. The point is stronger: values and virtuous behaviours are built into the operation of the activity such that when you fail to exhibit the behaviours these norms involve, you are failing to engage in the practice, properly speaking, at all. One might object that on this basis most Platonic dialogues

would not count as dialogues, but this is an implication of the view. Though participants may be having a go in the *Gorgias*, for example, and they exhibit certain features in doing so (like short question and answer), if one plays chess with a child who plays snakes and ladders with the pieces, does this still count as an instance of playing chess, just because the board and the pieces are the ones used in the genuine game? We might resist that conclusion. This does *not* imply that participants need to be fully virtuous persons to engage *at all*, though, a position which would leave Socrates preaching to the converted. One does not need to be Kasparov to play, but to play chess, properly speaking, one would do best to follow his lead – and following the lead of a master practitioner, in the case of Socrates, involves adopting the virtuous behaviours the practice requires.

Now, once we appreciate that there are values built into the operation of the governing norms of dialogue, which are constitutive norms of the practice (**Claim 1**), *and* we notice that these are the very same values the practice seeks to instil, then this should lead to a reassessment of *how* it brings about that end, in other words, how dialogue instils virtue. For, we can begin to see dialogue as a practice which *fosters* virtuous behaviour in its very operation (**Claim 2**). By systematically inscribing the cardinal Greek virtues into dialogue, Plato is suggesting that we will be "better, braver, and less idle" (*M.* 86b7) by engaging properly in this practice. If we do so "often and better", as Socrates repeatedly urges (*Grg.* 513c; compare *Apology*, 19a, 37a-b; *Meno* 85c; *Phaedo* 105a; 58d), then the practice will foster an orientation towards the ethical universe under discussion simply by having a discussion in the proper way.

Talk of 'fostering' or 'practising' enables us to capture the thought that participants are not in full possession of the virtues when they engage; the focus is on 'becoming good', not 'being good', to use a distinction from the *Protagoras* (344b-c). The sorts of actions that

participants perform will either manifest the virtues if they have them, or foster them if they do not. Participants will learn how to adopt the requisite behaviours when they adhere properly to dialogue form; they will follow the lead of a master practitioner and perform actions appropriate to such a person, even if they fail to do so with *nous*, and without understanding the essential nature of that virtue. Talk of training and practice need not be taken to suggest *non-rational* habituation, though; as we saw above, ethical norms and dialogical norms are not independently constituted. It is by engaging *in this rational practice* that one learns to exhibit virtuous behaviours. To say that training and practice are an important part of the overall picture of how participants become good, then, is compatible with intellectualism; the account just provides a more expansive account of what is involved in that rational practice.

One might wonder whether this list of virtuous behaviours involved in the practice is exhaustive. The dialogues draw attention to the way in which the cardinal Greek virtues – those virtues which are typically under discussion, are practised in discussion, but not exclusively these: *koinonia* and *philia* are included, though the passage cited from the *Gorgias* (507e) suggests an intimate relationship between these values and certain virtues. 'Gentleness' is another value implicated in dialogue and something that is fostered in both Callicles and Thrasymachus (*Grg.* 489d; *Rep*. 354a). So, the cardinal Greek virtues are clearly not the only ethically relevant properties that are practiced in dialogue, though community, friendship and gentleness are evidently related to virtue. Further, one of the benefits of keeping intellectualism intact is that the account can maintain the intellectualist thesis about virtue, such that all of the values and virtues involve wisdom. Given that ethical values are not constituted independently of the epistemic norms identified, epistemic progress will be concomitant with ethical progress. There is no need to restrict epistemic

progress to propositional change, though. Progress occurs when participants learn how to give and receive *logos* in the appropriate way: they are adhering to the epistemic norms outlined and also, and thereby, they are engaged in virtuous behaviours and actions. Whether this is enough to achieve the wisdom Socrates suggests is known to no-one except the god (*Ap.* 42a) is a further question; but *for human beings*, we can begin to see why dialogue might be the greatest good; for practising that 'often and better' (*Grg.* 513c) is itself an epistemic – and an ethical, achievement.

