JÖRG HARDY

SEEKING THE TRUTH AND TAKING CARE FOR COMMON GOODS – PLATO ON EXPERTISE AND RECOGNIZING EXPERTS

ABSTRACT

In this paper I discuss Plato's conception of expertise as a part of the Platonic theory of a good, successful life (*eudaimonia*). In various Platonic dialogues, Socrates argues that the good life requires a certain kind of knowledge that guides all our good, beneficial actions: the "knowledge of the good and bad", which is to be acquired by "questioning ourselves and examining our and others' beliefs". This knowledge encompasses the particular knowledge of how to recognize experts in a given technical domain. The central element in Socrates' account of an expert is what I call the truth-and-caring criterion: an expert has to make seeking the truth and avoiding (avoidable) error her supreme epistemic goal and she has to make caring for common goods the supreme goal of practising her expertise.

Very often, we seek learning a certain truth from other persons. When we seek learning a truth from other persons, we are faced with the question of how we can tell that their statements are true. There are many cases in which we can figure out an answer to this question by using our own resources. If I ask someone to tell me the way from the Free University of Berlin to the central railway station, I can judge the truth of the answer that I get by checking the map. When we consult an expert, the situation is (in the majority of cases) different; we consult an expert because we know that we do *not* know what we suppose an expert to know. (The information I get by looking at a map is knowledge by testimony, which relies on expertise too. For the map that guides my way through Berlin is the product of geographical, mathematical, and editorial expertise. If I do not want to refer to any kind of testimonial knowledge that relies on expertise, I can use my own memory of the way from the university to the railway station.) The asymmetric epistemic relation between laypersons and experts raises the question: how can we know that someone is an expert whom we can trust? To put the question another way: Given that we know that we, as laypersons, do not know what we suppose an expert to know, how can we evaluate the truth of experts' statements? This question, which

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receives much attention in contemporary social epistemology,[1] is discussed in many of Plato's dialogues. In Plato's work the question of how to recognize an expert essentially matters to what scholars call Plato's eudaimonism, a theory about the good, successful life (or happiness, *eudaimonia*).[2]

1. EXPERTISE AND THE GOOD LIFE (*EUDAIMONIA*)

In Plato's dialogues, Socrates is on the search for the conditions of a good life (*eudaimonia*). The good life is the supreme goal of all our actions. The good life requires a certain state of soul, virtue (or excellence, *arete*). Socrates argues that a certain kind of knowledge is both necessary and sufficient to virtue and hence necessary for a good life (*Euthydemus* 278e–282e, *Protagoras* 361b, *Meno* 87d–88e, *Republic* I 353d–354a). Socrates calls it "the knowledge of the good and bad". We may also call it *eudaimonist knowledge* (cf. Hardy 2008). For Socrates, the good life is the "examined life" (or *examining* life), as opposed to what he in the *Apology* calls "a life without examination that is not worth living" (38a). The examined life is the life of a person whose actions are guided by knowledge – by the knowledge that is to be acquired by the process of questioning ourselves and examining our and others' beliefs that Socrates explains in the *Apology* (28a, 37e–38a) and that is at work in so many Platonic dialogues.

The self-examination Socrates has in mind yields an individual's knowledge both about the general conditions of a good life and about her *own* mental states. This knowledge determines our desires, actions, and our way of living as a whole (cf. *Laches* 187e–188a). To examine oneself is to make oneself into a good, virtuous person. Self-examination so conceived is the source of self-knowledge, self-determination, and self-efficacy. Socrates' assumption that the "knowledge of the good and bad" is even sufficient to virtue – the so-called Socratic intellectualism – is highly controversial. This is, however, too deep an issue to be discussed here.[3]

What matters to Plato's account of expertise is the less controversial thesis that the "knowledge of the good and bad" is necessary for virtue and hence for a person's pursuit of happiness (*eudaimonia*). In a number of dialogues, Socrates presents the following argument: Any quality such as wealth, health, power, honour, or endurance will in some circumstances be good and beneficial, but will be bad in some other circumstances. A certain quality is really good and beneficial – so that it contributes to the agent's good life (*eudaimonia*) – if and only if an agent makes a good and beneficial *use* of that quality. An agent makes a good and beneficial use of a certain quality if and only if she *knows* how to make a beneficial use of that quality. Thus, a certain quality will be good if and only if an agent knows how to make a good, beneficial use of that quality (*Meno* 87d–88c, *Euthydemus* 279a–282a). This applies to how one has to deal with expertise (*techne*) too.[4] Here is why:

> [If we] take away this science [i.e. the knowledge of good and bad] from the other sciences [i.e. the particular crafts and sciences], will medicine, then, any the less produce health, or cobbling produce shoes, or the art of weaving produce clothes, or will the

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> pilot's art any the less prevent us from dying at sea or the general's art in war? – No, they will do it just the same [i.e. they will produce the same work]. – But … our chance of getting any of these things *well and beneficially done* will have vanished if this [i.e. the knowledge of good and bad] *is lacking*. (*Charmides* 174c3–d1, trans. R. K. Sprague, Cooper 1997, 661, with slight modifications)

The "knowledge of good and bad", that is, the knowledge about human well-being, does not achieve the goals of a particular discipline; it can not "produce health, shoes, or clothes". This knowledge is, however, necessary for judging an expert and even supervising the experts' works. For the possession of a certain technical skill does not as such ensure that the practice of that skill will have beneficial effects to those to whom an expert applies her expertise.

