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# The means of ignorance: genuine dialogue and a rhetoric of virtue

Daniel Anthony Grano

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*, [dgrano1@lsu.edu](mailto:dgrano1@lsu.edu)

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**THE MEANS OF IGNORANCE:  
GENUINE DIALOGUE AND A RHETORIC OF VIRTUE**

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Communication Studies

by

Daniel A. Grano  
B.A., University of Memphis, 1995  
M.M.C., Louisiana State University, 1997  
August 2003

## **DEDICATION**

This is for Dee, who sustained me with love, support, patience, and turkey sandwiches.

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A special thanks goes to my mother and father, Lucille and Anthony Grano, for teaching me the values reflected in this study, and what it means to work hard on things that matter. I am also grateful for a blessed relationship with my brother, Ken.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>DEDICATION</b> .....	ii
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	iii
<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	vi
<b>CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
Problem.....	1
Response: Socratic Ignorance .....	5
Genuine Dialogue as Enacted Virtue .....	10
Enacted Virtue as Craft .....	16
Ignorance as a Mediated Solution .....	18
Dialogic Community .....	21
Preview of Chapters .....	23
<b>CHAPTER 2. IGNORANCE AND A RHETORICAL ETHICS OF VIRTUE</b> .....	25
Overview of Communication Ethics on Local and Transcendent Mediation.....	26
Contemporary Moral Philosophy and Ignorance .....	32
<b>CHAPTER 3. THE ETHICS OF CONTINGENCY AND IGNORANCE</b> .....	41
Introduction to Contingency and Ignorance .....	41
Uncertain Time in Narrative Theories of Moral Rhetoric.....	44
Immanent Versus Transcendent Narrative: An Evaluative Basis for Contingency .....	50
<b>CHAPTER 4. IMMANENT CONTINGENCY AND THE     RESTRICTION OF DIALOGUE</b> .....	62
Rorty’s Liberal Utopia and a New Moral Vocabulary .....	63
Moral Discourse in Rorty’s Public Sphere .....	72
<b>CHAPTER 5. CONTINGENCY AS UNCERTAINTY: VIRTUE AND     ARGUMENTS FROM DEFINITION</b> .....	77
Introduction to Arguments From Definition.....	78
Socrates’ Argument From Definition.....	80
The Priority of Definitional Knowledge Debate: Resolving the “Socratic Fallacy” .....	86
Aristotle’s Practice of Virtue Definition .....	92
Conclusion .....	100
<b>CHAPTER 6. THE MEANS OF IGNORANCE: SOCRATES’     DISAVOWAL OF KNOWLEDGE</b> .....	102
Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge .....	105
The Sincerity of the Disavowal.....	109

Socrates' Claims to Know .....	123
The Elenchos and Moral Uncertainty.....	127
Conclusion: Ignorance and Genuine Dialogue .....	131
<b>CHAPTER 7. IGNORANCE AS A DEFICIT OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE DEPARTURE FROM DIALOGUE.....</b>	<b>134</b>
Nicholas of Cusa's "Learned Ignorance" .....	137
John Rawls and Justice Behind the "Veil of Ignorance".....	142
Modesty and Ignorance: The Problem of Relational Sincerity and Self-Knowledge .....	152
Conclusion .....	156
<b>CHAPTER 8. PIETY, IGNORANCE, AND THE ENACTMENT OF VIRTUE: THE EXAMPLE OF PLATO'S <i>EUTHYPHRO</i> AND <i>APOLOGY</i> ...</b>	<b>159</b>
Defining Socratic Piety.....	161
Piety as Enacted in the <i>Apology</i> .....	168
<b>CHAPTER 9. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS .....</b>	<b>173</b>
Future Research and the Issue of <i>Praxis</i> .....	174
Catholic Social Teaching .....	176
Medical Ignorance in Pedagogy and Practice .....	180
Contingent, Ignorant Conclusions.....	183
Implications .....	188
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>194</b>
<b>VITA.....</b>	<b>201</b>

## ABSTRACT

Aimed at core problems of contemporary moral rhetoric - pluralistic argument, incommensurable disagreement on ordering terms, and a theoretical move away from essence to relativism - this study is an attempt to restore rhetoric as an art capable of investigating and positing terms of order and being. This restoration relies upon viewing rhetoric as a practice of epistemic mediation between the experiential and language-based knowledge of the local, and the perfected knowledge of the Absolute. I propose characteristically Socratic notions of contingency and ignorance as the bases for this mediated approach. As a recognition of what is unknown and uncertain in relation to the Absolute, contingency and ignorance promote rhetoric as “genuine dialogue,” an other-recognizing, inclusive, and open-ended practice carried out in the local but aimed at the Perfect. Genuine dialogue allows agents to relationally enact virtue, collapsing virtue and rhetoric together as a craft or *techne*. The study is structured as an argument against immanent notions of contingency (in historical and political utopianism and progressivism), and a-discursive notions of ignorance, which are demonstrated to violate basic values of dialogue. Concluding remarks focus on the *praxis* of contingent, ignorant dialogue as enacted in actual policy settings, as well as focusing on future directions and applications.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### Problem

Concerning the “ancient question of the right use of rhetoric,” Ralph T. Eubanks (1968) writes that the hope of an ideal rhetoric, “undimmed for 2500 years,” can only be made relevant for the present human condition by making a “new wisdom” operate in human affairs (187). Contemporary rhetoric, however, has tracked an ontological and epistemic downturn, declining from a substantive order of Being “through reason, pragmatic intellect, usefulness, production forces...to biological drives”<sup>1</sup> making the bases for a new moral wisdom difficult to locate. Where this slide has landed contemporary moral rhetoric - in base pragmatics, pluralistic confusion, argumentative disablement, or a theoretical over-emphasis on difference - is a matter of where theorists wish to focus their anxieties. Frenzt (1985) argues that with “the rise of science and the advent of positivism, rhetoric and morality have become disjoined, leaving both adrift, depreciated, and vulnerable to redefinition in terms of the presuppositions of contemporary philosophies” (1). Farrell (1986) complains that rhetoric has become a disabled moral art: it “no longer mimes an ordered world, even if it ever did. And with the shattering of mirrors has come a mad scramble for interpretive authority... Appearances and ‘orders’ are all we have” (15). Most importantly, we have lost the sort

<sup>1</sup> Voegelin, Eric “Necessary Moral Bases for Communication in a Democracy,” in Problems of Communication in a Pluralistic Society. Milwaukee: Marquette UP, 1956. 66-67. Quoted in Eubanks, Ralph T. “Nihilism and the Problem of a Worthy Rhetoric.” Southern Speech Journal 33 (1968) : 199. Here, Voegelin is describing a decline of order in Western civilization, which he relates to a decline in American communication.



of wisdom that can make the formation of a “Just society” and the search for a “common Good” possible through speech in human community. This study proposes that a “new” wisdom for moral practice may be found in ignorance.

Recently, rhetorical theorists aggravated by argument in a relativized and pluralistic world have been attempting to recover virtue-terms as expressions of communal order. For several of them Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* has been influential in framing attempts at restoring an ethics of virtue to public argument (see Herrick, 1992; Farrell, 1991; Johannesen, 1991; Frenzt, 1985; Fisher, 1984). MacIntyre (1984) summarizes our problem as “emotivism,” “the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character” (12). The emotivist attitude leads to the belief that “moral judgments, being expressions of attitude or feeling, are neither true nor false; and agreement in moral judgment is not to be secured by any rational method,” but instead by “producing certain non-rational effects on the emotions or attitudes of those who disagree with one” (12). This lack of grounding for moral discourse produces the attitude that the “utterance of any universal principle is in the end an expression of the preferences of an individual will” (20-21).

The context of emotivist rhetorical practice is liberal individualism, which pictures community as an “arena in which individuals each pursue their own self-chosen conception of the good life...” (195). No one public moral utterance can be said to be better than any other, and the ability to effectively and even usefully talk about morality is lost. MacIntyre offers the “disquieting suggestion” that we have utterly lost the ability to discuss morality and to secure moral agreement (2). Public utterances of concepts such

as “virtue,” “justice,” “piety,” “duty,” and “ought,” are deprived of the historical contexts that once gave them meaning, and we have no consistent means of talking about them (2, 10). The result is that modern moral disputes have an “interminable character,” that there “seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture” as evidenced by debates over what makes a “just war,” or how to negotiate rights of bodily possession versus murder in abortion debates (6-7).

A major cost of the loss of argumentative and interpretive foundations is a pragmatic turn in moral rhetoric away from discussions of “virtue,” “justice,” and “piety,” and toward winning. Herrick (1992) notes that rhetoric, removed in our pluralistic society from an agreed upon standard for ethical practice, has become directed not at seeking “consensus,” “community,” or “humanness,” but rather “victory, ideological hegemony, or...’having the last word’” (133-134). Research on etiquette manuals (Whittenberger-Keith, 1992) has revealed that this merely pragmatic focus on ethical rhetoric has resulted in a historical reduction of the concept of virtue once based in internal foundations (such as individual character), to something residing in appearances, and finally, “to a persuasive tool outside the individual” (34). In this final contemporary (described as “postmodern”) state, virtue becomes “management,” a tool “not really concerned with values at all,” but rather “concerned with one’s ability to use the manners system and the rules of etiquette to ‘get what one wants’ despite constraints” (37). Another pragmatic outcome has been the rise of public “experts” who expound a brand of “truth” that merely “prevails at the moment” (Fisher 1984, 12).

Complicating the contemporary search for foundations in moral argument, rhetoric, being “potentially persuasive and adversarial discourse” is situated in a problematic way

for the communication ethicist (Herrick, 135). Herrick argues that “the disparate nature of concrete values in modern urban societies,” mandate that “in the contemporary context, a rhetorical ethic must have utility for argumentation among persons disagreeing about the very bases of morality itself, and thus about the bases of policy, justice, and virtue” (135). Abstract and Absolute values lose their footing and dissolve under the pressure of public, local, and personal desires. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) point out that even when abstract values such as “the *True*, the *Good*, the *Beautiful*, and the *Absolute*” seem to acquire universal agreement this is only due to their generality. As soon as their content is specified “we meet only the adherence of particular audiences” (76). The removal of interpretive foundations for an ethic of rhetoric causes the theorist or practitioner that goes looking for ordering terms - justice, piety, equality, the Good - to run “directly into the problem of contemporary urban society’s divergent moral perspectives...” (Herrick, 135).

Celeste Michelle Condit (1987) has argued that individual desires are not as problematic for moral rhetoric as MacIntyre, Frenztz, and Farrell assume. Condit claims that competing rhetors persuade audiences and create “public consensus” that does not require total approval by every individual (but rather “minimal satisfaction”), and that this allows for the production of *public* moral consensus from individual desires (81). Condit claims that general resistance to the idea that morality can be humanly grounded is based on a “fallacy of composition and division,” that falsely assumes “that a ‘collective will,’ because its components are individual desires, can be *no more than* a bundle of individual desires, and similarly, that a collective will cannot transcend the interests of the collectivity.” Rather, Condit writes “It is precisely the practice of public

rhetoric that converts individual desires into something more – something carrying *moral* import, which can anchor the will of the community” (82) Condit is optimistic that the ‘public’ does not endorse enactment of social policies for apparently selfish interests,” and that “only when a policy can be presented as bearing greater goods will it be endorsed” (82). I share Condit’s optimism that public moral argument can produce a sense of greater good, but I disagree that individual desires do not problematize that process. My argument will point out that individual desires, disconnected from practices aimed at terms of order and *being*, often become articulated through base pragmatics and progressivist programs, both of which endanger dialogue.

Contemporary ethical rhetoric can justify its departure from idealist approaches on the grounds that their foundations have been crippled by an increased sensitivity to historical and experiential context. These recognitions of epistemic limitation and contingency plague moral argument at large, and especially universalist proposals. My study turns this justification around by taking the limits of human moral epistemology (moral ignorance) and contingency as the bases for recovering rhetoric as an art capable of articulating and examining terms of *being*. By returning to classical (Socratic and Aristotelian) theories of practice, I will propose a rhetorical ethics of virtue based in idealist notions of contingency and ignorance.

