Socrates' Human Wisdom

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ABSTRACT: The concept of human wisdom is fundamental for an understanding of the Apology. *But it has not been properly understood. The received interpretations offer insufficient resources for explaining how Socrates could have been humanly wise before Apollo's oracle, when he falsely believed that he was not wise at all. I argue that a satisfactory interpretation of human wisdom can be given in terms of "philosophia". Socrates was humanly wise before the oracle because he loved wisdom—even though he did not know that he did. The analysis is confirmed by its resolution of some enduring difficulties in the interpretation of* Apology, *in particular, the question of why Socrates continued to search for knowledge he thought impossible to attain.*

*RÉSUMÉ : La notion de sagesse humaine est fondamentale pour comprendre l'*Apologie *— mais elle n'a jamais été comprise correctement. Les interprétations généralement acceptées n'offrent pas assez d'éléments pour expliquer comment Socrate pouvait faire preuve d'une sagesse humaine devant l'oracle d'Apollon, alors qu'il croyait à tort ne pas être sage du tout. Je soutiens qu'une interprétation satisfaisante de la sagesse humaine est possible en termes de «philosophia». Socrate fut humainement sage devant l'oracle parce qu'il aimait la sagesse — même s'il ne savait pas qu'il l'aimait. L'analyse est confirmée par le fait qu'elle résout certaines difficultés bien établies de l'interprétation de l'*Apologie*, en particulier la question de savoir pourquoi Socrate continuait à chercher un savoir qu'il savait être hors d'atteinte.*

I

Socrates' human wisdom (*anthrōpinē sophia*) distinguishes him from other people (*Ap*. 29b2-6), accounts for his status as divine exemplar (23b2-4), and explains his conviction that he is obliged to live a life of philosophical

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examination (23b4-11, 28d-e, 38a). The concept of human wisdom is fundamental for an understanding of the *Apology*.

The received interpretations connect Socrates' human wisdom with the recognition of ignorance. There is something importantly right about this. However, these interpretations offer insufficient resources for explaining how Socrates could have been humanly wise before Apollo's oracle, when he falsely believed that he was not wise at all (21b5-6). The implication that Socrates failed to satisfy the conditions for human wisdom upon reception of the Delphic oracle is unacceptable and justifies the search for an alternative.

I will argue that a satisfactory interpretation of Socrates' human wisdom can be given in terms of *philosophia*. *Philosophia* is a complex psychological state constituted by a general awareness of ignorance and desire for knowledge. On this account, Socrates was humanly wise before the oracle because he loved wisdom—even though he did not know that he did. The analysis is confirmed by its resolution of some enduring difficulties in the interpretation of *Apology*, in particular, the question of why Socrates continued to search for knowledge he thought he could not attain (23a6-7, 28d-e). The proposed interpretation facilitates a coherent reading of a text that "gets more difficult every time one looks at it".[1]

II

Socrates introduces the idea of "human wisdom" in the context of the "older charges" (18a10, 18d8-e2). He denies that he is a natural philosopher or a sophist (19c1-3, 20c1-3) but concedes the need to account for why he has been popularly misrepresenteded as such (20c4-d1). The explanation, he says mischievously, is that his reputation for wisdom is due to "none other than a certain kind of wisdom" (20d7; *di' ouden all' ē dia sophian tina*), "human wisdom, perhaps" (20d9; *isōs anthrōpinē sophia*).[2] After distinguishing himself from those who are "wise with a wisdom more than human" (20e1-2), he "introduces" Apollo, the god at Delphi, as witness to "the existence and nature of his wisdom" (20e7-9).

The details of the oracle narration are well known. Chaerephon went to Delphi and asked the oracle whether anyone was wiser than Socrates (21a7; *ēreto gar dē ei tis emou eiē sophōteros*). The Pythia replied that no one was (21a8) and that Socrates was the wisest human being (21b7-8). Socrates was puzzled at the meaning of the oracle (21b4), for he was convinced that he was not wise at all (21b4-5) *and* that the god could not be telling a lie (21b6-7). After being in perplexity for a long time (21b7; *kai polun men chronon ēporoun*), he set out to test the oracle by searching for someone wiser than he was (22c1-3). He examined representatives of three groups of citizens—politicians, poets, and craftsmen—before coming to an understanding of the nature of his wisdom.[3]

What is Socrates' human wisdom? Two distinct answers to this question are discernible in recent scholarship. According to the first line of interpretation, Socrates' human wisdom consists in two things: the knowledge that he lacks

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divine wisdom and his actual possession of some kind of low-grade propositional knowledge. On G. Vlastos' version of the account, Socrates is humanly wise because he knows that he has no "infallible and unrevisable" knowledge, but merely a "chancy, patchy, and provisional" elenctically justified knowledge.[4] This picture is untenable. The *Apology* does not support the view that Socrates' human wisdom incorporates propositional knowledge. The text is perfectly clear: Socrates is in some sense wise *because* he knows that he is not wise (21d, 22e, 23b1-4, 29b).[5] Even if Socrates' knowledge of his ignorance is compatible with propositional knowledge, *anthrōpinē sophia* is not essentially constituted by propositional knowledge of any kind.[6]

A second line of interpretation denies that human wisdom consists even partly in first-order knowledge. Rather, Socrates' wisdom is held to consist in his knowledge of his lack of wisdom, that is, his humility.[7] While the rejection of the first-order knowledge requirement on human wisdom is faithful to the text, the precise structure of Socrates' humility remains opaque. The task of reconstruction is complicated by the fact that Socrates offers several divergent descriptions of his epistemic state during the course of the oracle narration.