What an expert does when practising his expertise in the narrower sense of technical expertise might not always contribute to a layperson's good life. An expert can use his expertise the way that it benefits as well as the way that it harms other people. A doctor can harm a patient much more effectively than anyone else. A technical expert might not want to harm another person, but he might suffer from what we may call the problem of *avoidable ignorance*. This problem is of great importance for Plato's philosophy. If an agent knows that she does not know whether a certain belief is true or not, and if she considers herself a person who does not want to act on an uncertain belief, she would not perform an action that would be based on such a belief. But even a technical expert can be ignorant about what she knows or does not know, and as a result she can be ignorant about the fact that what she thinks is good for a person to whom she *applies* her expertise is actually bad for this person.

The avoidable ignorance that results from lacking a second-order knowledge about one's own beliefs is the source of many kinds of error, (self-)deception, and wrong, harmful actions. Socrates calls such ignorance a great (perhaps the greatest) evil (*Gorgias* 458a–b, 472c–d, 505b).[5] Avoidable ignorance so understood is one of the central themes of the *Apology*.

2. SOCRATES ON "HUMAN WISDOM" AND EXPERTISE IN THE *APOLOGY*

In the *Apology*, Socrates explains what he calls "human wisdom" (20d7–9). The oracle of Delphi had said that Socrates is "the wisest among men" (23a7–b4). As Socrates *disavows* being wise, he aims to refute the oracle by asking *other* persons who *are* wise because they are *experts* in a given domain (21a–b). Here is what Socrates reports as the surprising outcome of his investigation:

> I thought that he [i.e. a politician with the reputation of being an expert in his field] appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not. I then tried to show him that he thought himself wise, but that he was not … So I thought to myself: I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do

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> I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know … After the politicians, I went to the poets … and I saw that because of their poetry, they thought themselves very wise men *in other* respects, which they were not … Finally I went to the craftsmen … and I knew that I would find that they had knowledge of many fine things. On this I was not mistaken; they knew things I did not know, and to that extent they were wiser than I. But the good craftsmen seemed to me to have the same fault as the poets: *each of them, because of his success at his craft, thought himself very wise in other most important pursuits, and this error of theirs overshadowed the wisdom they had.* (*Apology* 21c–22e, trans. G. M. A. Grube, Cooper 1997, 21f., with slight modifications)

The "human knowledge" (20d7–9) that makes Socrates a wise man is a second-order knowledge about what he knows and what he does not know. Socrates explains his own wisdom this way: "I am wiser than this man [i.e. the man who thinks he possesses some knowledge when he actually does not possess that knowledge]; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, *that I do not think I know what I do not know*." (21d2–8) Notice that the Socrates of the *Apology* understands the oracle as saying that he is an *example*, that is, *one* of the "wisest among men" (23a7–b4). In fact, the art of examination Socrates is practising is a common good and a common endeavour; everyone is able to do that. Socrates locates the "human knowledge" between what he calls the "real wisdom" that only the God possesses (23a5–6), and the kind of ignorance that consists in "not being wise, but seeming wise" (21c8–d1). The Socrates of the *Apology* wants to find out whether or not his interlocutors possess the wisdom (and expertise) they claim to have, and the same kind of examination is at work in Plato's dialogues.[6]

3. A SOCRATIC CONCEPTION OF EXPERTISE

Let me give a brief exposition of the conception of expertise that we can take from Plato's dialogues before I take a closer look at some significant passages from the *Gorgias*, *Charmides*, and *Laches*. According to Socrates, an expert

(a) is always seeking the truth – trying to be "free from error" (*Charmides* 171d–172a, cf. *Theaetetus* 170a–179b),
(b) makes caring for common goods her priority in practising her expertise (*Gorgias* 464e–465a, 513d–e, *Alcibiades I* 126a–c), is able
(c) to produce success in practising her expertise (*Charmides* 171d–172a, *Euthydemus* 280a),[7]
(d) has a holistic understanding of a given subject matter S,[8] which enables her
(e) to give an account of the particular things that belong to S (*Gorgias* 464e–465a, *Phaedrus* 270a–272b, cf. *Theaetetus* 201c–d in conjunction with 145d–e, 147c–148e), and