### **Response: Socratic Ignorance**

Socratic ignorance is the key ethic in a larger dialogue practice that seeks moral terms like piety, justice, or courage as Ideas or essences, in an attempt to make them consistent bases for moral judgment across contexts. A thorough consideration of Socratic ignorance reveals that the problems of epistemology that plague moral investigations and

moral reason (as discussed in the next chapter) can actually form an ethics for moral discourse. My investigation of Socratic ignorance will describe this ethic and outline its possibilities as an idealist solution for problems of moral argument in contemporary rhetoric. As an existing discourse that makes unknowing both a situated and ideal ethic, Socratic ignorance illustrates several potential contributions to these problems.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> It is appropriate to raise the matter of the “Socratic question” in order to describe the labeling of the ideas that are of interest to me as “Socratic.” Kennedy (1999) defines what is commonly called the “Socratic question” as the problem of the extent to which Plato’s dialogues are vehicles for the actual views of Socrates, and the extent to which they are vehicles for Plato’s own philosophical thought. According to Kennedy the most common view today is that the *historical* Socrates stressed the need to examine assumptions and form definitions, and that although many Platonic doctrines such as “Forms,” recollection, and imitation were perhaps inspired by Socrates’ interests, Plato felt free to develop his own ideas, retaining Socrates as a dramatic figure (54). Kennedy, George A. Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition From Ancient to Modern Times. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1999.

Vlastos (1991) works through this “historical Socrates” distinction in more detail, and offers that from a historical standpoint one would be more concerned with whether or not the ideas articulated through Socrates’ mouth were accurately Socrates’ own ideas; that is, were they expressed somewhat verbatim by the historical Socrates? From a *philosophical* standpoint, historical accuracy matters less than what the articulated ideas mean, and to which degree they are *Socratic* in a more general sense (by this I mean to which degree they are *influenced* by Socrates’ basic ideas) (45). Vlastos, Gregory. Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1991.

Consistent with Kennedy, Vlastos (1991) claims that Plato, in his earlier writings, remains convinced of the truth of Socrates’ methods and teachings, but at no point in his quest does Plato become “shackled” by Socrates’ ideas (53). Instead, Plato is free to change without severing the ties to his teacher, and as he changes, so does the philosophical Socrates change, absorbing Plato’s new convictions, and arguing them with the same “zest” with which Socrates argued the ideas of the earliest dialogues (53).

I am viewing the ideas I am interested in as “Socratic” based on the historical/philosophical distinction. The “Socratic question” has minimal impact for *philosophical* interpretations of the dialogues. At the beginning of his treatment of the “Socratic question,” Vlastos (1991) asks himself, “why not let the historians have the Socrates of history all to themselves, keeping for myself the enchanting figure whose challenge to philosophers would be the same whether he were historic fact or Platonic fiction?” If his aims were purely philosophical, writes Vlastos, this would have been his decision (45). Scholars like Vlastos who are interested in history must examine the problem of Socrates *contra* Socrates in Plato, but that is not my concern here.

In Socratic ignorance we have the conjunction of two discourses that seem at odds with one another; in this study, unraveling the paradox of this conjunction will reveal lessons for contemporary practices, as well as a reconsideration of idealist practices. The first discourse is definitional argument, where Socrates seeks the Idea or Form of a given virtue (for example piety, justice, or friendship) for the sake of judgment. Consider the exchange between Socrates and Euthyphro on the matter of what the holy is as a primary example (*Euthyphro* 6d-e):<sup>3</sup>

SOCRATES: ...At present, try to tell me more clearly what I asked you a little while ago, for, my friend, you were not explicit enough before when I put the question.

Finally, I can dispatch of the problem of the “Socratic question” by pleading reliance on the literature and the authors I utilize most heavily in my study. I am calling those ideas and problems “Socratic” that researchers in Socratic philosophy call by the same name. For a defense of the interpretive principles behind these determinations see Brickhouse, Thomas C. and Nicholas D. Smith. *The Philosophy of Socrates*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000. 11-52.

<sup>3</sup> I use Lane Cooper’s translation of *Euthyphro* throughout the study because key passages relevant to my argument are presented in a helpful way. Plato. *Euthyphro*. Trans. Lane Cooper. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1941. Reprinted in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*. Ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961. 170-185. The subject of the *Euthyphro* is considered interchangeably by translators to be “piety” or “holiness.” The forms that appear in the dialogue are *hosion*, meaning holy, hallowed, or sanctioned, and *eusebes*, meaning pious, religious, or reverent. While the meanings are not precisely the same, translators variously offer the subject of the dialogue as either “piety” or “holiness.” In the Introduction to the Fowler (1999) translation in the Loeb Classical Library edition, for example, the *Euthyphro* is described as a discussion “of the nature of piety, or holiness, the chief theme of the dialogue.” Fowler, Harold North (Trans). “Introduction to the *Euthyphro*.” *Plato I: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999. Mark McPherran (2000) assumes, “as most commentators do,” that *eusebes* “is used synonymously” with *hosion* “since to all appearances they are used interchangeably and unsystematically” (300). McPherran, Mark L. “Piety, Justice, and the Unity of Virtue.” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 38 (2000) : 299-328. On this basis, I will discuss the subject of the *Euthyphro* as piety or holiness interchangeably throughout my study.

What is holiness? You merely said that what you are now doing is a holy deed - namely, prosecuting your father on a charge of murder.

EUTHYPHRO: And, Socrates, I told the truth.

SOCRATES: Well, bear in mind that what I asked of you was not to tell me one or two out of all the numerous actions that are holy; I wanted you to tell me what is the essential form of holiness which makes all holy actions holy. I believe you held that there is one ideal form by which unholy things are all unholy, and by which all holy things are holy. Do you remember that?

EUTHYPHRO: I do.

SOCRATES: Well then, show me what, precisely, the ideal is, so that, with my eye on it, and using it as a standard, I can say that any action done by you or anybody else is holy if it resembles this ideal, or, if it does not, can deny that it is holy.

The above is an example of Socrates' "What is F?" question, a definitional practice that is part of his method of moral investigation, the elenchos. As a search for *eidōs* (Idea), Socrates' definitional method of questioning is a relevant practice for the problem of order and foundation in contemporary moral rhetoric. Its most important contribution and its possibilities for returning rhetoric to a language of *being* are illustrated by the role of ignorance.

Through his disavowal of knowledge, Socrates claims ignorance on the very bases of moral knowledge that would allow him to define the Idea of the virtue terms he pursues in practice. Socrates' disavowal is most prominent in the *Apology*, as told in the narrative of his first speech. The oracle at Delphi has stated that he, Socrates, is the wisest of all men. Troubled by this, Socrates wonders what the god might mean, for, he says "I am only too conscious that I have no claim to wisdom, great or small" (21b). To examine the Oracle's claim, Socrates seeks out men who are wiser, first going to the politicians, who, he finds, think they are wise, but are in fact not. Socrates concludes that he must indeed be wiser, because it is likely that neither of them knows anything noble and good, but

where the politician believes he knows, Socrates is aware that he himself does not know (21c-e). Socrates similarly examines the poets and manual artisans, and comes to the same conclusion: they think they know what they do not. The narrative ends with the realization that, if Socrates is wise, this is based on his cognizance of the truth that he is nothing with respect to wisdom (23b).

As a search for foundations of moral judgment and utterance, Socrates' method should break down before it begins. After all, his search is aimed at moral knowledge at the level of Form and Idea, yet he has disavowed the possibility of that knowledge not only for himself, but for his interlocutors as well. Unraveling this apparent *stasis* will be my method for offering an ethics of ignorance to contemporary rhetoric. I will derive this ethic from a description of the form, content, aims, and outcomes of dialogue that Socratic ignorance promotes. My analysis will be directed at two primary ambitions. First, I will offer Socratic practice as evidence that making idealist notions of ignorance and contingency ethics in moral discourse promotes that discourse as a "genuine" dialogue, a true recognition of otherness and other arguments, in an inclusive pursuit of Absolutes. Socratic ignorance also allows me to offer idealist notions of ignorance and contingency as evaluative bases for distinguishing between dialogues that are inclusive and other-recognizing, and those that are "false," that shut down moral argument by various means of removal and avoidance. Idealist solutions are justified throughout the study on the basis that they are more dialogic than their immanentist counterparts. Second, I will generally reconsider the aims and outcomes of idealist discursive practices through the lens of their limitations. The example of Socratic practice allows for a re-description of essentialist dialogue as ethically ordered around ignorance and



contingency. Reconsidering the possibilities of ideal dialogue in these terms demonstrates its potential as a response to pluralistic forms of moral debate, as well as its possibilities for actual practice in the contemporary public sphere.

Examination on both these points will support my primary goal, to demonstrate that ignorance promotes “genuine” dialogue as an *enactment* of virtue. The emphasis on enactment contributes to idealist theories of rhetoric a thoroughly *practiced* perspective. It also implies a standard for the performance of dialogue that can either be more or less virtuous based on its ignorant and contingent qualities. Unraveling the paradox of Socratic ignorance will provide distinctions between certainty and uncertainty, inclusive and restrictive dialogue, and dialogic and a-dialogic notions of ignorance and contingency. A beginning definition of dialogue as “genuine” and “enacted virtue” provides a starting point for understanding these distinctions.

### **Genuine Dialogue as Enacted Virtue**

In communication ethics, “dialogue” can mean anything from the general give and take of the public political arena, to Platonic dialogue, to communication ethics that challenge monologic models (Johannesen 2002, 55). Generally, the dialogic perspective evaluates communication ethics based on “the attitudes toward each other held by the participants in a communication transaction.” Participant attitudes are the basis for judging the ethical level of communication, with the assumption that attitudes characteristic of dialogue are “more fully human, humane, and facilitative of self-fulfillment,” than are those attitudes characteristic of monologue. Dialogical attitudes are “held to best nurture and actualize each individual’s capacities and potentials...” and

techniques are analyzed to determine the dialogic (ethical) versus monologic (unethical) communication content (55-56).

This study specifies a definition of “genuine dialogue” and applies it to discussions on Socrates’ method of questioning, positing, testing, and retesting, moral theses; genuine dialogue will be the description of enacted virtue offered throughout. My argumentative task will be to demonstrate how ignorance promotes dialogue in its genuine form.<sup>4</sup>

Genuine dialogue will identify those dialogues that maintain discourse as a search for Absolutes without sacrificing other-recognition, nor the recognition of the locality of human practices; my study will discuss other-recognition primarily as an inclusive ethic of arguments and argument vocabularies. Descriptions of dialogue as “ethical” or “true” generally emphasize otherness. Maranhao (1990) writes that one approach to ethical dialogue rests in “the relation between Self and Other,” so that dialogue is “ethical in the sense of the Self’s turning to the Other” (18). The idea that Socratic ignorance is a sincere turning to argumentative others will be an especially important focus. For Buber, this sincerity is at the heart of “genuine” dialogue: participants must truly have the other or

<sup>4</sup> Issues of “form” and “content” pertaining to dialogue are not without controversy. Details on the debates that variously separate or synthesize form and content in dialogue are outside the scope of my study. It will suffice to say here that I am taking a stance on the interpretation of dialogue that makes form and content inextricable. Put another way, my view does not separate dialogue as form from epistemology as content. When I emphasize dialogue *form* I am implicitly discussing *content*, because, in the case of Socratic ignorance, it is the content (the disavowal of knowledge) that promotes the form (genuine dialogue). When I discuss *content* I am implicitly talking about *form*, since the meaning of the content (the inclusiveness of ignorance, the meaning of individual arguments) promotes and maintains the integrity of the form. In this way the meaning of both *what* is said (ignorance) and *how* it is said (through the act of questioning and testing) are matters of focus. For an introduction to the greater issues here, see Maranhao, Tullio. Introduction. The Interpretation of Dialogue. Ed. Tullio Maranhao. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990. 1-22.

others in mind, turning to them with the intention of establishing a living and mutual relationship (Friedman 2002, 101).

