

Socrates on being good¹

Sócrates sobre ser bom

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this paper is to present an interpretation of what Socrates understood by being good for a human being. Starting from the evidence in the *Symposium* that Socrates himself was a *phronimos* and *sophron* person, I seek to show how Socratic ethics is centered on the thesis of the (1) identity of virtue and knowledge, which I articulate with the theme of (2) Socratic ignorance, and (3) the role of Socrates as an educator, to display how Socrates attempted to help people to improve themselves. In order to explore the core of Socratic moral thought, I take into account Penner's explanation of Socratic intellectualism endorsing his description of what being good for a person means, but not following his conclusions. Then I argue that even if Socrates had held moral beliefs and been to a certain degree wise and virtuous, the moral knowledge, virtue, wisdom or the science of the good that only the gods completely master should not be ascribed to him. Socrates often made profession of ignorance. In the *Apology*, the knowledge that he admits to having and that makes him wiser than the others is "human wisdom", that is, the recognition of his own ignorance and, in general, human ignorance about how to live well. Endowed with this self-knowledge, Socrates assumed the educational task to try to free people from the worst ignorance: not to know and to think that you know. Through philosophy practiced as examination by refutation (*elenchos*), he did his best to lead his fellows to self-knowledge, to take care of their souls, to dedicate themselves to *phronesis*, truth, and perfection of soul, in sum, to be prudent; this is the only way in which a person would do well, be good and happy.

Keywords: Socrates, virtue, knowledge, being good.

RESUMO

O principal objetivo deste artigo é apresentar uma interpretação do que Sócrates entendia por ser bom para um ser humano. Partindo da evidência no *Banquete* de que o próprio Sócrates era um indivíduo *phronimos* e *sophron*, procuro mostrar como a ética socrática está centrada na tese da (1) identidade da virtude com o conhecimento, que articulo com o tema da (2) ignorância socrática e (3) o papel de Sócrates como educador para mostrar como Sócrates tentou ajudar as pessoas a melhorarem a si mesmas. Para explorar o núcleo do pensamento moral socrático, levo em consideração a explicação de Penner do intelectualismo socrático, endossando sua descrição do que significa ser bom para uma pessoa, mas não seguindo suas conclusões. Argumento então que, mesmo que Sócrates tenha sustentado crenças morais e, em certo grau, tenha sido sábio e virtuoso, não se deveria atribuir a ele o conhecimento moral, a virtude, a sabedoria ou a ciência do bem que somente os deuses dominam completamente. Sócrates costumava fazer profissão de ignorância. Na *Apologia*, o conhecimento que ele admite ter e que o torna mais sábio que os outros é a "sabedoria humana", isto é, o reconhecimento de sua própria ignorância e, em geral, da ignorância humana sobre como viver bem. Municiado deste autoconhecimento, Sócrates assumiu a tarefa educacional de tentar libertar as pessoas da pior ignorância: não saber e pensar que sabem. Por meio da filosofia praticada como exame através da refutação (*elenchos*), ele se esforçou

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ao máximo para levar seus companheiros ao autoconhecimento, a cuidarem de suas almas, dedicarem-se à *phronesis*, à verdade e à perfeição de alma, em suma, a serem prudentes; esta é a única maneira pela qual uma pessoa atuaria bem, seria boa e feliz.

Palavras-chave: Sócrates, virtude, conhecimento, ser bom.

Introduction

Alcibiades' speech, in Plato's *Symposium*, indicates that Socrates³ was no ignorant inquirer, but a person endowed with soundness of mind (*sophrosune*) (216d), prudence (*phronesis*), courage (*andreia*), and strength (*karteria*) (219d), moral qualities and virtues that he – in so far as he possessed them – acquired or developed by constantly examining himself and others. The emphasis put on *sophrosune* and *phronesis*⁴ suggests that Socrates' conception of a virtuous and good life was centered on the idea that only knowledge can make us better. In order to make sense of what Socrates means by being good as a human being, I will address the theme of (1) the identity between virtue and knowledge, which I seek to articulate with the theme of (2) Socratic ignorance, and (3) the role of Socrates as an educator, to show that, since the good life is based on the knowledge which is virtue, although neither Socrates nor anyone else master the science that secures happiness, he was a good human being to the extent that he pursued virtue and was a prudent and thoughtful person, teaching others to do the same; so someone can be good by being prudent, acting with *phronesis* and *sophrosune*.