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(f) to make reliable prognostic statements about the particular things that belong to S (*Theaetetus* 178b–e);[9] an expert is also able
(g) to provide evidence of her expertise (*Laches* 185a-186e, *Gorgias* 514d–e),
(h) to teach her knowledge (*Laches* 185a–186c, *Meno* 87c, *Gorgias* 514a–515a, *Alcibiades I* 188c–d),
(i) to recognize another expert in the same domain (*Ion* 531d); and finally an expert
(j) agrees with other experts on the facts of her expertise (*Meno* 95b, *Alcibiades I* 111b–d).[10]

If we consider the understanding-condition (d) as entailing the conditions (e)–(j), we get the following, so to speak, Socratic definition of an expert:

> A person is an expert in a given domain if and only if she is always seeking the truth, makes caring for common goods her priority in practising her expertise, is able to produce success in practising her expertise, and has a holistic understanding of a given subject matter.

I take it that the most important element in Socrates' account of an expert, on which I focus in this paper, is the conjunction of (a) and (b), which we may call the *truth-and-caring criterion*: an expert has to make seeking the truth and avoiding (avoidable) error her supreme *epistemic* goal *and* she has to make caring about common goods the supreme goal of *practising* her expertise. The truth-and-caring criterion evidently combines a theoretical desideratum with a practical one. Strictly speaking, the latter one does not concern the *epistemological* question of who is an expert, for a person may well be considered an expert just because of her knowledge, whereas the caring condition is a genuine ethical desideratum. From a modern perspective one may want to distinguish these two aspects. That Plato does not make such a distinction is grounded in the eudaimonist framework of his treatment of expertise. For Plato, *epistemic* authority is *moral* authority too.

Plato's Socrates conjoins the seeking-and-telling-the-truth condition with the caring condition because an expert in the narrower sense of a person who possesses technical knowledge in a given domain might be interested in knowing the truth, but he might not share a layperson's interest in *caring* for a certain good. For example, a doctor might want to know how to cure a certain disease, but when he applies a certain therapy, he might not primarily want to heal his patient, but to make a lot of money or even to abuse a patient in order to test a new method's efficacy. A doctor might be well aware of the fact that he does *not know* whether a certain therapy is really helpful and beneficial to the patient, but he might nevertheless employ that therapy because of some other interests. For Socrates, such a person is not an expert, but an ignorant person in the sense explained above. The technically skilled ignorant person is careless in two respects: He does not sufficiently care for the layperson's good – such as health – and so he is careless in

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examining his beliefs; he undertakes certain actions he would *not* have undertaken had he made caring for common goods his *own* priority.

One of our best sources for the truth-and-caring criterion is the *Gorgias*.

4. EXPLAINING AND CARING IN THE *GORGIAS*

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates makes a distinction between real expertise and kinds of flattery (to which he counts the art of oratory):

> [Socrates:] There is, I take it, something you call body and something you call soul? Yes, of course. And do you also think that there is a state of fitness for each of these? Yes, I do. Is there also an apparent state of fitness (or goodness), one that is not real? The sort of thing I have in mind is this: there are many people who appear to be physically fit, and unless one is a doctor or one of the fitness experts, one would not notice that they are not fit. That's true .... I am saying that of this pair of subjects [i.e. body and soul] there are two crafts. The one for the soul I call politics. The one for the body, though it is one, I can't give you a name for offhand, but while the care of the body is a single craft, I am saying it has two parts: gymnastics and medicine. And in politics, the counterpart of gymnastics is legislation, and the part that corresponds to medicine is justice .... These are the four parts, and *they always provide care*, in the one case for the body, in the other for the soul, *with a view to what is best*. Now flattery takes notice of them and, I won't say by knowing, but only by guessing, divides itself into four, masks itself with each of the parts, and then pretends to be the characters of the masks. It takes no thought at all of *whatever is best*, with the lure of what is most pleasant at the moment ... it gives the impression of being most deserving .... I call this flattery, and I say that such a thing is shameful ... because it guesses at what is pleasant with no consideration for what is best. And I say that it is not a craft, but a knack, because it has no account of the nature of whatever things it applies by which it applies, so that it is unable to state the cause of each thing. And I refuse to call anything that lacks such an account a craft [or expertise]. (*Gorgias* 464a-465a, trans. D. J. Zeyl, Cooper 1997, 808f., with slight modifications)

Socrates' twofold desideratum holds for any craft or science: the expert always cares for the best possible state of a certain thing and she is able to give an account of both the subject in question and her own beliefs. The real expert wants to care for common goods and she therefore wants to know what she knows or does not know. (The subject of wanting what is good and knowing what one wants to do is the issue at stake in the passage 466e–468a that follows Socrates' account of expertise in the *Gorgias*.) Socrates invokes the criteria of knowing (being able to give an account) and "caring for what is best" not only to tell the experts from the technical laypersons but also to make a distinction between the real expert and the fraud *within* the range of those who possess expertise in the narrower sense of technical knowledge. Even a technically brilliant doctor can be a flatterer who presents a sweet-tasting medicine "that is most pleasant at the moment", without caring about the patient's health.