Bakhtin (1984) echoes this requirement, with the addition that “real” dialogue is open-ended. In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, he writes:

the new artistic position of the author with regard to the hero in Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel is a *fully realized and thoroughly consistent dialogic position*, one that affirms the independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminacy of the hero...The hero is the subject of a deeply serious, *real* dialogic mode of address, not the subject of a rhetorically *performed* or *conventionally* literary one. And this dialogue - the “great dialogue” of the novel as a whole - takes place not in the past, but right now, that is, in the *real present* of the creative process. This is no stenographer’s report of a *finished* dialogue, from which the author has already withdrawn and *over* which he is now located as if in some higher decision-making position: that would have turned an authentic and unfinished dialogue into an objectivized and finalized *image of a dialogue*, of the sort usual for every monologic novel. The great dialogue in Dostoevsky is organized as an *unclosed whole* of life itself, life poised *on the threshold* (63).<sup>5</sup>

This passage draws vital lines for my analysis. Setting “unfinalizability,” “indeterminacy,” “unfinished,” and “unclosed” as standards for “real,” “great,” and “fully realized” dialogue, adds to genuine dialogue an *uncertain* and *extensive* ethic of

<sup>5</sup> The dynamic turning to the other enters people into dialogic relationship with an “encompassing awareness” and “inclusion,” that does not compromise their individual sense of self or agency (Friedman 2002, 356-357). On this point “Bakhtin,” writes Friedman, “shares Buber’s emphasis upon the alternation of distancing and entering relation as the heart of genuine dialogue” (356). This allows for a genuine turning to the other as an act of inclusion without giving up the “ground of one’s consciousness” or the ability to “see through one’s own eyes” (357). Friedman, Maurice S. The Life of Dialogue (4th ed). New York: Routledge, 2002. On this distancing and entering, Bakhtin (1984) writes: “The author speaks not *about* a character, but *with* him...only a dialogic and participatory orientation takes another person’s discourse seriously, and is capable of approaching it both as a semantic position and as another point of view. Only through such an inner dialogic orientation can my discourse find itself in intimate contact with someone else’s discourse, and yet at the same time not fuse with it, not swallow it up, not dissolve in itself the other’s power to mean; that is, only thus can it retain fully its independence as a discourse” (63-64). Bakhtin, Mikhail. Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics. Ed. and Trans. Carl Emerson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984.

contingency. I will argue that this kind of contingency is preserved in divine views of time and practice. Bakhtin's oppositional list - "finished," "finalized," "objectivized" - as markers of monologic discourse will be argued as the result of immanent and programmatic views of practice.

Adding to a conception of "false" dialogue, Buber notes that "the participants do not really have each other in mind, or they have each other in mind only as general and abstracted *opponents* and not as particular beings," so that there "is no real turning to the other, no real desire to establish mutuality" (Friedman, 143, emphasis mine). The idea of confronting others as dialogic opponents calls to mind Herrick's (1992, 135) claim that contemporary moral rhetoric is adversarial discourse in a competitive public arena. As my argument is a general response to this problem, the conception of ignorance I offer is a particular response to the competitive impulse in contemporary moral argument; ignorance maintains "genuine" dialogue by promoting moral argument as a practice aimed at mutual discovery rather than victory. I will also offer an elaboration on "false" dialogue throughout the study by aligning it with immanentized perspectives on contingency and ignorance that actually shut down discourse.

Buber is particularly helpful in outlining a "genuine" dialogue for my study because he maintains an ethic of "other" recognition as its determinant, but does not translate otherness into a relativistic form of moral pluralism or individualism that sacrifices dialogue as a search for Absolutes. Buber's proposal for recapturing true and genuine dialogue as a turn to the "other" requires that we first "escape from that modern idolatry which leads us to sacrifice 'the ethical' on the altar of our particular causes." This is manifest as the rise of a "new conscience" that will summon people "to guard with the

innermost power of their souls against the confusion of the relative with the Absolute” (Buber 1952, 155). Escape from this idolatry (and a return to genuine dialogue) comes only when we “penetrate again and again into the false absolute with an incorruptible, probing glance until one has discovered its limits, its limitedness - there is today perhaps no other way to reawaken the power of the pupil to glimpse the never-vanishing appearance of the Absolute” (155-156).

In addition to this beginning framework for “genuine dialogue,” Thomas Farrell’s (1991) idea of a *relational good* helps us to picture enacted virtue. It upholds a standard of dialogic “otherness,” and has the additional benefit of allowing us to derive a characteristically rhetorical definition of *virtue*. Farrell’s relational goods perspective is based on MacIntyre’s (1984) notion of goods internal and external to a practice.

MacIntyre defines a practice as follows:

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (187).

Frentz’s (1985) unpacking of this definition is excellent. First, “a practice is a cooperative human activity engaged in by persons who cojointly value the goods intrinsic to that practice” (2). So, throwing a football with skill (an individual act) is not a practice, but the game of football (a collective activity) is, just as Bricklaying is not a practice, but architecture is (Frentz, 2; MacIntyre, 187). Second, “practices have internal goods which can only be achieved by participating in that practice” (Frentz, 2). Using the example of chess, MacIntyre (1984) makes a distinction between goods internal and external to a practice. External goods are those goods “contingently attached to chess-playing and to

other practices by the accidents of social circumstance” such as “prestige, status, and money.” These goods can be achieved in a number of other practices and are “never to be had *only* by engaging in some particular kind of practice.” Internal goods, conversely, are goods such as “analytical skill, strategic imagination, and competitive intensity,” all of which might be gained from playing chess. These goods are internal because they are specific to the activity that produces them (e.g. chess or another activity of a specific kind), and they “can only be identified and recognized by the experience of participating in the practice in question” (188-189).

Farrell (1991) notes that the internal/external distinction becomes serviceable to rhetoric if we realize first that the goods internal to an activity “are not necessarily the reason one seeks to master the practice,” and more importantly that “the ‘goods’ that are cultivated are not always localized within the autonomous agent alone” (186). One person improves the other through his or her own excellence in an activity, and this means “we should not confuse goods that are internal to a practice with virtues that are somehow interior to its practitioner alone,” because some such goods “require another person in order to be practiced and thereby cultivated” (186-187). These goods are *relational*. Farrell argues that this idea is “pivotal to rhetoric” (187):

I think we are now in a position to claim that the “goods” or qualities *internal* to rhetoric are necessarily relational. Like competitiveness and strategic imagination (which mastery of rhetoric is also capable of providing), they require some *other* in order to be practiced. But beyond this, some very important civic qualities – such as civic friendship, a sense of social justice – are actively cultivated through excellence in rhetorical practice. These qualities, in other words, are not distinctions for the autonomous agent to master; they are qualities of the body politic itself... Truly we have been introduced to a *practice*, that is – a coherent, creative activity admitting to certain standards of accomplishment (187).

Farrell offers two important additions to a concept of genuine dialogue as enacted virtue. First, the idea of a good being relational reinforces the dialogic ethic of otherness, but draws our attention more squarely on a given civic virtue, or list of virtues, as the argumentative and creative focus of other-recognizing practices. By this idea we can move from the general statement that genuine dialogue recognizes otherness as an ethical act, to the specific statement that genuine dialogue relies upon otherness for the civic investigation and cultivation of virtues - piety, justice, courage, and so on. Secondly, by describing the idea of a relational *good*, Farrell implies that the goods relational to moral rhetoric are not only a description of its possible outcomes but also realized in its form and activity. That is, civic argument as a cultivation of virtue *requires otherness* in order to become a real practice. In this way the form of the practice and its outcome are intimately related; enacting relational rhetoric and enacting relational (civic) virtue both require the same *good* of otherness, realized not only in particular arguments, but in overall form. Added to Buber's requirements for genuine dialogue, there is an overall synthesis between the cultivation of dialogue and the cultivation of virtue in civic settings, enriching the idea of *enactment*. Grounding virtue so thoroughly in practice requires a fitting definition. In this study I define virtue as a craft, or *techne*.

### **Enacted Virtue as Craft**

The idea that genuine dialogue and relational goods outline identifiable standards for accomplishment in moral discourse implies an analogy of virtue as a craft or *techne*; the idea is consistent with the Socratic focus of my study. Brickhouse and Smith (2000) argue that the type of knowledge about which Socrates questions others, and seeks himself, is "in many respects like the wisdom, or *techne*, a craftsman possesses, which

enables the craftsman to produce some characteristic *ergon* (product or task)” (141; also see 169). The basic idea is that virtue is a craft in the sense that it consists of doing, as a morally creative process, and finds the knowledge for performing its practice from the considerations and materials specific to its craft. Just as medicine and law admit of certain standards of practice for the production of their desired ends, so does ethical rhetoric have standards for the desired production of virtue.

The craft analogy highlights the lived aspect of morality. In his essay on ethics as craft, James D. Wallace (1988) articulates the basic premise that views living as “an everyday occurrence that takes place in a complex and demanding world,” noting that this calls upon moral knowledge grounded in an understanding of the problems of our lives, requiring intellectual resources “no more ephemeral than the intellectual resources needed to pursue such activities as healing, carpentry, or playing a musical instrument.” This is the craft analogy (223). What is needed to pursue a craft intelligently or successfully depends on “the point or purpose of the activity and the sorts of difficulties its practitioners encounter,” providing us the “standard according to which the craft is practiced well or badly...” (223). MacIntyre’s internal/external goods perspective, and Farrell’s relational goods, imply a craft definition of virtue, inasmuch as the goods relevant to practices set the standards for their accomplishment.

Just as MacIntyre’s and Farrell’s theories on practices and goods have an Aristotelian heritage, so does the craft analogy. Wallace (1988) notes that scholars who find the craft perspective promising inherit an Aristotelian question on human practice and the good (224). Aristotle wrote in *Nicomachean Ethics*,

just as the goodness and performance of a flute player, a sculptor, or any kind of expert, and generally of anyone who fulfills some function or performs some action,



are thought to reside in his proper function, so the goodness and performance of man would seem to reside in whatever is his proper function. Is it then possible that while a carpenter and a shoemaker have their own proper functions and spheres of action, man as man has none, but was left by nature a good-for-nothing without a function? (1097b26-31).

Aristotle's own answer reveals the usefulness of the craft perspective for rhetoric:

if we take the proper function of man to be a certain kind of life, and if this kind of life is an activity of the soul and consists in actions performed in conjunction with the rational element, and if a man of high standards is he who performs these actions well and properly, *and if a function is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the excellence appropriate to it*; we reach the conclusion that the good of man is an activity of the soul in conformity with excellence or virtue, and if there are several virtues, in conformity with the best and most complete (1098a14-18, emphasis mine).

The italicized portion of the above quote points out that the craft perspective allows us to identify *rhetoric* practiced well or badly, virtuously or poorly, in conformity with the standards of excellence specific to its activity; in virtuous rhetoric, we look for excellences of virtue in its procedures and product. In dialogue, excellence and virtue are achieved by the standards of “genuine” dialogue. On the idea that genuine dialogue has the identifiable standards of other-recognition and Absolute, the craft perspective allows for questions on its accomplishments according to these standards: “do the practitioners of genuine dialogue enact the virtues that its practice demands?” “Are the outcomes produced by genuine dialogue in conformity with the standards of excellence particular to its activity?” The additional question I ask in this study is “what ethics allow for the enactment of these standards and outcomes through practice?”

### **Ignorance as a Mediated Solution**

Given contemporary contextual emphases on historical moment, cultural diversity, and the influence of language on human experience, an idealist proposal seeking “otherness” must offer a full account of the local as it seeks Absolute terms of order. The

accomplishments of genuine dialogue rely on a sense of mediation. In a practical sense the unknown that ignorance describes is an epistemic gap between local human experience and the realm of Ideals and Absolutes. The problem faced by an idealist proposal emphasizing *techne* is a matter of negotiation: how do practitioners mediate the epistemic gap in moral rhetorical practice between the local and the Absolute without overemphasizing the Absolute (thus making the accomplishments of the practice unattainable), nor the local (thus repeating the problems of emotivism and moral pluralism)?

Ignorance becomes useful for framing an answer. The specific statement of mediation made in this study is that *ignorance can emphasize difference without turning to relativism*. By the example of Socratic practice, I will demonstrate the mediation ignorance is capable of accomplishing in genuine dialogue between arguments invented from local, experiential materials, and the articulation of discoveries made on the realm of Absolutes. References to “mediation” throughout the study will describe a negotiation of the problem of *unknowing* created by the limitations of human language and experience. David Frank (1997) describes Perelman’s work on justice as an attempt at this kind of mediation, an effort to “navigate between the polarities of idealism and relativism,” by offering “a reason and logic designed for a world of pluralism...in need of a system of justice” (312). Perelman’s perspective “incorporated the Jewish and Christian prophetic view of justice” because of its “ability to include the immanent and transcendent” and produce forms of debate “that bridged universal principles to particular circumstances” (Frank, 314). My proposal for mediation adds a thorough discussion of ignorance and contingency as a way to address the centrally *epistemic* considerations of

immanent/transcendent forms of discourse. Systems and practices of ethical rhetoric are generally complicated by issues of moral epistemology, and this seems especially true for proposals that try to negotiate gaps between the local and transcendent. For this reason the study of moral rhetoric generally, and systems like Perelmanian justice specifically, may benefit from a better conversation on ignorance.