1. Virtue is knowledge

In Socratic scholarship it is almost consensually admitted that Socrates claims that virtue is knowledge. Indeed, in Plato's early dialogues, this claim is conveyed⁵ by Socrates' insistence on the idea that a successful life results from wisdom, that is, wisdom

is the only real means to happiness. There is plenty of textual evidence for this⁶; the *Euthydemus* is a case in point.

At *Euthydemus* 278e-282d, Socrates develops a protreptic discourse designed to encourage Cleinias to "devote himself to wisdom (*sophia*) and virtue (*arete*)". He reaches some controversial views about the relation between wisdom and happiness starting out from claims about happiness or doing well⁷ that are widely accepted. It seems too obvious that all of us wish to do well and be happy; it seems equally obvious that we achieve happiness through having lots of good things, namely, wealth, good looks, health, good birth, power, and public honors. Also, the ethical virtues: temperance, justice, courage, wisdom (*sophia*), and lastly good fortune (*euthuchia*). Intriguingly, however, Socrates warns that good fortune was perhaps repeated unnecessarily, since *euthuchia* turns out to be nothing else than *sophia*. For "wisdom makes men fortunate in every case [...] with wisdom one could not ever make any sort of mistake, but must necessarily do right and be lucky"⁸ (280a). Based on this, Socrates argues that none of the other mentioned goods ensures happiness except wisdom, because not mere use but right use, which is determined by knowledge (*episteme*, 281b1), is needed to make one happy. Only prudence and wisdom (*phronesis kai sophia*, 281b6; d8) endow our possession or action with advantage. Accordingly, things popularly considered good are, for Socrates, in themselves deprived of value; they are neither good nor bad, but they will be good if controlled by wisdom and bad if controlled by ignorance; so, "of these two, wisdom is good and ignorance bad" (281e). As a result, if people wish to be happy, they should by all means attempt "to become as wise as possible" (282a).

³ I shall not be concerned here with reconstructing the historical Socrates; rather, throughout this paper Socrates should be taken as the character of Plato's dialogues.

⁴ Plato used the two nouns synonymously. The sense of *sophrosune* is well presented by Cooper (1997, p. 639): "*Sophrosune* means a well-developed consciousness of oneself and one's legitimate duties in relation to others [...] and in relation to one's own ambitions, social standing, and the relevant expectations as regards one's own behavior"

⁵ Rowe (2011, p. 206) is right in remarking that "'Virtue', or 'excellence' (or 'goodness': *aretê*) is knowledge [...] is the theme around which the Socrates of a whole series of dialogues dances, without ever firmly asserting it; but then how could he assert it, when he knows nothing?" The question is complex. In fact, in Plato's early dialogues Socrates often appears dealing with a virtue in particular – e. g. courage, soundness of mind, justice – or all together as knowledge without explicit arguments to identify virtue with knowledge. The *Meno* is an exception. In this book, Socrates formulates an argument that concludes with the statement that virtue, as it is beneficial, must be a kind of wisdom (*phronesis*, 88d3, 89a). Some pages later, however, virtue is said not to be knowledge, since it is shown not to be teachable. In any event, the general frame found in the dialogues to identify virtue with knowledge is the following: 1- The only thing which always benefits us is wisdom. 2- Virtue always benefits us. 3- Therefore virtue is wisdom (Reshotko, 2006, p. 95).

⁶ *Protagoras*, 360e-361c; *Laches*, 199d-e; *Gorgias*, 506d-507c; *Republic* I 350d-351c, *inter alia*.

⁷ "Doing well" (*eu prattein*) and "happiness" (*eudaimonia*) are clearly synonymous in this passage and refer to a successful way to live. For the same idea, Socrates also used the expression "living well" (*eu zen*).

⁸ I quote from the translation by Sprague.