One possible account of Socrates' humility, H1, is given by 21b5-6:[8] Socrates knows that that he is not wise at all (*egō gar dē oute mega oute smikron sunoida emautōi sophos ōn*).[9] H1 attributes human wisdom to Socrates on the basis of his maintaining a second-order belief, that is, a belief about a belief.[10] More precisely, the content of Socrates' first-order belief is given by P: "Socrates is not wise at all". Correspondingly, the content of the second-order belief is given by Q: "Socrates knows that P", that is, "Socrates knows that Socrates is not wise at all". According to H1, then, Socrates is humanly wise just in case Q obtains.

H1 analyses human wisdom as false belief. Socrates' inquiry into the oracle led him to judge that the god was right after all (23b1-3, 20d6-9): P was false and the falsity of P entails the falsity of Q.[11] H1 is therefore inadequate. A state recognisable as a kind of wisdom cannot be constituted by false belief.[12] At any rate, H1 fails to explain why human wisdom is a good state to be in, at least on the plausible and Platonic view that false belief does not confer value (*Rep*. 506c-d; cf. *Men*. 97a-98c).

Some commentators question the value of human wisdom.[13] But there are compelling reasons for treating *anthrōpinē sophia* as a valuable state. First, Socrates came to recognise that he was wiser than (21d2-7, *sophōteron)* or superior to (22c6-8; *perigegonenai*; cf. 29b4; *diapherō tōn pollōn anthropōn*) members of the groups he examined on account of his human wisdom. He thought that it was to his advantage to be as he was (22e5; *lusiteloi moi)*.[14] Secondly, the idea that Socrates is made to serve as an *exemplar* (23b1; *paradeigma*) of a worthless quality threatens the intelligibility of the oracle narration. He could not have reasonably come to believe that Apollo was using him as a paradigm of a wisdom devoid of value. Socrates' *anthrōpinē sophia* must therefore in some sense be a good state for a human being.[15]

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How then to make sense of *Ap*. 23a4-b1 where Socrates says: "What is probable, gentlemen, is that in fact the god is wise and that his oracular response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing"?[16] One possibility is to deploy a distinction between Socratic and "ordinary" human wisdom, restricting the scope of the above claim to the latter.[17] Another is to interpret the claim comparatively and as involving exaggeration: human wisdom is of little value in comparison with divine wisdom (*sophia*).[18] The details are in the present context somewhat unimportant. The *Apology* cannot sustain an interpretation of Socrates' human wisdom as categorically lacking in value.

A second version of the humility theory is suggested by *Ap*. 21d2-d6, 22c6-8, and 22d7-10 (cf. 29d). A person of human wisdom "recognizes that he fails to know what he fails to know".[19] According to this account, H2, Socrates' human wisdom is to be understood in terms of the truth of the following conditional: R: for all relevant p, if Socrates does not know that p, then he would not believe he knows that p.[20] Socrates is humanly wise just in case R.

H2 avoids the above problem with H1. H2 is not undermined by Socrates' interpretation of the oracle and acceptance of his human wisdom. Not believing that one knows what one does not know is perfectly compatible with being wise in some way. However, H2 is subject to a related difficulty. Since Socrates came to accept that the oracle was right, and he was, contrary to what he previously thought he knew, wise with a certain sort of wisdom (20d6-7; *dia sophian tina*), it seems that upon reception of the oracle he thought he knew that he was *not* in any way wise when he was. Although Socrates initially did not know that he was not wise at all, he thought he knew this. Therefore H2 cannot explain why Socrates was humanly wise before the oracle: he did not then fulfil its condition for human wisdom.

Perhaps Socrates was better off falsely believing that he had no wisdom at all rather than falsely believing that he was really wise. Whether this is so is not entirely clear. But it is unnecessary to pursue the point since H2 in any case fails to account for Socrates' summary of the oracle's meaning at 23b2-4. The claim that the wisest human being realises that he is in truth worthless in respect of wisdom (23b2-b4; *hōsper an ei eipoi hoti houtos humōn...sophōtatos estin, hostis hōsper Sōkratēs egnōken hoti oudenos axios esti tēi alētheiai pros sophian*) is not equivalent to H2.[21] It is a fundamental claim about the human epistemic predicament that goes well beyond a conception of human wisdom as not taking oneself to know that which one does not know. If the formulation at 23b2-4 represents Socrates' final view of what human wisdom is, as seems reasonable, then H2 is at least incomplete. A satisfactory analysis of human wisdom should accommodate the significance of Socrates' concluding statement of the meaning of the oracle.

According to a third formulation of the humility theory, H3, Socrates is humanly wise on account of recognising that he is worthless in respect of wisdom (*sophian*) (23b3-4).[22] This is how he defines human wisdom at the end of the oracle narration.[23] H3 must therefore be correct: it is not a preliminary or partial

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formulation such as Q and R.[24] However, the claim that H3 correctly specifies Socrates human wisdom does not conclude our inquiry. The meaning of the account is by no means transparent.

Initially it appears that H3 will have to be analysed in terms of belief: Socrates knows that S, i.e., that he is worthless in respect of wisdom (*sophia*). This is problematic because there is no reason to think that Socrates believed S upon reception of the oracle. Rather, he initially mischaracterised his psychological state in terms of P. But since Socrates was humanly wise *before* the oracle, there must be some sense in which he "recognised that he was worthless in respect of wisdom" without believing S. This seems to me to be a significant point, which undermines all interpretations of human wisdom worked out in terms of belief-states alone. If Socrates was humanly wise when his beliefs about his epistemic state were false, his "recognition" that he was "worthless in respect of wisdom" cannot be understood as an explicit belief. Nor can it be understood in terms of implicit belief: Socrates did not have a clear idea of the character of human wisdom until after his inquiry into the meaning of the oracle. Whatever human wisdom turns out to be, its value does not depend on its possessor's ability to identify it.