My focus on ignorance in the enacted form and content of dialogue also allows me to contribute a focus on practice, potentially adding to general “systems” of justice such as that offered by Perelman. Through the consistent focus on practice in my study the concept of *phronesis* as mediation is expanded. As a concept traditionally concerned with managing moral choice in communal, relational (other-recognizing) practices (Arnett 1987, 45; Johannensen 2002, 26-29, 68-69), practical wisdom is a situated account of moral agency and argument. Farrell (1991) has written that because rhetoric involves “directional choices from among an array of options,” the “other” becomes important in considering these options, and “rhetorical *phronesis* cannot be enacted without at least a partial intuition of what the ‘appropriate’ *is* in each historically specific context” (194).

At a deeper level, *phronesis* mediates between considerations of concrete situation and the realm of Absolutes. In an essay on Aristotle’s contribution to *phronesis* in this sense, Johnstone (1980) writes that “the exercise of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) in choosing conduct manifests the human capacity for deliberation and self-conscious action; it manifests, in short, the essentially human power of *logos*” (2). Johnstone defines *logos* in a general sense as the “rational principle” that “involves a rule or standard according to which practical deliberation proceeds and actions are judged or appraised,” implying that the agent “can act self-consciously, with an awareness of what

one is doing and why one ought to be doing it” (2). Practical wisdom is the enactment of this capacity, “the power of good deliberation,” an “excellence of the practical intellect,” with an aim “to discover through deliberation ‘truth’ about rightness in action...” (3). Describing the mediated focus of *phronesis*, Johnstone writes: “The objective...therefore, is the apprehension of *moral* truth, of truth in the probable and contingent realm of action” (3).

Ignorance and contingency contribute to practical wisdom as mediation by focusing on the epistemic gaps that make discovering truth in a probable realm so problematic. As Farrell (1991) notes, the idea of *phronesis* “has always involved an uneasy tension among form, content, and context” (196). Socratic ignorance reconciles with this unease, making it a basis for practical action in idealist moral agency.

### **Dialogic Community**

Finally, the dialogic focus of this study is intended to reconsider moral community as an order of goods constructed through speech. For Buber, recapturing genuine dialogue is the way to establish “true community” as a turn to the other (Buber 1949, 30-32, 201; also see Friedman, 171-172). In *Between Man and Man* Buber (1949) writes “community...is the being no longer side by side but *with* one another of a multitude of persons...a dynamic facing of, the other...” (31). Friedman summarizes Buber’s definition of community as “an organic unity which has grown out of common possessions, work, morals, or belief.” This is differentiated from collectivity, which is a “mechanical association of isolated self-seeking individuals,” “an ordered division of society into self-seeking individuals held together by force, compromise, convention, and public opinion” (Friedman, 52).

The movement from community to collectivity troubles Buber as a move away from dialogue. “Collectivity,” Buber (1949) writes, “is based on an organized atrophy of personal existence, community on its increase and confirmation in life lived towards one another.” Buber adds that the move toward collectivity is “a flight from community’s testing and consecration of the person, a flight from the vital dialogic, demanding the staking of the self, which is in the heart of the world” (31-32).

Buber reveals that a self-interested and individualistic public sphere (what MacIntyre identifies as a state of “liberal individualism”) sacrifices both genuine dialogue and true community according to the standard of other-recognition. By challenging contemporary pluralism with genuine dialogue, Buber offers a discursive standard for the construction of “true” community. The definition I derive from this standard maintains community as *an order of goods established by and tested through the relational, dialogic arguments of people, who can establish together a common order of morals and beliefs*. This definition not only captures a dialogic focus, but also specifies the activity of Socratic dialogue (through the What is F? question and elenchos). Throughout the study references to “genuine dialogue,” and “community” imply dialogic standards both for moral discourse and moral community. Applying dialogue as a standard for community-building recaptures, in part, the Aristotelian notion of community as an order of goods established through *logos*. In *Politics*, Aristotle writes “speech serves to make plain what is advantageous and harmful and so also what is just and unjust...and community in these things makes a household and a city (I.2.1253a13-17). Considering contemporary community in this way relies on a restoration of discursive practice with the ability to posit terms of order as terms of *being* with a relational and other-recognizing ethic.

## Preview of Chapters

My analysis will proceed through definitions and distinctions of contingency and ignorance, offering particular notions of these as ethics for genuine dialogue and enacted virtue. The next chapter (chapter two) will review communication ethics and virtue ethics for the purpose of describing the virtue ethics response to moral philosophy as an opening for rhetoric, ignorance, and contingency. Chapter two also begins a more thorough understanding of what ignorance and contingency mean as responses to problems in moral philosophy and rhetorical studies, providing a justification for their application, and a demonstration of their potential.

In chapter three I will describe conceptions of contingency and ignorance as *ethics* in discourse, based on comments from the first two chapters. Here I will set up the interpretive and evaluative guidelines for the application of these main terms throughout the study. The concept of *telos* as uncertain moral time will be drawn from narrative theory as an elaboration of contingency. The *teloi* of differentiated moral quest narratives - uncertain versus immanent (utopian and progressive) - will be introduced as dividing lines for evaluating various conceptions of contingency and dialogue discussed throughout the study. A description of the relationship between contingency and ignorance in this chapter will offer a preview of their importance in genuine dialogue.

Chapters four and five differentiate between notions of contingency. Chapter four presents a challenge to ideological conceptions of “immanentized” contingency through the example of Richard Rorty’s “contingency of language.” Rorty’s proposal to do away with metaphysical terms is rejected as an example notion of contingency that shuts down dialogue by the removal of argumentative vocabularies. In contrast, chapter five

reconsiders the ethics of uncertain futurity and contingent discovery maintained in definitional arguments, calling upon the examples of Socrates' "What is F?" question, and Aristotle's notion of defining virtues over time. These discourses are offered to illustrate the importance of contingency as uncertain futurity for the maintenance of genuine dialogue.

Ignorance is the topic of chapters six and seven. In chapter six I describe Socrates' disavowal of knowledge and what a resulting discursive notion of "ignorance" might be in light of the elenctic (dialogic) practice within which the disavowal appears. Here, I argue for the sincerity of the disavowal, for the sake of demonstrating Socratic ignorance as an ethic productive of genuine dialogue. In chapter seven I criticize notions of ignorance after Socrates that similarly offer ignorance as an epistemic condition attached to virtue, but dissimilarly work to shut down, or even completely turn away from, dialogue.

With this dialogic picture of contingency and ignorance completed, chapter eight focuses on Socratic piety as developed in the *Euthyphro* and practiced in the *Apology*. Socratic piety is offered as an illustrative example of how contingency and ignorance can operate within dialogue to make its practice an enactment of virtue. Socratic piety is also provided as evidence of the *praxis* of the dialogue form I advocate, in terms of moral choice and policy.

Finally, chapter nine begins by following up on the issue of *praxis* through a discussion of potential contemporary contexts for investigation, and ends with the framing of a set of implications based on the main theoretical terms developed in the study.

## CHAPTER 2

### IGNORANCE AND A RHETORICAL ETHICS OF VIRTUE

Moral philosophy was begun (at least implicitly) as a conversation on ignorance with the publication of H.A. Prichard's (1912) essay "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?," which described as the "illegitimate" demand of moral theory the requirement for *proof* at the level of certainty as the arbiter of moral choice (36). The "remedy" Prichard offers is rooted first in unknowing - a letting-go of the requirement of moral knowledge at the level of certainty - and second in practice - a related "face to face" turn to particular instances of moral choice and obligation (37). Prichard's essay is also frequently marked as the beginning of the virtue ethics perspective (see Frankena 1970, 1; Alderman 1982, 127). The turn in contemporary rhetorical theory to virtue ethics enters rhetoric into a longer debate between systematic moral philosophy and challenges posed by ethicists of virtue. The point of this chapter will be to illustrate this debate as a discussion on ignorance and contingency, and describe the entry points for a rhetorical perspective. Rhetorical theories that affiliate with the virtue ethics perspective become part of a challenge to moral philosophy founded on the unknown, the unknowable, and situated conceptions of moral agency. Understanding this points out the important contribution represented by a rhetorical perspective on ignorance. By getting involved in virtue ethics, rhetoric has been headed for a conversation on ignorance that it is uniquely capable of carrying out.

I will begin the chapter by outlining some general contributions and perspectives that communication ethics has offered to the debates that interest me in moral theory. The rest of the chapter describes virtue ethics' epistemological and practical challenge to moral



philosophy in discursive and ignorant terms. The desired result of both discussions is a more thorough sense of what contingency and ignorance mean given the problems of knowing facing rhetoric and moral reason alike.

### **Overview of Communication Ethics on Local and Transcendent Mediation**

Research in communication ethics asks questions as to where moral discourse practices *are* or *should be* grounded based on competing visions of ideals, context, culture, history, and human agency. Two reviews by Ronald Arnett (1987) and Richard Johannesen (2002) in the area of communication help to describe the major categories in this effort. My brief overview of these categories is intended to provide an outline of differing visions for rhetorical practice based on universalist or relativist ethics. Arnett's review of communication ethics literature from 1915 to 1985 leads him to describe the study in terms of five major approaches, three of which I will focus on:

Universal/Humanitarian, Contextual, and Narrative.<sup>1</sup> The relevant categories in Johannesen's review are relativist, political, and human nature.

According to Arnett (1987) the universal/humanitarian approach seeks a publicly grounded ethics, but as a "public announcement of principles," instead of a "public

<sup>1</sup> The other two categories identified by Arnett (1987) are democratic and codes/standards/procedures. Democratic communication ethics are based on a public "process" where there is an open airing of diverse opinions controlled by majority vote. Ideally the best ideas will rise to the top through debate (46), forging "mass collaboration on ideas, customs, and rights" (48). The codes, procedures, and standards approach relies on a select intelligentsia to determine ethical conduct, but the principles are *created* by the members rather than discovered *a priori* (unlike the universalist approach). The potential of this approach is to promote discussion and to regulate crisis and identity formation in organizations rather than to promote behavioral conformity (50-51). Arnett, Ronald. "The Status of Communication Ethics Scholarship in Speech Communication Journals from 1915 to 1985." Central States Speech Journal 38 (1987) : 44-61.

decision-making process” (48). These principles are articulated by a select intelligentsia but not created by them. Rather, they are *a priori*, universal principles. Arnett describes this approach as opposed to the democratic ideal of process (yet necessary to the public consideration of lofty goals for human conduct), and as a search for a more permanent ethical position than that of relativism (48). Importantly, Arnett writes “Rhetoric is a vehicle through which people gather their wisdom as they test propositions in everyday communication,” which describes the universal approach as process-oriented in my reading (48). In part, my contribution of ignorance to the universalist approach can be seen as “democratizing” because of its other-focus and inclusive, dialogic ethic. Among the objections to an idealist stance, its practical exclusivity to a select intelligentsia stresses a desire for participation not only on a democratic, but a more broadly dialogic, basis. My proposal for ignorance is offered as a possible response to this important objection.

The “communicative task” from a universal standpoint is to make morality visible through discourse and to uphold the idea that wisdom may be a creative and useful vehicle in culture for the discovery of universal human knowledge (Arnett 1987, 48); the form of wisdom I advocate for this process of discovery is ignorance. This task is implied as mediation by universalist scholars who “suggest that the *potential* for ‘humane-knowledge’ is universal, always present,” but that such knowledge will be considered differently from one historical moment to the next, so that “the potential is universal, but the particular expression is historically grounded” (48-49).<sup>2</sup> Conceptions vary in their

<sup>2</sup> Arnett (1987) cites the examples of Eubanks, R.T., “Nihilism and the Problem of a Worthy Rhetoric.” Southern Speech Journal 33 (1968) : 188-97 and Eubanks, R.T. “On

universality from the mediated universal/historical, to Weaver's Platonism where transcendentals, the primacy of forms and ideals, and definitional arguments appeal to essences as the source of potential for human betterment (49).