3. Locating Value Within the Activity

Claims 1 and 2 show that dialogue is not an *ethically neutral* tool, but it may remain a tool. After all, it is difficult to deny that a definition is an objective of the practice, nor do we want to deny that dialogue aims at knowledge and virtue. Dialogue may be a very great good, but surely knowledge, or virtue is a better candidate for being *the greatest* good (even if 'for *human* beings'). After all, Socrates sometimes talks as if dialogue is a kind of craft. In the *Gorgias*, for example, speech is a kind of craft and the other craftsmen Socrates mentions, painters, builders and shipwrights, for example, make a painting, a house, a ship, where in each case the product is distinct from the activity and, crucially, *this is where the good of that craft resides*. Just as the end of medicine is health, so, according to the *Gorgias*, the end of speech is some kind of psychic order, or virtue. If dialogue is so conceived, then it is not *the greatest* good; virtue in the souls of its practitioners is the good at which it aims. And in many dialogues, this is aligned with knowledge.

This end product distinct from the exercise of dialogue (however specified) threatens to eclipse the supreme value of the activity. As Aristotle explains:

> In some cases, the activity is the end, in others, the end is in some product beyond the activity. In cases where the end lies beyond the action the product is naturally superior to the activity (*NE* 1094a).

One might deny that dialogue is a kind of making with an end product distinct from itself and argue that it has the conceptual structure of an Aristotelian *praxis*, or embrace the claim that dialogue, qua craft, has a product distinct from its exercise, but deny that this is where its good resides. The challenge is to specify the relationship between activity (dialogue), and end, or aim (virtue), whilst resisting the thought that "*where the end lies beyond the action the product is superior to the activity".*

The previous claims have begun to close the gap between activity and product. For dialogical activity and virtuous product are not as sharply delineated once we realise that *dialogue is a value-involving practice*. When Socrates urges participants to weather the argumentative storm and act courageously, or when he chastises Callicles for failing to exhibit the moderation under discussion in discussion, he is suggesting that these virtuous behaviours, at least, are exhibited *within the activity*.

So, what account can be given of how this activity is related to knowledge, or virtue in a way that does not leave us with a superior end that "lies beyond the action"? Notice first that when Socrates urges participants to model the virtue under discussion in the discussion, he is directing participants' attention to features of the virtue they are trying to understand. In this way, Socrates gives participants the opportunity both to *learn how* to exhibit the virtuous behaviours in question, and to *learn that* these virtuous behaviours are cultivated *in dialogue*. For this not to be a distraction from their task of *understanding* the virtue under investigation, one might venture the further thought that virtuous behaviours are learnt *in this domain* because they are, properly speaking, virtues *of* that kind of thinking

involved in Socratic inquiry. This is what we would expect from a philosopher who consistently entertains the proposal that virtue is related to an intellectual state (*Prt.* 356c-57e; *Meno* 86d-89d; *Euth.* 278e-282d; *Chrm.* 173a-174e). This is not to imply that one cannot also be moderate at the symposium, or courageous on the battlefield; there are many domains in which the kind of thinking outlined in the previous section can, and ought to, be exhibited. Nonetheless, the fact that one learns to exhibit virtuous behaviours in this domain, suggests that this is a particularly pertinent domain in which to practice and understand them.

It is not obvious why dialogue is the paradigmatic domain to cultivate thinking, along with the virtuous behaviours that accompany that activity, because according to intellectualism, when you practice virtue in *any* domain you are thinking. Perhaps dialogue is an activity where one gets to practice more of these values and virtues than in any other domain. This 'quantitative' reply is tricky, though, when read against the unity of virtues thesis of the *Protagoras*; perhaps any formulation of intellectualism would come up against some version of this problem. One might adopt a 'qualitative' approach, according to which the thinking that is central to the virtues is better, when unconstrained by the force of practical circumstance; as Socrates is fond of saying elsewhere, we need leisure (*Tht.* 172d-173c). The question now is what can we do with the thought that virtuous behaviours are learnt *in dialogue* because they are, properly speaking, virtues *of* that kind of thinking that is *best* (though not exclusively) practised in dialogue. Is this enough to claim that virtue is not an end "beyond the action", but rather the excellence *of* the activity in which participants are engaged?