If we, as laypersons, were able to know whether someone is an expert who possesses a certain expertise and *pursues a goal* that contributes to the layperson's

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good, this knowledge would provide an extraordinary benefit – as it becomes clear in the *Charmides* again.

5. THE BENEFIT OF RECOGNIZING EXPERTS IN THE *CHARMIDES*

The topic of the *Charmides* is the particular virtue of temperance or soundness of mind (*sophrosyne*). An intriguing hypothesis that is discussed in this dialogue says that temperance is an ability by which one can successfully examine one's own *and* all other persons' knowledge claims, including those of experts. A community that was ruled by such wisdom would provide optimal conditions for human life. Here is how Socrates describes the tremendous benefit of such wisdom:

> [I]f … the temperate man knew what *he* knows and what he does not know … *and* were able to investigate another man who was in the same situation, *then* it would be of the greatest benefit to us to be temperate. Because those of us who had temperance would live their lives *free from error* and so would all those who were under our rule. Neither would we ourselves be attempting to do things we did not understand … nor would we trust those over whom we ruled to do anything except what they would do correctly …. And thus, by means of temperance, every household would be well-run, and every city well-governed, and so in every case where temperance reigned. With error rooted out and rightness in control, men so circumstanced would necessarily fare admirably and well in all their doings and, faring well, they would be happy [*eudaimon*]. Isn't this what we mean about temperance, Critias, … when we say what a good thing it would be to know what one knows and what one does not know? This is certainly what we mean.[11] (*Charmides* 171d–172a, trans. R. K. Sprague, Cooper 1997, 658f., with slight modifications)

Socrates here speaks of a person's ability to (a) control her own process of belief formation such that she will always possess second-order knowledge about what she knows or does not know, (b) to determine her wanting and acting by that knowledge, and also (c) to judge whether or not *any* other person possesses the same second-order knowledge about what she knows or does not know. Evidently this is a very demanding account of knowledge. The complex second-order knowledge Socrates has in mind here consists – as I have tried to show elsewhere (cf. Hardy 2008, ch. 2) – in both knowing the necessary conditions for a true belief, and being able to judge whether someone who believes that p has formed her belief under the *best possible* epistemic conditions that are currently available to her. Socrates invokes, as I take it, the following account of (propositional) knowledge: A person knows that p if she has a true belief that p and if she is able to give an account of why she believes that p – so that she "ties down her belief by an account of the reason why the belief is true" in the sense of *Meno* 98a3–4. She is able to give an account if and only if she has formed her belief by way of employing truth-conducive methods and if she has formed her belief under the best possible epistemic conditions that are available to her so that she takes into account the sources of *avoidable* error that she *knows*.[12]

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If we know whether or not someone has formed a given belief under the best possible epistemic conditions available to her, we are, at least, in the position to know that her statement might *not* be true.[13] The same applies to judging experts' statements. If we have good reasons to believe that an expert's statement might not be true, we had better not trust such a statement. But first of all, we have to be aware of what *we*, as laypersons, need to know in order to recognize an expert and to evaluate her statements. This is what we can learn from the *Laches*.

6. CONFLICTING EXPERTS' STATEMENTS IN THE *LACHES*

In Plato's *Laches*, Lysimachus and Melesias, two "elder statesmen" and former generals of Athens, seek advice on how to educate their sons so that they become good citizens. The dialogue begins with the following scene: Lysimachus and Melesias have visited a performance of a man who is very skilled in the art of fighting with the weapons of a hoplite (a man who stands in the phalanx of an army). The reason is that they think that learning the art of fighting might be an appropriate means for a training that makes an adult a virtuous man and a good citizen of Athens. As they are not sure about that, they invited Nicias and Laches, two experienced and active generals, to come with them to visit the performance. After the performance is over, Lysimachus and Melesias tell Nicias and Laches that they would like to ask them for advice:

> You have seen the man fighting with weapons, Nicias and Laches … [and now] we shall explain [the reason why we invited you to see him with us], because we think it especially right to be frank with you. There are some people who make fun of frankness and if anyone asks their advice, they don't say what they think, but they make a shot at what the other man would like to hear and say something different from their own opinion. But you we considered *capable not only of forming a judgement but also*, having formed one, *of saying exactly what you think*, and this is *why we have taken you into our confidence* about what we are going to communicate to you: … we have these two sons here … We have made up our minds to take as good care of them as we possibly can and not to behave like most parents, who, when their children grow up, permit them to do whatever they wish. No, we think that now is the time to make a real beginning, so far as we can. Since we knew that both of you had sons, too, we thought *that you*, if anyone, *would have been concerned* about the sort of training that would make the best men of them. And if by any chance you have not turned your attention to this kind of thing very often, let us remind you that you ought not to neglect it, and let us invite you *to care* for your sons along with ours. (*Laches* 178a–b, trans. R. K. Sprague, Cooper 1997, 665, with slight modifications)