Mediation in the universalist approach allows for a recognition of locality without translating the local into a relativist ethics of practice. Differentiating relativism from all other communication ethics categories, Arnett (1987) writes "In this communication ethic decisions emerge more from the private self, not from a democratic process, *a priori* principles, or agreed upon standards and codes" (51). The contention is that values and ethics are not universal but rather culturally or contextually rooted, and that even when an ethical standard appears across cultures its particular implementation is generally unique (51). The contextual perspective justifies different communication standards according to audience, culture, or relationship, focusing on historicity and subjectivity (52).

Johannesen (2002) writes that while most perspectives make some allowances for modifying ethical criteria due to special circumstances, extreme situational perspectives make judgments "only in light of *each different context*," avoiding reliance on "Criteria from broad political, human nature, dialogical, or religious perspectives," as well as "absolute and universal standards" (77). Situational or contextual factors are instead considered for ethical evaluation and may include the role or function of the speaker for the audience, audience standards concerning what is reasonable or appropriate, how aware the audience is of the communicator's tactics, audience goals and values, and

Living in the House of Humanities." Southern Speech Communication Journal 48 (1982) : 1-10. See also Johnstone, C.L. "Ethics, Wisdom, and the Mission of Contemporary Rhetoric: The Realization of Human Being." Central States Speech Journal 32 (1981) : 177-88.

audience standards for ethical discourse” (77). The point that should be obvious from the foregoing description of the problem is that different audiences will embody different sets of values, rules for ethical discourse, goals, and desires, and these divisions apply also to members *within* those audiences, leaving us without a consistent basis on which to judge communication goals or tactics as ethical or unethical. My description of the problem as a loss of moral order and the bases for ethical argument is a fairly representative objection to the relativist approach. The particular version of this objection appearing in my study articulates the endangerment of genuine dialogue under the relativist vision.

Much of the recent research in communication ethics has taken a narrative direction. Narrative ethics offers “a story to guide people...and a desire to find a vision without locking the follower into an uncompromising pattern or technique” (Arnett 1987, 52). Arnett writes that the narrative approach is close to universal ethics, the “key difference” being “that the universal/humanitarian ethic is *a priori* grounded in an ideal while narrative is rooted in community...the former can only be approximated in discourse while the latter is constituted in the common communication life of a people” (54). This distinction ignores the possibility that human communal interaction can proceed toward an ideal notion of the good, or that disparate public narratives cannot speak to a consistent human vision of moral excellence. That these possibilities exist in real practice is an important contribution of mediated idealist proposals. Specifically, genuine dialogue allows for the realization that *a priori* knowledge is a matter of communal and relational discovery of Absolutes. I will marry the ethics of genuine dialogue with the idea of a narrative moral quest in the next chapter, to uncover bases for idealist discourse in common, communal stories.

Johannesen (2002) additionally describes various categories that elaborate a universal/situational ethical perspective. Political perspectives, for example, contain “essential political values” accepted as crucial goods to the system that are identified and employed “as criteria for evaluating the ethics of communicative means and ends within that particular system.” Communication should foster realization of these values and tactics that subvert “fundamental political values should be condemned as unethical” (23). A sense of what is “essential” and “fundamental” is necessary for ethical assessment within individual systems and the basis for reaching the lofty democratic goals of political perspectives such as “the intrinsic dignity and worth of all persons; equal opportunity for fulfillment of individual potential...maximization of freedom of choice,” or “recognition that the societal worth of an end or goal seldom should be the primary justification of the ethics of the means used to achieve that end” (Johannesen, 23-24). These communal goals - intrinsic dignity, the realization of human potential, freedom - would lack rhetorical force without their universal or idealist underpinnings.<sup>3</sup>

They are the similar outcomes of human nature perspectives, which focus on “the essence of human nature,” or, the question as to what makes humans essentially human “no matter the context” (Johannesen 2002, 39). The search for an essential human nature underlies the democratic political goal of realizing human potential, according to

<sup>3</sup> The same may be said for “postmodern” political articulations of similar goals. We live in a time when we accept contradictory ideals, where beliefs in individual freedom and dignity meet an increasingly postmodern articulation of truth as culturally made rather than discovered. The problem for postmodern denials of *a priori* truth is that the identification of various social “injustices” implies some stable order of “justice” as the basis of its claims and comparisons. Put another way, when postmodernism goes political, it often finds itself making the very truth claims it denies philosophically, in order to retain rhetorical force and moral authority for the communities it addresses.

Johannesen's description of the human nature assumption: "uniquely human attributes should be enhanced, thereby promoting fulfillment of maximum human potential" (39). The determination of ethical communication from the human nature perspective is whether a communicator's techniques "foster or undermine the development of a fundamental human characteristic" (39). Johannesen's human nature description reconciles a universalist approach with the "democratic" aim of helping human individuals realize their potential and the fullness of their dignity much in the same way that genuine dialogue does.

The sense of mediation developed by the above description of universalist/relativist approaches in communication ethics implies that moral rhetoric can be framed as an idealist practice without sacrificing a view to the actual practices and participation of everyday-people-in-context, nor their development and fulfillment of personal moral dignity as accomplished in communal dialogue. Ignorance brings to dialogue the ability to maintain relativism's emphasis on epistemic limitations imposed by historicity, human experience, culture, and language, without deriving from that emphasis notions of a baseless practice. As James Herrick (1992) notes, communication scholars tend to avoid religious or universal approaches to ethics, and the reason may be found in "the tendencies of religious and universalist rhetorical ethics to anchor truth in some idea external to people and social contexts..." (136). Opponents view the practices emergent from this "tendency" as equally external to regular people living relativized lives. My re-description of idealist practices as grounded in ignorance will reveal this as a misconception. Rather than being external and irrelevant in a time when contemporary theory advocates an ethics of relativism, idealist practices of ignorance are both grounded

and Absolute, in a time when genuine dialogue can answer a call for order. In this sense, moral rhetoric has an opportunity to direct virtue ethics' conversation on ignorance, and become an important part of restoring public moral order.

### **Contemporary Moral Philosophy and Ignorance**

The rhetorical problem of finding epistemic bases for public moral judgment and inquiry are echoed in moral philosophy. Most people know *that* murder is wrong, or *that* forming a “just society” sounds like a good idea, but articulating *how* or *why* these things are right and wrong at the level of *proof* or *certainty* is nearly impossible. Contemporary moral philosophy, as an algorithmic search for *how* and *why* has produced an unrealistic, inapplicable, and incomprehensible way to determine what makes actions, including discursive actions, right or wrong. H.A. Prichard's (1912) “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?” objected to moral inquiry as a search for formulaic ethical certainties in a way that made the proposal for a return to classical virtue ethics possible. The essay also created the need for a useful way to talk about ignorance in moral philosophy, especially from an enacted, discursive standpoint, although this opportunity has gone largely unnoticed. I begin this part of my survey with a closer look at Prichard's seminal criticism of contemporary moral philosophy as the first statement in a conversation on ignorance.

Prichard's (1912) thesis is that “the existence of the whole subject, as usually understood, rests on a mistake, and on a mistake parallel to that on which rests, as I think, the subject usually called the Theory of Knowledge” (21). In stating this, Prichard points to the problem haunting contemporary moral philosophy. Consider, as he does, a typical moral agent who feels compelled to behave a certain way, feeling the force of obligations

and sacrifices, who finally asks what the *reasons* are for acting this way her entire life. May she not have been illusioned the entire time in thinking the way she did? After leading a life of feeling she *ought* to do one thing or another, she eventually demands *proof* that these feelings are justified (21-22). This is where Prichard compares the requirement of moral philosophy to the requirements in epistemology: the requirement for moral judgment has become *why*, articulated in the question “*Why* should I do this?,” my duty, fulfill my obligations, keep my promises, and so on (22).

The self-created dilemma of this pursuit, Prichard writes, begins when the moral agent, realizing a tension between what she wants to do and what she feels she ought to do, seeks *proof* as to *why* she ought to do that thing. The “illegitimate” demand of moral philosophy is the demand for *proof* that we ought to behave in a certain way. But “there is no such knowledge, and all attempts to attain it are doomed to failure because they rest on a mistake, the mistake of supposing the possibility of proving what can only be apprehended directly by an act of moral thinking” (36). What is moral philosophy to do, then? Here is where I see Prichard creating a call for a useful way to talk about ignorance: he proposes removing epistemology at the level of “proof,” or “why” as the standard for moral philosophy. Prichard’s replacement for proof is a better focus on practice, and the closing of his essay opens a space for rhetorical agency in considerations of moral philosophy. Prichard’s revised view to moral agency is more than implicitly rhetorical:

The only remedy lies in the actual getting into a situation which occasions the obligation, or – if our imagination be strong enough – in imagining ourselves in that situation, and then letting our moral capacities of thinking do their work. Or, to put the matter generally, if we do doubt whether there is really an obligation to originate A in a situation B, the remedy lies not in any process of general thinking, but in



getting face to face with a particular instance of the situation B, and then directly appreciating the obligation to originate A in that situation (37).

Through this enacted perspective on moral philosophy Prichard invites rhetoric into a central role. His essay is an important historical marker in the progression of moral philosophy, but it also marks the early articulation in moral philosophy of two of key ideas for rhetoric: 1) the limitations of *proof* in human moral agency demand that we find a useful way to talk about the unknown and unknowable as a matter of practice, and 2) morality revealed as a practice is relational, communal, creative, and situated; it is largely rhetorical. According to Harold Alderman (1982), “the efforts of moral agents to make moral sense of their experience,” points to the shortcomings of rules systems that “fail to notice important features of the decision procedures actually employed by moral agents in...times of moral quandary...” (129). The virtue ethicists’ objections to the “remoteness” from real human experience of normative theories (Nussbaum 1988, 32), and the difficulty in applying those theories to real moral dilemmas (Solomon 1988, 437-438), is articulated on grounds of moral disagreement and actual human agency. Frenz (1985) describes the usefulness of MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* to rhetoric on this basis: “By grounding practices in action (*praxis*), MacIntyre preserves the important Aristotelian notion that morality is less a form of knowing than of doing” (3).

Prichard’s proposed replacement of ethical *proof* with ethical *practice* is central to understanding the general virtue ethics project. Just as some rhetorical scholars concerned with contemporary public moral discourse seek to return to more classical models, virtue theorists argue that a more useful perspective exists in classical systems of morality – going back to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle – in response to predominant rules and obligations theories. The overarching claim for these theorists is that, with the

predominance of rules and obligations theories, virtue has been largely neglected (see for example Becker 1975, 111; Hudson 1981, 189), for the privileging of remote, abstract ethical systems that are severely limited in their ability to inform and describe real human moral experience and action as compared to a focus on the virtues (see for example Nussbaum 1988, 32; Sichel 1988, 82; Solomon 1988, 428; Wallace 1988, 222; Alderman 1982, 129).

Distinctions between virtue ethics and rules ethics become complicated, but basic descriptions are available that will serve our purposes. Much of the difference rests on what is logically prior - virtue or rules - in the proposed ethical system. Davis (1988) summarizes, a virtue theory “begins with a description of virtues (showing in what way they are required by reason, necessary for happiness, or the like)” and moral rules, duties, or obligations are “derived by considering how to realize the virtues in practice.” Conversely, a rule theory “begins with a set of rules (including some proof that they are required by reason, necessary for happiness, or the like),” and virtues are then introduced, if at all, “as dispositions to follow certain rules. The virtues serve the rules” (353).

The distinction is made more sensible by considering the goals of rules or “normative”(deontic) theories as opposed to those of virtue (aretaic) ethics. David Solomon’s (1988) synopsis is helpful. A normative theory that takes judgments of *actions* as basic is a “deontological” theory. It typically has the following goals: “(1) to formulate and defend a particular set of moral rules, or to defend some procedure for generating appropriate moral rules; (2) to develop and defend some method of determining what to do when the relevant moral rules come into conflict” (430). Consider, for example, the Kantian determination of whether an action is good based on whether one treats others as

ends rather than as means. The determination seems to be based on whether I propose a course of action to another person by offering reasons to do so or by attempting to exert influence through non-rational means. If I do the former I treat the person as a “rational will, worthy of the same respect as is due myself,” because in offering reasons I offer “an impersonal consideration” to be evaluated. Conversely, an attempt at non-rational persuasion “embodies an attempt to make the agent a mere instrument of *my* will, without any regard for *his* rationality” (MacIntyre 1984, 46).