III

H3 is correct; *Ap*. 23b3-4 gives the truth about human wisdom. Socrates is humanly wise on account of recognising that he is worthless in respect of wisdom (*sophia*). It follows that Socrates "realised" that he was worthless in respect of wisdom before he realised that he "realised" this. The heart of the problem is then to give an account of Socrates' recognition of his worthlessness in respect of wisdom that applies to him before the oracle. I will begin with the thought that *anthrōpinē sophia* is related to *aporia*.

The word *"aporia"* refers either to a logical puzzle or to a psychological state of "bewilderment" or "perplexity".[25] Three different types of psychological *aporia* may be distinguished in Plato's early dialogues.[26] The first occurs when an answerer is unable to say what virtue or a particular virtue is. He is perplexed because he cannot satisfactorily formulate what he thinks he knows in a definition.[27] The second is brought about when somebody realises that he is trapped in contradiction. For example, Socrates was perplexed (21b7; *kai polun men chronon ēporoun*) upon reception of Apollo's oracle because the god contradicted his belief in his own lack of wisdom. His *aporia* is here caused and rationalised by commitment to contradictory propositions: "I am wise" vs. "I am not wise" (21b4-7).[28] What these two kinds of psychological *aporia* have in common is that they are rationalised by specific obstacles to understanding.

In addition to particular *aporia*, Socrates also seems susceptible to *aporia* of a more general kind. I offer two reasons for making this distinction. First, Socrates frequently disavows knowledge at the beginning of elenctic conversation. For example, in *Euthyphro*, he professes to be ignorant about how to

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care for the young and implies that he does not know what piety is (2c-d, 5a-b).[29] Socrates' disavowal of knowledge expresses *aporia* in regard to the definition of virtue. But since this *aporia* is in the dialogue represented as prior to inquiry, it is not rationalised by any particular dialectical difficulties or failures of definition.[30] Secondly, in the *Meno,* the eponymous interlocutor claims to have heard that Socrates is "always in a state of perplexity" (79e-80a; *ō Sōkrates, ēkouon men egōge prin kai suggenesthai soi hoti su ouden allo ē autos te aporeis*), comparing him to the "torpedo fish", which "makes anyone who comes close and touches it feel numb". Socrates is willing to accept the comparison, at least, on condition. He says: "[if] the torpedo fish is itself numb and so makes others numb, then I resemble it, but not otherwise, for I myself do not have the answer when I perplex others, but am more perplexed than anyone when I cause perplexity in others" (80c7-10). The important point for present purposes is the metaphor of transmission: Socrates apparently *transfers* a pre-existing state of perplexity to his interlocutor. Again his *aporia* would appear to be prior to the emergence of any specific conceptual problems in discussion. At any rate, it seems fair to say that *aporia* is a general characteristic of Socrates' epistemic outlook.[31]

The notion of general *aporia* fits with the text of the *Apology*. Socrates' initial description of himself as "being conscious that [he is] not wise at all" (21b5-6) is a description of general *aporia*: the ignorance is global and not rationalised by any particular puzzle. Socrates was already in this state when he received the news of the oracle (21b7). If this is right then the oracle reduces Socrates to *aporia* about *aporia*, that is, particular *aporia* about the veracity and character of his general *aporia*. The oracle challenged Socrates' deeply held conception of himself as one who was *not* in any way wise. And although he later came to realise that he had underestimated himself, his final statement of the oracle's meaning incorporates the sense of ignorance within the concept of human wisdom (23b2-4). Human wisdom is closely related to general *aporia*.

IV

Socrates' declaration of ignorance upon reception of the oracle (21b5-6) amounts to an expression of general *aporia*. I want to suggest that the sense of ignorance underlying the declaration can also be linked with *philosophia*. The consciousness of a lack of wisdom is definitive of the philosophical soul.

In Plato, the word "*philosophein*" and cognates are used to express the love or desire for wisdom and not the actual possession of it (e.g. *Phaed*. 61d ff; *Rep*. 485a; *Theat*. 174b). In addition, both the *Lysis* and the *Symposium* link the desire for wisdom with consciousness of ignorance rather than ignorance simpliciter. In the *Lysis,* philosophers are said to be conscious of not knowing what they do not know, and, on account of this awareness, loving the wisdom they do not take themselves to have (*Lysis* 218a-b). The same relation between the knowledge of ignorance and philosophy is registered in the *Symposium*.