I do not discuss here whether virtue contributes to happiness as an instrument or as an ingredient, however I sympathize with a moderate version of the instrumentalist view: virtue is surely the best means to attain happiness, but as the art of living it is not limited to a specific realm of human action; as it encompasses life as a whole, virtue should be inseparable from living well. Also, I do not address the question whether it is sufficient or only necessary for good life, but I stress that when Socrates asserts that only virtue or wisdom can lead to happiness, he does not necessarily mean that it alone makes it. It seems clear that, for Socrates, even if wisdom is the only thing good in itself, it is still good for the sake of a final good⁹, *eudaimonia*, the utmost end of all our actions. As is well known, Socrates held the two following tenets concerning human psychological motivation for action: each person desires the good, that is happiness; and, in pursuing it, no one errs willingly. Under the influence of these ideas, Socrates advanced the identity between virtue and knowledge – the core of his ethical doctrine. This identity is implied by the argument that there is no good fortune without wisdom. Through an inductive argument, Socrates intended to show that smart craftsmen are much more successful in their areas of expertise than ignorant craftsmen; this for the obvious reason that the former have while the latter lack knowledge¹⁰. Therefore, if people have knowledge, they do not need luck. Notice, however, that Socrates' suggestion is not to eliminate good fortune as conducive to happiness; he simply claims that "the person with wisdom or knowledge will invariably make decisions or choices conducive to his or her happiness" (Benson, 2000, p. 150). Good fortune, in the sense of success, was just reduced to wisdom¹¹. Therefore, without knowledge nobody can be good. That is why virtue is knowledge.

Concerning the intrinsic relation between virtue and good life in the moral philosophy of Socrates, it is worth taking into account Terry Penner's interpretation of Socratic intellectualism. Firstly, Penner explains the Socratic psychology of action through the belief/desire theory according to which every deliberate action is determined by the interaction of "the generalized desire" for good/happiness with "a belief about which particular action will best produce this good" (Penner, 2011, p. 268)¹². Also, to clarify Socratic ethics, Penner introduces the distinction between the human *good* and human *good-ness*: virtue is human goodness, whereas happiness is the human good; and then resorts to the theory of functional good according to which whatever does any work (for instance, artifacts, sensory organs, athletic activities, sciences) has a corresponding function: the good or end it achieves, and virtue, that means, the power of "providing the means to success in gaining that end". For example, medicine has health as its good and end, and a good doctor has "the virtue of medical practitioners through his or her goodness at contriving the means leading to that end". So too "the science of ethics (the science of happiness) has its end, or good, namely human happiness, and a human being has the virtue of a human being, or is a good human being through being good at contriving the means leading to that happiness" (Kim, 2012). By enabling us to improve our beliefs about the best course of action, the science of human good makes us do well. Hence, a good or virtuous person is he or she who is good at gaining happiness just by having the "appropriate (true) belief-structure about what will lead to the best achievable outcome here and now" (Penner, 2011, p. 269). This wisdom, says Penner, is "a science like any other" with purely factual ends¹³, and so it leaves no room for any moral principles, norms or intrinsic goods.

⁹ Penner (2011, p. 271) makes it clear: "When Socrates says that virtue [= wisdom] is the only thing good in itself, the context is a discussion of means to happiness (*Euthydemus* 279A1–4 with 278E3–6 and 282A1–7). So what Socrates is saying here, in this context of choice between rival candidates for being the best means to happiness, and in singling out wisdom as the only thing 'good in itself,' is not that wisdom is the only thing good in itself simpliciter – much as that will appeal to those anxious to find the intrinsic good or the moral good in Socrates – but that wisdom is the only thing good in itself as a means to happiness. He is presupposing that happiness is the final end, and so the good. Accordingly, when he says that wisdom is the one thing good in itself, he can only be saying that it is the one thing good in itself as a means".

¹⁰ It was a Socratic saying, according to Nicias, that "every man is good in that in which he is wise, and bad in that in which he is ignorant (*Laches*, 194c-d).

¹¹ For a careful and enlightening analysis of the argument for the identity between good luck and wisdom, see Rudebusch (2009, p. 122-127).