A normative theory that takes judgments of *consequences* of actions (as opposed to the *actions themselves*) as fundamental is a “consequentialist” theory (Solomon, 1988). Its goals are typically as follows: “(1) to specify and defend some thing or list of things which are good in themselves; (2) to provide some technique for measuring and comparing the amount of the relevant good thing (or things) that might be brought about; (3) to defend some procedures for those cases where one is not in a position to determine which of a number of alternative actions will maximize the good thing or things” (430). Consider, for example, Mackie’s (1977) description of act utilitarianism, a viewpoint that holds that when an agent has a choice between courses of action “the right act is that which will produce the most happiness, not just for the agent himself but for all who are in any way affected.” The criterion for moral judgment is “The greatest possible total happiness,” or “utility,” often defined as a balance of pleasure over pain. The algorithm that results goes something like “for each alternative course of action it is possible in principle to measure all the amounts of pleasure it produces for different persons and to add these up, similarly to measure and add up all the amounts of pain or distress it produces, and subtract the sum of pain from the sum of pleasure; then the right action is

that for which there is the greatest positive or the least negative balance of pleasure over pain” (125-126).<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to these algorithmic approaches, virtue ethics “suggests not only that moral philosophers should pay attention to virtue concepts and include a virtue component in a complete normative theory, but also that the concept of virtue is in important respects a more fundamental notion than the concepts of ‘the right’ or ‘the good’ where the good is seen as attaching to objects as possible consequences of our action” (Solomon 1988, 430). For further clarification, Solomon offers that virtue ethics takes “foundational moral claims to be claims about the agent,” and generally looks to develop some conception of the ideal person, develop a list of the virtues that are necessary to be that kind of a person, and defend a view of how persons can come to possess the appropriate virtues (429). Wallace (1988) makes the point succinctly: “It is the study of virtues conceived as a distinct mode of moral philosophy, different from and in competition with the other modes that people have in mind when they use the term ‘virtue ethics’” (222).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This is precisely the kind of moral theorizing that virtue ethicists object to as “removed” from lived morality. Such utilitarian ideas have been criticized for their various indeterminacies, such as how to determine who among people or even nonhuman beings are to be included in “all who are affected in any way.” See, for example, Mackie, J.L. Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong. New York: Penguin, 1977, 126-127. Another typical criticism is that they have an overly unitary view of human pleasure that cannot answer *which* pleasure or *which* happiness should guide us. See, for example, MacIntyre, Alasdair. After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory (2nd ed). Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1984, 63-64. Utilitarianism also did not anticipate the complexities of a global economy, where the welfare of workers in one part of the globe may be bad for the satisfaction of consumers in another part of the world.

<sup>5</sup> Definitions of “virtue,” in addition to the craft definition offered in Chapter One, are multiple. J.L Mackie (1977) has noted that conceptions of virtue from Aristotle forward

Some moral theorists have proposed that the rules and obligations vocabulary be thrown out altogether. G.E.M. Anscombe (1958) notably proposes that “the concepts of obligation, and duty – *moral* obligation and *moral* duty...and of the *moral* sense of “ought,” ought to be jettisoned...because they are survivals, or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it” (1).<sup>6</sup> Anscombe’s proposal to entirely “drop” the vocabulary of “morally ought,” and instead engage in the practice of judging or naming actions “unjust,” “untruthful,” or “unchaste,” leads her to imply a complete replacement of normative ethics with virtue ethics, “with which, I suppose, we should be beginning some sort of a study of ethics” (9, 15).

Most ethicists of virtue, however, wish to offer virtue as a critical component to normative theories, proposing the centrality of virtue in varying degrees. Some theorists

differ depending on notions of rationality and various proposals for application (186-189). Virtues have been found by some authors to reside in a person’s character (see, for example, Alderman, Harold. “By Virtue of a Virtue.” Review of Metaphysics 36 (1982) : 127-153), in relationship with desires as “dispositions” (see for example Frankena, William. “Prichard and the Ethics of Virtue: Notes on a Footnote.” Monist 54 (1970) : 1-17), and in practices (see MacIntyre 1984, 181-203). Johannesen’s (2002) review of the term as it is used in ethics reveals that virtues have been variously described as “deep-rooted dispositions, habits, skills, or traits of character that incline us to see, feel, and act in ethically right and sensitive ways,” as well as “learned, acquired, cultivated, reinforced, capable of modification, capable of conflicting, and ideally coalesced into a harmonious cluster” (280). Johannesen, Richard L. “Virtue Ethics, Character, and Political Communication.” Ethical Dimensions of Political Communication. Ed. Robert E. Denton, Jr. New York: Praeger, 1991. 69-90. Reprinted in Johannesen, Richard L. Ethics in Human Communication. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 2002. 279-297.

<sup>6</sup> Anscombe (1958) bases this statement on the very compelling claim that senses of obligation and “ought” have been removed from their original divine law context and have therefore become unintelligible (6). Anscombe, G.E.M. “Modern Moral Philosophy.” Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy 33 (1958) : 1-19.

claim that virtue or character must be the primary focus of moral theorizing (Becker 1975, 110), with some among them claiming that character should be the final terminus of moral judgment (Alderman 1982, 143; Pincoffs 1986, 4-5). Yet other virtue theorists such as Stephen Hudson (1981) are comfortable with offering virtue as a complement to normative systems. Although Hudson claims that “a strong argument can be made for taking virtues seriously,” he adds “moral theorists should be concerned *both* about substantive moral principles which specify a person’s moral obligations and duties, *and* a substantive theory of moral virtues and vices. Without either a theory will be inadequate to the facts of morality” (189). Similarly, Michael Davis (1988) argues that “what virtue theory can tell us is more or less equivalent to what rule theory can tell us” (352).

It is not within my interest to enter the debate on whether virtue theory or rule theory should be privileged, in varying degrees, in macro-ethical systems. I agree with Davis’ (1988) contention that “Converting a virtue analysis into a rule analysis means giving pride and place to rules rather than virtues, nothing more... we need not be embarrassed if we must, for example, argue from the rules to a need to cultivate certain virtues because they serve the rule (or, indeed from such a derived virtue to the need for certain secondary rules)” (362). When we look at actual moral theories, Davis argues, we find that “virtue theories always make some place for rules and that rule theories always do the same for virtues” (363). In addition, Hudson (1981) claims moral systems that do not include both virtues and rules will be inadequate to handle real moral situations (189), and this would seem clear for rhetorical enactments of virtue that must end in statements of order and policy.

I find virtue ethics particularly attractive because of those elements of its response to rules and obligations theories that emphasize the unknown as a matter to be handled through moral practice. Specifically, the central objection to *proof* calls into question the value of certainty claims as the standard for moral practice and judgment. In the next chapter, contingency and ignorance will be introduced as ethics that privilege the *uncertainty* of human futurity and argumentative outcomes in genuine dialogue. The foregoing discussion on communication and virtue ethics revealed the potential of a conversation on ignorance for both areas of inquiry; the next chapter introduces the basic terms of that conversation.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE ETHICS OF CONTINGENCY AND IGNORANCE

In the introduction I described the potential contribution of ignorance in contemporary moral rhetoric as well as relevant notions of dialogue and enacted virtue. The previous chapter discussed aspects of the virtue ethics perspective that invited a rhetorical perspective grounded in ignorance. With these discussions in the background, this chapter provides a working sense of contingency and ignorance. Succeeding chapters will elaborate on the basic statements made here, dividing between concepts of contingency and ignorance that either promote or disable genuine dialogue. The aim of this chapter is to provide a framework for those discussions. To begin, I will frame definitions of contingency and ignorance. These definitions will describe a relationship between the two concepts, as well as their place in genuine dialogue. Next, I will add a sense of uncertain futurity to contingent, ignorant practices by an examination of *telos* in divine moral quest narratives. The discussion of narrative will enrich our understanding of contingency, and create an evaluative structure for judging between concepts of immanent, ideological contingency that disable genuine dialogue, and transcendent contingency, that promote it.

#### Introduction to Contingency and Ignorance

Virtue ethics' departure from *proof* and its related turn to practice reconstitutes moral agency as an uncertain, situated activity. Saving moral agency (and moral rhetoric) from an algorithmic calculus opens us for the realization that practices are thoroughly contingent in their proceedings, in their aims, and in their outcomes. From a rhetorical perspective, the contingent accent falls on argument; in idealist practice, the focus draws



in on discovering, positing, testing, and retesting terms of order - justice, piety, courage, fairness, and so on - by way of argument with relational “others.” This idealist process remains inclusive and extensive according to the ethics of genuine dialogue by promotion of a similarly idealist notion of contingency. The epistemic gap between locality/difference and the realm of Absolutes means that situated though ideal discourses will be uncertain in terms of what they are able to discover through argument. Contingency is a recognition of this according to the ideals of genuine dialogue. That is, contingency is an attitude toward uncertainty, a recognition that the unknown central to ideal practice is an essentially human condition shared by a community of other arguers. Contingency promotes reconciliation with the idea that local, experiential materials are all that we have available for the discovery of moral arguments on terms of order; rather than making this epistemic limitation an excuse for resignation, contingency calls upon it to form an ethics for practice. Rhetoric becomes an art tied to the contingencies of present existence and effort, and the unknown of future argumentative outcomes, failures, revisions, and motivated actions. Genuine dialogue becomes possible according to contingency as an inclusive and open-ended ethic. Human community, as a population of potential interlocutors, is re-constituted as a place of uncertain, relational agency, and because contingency will remain a permanent condition of immanent human activity, the potential for “other” inclusiveness is practically endless. The resulting argument practices, extending into an uncertain future, are promoted as open-ended and extensive. In summary, contingency and uncertainty provide an attitudinal, ethical, and chronological framework for ignorance.

Ignorance is defined in the study in two senses: as a form of moral knowledge, and as a discursive means. As a form of moral knowledge ignorance is tied to uncertainty. This definition comes especially from Socratic ignorance. The summary idea is that *knowing that one does not know a moral thing with certainty* is an important form of moral knowledge. This is the basis for Socrates' assignment to improve virtue in Athens; he is the wisest because he knows that he is nothing in comparison to moral wisdom (*Apology* 23a-b). It is also a value central to discursive moral agency: knowing that one does not know moral terms with certainty promotes the other-turning of genuine dialogue as a sincerely relational practice. Ignorance promotes a spirit of inclusive discovery on the basis of unknowing and a commitment to the unknown, making those interlocutors who recognize their own lack of moral wisdom particularly capable participants in dialogues on order and community. This ethic of inclusion and commitment is promoted by ignorance as a *means* in discourse. Socrates' disavowal of knowledge is the model offered in the study, although disavowals of moral wisdom contribute generally to genuine dialogue. When one says she does not know, or is incapable of moral certainty, that utterance can represent a sincere and (as Buber puts it)"dynamic" facing of the other in communal argument. This is an especially vital means of turning to others in idealist practices, a recognition of the relational commitment to unknowing made by dialogic participants in pursuit of the Absolute.

Based on these descriptions of contingency and ignorance, a concise, "working" definition posits a relationship between the two: *contingency* is a sense of uncertainty particular to moral agency and argument (the recognition that relational action and the outcome and potential future revision of arguments extends into an unknown future); and

*ignorance* is a discursive means that actualizes contingency in moral practices. Both of these ideas are enriched by a sense of uncertain, divine narrative time.

### **Uncertain Time in Narrative Theories of Moral Rhetoric**

I discuss narrative in this section not for the sake of advocating a narrative perspective on communication or a “narrative paradigm,” but to gain a sense of open-ended moral time (consistent with the open-endedness of genuine dialogue), by the idea of an uncertain *telos* as the moral future of unified interlocutors.<sup>1</sup> This section begins with a general review of rhetorical statements on moral narrative, then moves into a more focused discussion of uncertain futurity. The narrative perspective on communication ethics examines the stories that guide peoples’ lives and situate them in dialogue with others, with the moment, and within communal action, while allowing for a less rigid type of rationality as the basis for moral judgment. From this mindset Walter Fisher has contributed the “narrative paradigm” to rhetorical theory as a new mode of moral reason.