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According to Diotima, Eros is neither wise, nor ignorantly unaware of his lack of wisdom (*Symp*. 204a; *amathia*). He recognises that he is in need of wisdom and is hence a lover of wisdom. This is significant because the *Symposium* comes to identify Eros and Socrates.[32] "[Eros] and Socrates personify—one mythically, the other historically—the figure of the philosopher".[33]

The parallel between these definitions of the philosopher and the portrayal of Socrates in *Apology* is striking. The *Lysis* and *Symposium* present a transition between not taking oneself to know what one does not know and recognising one's lack of wisdom that almost exactly corresponds with the movement from H2 to H3 (21d2-d6, 23b2-4). These last two dialogues are distinguished from the *Apology* in their drawing of a clear connection between the awareness of ignorance and loving wisdom. In addition, the *Lysis* and *Symposium* offer a tripartite ranking of epistemic positions: the best epistemic state is *sophia*, which only the gods possess; the worst state is *amathia*, thinking one knows what one does not know; the philosopher stands in the middle. But these three positions are also discernible in the *Apology*. *Anthrōpinē sophia* occupies a middle position between (*metaxu*) divine wisdom (*sophia)* (23a-b), and blameworthy ignorance (*amathia*) (29b1-2).[34] Socrates' human wisdom, therefore, seems to be nothing other than his love of wisdom, his *philosophia*. In fact, he almost says as much in the counter-penalty. The "hardest thing" is to make the Athenians believe (37e5, 38a6) that "the greatest good for man is to discuss virtue every day" (*peri arētes tous logous poieisthai*) (38a2-6, cf. 30a5-7, 36c3-d1, 36d9-e1, 41b5-c7). The connection between the claim that the good life is the philosophical life and the idea that human wisdom is *philosophia* may be drawn as follows. If the good life is the life of virtue then the philosophical life is the life of virtue. Given that human wisdom is human virtue or the most important element in human virtue, the philosophical life is the life of human wisdom.[35]

The nature of Socrates' human wisdom is greatly elucidated by its identification with *philosophia*. Human wisdom is not a purely cognitive state: it is a state of loving and desiring wisdom. Moreover, general *aporia* may be construed as the cognitive part of the composite. It is an "awareness of not knowing" without definite propositional content. This follows from the fact that Socrates' initial mischaracterisation of his sense of ignorance (21b5-6) does not undermine his human wisdom. The state of general *aporia* is one in which the object not-known is incompletely grasped (cf. *Rep*. 505e).

Some scholars have thought that an account of human wisdom can be worked out by subtraction from divine wisdom.[36] If the nature of the knowledge that Socrates takes himself not to have can be specified, so can his human wisdom. For human wisdom consists, at least in part, in his recognition that he does not have divine wisdom. I do not believe that this is a promising strategy. If the cognitive component of *philosophia* does not have definite propositional content, but is a general mode of awareness, the nature of the knowledge which Socrates knows he lacks cannot be precisely rendered. In any case, the vagueness

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inherent in Socrates' conception of *sophia* before the oracle—evidenced by his willingness to examine people professing quite different kinds of wisdom (political, poetic, technical)—is never clarified in the text. This is not surprising. To suppose that one knows the precise nature of the wisdom which one lacks is, in a sense, to take oneself to know what one does not know and hence a way of failing to exhibit human wisdom (cf. *Rep*. 506c). It does not follow that Socrates has no positive conception of divine wisdom. Clearly, he does. His considered judgment that the politicians, poets, and craftsmen lacked wisdom depends on their failing to meet criteria of understanding (22c3) and completeness (22d7-9). And although it is not wrong to say, schematically, that wisdom is knowledge of the whole,[37] this knowledge cannot reasonably be identified with deductive certainty or technical skill. The transcendence of divine wisdom (*Phaedr*. 278d) is not merely a matter of procurement: it is also a matter of comprehension.

V

I have offered some reasons for thinking that Socrates' human wisdom is *philosophia*. I now want to put my hypothesis to work by showing that it offers a satisfying explanation of the oracle narration. I will begin by restating the problems to which other accounts of human wisdom are susceptible (see §II) but now reformulated as requirements on an interpretation of the oracle narration. I will then show that my proposed hypothesis satisfies each of these requirements. If the reasoning is reversed, we may conclude, by abduction, that the account is likely to be true.

The first condition is that the analysis of human wisdom accommodate the substantial correctness of H3. Human wisdom is a state in which one realises that one is worth nothing in respect of *sophia* (23b3-4). It is not a matter of possessing fallible propositional knowledge or recognising that one knows nothing at all. The second condition is that the account be developed in terms which can be attributed to Socrates before and upon reception of the oracle. Although Socrates did not initially understand why Apollo praised his wisdom, he was as a matter of fact in a praiseworthy state. The third condition is that human wisdom is not a state of belief: Socrates was humanly wise before the oracle even though his beliefs about his own epistemic state were substantially false. And the fourth and final requirement is that the interpretation ought to be given in terms which can be seen as valuable from a Platonic point of view.

The hypothesis that human wisdom is *philosophia* satisfies each of these conditions. *Philosophia* is to be identified with a state in which one recognises that one is worth nothing in respect of *sophia* (*Lysis* 218a-b; *Symp.* 204a1-b2). And it can be attributed to Socrates before and upon reception of the oracle. His declaration of a global lack of wisdom (21b5-6) is reasonably understood as an expression of *philosophia*. Moreover, if we attend to the pattern of Socrates' response to the oracle, we will see that it perfectly mirrors the pattern of the elenchus represented in Plato's other writings.[38] Socrates enacts the very

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philosophical process he tries to facilitate in others.[39] This makes it reasonable to think that he was in a state of *philosophia* before Apollo's oracle.[40]

The third and fourth interpretive conditions are also satisfied. *Philosophia* is not a pure state of belief: it incorporates love or desire. Moreover, since the cognitive component of *philosophia,* viz., general *aporia*, does not have definite propositional content, it too cannot be identified with belief. And finally, *philosophia* is clearly, in the Platonic worldview, a very good state to be in: the identification of the philosopher with the virtuous person is a main theme of Plato's writings.[41] So the value of the state that Socrates thought Apollo approved (23b3-4) is more generally attested in the Platonic writings. This is a satisfying conclusion.