It is interesting to note that Lysimachus opens the discussion with an observation on reliability. The two fathers who consider themselves as laymen point to a condition of learning something from an expert: the expert has to openly say what she thinks is correct. Trivially true, one might say. The problem with expertise is not so much about the fundamental assumption of sincerity, but about how to know if what the experts say *is* really true. However, what the laymen in the *Laches* expect from the experts shows what we have called the truth-and-caring criterion.

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The laypersons have to be sure that the experts want to know a certain truth and also want to tell the truth because they share the interest in caring for the same *good* that is the subject of the laypersons' request for advice. The generals Nicias and Laches have to care about educating young people, and if they do, they will care for discovering the truth about this matter. What is present right from the beginning in the *Laches* is that a layperson is entitled to trust an expert only if she knows that an expert (a) is primarily interested in seeking the truth in general and (b) shares the laymen's interest in actively caring for a certain (common) good.

Lysimachus and Melesias think that the two generals, Laches and Nicias, are experts in "the sort of training that would make the best men of young people". How can they know that? Reading the opening scene of the *Laches*, we might be surprised by noting that Lysimachus and Melesias are not at all concerned with this question. Lysimachus and Melesias, the self-declared laymen in the *Laches*, in fact trust in Nicias' and Laches' ability to form judgements as well as in their sincerity and their interest in caring about the same good: the education of young men. Recall that Lysimachus and Melesias "considered you [i.e. Laches and Nicias] capable not only of forming a judgement but also, having formed one, of saying exactly what you think, and this is why we have taken you into our confidence about what we are going to communicate to you". Well then, if this is how Lysimachus and Melesias think about Laches and Nicias as being experts, why won't they just trust their advice? They probably would. But what if the two experts have *conflicting opinions* about the same thing? This is precisely what happens.

Lysimachus and Melesias do not get the advice they were looking for because Nicias and Laches are in complete disagreement. What to do, whom to trust? There might be a way to get out of the perplexity that arises from the conflicting judgements. Before having given their conflicting votes, both Nicias and Laches recommended Socrates as the one to ask for advice. Socrates replied that he should first listen to Nicias' and Laches' opinions about the subject in question. Having heard two completely different stories from Nicias and Laches about the art of fighting, Lysimachus and Melesias take up the recommendation to ask Socrates for guidance. Lysimachus asks Socrates to cast the deciding vote (184c–d). For Socrates, however, this would not at all solve the problem:

> [Socrates:] What is that, Lysimachus? Do you intend to cast your vote for *whatever* position is approved by the *majority of us*? [Lysimachus:] What else could we do? [Socrates:] And do you, Melesias, plan to act in the same way? Suppose there should be a council to decide whether your son ought to practice a particular kind of gymnastic exercise, would you be persuaded by the greater number or by whoever has been educated and exercised under a good trainer? [Melesias:] Probably by the latter. [Socrates:] And you would be persuaded by him rather than by the four of us? [Melesias:] Probably. [Socrates:] So I think it is *by knowledge* that one ought to make decisions, if one is to make them well, and not by the majority rule.... So in this present case it is necessary to investigate first of all whether *any one of us is an expert* in the subject we are debating or not. (*Laches* 184d–185a, trans. R. K. Sprague, Cooper 1997, 670, with slight modifications)

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Socrates' quest for knowledge seems, however, to lead into a dilemma: if recognizing an expert requires, in turn, the possession of the same expertise, the layperson would, then, either be an expert herself or never be able to evaluate the truth of experts' statements. This dilemma had the same paralyzing effect as the paradox of inquiry, which Meno puts forward in order to prove the impossibility of learning what one does not yet know (*Meno* 80d). Fortunately, Socrates knows a way out of both these problems: the examination of one's own and others' beliefs, which he calls "human knowledge" in the *Apology* and "temperance" (or soundness of mind) in the *Charmides*. To this knowledge Socrates turns his interlocutors' attention by making a quite subtle move in the *Laches*.