<sup>1</sup> This is to say, I am not proposing an explanation for all of rhetorical discourse as storytelling on the model of Fisher’s “narrative paradigm” (see Fisher, Walter. Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action. Columbia, SC: South Carolina UP, 1987). Nor am I proposing a “grand” or “master” narrative to explain everything. Among the critics of this idea, Nietzsche has written that it generates “truth” as “A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to people” (46-47). Nietzsche, Friedrich. “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense.” The Portable Nietzsche. Trans. Walter Kauffman. New York: Penguin, 1954. As much as I disagree with Nietzsche’s characterization of “truth,” I am interested in narrative only insofar as it allows me to assign to genuine dialogue a notion of divine, teleological *time* for the unification of human practices. This sense of time binds practitioners together with a view to uncertain futurity in a way that retains truth-seeking while resisting the restrictive form of designed “progress” narratives. I discuss this more in my next chapter.

Fisher (1984) proposed his “narrative paradigm” for communication in part due to the problems he saw with public moral argument. He defines public moral argument as having the following qualities: 1) being public it is available for “consumption and persuasion of the polity at large;” 2) it is aimed at non-experts; and 3) it inherently crosses fields, unlike scientific or theological debates, which are contained “by subject matter, particular conceptions of argumentative competence, and well recognized rules of advocacy” (12). The problem is that experts make it difficult for “untrained” audience members to win or even effectively judge moral argument because they have to sift through competitive technical arguments representative of the mode of debate found in the rational world paradigm (12-13). Fisher’s use of narrative as a solution has implications for the dialogic ethic of inclusion in public moral argument. From a narrative perspective the role of the expert is introduced anew, as “a counselor...the true function of the storyteller,” who contributes to public dialogue “to impart knowledge, like a teacher, or wisdom, like a sage” (13). The expert thus has the potential to bring the public back into the arena of moral argument by assuming “the role of public counselor whenever she or he crosses the boundary of technical knowledge into the territory of life as it ought to be lived,” with the result that “the public, which then includes the expert, has its own criteria for demanding whose story is most coherent and reliable as a guide to belief and action” (13).

Another recent theory that has implications for dialogic inclusiveness is Frenzt’s (1985) conversation model of moral discourse. Frenzt has offered conversation as a moral communication paradigm by taking some cues from MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*. MacIntyre (1984) writes that “conversation, understood widely enough, is the form of human

transactions in general.” He links conversations to narratives because both have beginnings, middles, ends, climaxes, plots, and subplots, and presents “both conversations in particular...and human action in general as enacted narratives” (210-211). Frenzt’s definition of “rhetorical conversation” is partially drawn from this idea, as well as MacIntyre’s general concept of narrative as the “moral unity of an individual life” (Frenzt 1985, 2):

A rhetorical conversation is a narrative episode in which a conflict over opposing moral viewpoints re-unites agents with their own moral histories, with the moral traditions of which they are a part, and – perhaps most important – with an awareness of the virtues. As a practice, the goods internal to rhetorical conversations are an awareness of the moral unity of individual life and a sense of the quest for the ultimate good for self and humanity (4-5).

The limitation of conversations to discover the “moral unity of individual life” as an expression of “the ultimate good for humanity” is that they are overly local. In his analysis of the film *My Dinner With Andre*, Frenzt writes of the moral outcomes of Wally’s and Andre’s dinner conversation that Wally “rediscovers the wonderment of being alive as an individual connected with all that surrounds him,” while Andre’ “realizes that self-awareness devoid of moral tradition has no purpose and that surrendering life to disconnected moments of ‘pure being’ can lead to the fascistic horrors of Nazism which forever haunt his mind” (13). A dialogic connectedness to the other, and to moral tradition and community, is described by Frenzt’s claim that Andre and Wally needed each other to “rediscover the constituents of a moral perspective:” Andre’ “imparted a sense of selfhood to Wally” and Wally “gave Andre’ a renewed appreciation for a teleological tradition.” There are also ties to the continuity of an individual life and moral tradition through the virtues with which the conversation accorded: “justice (the desserts each owe the other), courage (to risk one’s self for the

other), and honesty (to be truthful beyond all else)” (13). This conversation is an illustrative example of the function of moral dialogue, and the potential contribution made by narrative to dialogic discourse. But while these statements speak to a narrative unity between self, other, and moral tradition, the virtue outcomes of conversations are too local for the purpose of seeking a communal Good and an Absolute Justice.

Condit (1987), for example, does not doubt that “for these two individuals, the social interaction...produces improved individual virtue,” but writes that “their discovery...lacks breadth and depth,” providing answers far from significant to collective moral quandaries such as nuclear war, resource allocation, and abortion (80). Condit may overstate the private outcomes of a public conversation presented in a film, but her criticism is, I think, accurate. The important idea to retain from conversation for my purposes is that narrative can be connected with dialogue in a way that unifies arguers in the common hope for a fuller moral development of self and other.

Fisher’s and Frenztz’s theories are in part derived from the narrative thesis of MacIntyre’s (1984) *After Virtue*, that “man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal...a teller of stories that aspire to truth” (216). MacIntyre’s version of moral narrative promotes a view of human action as teleological narration, happening in the present yet moving toward a possible, contingent future of shared ends, goals, and goods. For MacIntyre, in understanding the actions of others “we always move towards placing a particular episode in the context of a set of narrative histories, histories both of the individuals concerned and of the settings in which they act and suffer” (211). The identification of individual, present actions within a narrative structure infuses those actions with meaning by showing the present as extending into a

potential future (Frentz 1985, 5). As MacIntyre articulates this idea “An action is a moment in a possible or actual history or in a number of such histories” (214).

This idea of a “potential” or “possible” future as the context of moral action is where *telos* and contingency become a sense of future, uncertain time in discursive practice. For MacIntyre what links futurity and narrative is *unpredictability*, a characteristic that all stories rely upon, and an accurate description of human life: “unpredictability...is required by the narrative structure of human life” (215). What is vital about unpredictability is that it “coexists with a second crucial characteristic of all lived narratives, a certain teleological character (215):”

We live out our lives, both individually and in our relationships with each other, in the light of certain conceptions of *a possible shared future, a future in which certain possibilities beckon us forward and others repel us*, some seen already foreclosed and others perhaps inevitable. There is no present which is not informed by some image of some future and an image of the future which always presents itself in the form of a *telos* – or of a variety of ends or goals – towards which we are either moving or failing to move in the present. *Un-predictability and teleology therefore coexist as part of our lives*; like characters in a fictional narrative we do not know what will happen next, but nonetheless our lives have a certain form which projects itself towards our future. Thus the narratives which we live out have both an unpredictable and a partially teleological character (215-216, emphases mine).

By conjoining narrative unity and teleological unpredictability in a notion of shared, uncertain futures, MacIntyre enriches the goods of practice in a sense of time. The standards described though goods internal/external/relational to practices are now determined by a gaze forward to communal conceptions of an uncertain future by which participants can judge practiced virtue in the present. In genuine dialogue, *telos* as unpredictable includes participants in a shared future that colors arguments and mutual discovery as uncertain and open-ended. Recognizing the teleological unpredictability of human life and practice becomes a guideline for attitudes toward the contingency of

enacted virtue; but, just as all moral stories are not the same, neither are all notions of contingency. The implications for genuine dialogue are that varying senses of time gained through competing moral narratives will contribute to differing theories of contingency that can either promote, or hinder, inclusiveness other-turning, and the extensive future trajectory of arguments. Viewing *telos* as unpredictability or contingency makes narrative a potentially powerful and unifying construct for communal moral dialogue. As MacIntyre explains, the agent may ask two questions. The first, “what is the good for me?” asks how I might live out the unity of my life with all of the considerations of narrative— present action, future possibilities, and unpredictability. The question “what is the good for man?” asks “what all the answers to the former question must have in common.” Most importantly, “it is the systematic asking of these two questions and the attempt to answer them in deed as well as word which provide the moral life with its unity,” a unity similar to the unity of a narrative quest (218-219).

MacIntyre notes that without at least some conception of the final *telos* a quest could not even begin. A quest begins in “looking for a conception of *the* good which will enable us to order other goods, for a conception of *the* good which will enable us to extend our understanding of the purpose and content of the virtues, for a conception of *the* good which will enable us to understand the place of integrity and constancy in life,” and this is how we define a life which is a quest for the good (219). As much as MacIntyre contributes narrative time as unpredictability, his description of *telos* is limited in its capacity to make the moral quest a search for Absolute terms of order. This is so because MacIntyre offers a version of *telos* stripped of its transcendent power and potential. Frenz’s (1985) criticism on this point is excellent:



MacIntyre preserves a teleology by recasting it in Homeric terms, as a narrative quest. What MacIntyre fails to see is that a narrative quest in the Homeric tradition is inextricably linked to a supernatural telos – the desires and actions of the gods, as memorialized in poetry...By divorcing the narrative quest from the gods, MacIntyre has changed its meaning and, in so doing, created a moral fiction of his own. When he then grafts that fiction onto a teleological tree, itself having been pruned of its theological impulse...the resultant bush does not exactly burn with moral authority. For when the telos of humanity is a quest plus humanly derived moral concepts, all that can follow is a humanly grounded morality, and those are at base emotivist, no matter how persistent the protests to the contrary (15).

Based on this criticism, MacIntyre's *telos* as unpredictability can be kept as a useful contribution to contingency, but a transcendent impulse must be added for the purposes of genuine dialogue. Frenz (1985) proposes a return to "the gods," to conceptions of the moral quest on Homeric terms as a search for spirit and transcendence (15). His recommendations are a good place to begin dividing narrative contingency along immanent/ideological and transcendent lines.

### **Immanent Versus Transcendent Narrative: An Evaluative Basis for Contingency**

This final section establishes evaluative categories for contingency and ignorance by dividing ideological narratives from transcendent (divine) narratives. The discussion here follows from the idea that contingency is connected to conceptions of *telos* as either uncertain (unpredictable) as it appears in transcendent narratives, or as a perfected or progressive new age, as it appears in ideological narratives. The former sense will be privileged in my analyses of contingency and ignorance, the latter denied as an endangerment to genuine dialogue.

Frenz (1985) posits the restoration of a teleological morality of transcendence by calling for the reunion of the narrative quest with "the gods," a re-conceptualization of human history in the most meaningful sense as pointing to something *other* than itself, to a ground of Being and Divinity (15). This return would constitute a marriage back to the

teleology of the Homeric tradition that Frenzt finds lacking in MacIntyre. In the resulting system “practices and their attendant virtues would be vehicles for gaining access to the moral truths of the gods,” making the “narrative unity of an individual’s life and the historical unity of moral traditions...narrative quests in the fullest Homeric sense, quests for universal moral truths” (15).

Recapturing the divinity of Homeric *telos* contextualizes present practice in a richer framework of uncertain time. It also returns us to an ancient Greek sense of mediation. Kitto (1957) describes what the divine background of Homeric poetry did for the Greeks, and does for us: “It makes us see that particular action that we are watching not as an isolated, a causal, a unique event; we see it rather in its relation to the moral and philosophical framework of the universe” (55). Here, Kitto eloquently describes the narrative unity between an individual life and the transcendence of its moral history.

Homer, Kitto writes,

sees that there is a unity in things, that events have their causes and their results, that certain moral laws exist. This is the framework into which the particular action is seen to fit. The divine background of the epic means ultimately that particular actions are at the same time unique and universal ( 55).<sup>2</sup>

By Kitto’s description, the Homeric divine “framework” unifies peoples’ moral actions with a greater moral community.<sup>3</sup> Rushing (1985) writes that when people

<sup>2</sup> For a description of a similar sense of mythic, divine connectedness revealed in contemporary film see Rushing, Janice Hocker. “*E.T.* as Rhetorical Transcendence.” Quarterly Journal of Speech 71 (1985) : 188-203.