A further advantage of the present account is that it provides an explanation of the development in Socrates' understanding through the course of his examination of the oracle. If Socrates were in a state of *philosophia* before the oracle then his initial conceit of knowledge, his misrepresentation of himself as not wise at all (21b5-6), becomes explicable. Socrates' false belief that he was not wise at all was grounded on a general sense of *aporia*. Furthermore, if Socrates were in a state of *philosophia*, we should expect that he would be motivated to inquire. And this is precisely what he does (21b8-9; *epeita mogis panu epi zētesin autou toiautēn tina etrapomēn*). Moreover, the general sense of ignorance partly constitutive of *philosophia* offers an explanation for H2 as an approximation of human wisdom. A person who takes himself not to know will not—at least for the most part—be susceptible to the most blameworthy ignorance (*amathia*). Lastly, the hypothesis explains why Socrates would have thought himself superior to the politicians, poets and craftsmen in self-knowledge. *Philosophia* is, in fact, connected with the movement towards self-knowledge.

VI

The hypothesised identity of human wisdom and *philosophia* is confirmed by its resolution of some enduring difficulties in the interpretation of *Apology*. This is to say, more precisely, that it offers a satisfying explanation of some apparent discrepancies in Socrates' descriptions of his service to Delphi. In this section, I outline the nature of these puzzles; in the remainder of the paper, I explain how they may be resolved by the proposed hypothesis.

Socrates describes his philosophical and religious mission in various ways. Immediately after the oracle narration, he refers to the goal of showing those who falsely believe themselves to be wise that they are not wise (23b6-7, cf. 33b9-c7 and 41b5-c3). But he goes on to say in the digression that he is obliged to live the philosophical life (28e5, 29c8), to examine both himself and others (23b4-c1, 28e5-6), and, in a well known passage claims to "go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old…not to care for…body or wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of [the] soul" (30a7-b2).[42]

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On my reckoning, Socrates presents five different descriptions of the goals relevant to his divine mission. These descriptions can be divided into two types. The distinction in type reflects a distinction between what Socrates seeks for himself (self-regarding or personal goals), and what he wants others to achieve (his other-regarding goals). On this scheme, self-examination and philosophy may be classified as personal goals, whereas disabusing the conceitedly wise of their false wisdom, examining other people, and exhorting his fellow Athenians to pursue virtue over material goods, count as other-regarding goals.

Socrates' divergent descriptions of his service to Apollo generate two basic interpretive problems. The first concerns the relation between Socrates' understanding of the oracle and his personal goal of philosophy. If human wisdom is merely a matter of recognising that one is "worthless in respect of wisdom" (23b4), why would Socrates seek to improve his epistemic state? The interpretation of the oracle seems to give him no reason for further inquiry. He already knows that his wisdom is worthless and that this knowledge makes him as wise as he can be.

A second riddle is this. How could Socrates could go around doing *nothing other* than (*ouden gar allo prattōn egō pierierchomai*) persuading people to care for virtue over material goods given the earlier descriptions of his service to the god as showing up those who (falsely) pretend to be wise (23b4-7), practicing philosophy, and examining himself and others?[43] The puzzle arises in both self-regarding and other-regarding forms. The self-regarding dimension concerns the relation between Socrates' philosophical and protreptic goals;[44] the other-regarding dimension pertains to the relation between moral exhortation, examination, and the elimination of false wisdom.

VII

Socrates seems to have no reason for further inquiry after he has come to an interpretation of the meaning of the oracle. He is already humanly wise on account of "recognising that he is worthless in respect of wisdom" (23b2-4), and knows or thinks it likely that he is wise in just this way. What then is the point of further philosophy?[45]

It is important to distinguish the question of whether Socrates could rationally pursue knowledge after the interpretation of the oracle from the question of whether he has a reason to continue inquiring. Some commentators have been troubled by Socrates' pursuit of knowledge he believes he cannot attain.[46] But Socrates does not take his interpretation of the oracle to be indisputably correct. He says: "What is probable (*to kinduneuei*), gentlemen, is that in fact the god is wise…" (23a).[47] In addition, the *Apology* is clear that the probable impossibility of a human being's attaining wisdom (*sophia*) (23a5-6)[48] does not undercut the potential for progress: one can know more or less about virtue and value even if they are in some sense transcendent. This point is expressed

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mythically in the construction of the oracle narration. Socrates' inquiry into the meaning of the oracle improved his understanding of wisdom. Although he discovers that real wisdom is probably (*to kinduneuei*) the possession of the god alone (23a5-6) and that the appropriate wisdom for a human being is *philosophia*, this return to perplexity is not a matter of stasis. By means of his inquiry into the oracle, Socrates distinguished human wisdom from *sophia* and, therefore, improved his understanding of wisdom. The return to *aporia* is not the return to the point from where he began unless it is to "know the place for the first time".[49] The probable unattainability of true wisdom does not imply that epistemic progress cannot be made.