Before looking for experts and teachers one has to be clear about what it *is* that one wants to know (185b). Socrates asks "what discipline is it of which we are looking for teachers". Nicias is surprised. Wasn't it the art of fighting in armour that they were investigating? Quite so, but Socrates wants his interlocutors to see that the art of fighting does not at all matter to the question of how one "becomes as good as possible". What really matters to that question is *virtue* itself. Socrates invokes the following principle: If one knows that the application of a certain thing X to another thing Y makes Y better, one knows what X is (189e–190). The interlocutors agree that it is virtue that makes the souls of young men better. It follows that if one does not know what virtue is, one does not know how to educate people so as to make them better. Socrates says, "Isn't it necessary for us to start out knowing what virtue is? Because if we are not absolutely certain what it is, how are we going to advise anyone as to the best method of obtaining it? [Laches:] I don't think that there is any way in which we can do this." (190b–c) Consequently, the interlocutors turn their attention to the question "What is virtue?" Socrates suggests starting off by investigating courage as one *part* of virtue entire. This question is discussed in the second main part of the *Laches*.

Let me briefly summarize the outcome of the investigation of courage as a part of virtue (194e–199e). Laches regards courage as "perseverance joined with wisdom" (192d10–12) but he does not succeed is giving a proper definition of courage. Nicias then reminds Socrates of an "excellent saying" that he has often heard from him. According to Nicias, Socrates has often said "that every one of us is good with respect to that in which he is wise and bad in respect to that in which he is ignorant" (194c–d), and Nicias himself suggests that courage is the knowledge of "terrible or emboldening things in war and in every other situation." (194e11–195a1) The knowledge he has in mind is not experts' knowledge about what is to be feared or to be dreaded in a *particular* domain, but the *general* knowledge about the good (beneficial) or bad (harmful) features of any kind of thing (196d). Socrates regards this knowledge as "the knowledge of the good and bad" (199d4–e1) that is just the same knowledge that encompasses the ability of recognizing experts that we know from the *Charmides* (cf. 174a–c). Nicias' attempt to define courage, however, fails. Nicias agrees on the assumption that courage is a part of virtue, besides others like temperance or justice, which all together

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form virtue (198a–b). He also agrees on the thesis that one knows terrible or emboldening things if and only if one possesses the knowledge of the general good or bad qualities of any kind of thing. But this knowledge is the same as the *whole* of virtue (199d–e). Thus, Nicias' definition of courage runs into contradiction with the assumption that courage is but a part of virtue (199e). The problem of how to find an interpretation of these two theses that would avoid the apparent contradiction is not solved in the *Laches*.[14] Rather, the conversation ends with what it began with: the search for an expert who could teach others on how to "help the young men to become as good as possible."

Recall that the topic of courage was introduced as part of an investigation of virtue, because Socrates had convinced his interlocutors that they first have to know what virtue is before they can give any advice on how to acquire a virtuous character. As the interlocutors have not found what virtue is, they are not able to give any advice on the matter in question. Laches' final piece of advice is that it would be better to seek advice from Socrates than from anyone else: "I advise Lysimachus here and Melesias to say good-bye to you [Nicias] and me as teachers of the young men and to retain the services of this man Socrates, as I said in the beginning. If my boys were the same age, this is what I would do." (200c) Nicias agrees, and Lysimachus would like to follow this advice: "What do you say, Socrates? Will you comply with the request and take an active part with us in helping the young men to become as good as possible?" (200d) This is the second time Socrates is asked for advice in the *Laches*. The first time, he was asked to cast a deciding vote but he refused to do that because "it is by knowledge that one ought to make decisions, if one is to make them well, and not by majority rule." How does Socrates reply to the second invitation? He puts his answer into the form of a conditional:

> *If* in the conversation we have just had I had seemed to be knowing and the other two had not, then it would be right to issue a special invitation to me to perform this task; but as the matter stands, we were all in the same difficulty. Why then should anybody choose one of us in preference to another? . . . as things are, see whether [this] suggestion may not be a good one: what I say we ought to do, my friends . . . is to join in searching for the best possible teacher, first for ourselves – we really need one – and then for the young men, sparing neither money nor anything else. What I don't advise is that we remain as we are. And if anyone laughs at us because we think it worthwhile to spend our time in school at our age, then I think we should confront him with the saying of Homer, "Modesty is not a good mate for a needy man." And, not paying any attention to what anyone may say, let us join together in looking after both our own interests and those of the boys. (200e–201b, trans. R. K. Sprague, Cooper 1997, 685f., with slight modifications)

Lysimachus agrees, and he asks Socrates to come to his house tomorrow so that they can continue the conversation. Socrates promises to come. What is clearly stated in the concluding remarks in the *Laches* is that Socrates thinks that it makes

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good sense to investigate virtue and its various parts, even though neither he nor his interlocutors knows anyone who really *is* an expert on virtue and happiness (cf. *Protagoras* 320b, *Meno* 89d). And the source of *this* insight is the same knowledge about what one knows or does not know, which includes the knowledge of how to recognize an expert.