¹² Also, Penner (2005, p. 172-185); Penner and Rowe (2005, p. 216-230). A bit more detailed, Penner's explanation is like this: In each motivated action, the agent starts from his desire for the final end (happiness) that takes the form of a desire to do whatever particular action is the best (a "whatever" desire) means available, considering his particular circumstances and his general priorities (health, pleasure, safety etc.). Finally, the agent reaches the belief about the best actual course of action and takes it to attain the maximum of happiness really available to him here and now (the practicable happiness). This explains the two famous Socratic psychological dicta: "Everyone desires the good" and "No one errs willingly", which, observes Penner, mean the same thing. And the best-known Socratic dictum "Virtue is knowledge" means that wisdom is good *qua* the best way for one to achieve one's final end. Penner's "motivational intellectualism" is criticized by Brickhouse and Smith, who show that "Socrates thinks there are conative psychic powers other than the rational desires Penner recognizes" (2010, p. 51).

¹³ As Penner (2011, p. 269) puts it: "Like any other science or expertise, what the end is, is a purely factual matter. It is not a matter of moral truth, or norms, or values, and not a matter of what is intrinsically good, good as such, good in itself, good simpliciter, or any such thing. It is simply what is good for humans. For Socratic ethics, in total contrast to most of modern moral philosophy, there are no further elements of the subject-matter of ethics involving any of the aforementioned norms, values, moral principles, intrinsic goods, and the like. There is just the science of what is good for humans and of the means to that good." But by reading Socratic ethics as a science for attaining egocentric goals, Penner does not commit Socrates with a "selfish egoism", nor does he imply that the Socratic wise, by virtue of the ambivalence of science, does not mind to harm anybody else. Such a wise never finds motive to harm anyone. On the contrary, since the Socratic wise is more interested in improving the lives of their fellows, he or she leads them to engage in dialectic and self-examination in order to make them correct their own beliefs, so that they can take the best course of action to their happiness.

In my view, Penner provides a perfectly plausible account of what being good means for Socrates, namely to be able to live a good life. However, to my mind, his unorthodox conclusion that Socratic ethics does not admit any “further non-factual, non-natural, evaluative, normative, moral, or conventional elements” (2011, p. 291) is unconvincing. I think it is very unlikely that a thinker like Socrates, who wanted to ground philosophically values such as *sophrosune* and *dikaiosune* – two cardinal virtues of ancient Greek ethics – would stray so far beyond the influences of his own culture. But, more significantly, it seems to me that Penner exaggerates in reducing Socrates’ ethics as a whole to the effort of getting correct beliefs about which course of action will maximize happiness for an agent *hic et nunc*. Unless the philosopher had believed that poverty and death could be conducive to one’s present happiness, he would have done nothing else than pursuing his own happiness. As Ahbel-Rappe (2009, p. 88-89) elegantly noted, “Conceptions such as self-sacrifice, beneficence and duty” are “valid descriptions” of Socrates’ actions. According to Ahbel-Rappe, Socrates did not think that “the reasons for actions can best be captured in terms of whether they are primarily self-beneficial”; in Plato’s dialogues, he sometimes appears to act on a desire “to promote the well-being of others,” sometimes on a demand for justice and truth. In any case, our textual sources do not support Penner’s claim that Socratic ethics leaves no room for moral principles, norms, values, intrinsic goods, or conventional elements. Surely, Socrates was no traditionalist, nor did he seem to have held a natural and factual ethics while defending that what is pleasant is not necessarily good, or that committing an injustice is worse than suffering it, and that not being punished is still worse. He did not seem to be indifferent to notions of responsibility, deserved punishment, and duty; this was a man who would rather be killed than abandon his ideal of justice and harm the *polis*. In brief, Penner’s theory of functional good ultimately does not fit well with some of Socrates’ convictions and behaviors. Yet, although its upshot is contentious, the gist of Penner’s view of Socratic ethics is valid and tenable, since Socrates actually understood virtue as the science of the ends and means to achieve happiness, the knowledge that he spent his lifetime searching for because he did not have it. This takes us to the next topic.