Even if there is nothing irrational about pursuing probably unattainable knowledge (23a5-6), a question remains as to why Socrates would continue to pursue knowledge if human wisdom is the best state for a human being (23b2-4). The possibility of epistemic progress does not alter the fact that the recognition that one is worthless in respect of wisdom makes one humanly wise. Consider, in illustration, Michael Forster's interpretation of Socrates' wisdom as "having the humility before the gods to realize that unlike them you do not know anything".[50] On this reading, Socrates has absolutely no rational reason for inquiry after the interpretation of the oracle. If he believes that he does not know anything then he is humble and humanly wise. Socrates could preserve his human wisdom without searching and philosophising: divine approval requires only the preservation of the *belief* in his own ignorance.[51]

On my proposed hypothesis, Socrates' continued inquiry after the interpretation of the oracle is explicable in the following way. Socrates was in a state of *philosophia* and (hence) general *aporia* upon reception of the oracle. The most plausible explanation for this is that he had previously been inquiring into the nature of virtue but was unable to attain the knowledge he sought. Socrates' examination of the meaning of the oracle led to the realisation that *philosophia* is a valuable state, and its expression in searching and inquiring, a valuable activity. So, he realised that the god was instructing and advising him, "like those who encourage runners in a race" (*Phaed.* 60e-61a), to continue doing what he was doing already, that is, practice philosophy (cf. *Ap*. 33c4-7).

Socrates' pursuit of knowledge of virtue is genuine: the object of his search is *sophia*.[52] Philosophy involves striving for wisdom and not for anything less. However, given the likelihood that human beings cannot become truly wise, particular *aporia* is a near inevitable psychological by-product of searching, hence, justifying the return to general *aporia*. This point remains even when inquiry brings about epistemic improvement. In addition, while Socrates does not want his inquiries to fail, each failed inquiry, say, in the sense that virtue resists his attempts to pin it down, keeps him in a divinely approved state, and confirms his interpretation of the meaning of the oracle. Socrates has a reason to continue searching because he recognises that *philosophia* is a valuable condition of the soul, and philosophy, a valuable activity.

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VIII

Socrates says that he goes around doing nothing other than persuading people to care for virtue (30a7-b2; *ouden gar allo prattōn egō perierchomai*); and yet he also claims to be living a life of philosophy and self-examination and to be serving the god by refuting those who pretend to have wisdom (23b4-7). How can Socrates' mission consist in moral persuasion alone and something extra?

Socrates' activity of moral exhortation is intended to make his fellow Athenians better people. If human wisdom is human virtue, and human virtue is *philosophia*, it will follow that the goal of Socratic moral persuasion is nothing other than getting people to love wisdom. Hence the goal of moral persuasion and the goal of philosophy are not the same. If what Socrates means when he claims to go around doing nothing other than persuading people to care about virtue is that he pursues no goal in addition to moral persuasion, he is speaking falsely. On the other hand, if he is saying only that he conducts one kind of activity which may be legitimately described as philosophy and philosophical protreptic, his claim might very well be true.

Socrates converses with people about virtue (*Ap*. 38a2-6, 41a-c). He pursues knowledge dialectically. There is no reason why he could not engage in a single activity—philosophical conversation—in order to both improve his understanding of virtue and bring about moral persuasion. Dialectic may well be a suitable medium for searching *and* the reorientation of his interlocutor's value system. The self- and other-regarding aspects of Socrates' religious mission can be regarded as two descriptions of the same process of philosophical dialogue.

The second part of the problem is how Socrates could go around doing nothing but persuading people to pursue virtue given his earlier description of his service to the god as showing up those who pretend to be wise when they are not wise (23b4-7). My proposed solution is similar to, but distinct from, the one offered above. The two descriptions of Socrates' other-regarding goals do not refer to distinct ends brought about by the same process; rather, they are descriptions of the instrumental means to a goal and the goal itself.

Socrates tries to show people that they are not wise by reducing them to particular *aporia*. The repeated reduction of a person to particular *aporia* is intended to bring about general *aporia* and *philosophia*. If this is right then the activity of refuting the conceitedly wise is the activity of producing human virtue. By reducing his fellow citizens to *aporia*, Socrates gets them to care for virtue. (The justification for the description of the activity as loving wisdom rather than loving virtue is due to the prominence accorded to wisdom amongst the virtues.) The elenctic and protreptic dimensions of Socrates' divinely sanctioned activity are related as means to end.

The merit of this solution can be seen by comparing it with the account given by its main competitors. On analyses of Socrates' human wisdom developed in terms of the belief that he is not wise at all (H1), or even a tendency to

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self-knowledge (H2), it is hard to see how Socrates' activity could be accurately described as an attempt to get people to *care* for anything. While the point of the examination might very well be to disabuse the conceitedly wise of their false wisdom, the belief that one is ignorant and even the capacity for self-knowledge appear unrelated to loving virtue or caring for the soul. In order to preserve the dimension of caring, the state of *anthrōpinē sophia* must incorporate a desiderative element, a point accommodated by its identification with *philosophia*.

IX

What is the function of the oracle in Socrates' philosophical life? If Socrates was already philosophising before the oracle, what was the point of the oracle?

Socrates' coming to understand the nature of human wisdom is important for his philosophical development. It effectively marks his conversion to the philosophical life, not in the sense that he was not living the philosophical life before the oracle, but in that he came to be self-conscious about what he was doing. The conceptualisation of the good human life as the life of philosophy is philosophy come to awareness of itself. My argument for this claim is a simple one. In order to live a life of a certain sort, say, a doctor, one requires an ideal, which is capable of serving as an object of aspiration and self-regulation. Medicine becomes a vocation only when the value of health is recognised and used as an organising principle. Similarly, philosophy becomes a vocation only when its value is recognised. Before the oracle, Socrates thought of himself as radically deficient (21b). After the oracle, he was able to see the value in his mode of being. In recognising the value of general *aporia*, that is, in recognising the importance of the commitment to knowledge enabled by his sense of ignorance, Socrates is able to live a life of philosophy. The function of the oracle is, therefore, to legitimate the life that he had been living before the oracle.[53] While Socrates was humanly wise before he knew it—for this is why the god approved of him—his interpretation of the oracle is that his characteristic psychological state of general *aporia* is of normative significance because it expresses *philosophia*. It is then clear why Socrates continued to live as he had been living: it is how a human being ought to live (23b2-4, 41a-c).