4. Dialogue, Thinking and Definitions

The suggestion that virtue is the excellence of dialogue sounds odd; but now consider that same activity, differently specified, as *thinking*. For, as Plato puts it elsewhere:

> Thinking and speaking are the same thing except that what we call thinking is the inward dialogue by the mind with itself without spoken sound *(Sophist* 263d6-264b4*).*

Internal dialogue is no metaphor, for Plato. Thinking *is* having a dialogue between two elements, or aspects in the mind, in the specific form of question and answer; it consists in the soul "asking questions and answering them, both affirming and denying" (*Tht.* 190a1-2; *Tim.* 37b; *Sph.* 263-264). *Dialogue form captures the structure of thinking* (Sedley: 2005).

One might object that in arguing for a more expansive sense of what is involved in dialogue, so much has been built into the practice that this makes the claim implausible. If there are virtuous behaviours involved in the proper functioning of dialogue, then do we need to suppose that the back and forth of *thinking* involves two mini-agents, with virtues and vices, like Plato's interlocutors? There is no reason for this supposition. For Plato, values and virtues such as community, friendship, moderation and justice are not domain specific; *philia*, for example, can bind together elements in the soul, the *kosmos* and so on; it is not conceived exclusively as an *interpersonal* value in a way that makes it difficult for us to entertain their operation in thinking. At any rate, it does not seem implausible to suppose that the structure of thinking, like inquiry, is better when each distinct viewpoint is given its due, such that the viewpoint can be expressed without encroachment from the other position, when each of the distinct viewpoints is expressed frankly and defended in the face of opposition, when each distinct aspect acts proportionately to its role and function as questioner or answerer, and

when each reciprocates in question and answer, sharing the task of self-examination. Thinking can be dialogical and involve the values and virtues identified. Put differently, if dialogue captures thinking, then this makes it a plausible candidate for the *megiston agathon*.

Here it is important to feel the force of **Claim 1**; for, the expectation is that whatever specification we give to the greatest good, it must include a specification of virtue, or excellence, which includes the virtues discussed in the Socratic dialogues – courage, justice, moderation and so on. This is where it is tempting to suppose that thinking is a very great good, but it cannot possibly be *the* greatest good because rich and full virtue is the greatest good. For that (so the story goes), we need knowledge in the form of a definition of the virtues. On the account given here, though, there is not the dry logic of elenctic dialogue, or thinking, on the one hand, and rich and full virtue on the other, which we need to find some way of connecting, via the promise of definitional results bolstered by an intellectualist thesis. Thinking is a value-laden activity, such that when we examine, explain, and defend, accounts of justice, piety, temperance, and courage, and we do this in accordance with the norms outlined previously, we thereby exemplify those (rich and full) virtues and will get better at doing so as we improve our thinking; for, the rich and full virtues are excellences *of* thinking.

Surely, though, we want thinking to be *successful*. Knowing is better than not knowing, so how can thinking itself be the greatest good? Since an indication of knowing in the Socratic dialogues is having a definition of some virtue term, a definition is an indication of success. One might say, then, that one thinks for the sake of acquiring a definition and thinking is instrumental to that end. A definition is surely an objective of dialogue; "if we know something we can say what it is" (*La.* 190c6), and to say what something is, is to indicate the nature of a thing in the form of a definition (*Eu.* 11a; *M.* 71b, *Grg.* 448c). What I want to reject is the thought that knowledge in the form of a definition is *the end* at which the activity aims,