2. Socratic ignorance

Although Socrates conceived ethics as a science, he never said that he possessed it; rather, he often claimed to know nothing. Socrates’ profession of ignorance is not easy to interpret. The first difficulty is to ascertain whether it is sincere or ironic, since it appears in open conflict with a

firm defense of certain convictions; and second, if it is sincere, we are left with questions such as: what did Socrates ignore? And what kind of knowledge did he deny having? It is essentially around these questions that the long debate on Socratic ignorance has been developed¹⁴. I will not address this debate here; as my focus is not on epistemological issues but the ethical significance of Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge, it shall suffice for my purposes to espouse the interpretation by Brickhouse and Smith (1994, p. 30-44) as the most cogent answer to the paradox of Socrates’ “ignorance”. Both scholars take Socrates’ profession of ignorance as sincere, and then explain that the philosopher did not disavow *all* knowledge, but the knowledge of virtue or moral wisdom, which is the “craft of living”. That said, it might now be interesting to evoke the famous story of the Delphic oracle in the *Apology* that gives us the clearest evidence of the ethical implication of ignorance in Socrates’ philosophy.

Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge is particularly explored in the *Apology* as part of the defense strategy where Plato seeks to clear up the misunderstanding about the uniqueness of Socrates’ thought. To distance himself from other thinkers, who were seen with suspicion by Athenians, Socrates needed to elucidate his reputation of being wise. This reputation was due to a certain wisdom, the only one which he admits that he perhaps owns: this is the human wisdom (*anthropine sophia*), which contrasts, on the one hand, with the “more than human wisdom” of the Sophists – alleged teachers of virtue of man and of the citizen – and, on the other hand, with the real wisdom of the gods.

Socrates grasps the meaning of human wisdom after a long investigation of a divine message. One of the most riveting moments of the defense is the report of the events caused by the query of Chaerephon to the god of Delphi. Chaerephon asked the oracle if any man was wiser than Socrates. “The Pythian replied that no one was wiser” (21a. tr. Grube). The answer intrigues Socrates extremely:

When I heard of this reply I asked myself: “Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle? I am very conscious that I am not wise at all”¹⁵; what then does he mean by saying that I am the wisest? For surely he does not lie; it is not legitimate for him to do so” (21b. tr. Grube).

To test (*elenchein*) the oracle and check whether it was right, that is, decipher the riddle, Socrates set out to examine men who had a reputation for being wise, questioning those who seemed notable for possessing one of these types of knowledge: *phronesis*, *poieisis* and *techne*. While investigating he found out that the higher the reputation, the less thoughtful people were, whereas the more “ordinary” per-

¹⁴ See Benson (2000, p. 168; 223, n. 1).

¹⁵ More literally: “I am conscious that I am wise, neither in something big nor in something small” (21b4-5).

sons seemed to him “more fit in regard to being thoughtful (*pros to phronimos echein*, 22a6)”. Then, having examined politicians, poets, and craftsmen, Socrates realized the ignorance that lies at the core of the human condition and in which respect he was wiser: without knowing “the greatest things” (*tà mégista*, 22d7-8), Socrates did not assume to know them. Eventually, this examination revealed, for him, what the god meant: “human wisdom is worth little or nothing”; in other words, when compared to the knowledge of the god about what really matters, the knowledge possessed by man is very little. Socrates’ name had been used by the god merely to show that among mortals “is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless” (23b. tr. Grube). In short, the human wisdom in question is a self-knowledge that involves the recognition of one’s own ignorance.

Nevertheless, acknowledging ignorance does not exclude the possession of beliefs and convictions concerning certain general principles or specific truths. Even in the *Apology* Socrates defends many beliefs that for him were fundamental truths: he claims to know (*oida*) that it is evil and shameful to commit injustice and to disobey an authority (29b); he is convinced of the absolute priority of watching out for prudence (*phronesis*), for the truth, and for keeping the soul in the best state possible (29d); he is sure that the greatest good for man (*mégiston agathón anthrōpoi*, 38a2) is to talk about virtue every day, to examine himself and others, and that an unexamined life is not worth living (*ho anexetastos bios ou biotos*, 38a5-6). Above all, he knows that he is not wise. As a second-order knowledge, Socratic human wisdom refers to the knowledge of what one knows and does not know. This is the kind of knowledge that everyone is expected to have about his or her own condition. In its absence, people are prevented from pursuing knowledge of *tà mégista*, that is, the “matters involved in how people would live best their lives” (Peterson, 2011, p. 32.)¹⁶, namely, moral knowledge, which is wisdom or virtue, the science of good and bad.