Notes

I would like to thank two anonymous referees for their helpful commentary on a previous version of this paper.

1 Stokes (1992, 28).

2 The translation of *Apology* is by G.M.A. Grube, as reprinted in Cooper (1997).

3 Since Socrates attributes wisdom to the craftsmen (22d-e), we are required to distinguish between Socrates' human wisdom and "ordinary" human wisdom (Stokes 1997, 19-21). Nevertheless, in the absence of explicit indicators to the contrary, "human wisdom" should be understood as shorthand for "Socrates' human wisdom".

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4 Vlastos (1985, 28-29). The "propositional" theory of human wisdom seems to be the majority view. See also Brickhouse and Smith (1994), McPherran (1992), Nehamas (1998), Reeve (1989) and Woodruff (1982).

5 See H. Benson for a similar criticism: "It is clear from Socrates' discussion of his human wisdom that he understands it to reside in his recognition of his ignorance" (2000, 170).

6 The objections stated do not, of course, undermine the account of divine wisdom as infallible propositional knowledge (Vlastos 1985), or, in alternative versions, technical knowledge of virtue (Nehamas 1998, Reeve 1989). See §IV.

7 The humility theory is characterised by its rejection of the first-order knowledge requirement on human wisdom. I do not mean to suggest that defenders of such accounts always describe them in terms of humility. The label "humility theory" is borrowed from Ryan (2007). Versions of the humility theory are defended by Stokes (1997), Benson (2000) and Forster (2006).

8 For this kind of analysis, see Forster (2006, 11-16).

9 I have revised Grube's translation of "s*unoida emautoi"* and substituted "very conscious" with "know". This revision is made in order to focus discussion on the idea that Socrates is disavowing a propositional state. The translation of "*sunoida emautoi"* as "know" is defended by Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 33). Grube's translation ("very conscious") actually suggests a non-propositional "awareness" of self, which fits nicely with model of human wisdom I will ultimately endorse.

10 My reasons for substituting "knowledge" with "belief" will become clear in the next paragraph.

11 Cf. Ryan (2007). Vlastos (1985, 6, note 13) seems to miss this point.

12 Socrates infers that the craftsmen are wiser than he on the basis of their craft-knowledge (22d-e). Therefore, it seems likely that he would also accept that wisdom involves knowledge (cf. *Theat*. 145e). See Hadot (2002, 17-21) on the development of the notion of *sophia* from Homer to the Sophists.

13 Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 33); Wolfsdorf (2004, 30).

14 Cf. Stokes (1997, 20).

15 See also Reeve (1989, 27) and Hadot (2002, 46) on the value of Socrates' human wisdom.

16 *Ap*. 23b2-4 does not support the claim that human wisdom is worthless. Human wisdom is here said to consist in Socrates' knowing that he is worthless in respect of *true wisdom* (*sophia*). This is perfectly compatible with attributing significant value to human wisdom.

17 See note 3; Stokes (1997, 19-21).

18 Adam (1951, 51); cf. Calef (1996).

19 Benson (2000, 170). Benson does not describe his account in terms of humility; nevertheless, it appears to me reasonably so classified. Cf. Socrates' discussion of the proposal that temperance is self-knowledge in *Charmides* (166b9-e6).

20 See Benson (2000, 169-172); cf. Ryan's discussion of the "Epistemic Accuracy Theory" of wisdom (2007).

21 On the translation of *egnōken*, see Stokes (1997, 20).

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22 I have here substituted a more literal translation of the Greek, rendering *"egnōken hoti oudenos axios esti tēi alētheiai pros sophian"* as "realises that he is in truth worthless in respect of wisdom" rather than, with Grube, "understands that his wisdom is worthless".

23 Socrates does not claim to know that his interpretation of the oracle is correct (23a5; *to kinduneuei*). See the discussion in §VII.

24 As already mentioned, H3 involves an evaluation of Socrates' epistemic state in relation to true wisdom (*sophia*): it does not imply that he is not wise at all. H3 is clearly distinct from H1.

25 See Politis for an argument against the traditional view that "the use of the term *aporia* to denote a particular puzzle and problem is absent from Plato's early dialogues" (2006, 90).

26 The distinction between type 1 and type 2 *aporia* corresponds roughly with Politis' (2006) distinction between "cathartic" and "zetetic" *aporia*. Politis does not draw the distinction between particular and general *aporia*.

27 For the interlocutor in this kind of *aporia*, see e.g., *La*. 194a8-b4; *Euthyp*. 11b6-7; *Men*. 80a8-b4. For Socrates in this kind of *aporia*, see e.g., *Hip. Maj*. 297d10-11. Compare also the link between *aporia* and instability, and the relation between the latter and Socrates' "wandering" (Blondell 2002, 73, 118-119, and 159). The attribution of *aporia* to Socrates or an interlocutor does not require the actual inscription of the word or its cognates in the text.

28 The reference to riddling at 21b3-4 (*ti pote ainittetai;*) does not, I think, refer to features of the Pythian mode of communication. The riddle that causes Socrates' perplexity (21b7; *ēporoun)* is simply this: the god, who is not permitted to speak falsely (21b6-7), uttered an apparent falsehood.

29 See also e.g., *Hip. Maj*. 286c-d; *Men*.71b-c.

30 Presumably, Socrates has knowledge of the various puzzles which have, in the past, prevented his attainment of a definition of virtue. But this does not alter the point at hand: in particular *aporia*, the agent's perplexity is presented along with the problem which rationalises it. This is not the case with Socrates' preliminary "general" *aporia*.