though it remains an objective, or a regulative ideal, of the practice. After all, a definition can be for the sake of better thinking, rather than the other way around; it can enrich the activity of thinking, providing greater resources for further investigations. The *Republic* supports the reversal of the usual conception that dialogue is merely a means and successful definition is the genuine end. The conversation starting from Book 2 attempts to provide a definition of justice as a means to answering the question whether it really is worth possessing even when deprived of all other (so-called) goods. Although the dialogue spans nine books following this challenge, already in Book 2 the interlocutors reach a definition, namely, 'each member of the whole doing their proper job'; but, at this point, the definition in no way conveys knowledge of justice. In order for it to begin to convey knowledge, the interlocutors must discover how this definition manifests itself in the city, and then, in a properly analogous way, in the soul. Only after the latter has been achieved, does Socrates claim that they have reached their objective. The initial formulation of the definition in Book 2 couldn't be used to answer the question of the importance of justice in a human life. In order to do *that*, the interlocutors had to discover first how that definition applies in the case of the city and the soul, and then recognize the formal resemblance between order in the city and soul and order in the body (which allowed them to recognize that justice, 'health in the soul', is more important than bodily health). So, merely possessing the definition does not mean that there is not thinking still to do. In order for it to be (part of) a manifestation of knowledge, there has to be active dialogue, with (the right) questions asked which attempt to connect the definiens to many features of reality which fall outside the actual formulation of the definition. This suggests that knowledge is not encapsulated in the definition itself; rather, it is encapsulated in the disposition to say (and ask) a great number of things about this definition, in other words, to *think with* the definition. Notice, too how the emphasis falls on

giving and receiving accounts in elenctic dialogue, even at the highest level of understanding in Book 7. Furthermore, there could be new objections and challenges to a proposal that need addressing; perhaps human nature is such that any definition might be forgotten and further work is required to preserve a view; and so on.

One might object that if knowledge is exercised in thinking, and thinking is better with knowledge, then we have moved away from the kind of thinking depicted in Plato's Socratic dialogues, which is largely zetetic. Strictly speaking, the thesis is formulated in terms of *dialegesthai* and not *zetesis*, which accommodates other forms of *dialegesthai* that may arise, if one achieves a definition, but I see no reason why thinking with a definition need be different in kind from thinking in the process of acquiring one: it will still take the form of question and answer in any further investigations and may well be zetetic as one searches for relationships between the definition of, say, justice, and considers how it can address whether the just life is happier. A greater degree of sophistication in one's thinking when successful may be captured by the distinction (in Plato's later works) between dialogue and dialectic, where the latter is the science of the former; but there is much continuity between the two activities, hence the reminiscence of Socratic elenctic dialogue at the highest level of cognitive achievement in the *Republic*. The point, though, is that one can embrace the importance of the definitional task in the dialogues, whilst maintaining the view that thinking itself is the greatest good. Unless one supposes that thinking will lead to the kind of omniscience of God, a deeply un-Socratic thought which would terminate the practice, there will be always be thinking to do; it is the kind of activity that can make *a life* worth living. The kind of wisdom that would rule that out is perhaps captured by the *sophia* to which Socrates refers in the *Apology*, which is an elevated state beyond our reach. If it were possible to achieve such a state, then zetetic dialogue would be ruled out, but this is

not a possibility entertained by Socrates in the *Apology*, who specifies the greatest good *for human beings*.

To conclude, the spirit of Socratic intellectualism has been retained in this paper, though I offered a more expansive sense of dialogue, which takes account of its value-laden form, and I revised the relationship between dialogue, definitions and virtue. I resisted the thought that dialogue is an ethically neutral tool in the service of acquiring definitions, where virtue falls entirely outside of the activity in, or as a result of, a separate definitional end product. Dialogue and virtue are intimately connected because dialogue is a value-laden practice (**Claim 1**), such that engaging in this activity can make us better thinkers and better as such (**Claim 2**). And dialogue is *the greatest* good because it is thinking aloud and the virtues are virtues *of* thinking (**Claim 3**). Formulating definitions will be an indication of our success in that endeavour, but thinking itself could well be the prize. If so, we can not only defend the *megiston agathon* claim; we can also appreciate why Plato remained committed to dialogue form.

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