The *Apology*, therefore, displays the ethical sense of Socratic ignorance. Humans do not have precise or complete knowledge about how to live well. The gods, on the contrary, are morally omniscient, they know all there is to know about morals and are thus wise and virtuous. One might ask: what kind of knowledge is this? It is the definitional knowledge of *arete*, that is to say, the knowledge of the nature of virtue that allows its possessor to not only provide an explanation of virtue but also to act flawlessly according to it. It is not about propositional knowledge, because its content is not merely the truth of a proposition; rather, it is direct knowledge of virtue itself and at the same time the expertise to achieve happiness. While a god utterly masters this knowledge, a human being can only have it unsteadily and to a certain degree¹⁷. Yet, as Socrates believed that the wiser a person, the happier she is, he took on the mission of enhancing people’s lives by helping them to become as wise as possible; and so, we come to our last topic in this paper.

3. Socrates as an educator

Deprived of the sought moral knowledge, wisdom or virtue – as indeed all humans are¹⁸ – but aware of it, Socrates devoted himself to the challenging educational effort of trying to free people from the most damnable kind of ignorance: “Knowing not, but thinking that you know”¹⁹. The Socratic pedagogy was very different from that of the Sophists. The Sophists claimed to be teachers of virtue. Their paid instructions were intended to train brilliant speakers and competent citizens capable of a successful political career. Socrates, in turn, was concerned with a person’s integrity and did not claim to have expertise (*arete*) on how to live well, the “real wisdom,” which is possessed by the gods. Nonetheless, if compared to any other Athenian, we might say, Socrates was an advanced apprentice of the art of living; as the oracle said, he was the wiser of men, and so Alcibiades was correct in recognizing Socrates as a

¹⁶ Also, Bett (2011, p. 220) thinks that “the greatest things” or “the things worth the most” (30a1-2) refer to ethical knowledge. He writes, “And the beginnings of an answer are also available in the *Apology* about what this really important knowledge might be. He says that he regularly criticizes those who rank trivial matters above those worth the most (*pleistou axia*, 30a1); and what he specifically accuses these people of neglecting is ensuring that their souls are in the best possible shape (29e1–3, 30b1–2). This, in turn, is what he [Socrates] himself attempts to persuade them to do. He also describes this task as that of trying to get them to care about being as good and wise (*phronimôtatos*) as possible (36c7), and as discussing *virtue* (*aretê*) with them and testing them about this and other things (38a3–5). Virtue and the state of one’s soul, then, are the most important matters for Socrates. So it is presumably some kind of knowledge or wisdom in this area, some kind of ethical knowledge or wisdom, that is the truly valuable variety he takes himself and everyone else to lack.”

¹⁷ I adopt Nicholas Smith’s view according to which “the kind of knowledge we should associate with Socrates’ virtue intellectualism is not a threshold concept, but rather one that is *gradable*. In other words, Socrates’ conception of knowledge, within what has come to be known as his ‘craft-analogy’, would be one that can be achieved and exemplified *in degrees*. The master craftsman has knowledge of that craft in some very high degree; the apprentice has knowledge of that craft in some lesser degree, and will continue to be only an apprentice (at best) so long as his or her knowledge does not reach the level required for master craftsmanship. The ignoramus, with respect to that same craft, will have extremely little or none of the relevant knowledge” (2016, p. 5).

¹⁸ Weiss (2006, p. 244): “Sophists, therefore, who think they can ‘educate human beings’ and make them noble and good are woefully mistaken”.

¹⁹ *Sophist*, 229c, tr. N. White; *Apology*, 29b.

prudent and virtuous person²⁰ – albeit he was this only to the extent of the humanly possible.