31 *Symp* 203b-d, 216d. Cf. *Theaet*. 155c-d. Aristotle links *aporia* and wonder in the *Metaphysics*: "And a man who is puzzled and wonders thinks himself ignorant..." (I.2; *aporōn kai thaumazōn*).

32 Cf. Diotima's account of Eros' parentage (203b-d).

33 Hadot (2002, 41).

34 Cf. De Strycker and Slings (1994, 63-64) and Hadot (2002, 44).

35 Cf. Stokes (1997, 27-30). When I refer to the "life of human wisdom", I am not suggesting that an activity, philosophy, can be identified with a condition of the soul, human wisdom. This would be a category mistake. Rather, the proposal is that Socrates' human wisdom is a condition of the soul that may legitimately be described as *philosophia*, and that this psychic condition is conceptually related to a certain kind of activity, viz. philosophy. For this reason, ascriptions of value to the activity are equally applicable to the state, and conversely.

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36 See e.g., Nehamas (1998, 75-76; 1992, 291-294).

37 This, I think, explains Socrates' ironic allowance of the possibility that the sophists possess divine wisdom (20e1-2). The sophistic claim to wisdom concerns the whole; it is, thus, at least of the right form to count as *sophia* (*Soph*. 233a3, d9-10).

38 The pattern is this: prior to the oracle, Socrates thought he knew that he was not wise at all (21b4-5); upon its reception, he became entangled in contradiction and reduced to particular *aporia* ((21b6-7); the reduction to *aporia* moved him to inquiry (21b8-9; *epeita mogis panu epi zētesin autou toiautēn tina etrapomēn*); and inquiry enabled him to understand human wisdom (23a6-b4). The same stages are exhibited in Socrates' slave demonstration at *Meno* 82b-85b. There may be some significance in the fact that the solution to Socrates' geometrical problem is arithmetically inexpressible. The slave boy reaches an answer to the problem but remains in a state of wonder, his opinions stirred up as if in a dream (*Men*. 85c). The possible parallel with *Apology* is that Socrates' resolution of the riddle returns him to a state of general *aporia* (23a6-b4). This would suggest that inquiry involves both the remediation of ignorance and recognition of further deficiencies in understanding. The philosophical process does not terminate. See also §9.

39 Most scholars understand the oracle examination as Socrates' elenchus of the god (e.g., Nehamas (1998, 83)). It is better described as the god's elenchus of Socrates.

40 Cf. Reeve (1989, 31-32).

41 E.g., *Phaed*. 82a11-82c1; *Rep*. 516c4-d7, 533c7-d4, 619b7-e5. One reason for this is that *philosophia* is associated with self-knowledge and, hence, conformity with the Delphic maxim "Know Thyself". See *Charm*. 166c-d and *Phaedr*. 229e-230a.

42 The entire passage from 29d5-30b5 is explicitly hortatory (*parakeleuomenos*), though it retains a connection with questioning and refutation (29e5) (cf. Slings 1999, 141 ff.). The phrases "care for virtue" and "care for virtue over material goods" are shorthand for the care of "wisdom and truth, or the best possible state of [one's] soul" (29e1-3) and the content of Socrates' exhortations at 30b1-5.

43 This problem is discussed by Hackforth (1933, 112-117); see also Slings (1999, 141).

44 I set aside the relation between the two self-regarding aspects of Socrates' divine mission, viz., philosophy and self-examination. At the level of the text, there is no real problem: philosophy is a mode of self-examination. See *Charm*. 166c-d and *Phaedr*. 229e-230a.

45 It be might be thought that Socrates comes to believe that he is divinely obligated to a life of philosophy (e.g., 23b4-5; 33b9-c7) and has, on account of this, reason for further inquiry. This view fails to explain how Socrates could believe in the value of the search for knowledge *qua* search for knowledge.

46 See Forster (2006, 111-13) and Yonezawa (2004, 3-6).

47 Cf. Stokes (1992, 44). It seems to me that it can sometimes be rational to aim for the impossible. For example, an archer might be certain that she will not hit a target, but also that she will shoot better if she continues to aim for it. But I will not insist on this point: Socrates' interpretation of the oracle is not that the god alone is wise, but that he alone is *likely to be* wise.

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48 Benson denies that human wisdom is all that is possible for a human being, arguing that it is all that has been achieved, but not all that is achievable (2000, 181-184). This is incorrect. Socrates' interpretation of the oracle is not really about Socrates at all (de Strycker and Slings 1994, 80). He is being used as an example (*paradeigma*) (23b): the oracle's message is a "timeless statement about the human condition" (Forster 2006, 12-13) See also Reeve (1989, 26) and Yonezawa (2004, 1-2, note 2).

49 T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*.

50 Forster (2006, 16, n. 36).

51 Forster would not regard this as a problem for his interpretation since he denies that Socrates pursues knowledge after coming to understand the oracle's message. However, his contention that Socrates' description of himself as philosophising (23d, 28e, 29c-d) does not imply the search for knowledge is fundamentally implausible (2006, 17-18).

52 I note, but do not explore, an anonymous referee's intriguing suggestion that Socrates' continued philosophy could be understood as an attempt to become divine (*homoiosis theoi kata to dunaton*). See *Theat*. 176a5-c3.

53 It would seem to follow that the value of philosophy cannot be rationally demonstrated. Socrates' rational religion is ultimately grounded on faith.

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