CONCLUSION: EXPERTISE AND THE SOCIAL NATURE OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

For Socrates, a real expert makes seeking the truth her supreme epistemic goal and she makes caring for common goods the supreme goal of practising her expertise. In the *Laches*, Plato sets on the scene the problem of conflicting expert claims in order to turn the laypersons' attention to the question of what *they* have to know by themselves in order to judge experts' statements. Even if the supposed experts Nicias and Laches had agreed, to trust their agreement is not enough since an agreement can well be based on a false belief.

When it comes to the question of how to recognize an expert and how to evaluate experts' statements, Socrates is, however, quite optimistic. The laypersons might know some true propositions about a certain subject S. But they cannot refer to the true propositions they know about S in order to know whether an expert knows what they do *not* know about S (the laypersons might, however, obtain that knowledge at a later point in time). What the laypersons, however, can do is to use their own second-order knowledge about truth-conducive methods of forming beliefs to judge whether an expert possesses the second-order knowledge that, at least, rules out avoidable ignorance. The main task is, as I said, to find out if the expert forms and examines her beliefs under the best possible conditions that are, at a certain point in time, available to her. Moreover, the laypersons can judge whether a technical expert is practising her expertise the way that it benefits or harms the layperson's good life (*eudaimonia*). Of course, the Socratic method of recognizing and supervising expertise is fallible and vulnerable to error. Socrates, however, reminds us of the fact that we, as laypersons, do know much more about experts than we might think we know since our own capacity of reason does not depend on any technical expertise.

Let me close by making some brief remarks on what we may consider a further Socratic contribution to the prehistory of social epistemology. In his excellent introduction to social epistemology, Frederick Schmitt says that "[t]he central question of social epistemology is whether, and to what extent, the conditions of knowledge include social conditions", and he divides social epistemology into three branches: "the role of social conditions in individual knowledge; the social organization of cognitive labor; and the nature of collective knowledge. The first branch concerns the knowledge possessed by individuals and asks whether social conditions enter into the conditions of individual knowledge." (1999, 354) On the face of it, Socrates does not pay much attention to the social conditions of

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the individual's "knowledge of the good and bad". But that is not true. On the contrary, Socrates' method of "examining myself and others" shows, to quote Alvin Goldman, the "collaborative and interactive nature of knowledge seeking" (1999, 4). In fact, the process of "examining myself and others" is a social route to the "human wisdom" (*Apology* 20d) that we need for conducting a good life and hence for the knowledge that allows us to recognize (and even to supervise) experts.

Let me briefly outline what I take to be the core of the Socratic conception of self-examination (cf. Hardy 2010): Socrates aims to show that an individual person's pursuit of happiness requires knowing (to the maximum extent) what really (and not just apparently) contributes to her good life (cf. Penner 2005, 172–5). The virtue that is required for conducting a good life encompasses both a second-order knowledge and a second-order motivation that guides an agent's capacities of forming her particular beliefs and her particular desires under the best possible conditions currently available to her. This is what we do when "questioning ourselves and examining our and others' beliefs" in the sense of the *Apology* (28a, 37e–38a, 41b–c). The successful exercise of self-examination yields, so to speak, examined beliefs and examined desires. An examined belief is a belief that I am able to justify by giving an account. An examined desire is a desire that I really *want* to have. In other words, we want to be able to know what we know or do not know. And we also want to be able to know what we want to want. However, an individual's self-examination has social conditions in that its success depends on the *interaction* of persons who share the intention of examining themselves. This might be the fundamental Socratic contribution to the prehistory of modern social epistemology.

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NOTES

1 On the various aspects of the problems of expertise and epistemic authority, see Goldman (1999, 267–71; 2001) and Scholz (forthcoming).

2 Aristotle is concerned with the problem of how to recognize experts too. He discusses the question of how one can know that a person is a moral expert (a *phronimos* in the sense of the *Nicomachean Ethics*). On Aristotle's treatment of this issue, cf. Biondi Kahn (2005).

3 Cf. Hardy (2008, 2010). Discussions of Socratic intellectualism may also be found in Benson (2000, 157), Brickhouse and Smith (2000), Cooper (1999), Devereux (1995), Irwin (1977, 76–96; 1995, 75f.), Kahn (1996, 224–47), Nehamas (1999), Penner (1992, 2005), and Reshotko (2006).

4 The Greek words for expertise are *techne* and *sophia*. The word *techne* refers to a particular scientific discipline or a craft, whereas *sophia* refers to expertise as an individual person's knowledge. Roochnik (1996) provides an excellent survey of Plato's use of *techne*. (Socrates sometimes also refers to expertise as *episteme*, cf. *Theaetetus* 145e6.)

5 Cf. *Apology* 21c–d, *Charmides* 166c–d, *Alcibiades* I 117a–e, *Sophist* 228c–230d, *Philebus* 48a–50a, *Laws* 731e–732b.