Rather than teaching, Socrates allowed people to listen to him while taking care of his own business – philosophy, examination, and refutation – and spoke with anyone for free. As he explains in the *Apology*:

Throughout my life, in any public activity I may have engaged in, I am the same man as I am in private life. I have never come to an agreement with anyone to act unjustly, neither with anyone else nor with any one of those who they slanderously say are my pupils. I have never been anyone's teacher. If anyone, young or old, desires to listen to me when I am talking and dealing with my own concerns, I have never begrudged this to anyone, but I do not converse when I receive a fee and not when I do not. I am equally ready to question the rich and the poor if anyone is willing to answer my questions and listen to what I say. And I cannot justly be held responsible for the good or bad conduct of these people, as I never promised to teach them anything and have not done so (33a-b. tr. Grube).

Accordingly, he made of philosophy a way of life that consisted in the examination (*exetazein*) of himself and the others, through the refutation of all apparent knowledge and all purely imaginary *arete*. As practiced in Plato's early dialogues, the Socratic *elenchos* did not have the function of bringing out truths or new knowledge to a soul that had not had them previously; strictly speaking, it could not even prove the interlocutors' opinions to be true or false. The role assigned to the refutation is essentially negative, that is, to reveal the lack of knowledge of the interlocutors by showing

the inconsistency of their beliefs²¹. However, we should stress that, given the intimate connection assumed by Socrates between beliefs and the life of an individual, the scope of the refutation was not limited to the statements made by the people being examined. In the elenctic encounters, the interlocutor is always required to be honest and "say what you think"²², thus being prompted to give an account of his own life²³. In this sense, the elenctic argument served as a powerful educational tool. It did not lend itself to inculcating finished doctrines, but was the most appropriate method for dealing with moral issues, which should be discussed thoroughly until a better position is achieved. Even if Socrates had had his own moral beliefs and gained a certain measure of virtue by means of the examination, he did his best to get the interlocutors to think for themselves, so that they also could discern on their own the beliefs and actions conducive to a successful life. Furthermore, it is by knowing oneself through self-examination that one would be better prepared to understand the significance of – and perhaps to accept – the lessons that Socrates spent all his life disseminating. Those lessons are summarized by Socrates in the *Apology* by saying:

Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom [phronesis: prudence] or truth, or the best possible state of your soul? [...] For I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul, as I say to you: Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence makes wealth and every-

²⁰ The question whether the Socrates depicted in Plato's early dialogues is compatible with that one in the middle dialogues is contentious and has been replied variously. Indeed, there are diverse portraits of Socrates in the Platonic works. Some of them at first glance seem irreconcilable with each other, such as the ignorant inquirer in the *Apology* (and in the so-called "Socratic" dialogues) and the Socrates depicted by Alcibiades as a man full of wisdom and virtue in the *Symposium*. An influential line of interpretation claims that, closer to the historical Socrates the main character in the Platonic early writings is distinct and, in general, incompatible with the character Socrates who is the mouthpiece of Plato in the middle dialogues (see Vlastos, 1991, 45-80). William Prior (2006), however, presents a different view about it. Focusing on the portrait of Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*, he argues for the historical essence of Socrates' representation in this middle dialogue and claims, accordingly, that this picture is reconcilable with that of the Socrates in the "Elenctic" dialogues. So Prior contends that the inconsistency between Socrates' profession of ignorance and the picture of him as a wise man can be overcome by understanding the disavowal of knowledge as ironic – as Alcibiades himself did – that means, a sham to lure interlocutors and submit them to the *elenchos*. Nevertheless, the irony involved in the Socratic argument is "complex and deep, a simultaneous concealment and expression of a constructive philosophical vision underlying the critical elenctic examination" (p. 161). In this sense, the Socratic irony, as Prior suggests, would indicate two faces of Socrates: his public face of an ignorant questioner, and his private face of the constructive philosopher revealed to disciples – or, as Prior prefers, "a mistagogos, a guide to the highest mysteries of philosophy." On my part, I still believe that Socrates' profession of ignorance was sincere when it comes to mastering wisdom or virtue; on the other hand, Socrates seemed and was wiser than others insofar as he made significant progress in the science of good. I am indebted to an anonymous referee of this journal for pointing out this issue, besides other useful comments.

²¹ We find a detailed description of *elenchos* by Plato himself at *Sophist*, 230b-d. The treatment given by Benson (2000, *Part I*) to the problem of the *elenchos* remains one of the most judicious. For a comprehensive survey – though restricted to the Anglophone tradition – of the scholarly literature on Socrates' method, see Wolfsdorf (2013).

²² *Gorgias*, 495a, 500b; *Republic*, I, 345b, 346a, 350d-e.

²³ *Laches*, 187e-188b.

thing else good for men, both individually and collectively (29d-30a, tr. Grube).

Socrates dedicated himself to making his fellows care first and foremost for their souls and for immaterial goods, such as prudence, truth, honesty, and righteousness; in one word: virtue, since without knowledge one cannot live a good life. Although no human can be as wise and virtuous as the gods are, each person can and should be as thoughtful as possible. Certainly, Socrates was neither a teacher of virtue (at least not in Sophistic sense)²⁴ nor an ignorant inquirer. He surely defended his firm moral convictions and held some degree of virtue or wisdom, but his main lesson, as known from the *Apology*, was that “the greatest good for a man is to discuss virtue every day,” and that “the unexamined life is not worth living for men” (38a, tr. Grube). That is because he believed that to think about one’s own beliefs, feelings, and actions leads to a humanly possible virtuous life. For someone to be good, Socrates urged, “know thyself”. Only thus can humans seek the wisdom which gods have in the highest degree.

Conclusion

My main purpose in this paper was to provide an interpretation of what Socrates understood by being good for a human being. I started from evidence in the *Symposium* that Socrates had his own moral beliefs and that he was a *phronimos* and *sophron* person. I argued that the Socratic moral doctrine was centered on the thesis of the identity of virtue and knowledge, which was articulated in this paper with Socratic ignorance and the educational role played by Socrates. To elucidate this tenet and core of Socratic ethics, I considered Penner’s account of Socrates’ ethical thought. Penner applied the theory of functions to explain what being a good or virtuous human is: good is one who knows or has the right beliefs about the best course of action available to his or her desired end, that is, happiness. Nevertheless, I cannot agree with Penner’s conclusion that Socratic ethics, by being natural and factual, allows no moral based on normative and evaluative principles. Penner’s view, it seems to me, does not fit well with the startling moral convictions defended by Socrates. Then I addressed the point that, even though Socrates had had his own moral beliefs and convictions, the moral knowledge, virtue, wisdom or the science of good and bad that only the gods completely master should not be ascribed to him. He repeatedly proclaimed his own ignorance. There is a knowledge, however, that in the *Apology* Socrates admits to hav-

ing and that makes him wiser than others: human wisdom, that is, the recognition of his own ignorance and of human ignorance in general about the most important matter in life: how to do well. Endowed with this self-knowledge, Socrates assumed the educational task to try to free people of the worst ignorance: not to know and to think that you know. Through philosophy practiced as examination by refutation (*elenchos*), Socrates attempted to improve his fellows. He did his best to lead people to self-knowledge, to take care of their souls, to dedicate themselves to *phronesis*, truth, and perfection of the soul, in sum, to be prudent and thoughtful; this is the way, in Socrates’s view, I contended, in which people would do well, be good and happy.

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²⁴ Socrates may be taken as a teacher to the extent that his *elenchos* allows one to realize one’s own situation before knowledge. In this regard, Vlastos (1991, p. 32) is right, I think, in interpreting Socrates’ disavowal of teaching as a complex irony [Vlastos explains: “in ‘complex’ irony what is said both is and isn’t what is meant: its surface content is meant to be true in one sense, false in another”]. When Socrates says he is not a teacher, his statement should be taken at face value, if teaching means the process by which a teacher fills a learner’s mind with knowledge; on the other hand, if teaching means “engaging would-be learners in elenctic argument to make them aware of their own ignorance and enable them to discover for themselves the truth the teacher had held back, in that sense of ‘teaching’ Socrates would want to say that he is a teacher, the only true teacher”.

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