6 "When … Socrates … is 'examining others', he is specifically examining people for the expertise he thinks they might, should, or could have, just as when he examines himself he is asking, most of all, how much or how little he knows.… And that will also mean examining people's lives, because the expertise he is examining them for is expertise in the business of life itself: what one puts first, what one goes for, what one thinks good or bad." (Rowe 2007, 93)

7 If we understand the success condition as saying that an expert is *always* successful, it is controversial. We might, however, read this condition as pointing to an *ideal* (cf. LaBarge 1997, 54f.) of what might be called "perfect knowledge", to which one can only approximate (cf. Rowe 2007 and Hardy 2008).

8 On this criterion see also LaBarge (2005, 16). An expert with a holistic understanding of a given subject matter S does not only know some true propositions about some things that belong to S. Rather she knows the fundamental structure of S and pays attention to the fundamental relations between the elements of S. Strictly speaking, this is a criterion of knowledge in the stronger sense of scientific knowledge (*Theaetetus* 201e–202c, 206a–c, 207b, *Sophist* 253a–e, 254b–c, *Statesman* 277d–278d, *Philebus* 17b–18d).

9 This assumption is the starting point for an argument against Protagorean relativism in the *Theaetetus* 170a–179b, cf. Hardy (2001, 104–16; 2006).

10 This list is not intended to provide a complete account of Socrates' conception of expertise. One may find comprehensive discussions of the Socratic conception of expert knowledge in Woodruff (1990), Gentzler (1995), Roochnik (1996), and LaBarge (1997, 2005). I adopt (i) and (j) from LaBarge (1997, 53; 2005, 17f). However, I should say that it seems to me that Plato's texts do not force us to read mutual recognition and agreement as necessary conditions for being an expert. But I leave this matter aside here. We may include these two criteria into the above definition, but nothing much hangs on agreement and mutual recognition.

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11 The picture of a world "free from error" that Socrates paints in this passage of the *Charmides* exhibits Plato's idea of an ideal (or perfect) way of human life (cf. on this point the excellent interpretation by Rowe 2007, 274ff.).

12 Although Plato is not primarily interested in propositional knowledge as such, he invokes two conceptions of propositional knowledge. Knowledge in a stronger sense is, for Plato, restricted to universals (the so-called Forms). This knowledge is "stable" and infallible because it refers to necessary truths. But Socrates also speaks of knowledge in a weaker sense when he refers to true beliefs, which have been formed under conditions of (in contemporary epistemological terminology) epistemic *responsibility* and *reliability*. This is true of the knowledge one gains by giving an account of why one takes a certain belief to be true. For this kind of knowledge holds: An epistemic subject S knows that p if (1) she believes that p, (2) p is true, and (3) S is able to give an account of why she believes that p. From a contemporary perspective we may interpret Plato's criterion of "giving an account" in terms of what Williams calls "personal justification" and "adequate grounding" (2001, 21ff.). If an epistemic subject forms her beliefs under the best possible epistemic conditions presently available to her, she is *personally* justified in believing that p and she believes p on the basis of adequate grounds (cf. Williams 2001, 22f.). In this respect, Plato's account of knowledge in a weaker sense corresponds – surprisingly though it might seem – to what Williams refers to as the extended (modern) standard analysis of knowledge (23; cf. Hardy 2005 and 2008, ch. 2).

13 LaBarge (1997, 61) makes a similar point in his discussion of Socrates' account of expertise.

14 Here is a suggestion on the solution to the problem: Socrates and Nicias agree on the following account of the knowledge of the good and bad (199d4-e2): A person knows (not only the terrible and emboldening things but) all the general features of good and bad things if and only if she possesses (not only courage but) all the various virtues. This comprehensive (theoretical and practical) knowledge that is associated with the motivational force(s) of the virtues is the kind of knowledge that Socrates equates to virtue as a whole. The various kinds of knowledge about a particular good or bad quality – such as the knowledge of terrible or emboldening things – entail each other. Likewise, the various virtues "entail" each other. In order to know the terrible and emboldening things, one has to know the other relevant good or bad qualities of terrible or emboldening things too. In order to act courageously, one has to be just, temperate, etc. too. This is why the *one* particular virtue like courage represents in fact the whole of virtue. On this reading the two theses in question do not contradict each other. Cf. Hardy (2010).

Jörg Hardy received his PhD at the University of Münster, Germany, and obtained his postdoctoral qualification (Habilitation) at the Free University of Berlin, Germany, where he currently works as Senior Research Scholar. He works on ancient philosophy, epistemology, and ethics. He is the author of *Platons Theorie des Wissens im "Theaitet"*. Forthcoming is a German translation and commentary of Plato's *Laches*, and also a monograph on self-knowledge and self-determination.

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