<sup>3</sup> The importance of divinity in Homer is also revealed in descriptions of rhetorical agency within his prose . In describing the early rhetorical consciousness displayed in Homeric poetry, Enos (1993), notes that the revelation of characteristically human capacities for discovery and heuristic in Homer should not come without an appreciation of the divine sources that allow humans to produce “genuine eloquence” (8). “There is

address the contemporary need for transcendence they “reaffirm the centrality of the present as one chapter in an evolutionary and cosmological narrative that stretches into the past as history and into the future as spirit” (189). When the unity of a human life is robbed of its divine *telos*, present actions lose the context for their meaning. The problem for contingency is that practices and practitioners become detached from the transcendent uncertainty of their aims and outcomes, unique, but no longer communal and universal. Of course, practices will still picture futures, but the old contingency has to be replaced for the new, de-spiritualized vision. When immanently revised narrative *teloi* are posited as corrective procedures for problems of transcendence in human history,<sup>4</sup> the resulting contingency endangers genuine dialogue.

In the broader narrative sense, two very different stories are told. Bass and Cherwitz (1978), for example, offer a basic distinction between *sacred myth* and *ideologies*. Sacred myth “is an immutable truth from which a system of normative ethics is derived,” while ideologies “are more programmatic and materially oriented” (214-215). Like sacred myths, ideologies attempt to build community, but organize people “through references to historical and political events, and appeals to a material orientation of the world” with a “necessarily pragmatic” focus (215). Expanding from these basic categories, the

little doubt” writes Enos “that in Homer eloquence is god-produced and god-given.” Humans struggle with the development of their own *techne*, but individuals who are considered eloquent are seen as the beneficiaries of divine intervention, recipients of a gift from the gods that makes them “god-like” (8-9). Enos, Richard Leo. Greek Rhetoric Before Aristotle. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1993. See also Kennedy, George. The Art of Persuasion in Greece. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1963. 36.

<sup>4</sup> Here I am referring to the problem of local/transcendent mediation as discussed in the first chapter.

re-articulation of human narrative life along ideological lines is a simultaneous reduction and revision of spirit. In *The New Science of Politics* Eric Voegelin (1987) describes this revision as it has taken place in modern politics. Certain versus uncertain notions of contingency are implied as guiding political ethics in Voegelin's argument. His description of the differing attitudes toward human history emergent from Gnosticism, in opposition to the "inner quest for transcendent reality" characterized by Greek philosophy, Judaism, and Christianity (Germino 1987, vii), help me to frame evaluative categories for contingency. For the remainder of the study I set in opposition the basic possibilities of immanent versus uncertain contingency as established by Voegelin's polemic against Gnosticism.

In the foreword to *The New Science of Politics*, Dante Germino (1987) summarizes Gnosticism as "a symbolic form" that "arose out of the fragile nature of earthly existence, which leaves many people thirsting for a *certain and immediate deliverance* from so hazardous a condition" (vi, emphasis mine). Germino's summary continues with a description of the sort of secret Divine knowledge that marks Gnosticism and the Gnostic "sage," who "typically believes that he has become one with the godhead and has achieved liberation from the world of ordinary human beings" (vi). Nilsson (1948) writes that Gnosticism was (and continues to be for Voegelin) "an attempt to restate Christianity and express it in terms and ways of thought which fitted the natural science and philosophy of the time," in order to meet the transcendental problem of "the relation between the transcendent and sensuous worlds" (131). Nilsson adds that Gnosticism "split into numerous sects and every Gnostic teacher spoke with this own tongue according to the promptings of his higher enlightenment" (130). Germino (1987) writes

that early Gnosticism “tended to be politically quietistic,” but later “became revolutionary and destructive in the West” as a “result of the coincidence of the revival of ancient Gnosticism with the remarkable expansion of power resulting from the growth of urban centers and increased trade” (vi).

Voegelin (1987) tracks Gnosticism’s historical development up to the end of the twelfth century (107-110) and begins his analysis with the form of Gnosticism articulated in Joachim of Flora’s “trinitarian eschatology” that “created the aggregate of symbols which govern the self-interpretation of modern political society to this day” (111). The first symbol is the conception of history “as a sequence of three ages, of which the third age is intelligibly the final Third Realm,” an immanent state of perfection (11-112).<sup>5</sup> The second symbol is the leader, which can be discerned in Machiavelli’s *Prince*, and the supermen of Comte and Marx (112).

The third symbol is “that of the prophet of the new age:” “In order to lend validity and conviction to the idea of a final Third Realm,” writes Voegelin, “the course of history as an intelligible, meaningful whole must be assumed accessible to human knowledge, either through a direct revelation or through speculative gnosis,” raising the importance of the “Gnostic intellectual” as someone who can articulate this vision (112).<sup>6</sup> This

<sup>5</sup> Since *Looking Backward* (1887), almost all Utopian schemes have been Dystopias (*We*, 1984, *Brave New World*).

<sup>6</sup> Here Voegelin (1987) returns us to the idea of a (modern) Gnostic prophet articulating the secret knowledge that will move human history to a final state of immanent perfection. Among several examples, Voegelin identifies the person of Marx, who pictures a mystical “realm of freedom and the withering away of the state” (113). Voegelin, Eric. *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987. In my study ignorance denies the immanent certainty of the Gnostic prophetic voice.

prophetic voice is important to contingency and dialogue. Recall Bakhtin's (1984) statement that a real dialogue avoids the "author" who "has already withdrawn" and looks "over" the dialogue, being now "located as if in some higher decision-making position," thereby turning "an authentic and unfinished dialogue into an objectified and finalized *image of a dialogue*" (63). The program histories of Gnostic speculation articulate a secret or privileged sort of emancipatory knowledge that progresses human history to a discernible final *end*, or at least toward a new "progress." Part of overseeing the conversation on history through Gnostic speculation is the sacrifice of spirit for immanence; this is done for the sake of making the historical *end* accessible to the knowledge of the intellectual. But removing spirit puts *certain* designs on *uncertain* contingency, and places the Gnostic voice in direct violation of the open-ended standards for genuine dialogue. Bakhtin's description of the "overseeing" author locates the *intellectual prophet of the new age*<sup>7</sup> (and general speculators on immanent designs of perfection or progress) as enemies to dialogue.

The fourth symbol is "that of the brotherhood of autonomous persons." Voegelin explains "by virtue of its new descent of the spirit," the final age "will transform men into members of the new realm without sacramental mediation of grace." The church will "cease to exist because the charismatic gifts that are necessary for the perfect life will

<sup>7</sup> From here on, most references to this idea will go by the name, "intellectual prophet of the new age," or "intellectual prophet" for short. The basic idea retained from Voegelin's description is that of an intellectual who by speculation or revelation articulates access to a vision of a final, immanent state of perfection for human history, or a new discourse that will lead to ethical "progress." The importance of promoting this vision at the cost of spirit is that the contingency of history becomes immanentized, and the open-endedness of genuine dialogue is violated.

reach men without administration of sacraments” (113). If we trace the narrative progression of Joachim’s symbols we witness a movement away from spirit as a means to articulate and justify a certain futurity. This narrative can be grafted onto scientific positivism’s move away from mystery as easily as it is onto immanentized politics.<sup>8</sup> The important violation described by Voegelin is a denial of uncertainty and a resulting reduction of Divine futurity to immanent symbols of society or political order as a supposed correction to problems of transcendence.

For Voegelin, modern political Gnosticism characteristically immanentizes symbols of transcendence (120) and puts them to work in local existence in order to project a perfected end to human history (129-132). In this way it is ideological.<sup>9</sup> When the

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Burke (1954), for example, writes that rationalization has moved from magic, to religion, to science, in a “corrective” way: “The ‘mystics’ are condemned for failing to abide by the established canons of positivistic science, quite as though science had never put itself forward as a deliberate and untiring questioner of any and all established canons. We begin to see that there are certain fixed Marquis of Queensbury rules for scientific combat, and anyone who would turn his skepticism against these vested interests of the scientific rationalization is suspected of a strong hankering to sink back into the Dark Ages of human thought” (63). Burke, Kenneth. Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose. Los Angeles: U of California P, 1954.

<sup>9</sup> I use the term “ideology,” and by extension “ideologue,” throughout the study in a specific sense. Gnosticism is an example. Borrowing from John Bliese’s (2001) synopsis, “‘Ideology’ denotes an abstract, utopian idea of the perfect society,” and an “‘ideologue’ is one who believes that people and society can be perfected, if only they can be forced to conform to that utopian notion” (66-67). Bliese, John. The Greening of Conservative America. Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001. Russell Kirk’s (1969) definition is more elaborative: “Ideology does not mean political theory or principle, even though many journalists and some professors commonly employ the term in that sense. Ideology really means political fanaticism-and, more precisely, the belief that this world of ours may be converted into the Terrestrial Paradise through the operation of positive law and positive planning. The ideologue... maintains that human nature and society may be perfected by mundane, secular means, though these means ordinarily involve violent social revolution. The ideologue immanentizes religious symbols and inverts religious doctrines” (154). Kirk, Russell. Enemies of the Permanent Things. New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House,

“accent” of Gnostic narrative “lies strongly on the state of perfection” then utopianism becomes its particular articulation. When the “accent lies strongly with movement” then “progressivism” is the interpretation of human history, holding that various qualitative and quantitative increases of goods are evidence of progress such as that in the human sciences and technology (Voegelin, 121; Germino, vii). I will criticize both utopian and progressive variants of spiritual reduction for their restraint of dialogue. While progressive advances in the sciences and technology have had the positive results of “an unprecedentedly high level of material comfort, health, literacy, and philanthropy,” Gnosticism’s move away from spirit and uncertainty means that these advances represent the simultaneous decline of civilization (Germino, vii; Voegelin, 132). While the tradition of Greek philosophy, Judaism, and Christianity “acknowledged the *limitation* of the human condition and fundamental ‘*uncertainty*’ of man’s knowledge about the *transcendent divine* ground” of existence,<sup>10</sup> modern Gnosticism “has been dedicated to the hubristic attempt to *overcome the anxieties and uncertainties of human life* by building a terrestrial paradise” (Germino, vii). This attitude toward uncertainty and divine epistemic limitation has meant that even the most worthy projects for resolving human misery have compromised “the inner quest for transcendent reality that motivated Plato,

1969. My definition and criticism of ideological programs will not be limited to utopianism, but will also extend to generally “progressivist” visions of human futurity as well.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, David Frank’s (1997) discussion of Perelman’s reliance on Jewish narrative to offer a transcendent ethic of pluralism: Frank, David. “The New Rhetoric, Judaism, and Post-Enlightenment Thought: The Cultural Origins of Perelmanian Philosophy.” Quarterly Journal of Speech 83 (1997) : 314-317.



Amos, and Paul” (Germino, viii), so that “The death of the spirit is the price of progress” (Voegelin, 131).<sup>11</sup>

Epistemic limitation and uncertainty form the bases for contingency as I conceive of it. Differing attitudes toward them, as Voegelin explains, result in competing visions for the *telos* of human history: discomfort and anxiety about uncertainty and limitedness are the grounds for a spiritual departure that motivates visions of progress toward a terrestrial paradise (or at the very least some notion of social perfectibility); reconciliation with and preservation of the transcendent pictures human history into an extensive and uncertain future. The second vision confirms the open-endedness of genuine dialogue, and the divine moral quest. For Voegelin, preservation of the quest involves maintaining the transcendent uncertainty of divine symbols. By putting these symbols to use in visions of human “progress” Gnosticism proposes a fallaciously certain *telos* for human activity. Specifically, the Gnostic story of progress reduces the Christian eschaton from a symbol of transcendent uncertainty, to a symbol of immanent certainty.<sup>12</sup> The spiritual disconnect of identifying immanent symbols of Perfection (symbols of progress, or utopias, for example) in the here and now is fallacious, because,

<sup>11</sup> Rushing (1985) writes that our time “is marked by a yearning for wholeness.” Even as we benefit from “the progress wrought by the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution,” we are asking about the costs. The twentieth century “has enjoyed labor-saving devices...and increased lifespans,” but has also seen us suffer several “technological nightmares.” Few would actually return to a pre-industrial age, but “many feel an undeniable, if unspoken, sense of fragmentation and separation - from their world, their fellow human beings, and themselves” (188).

<sup>12</sup> Thus, it examples the inter-penetration of both of our primary sources of contemporary order: politics (the order of the world below), and religion (the order of the world above). The problem created by the Gnostic variants of utopianism and progressivism is that this inter-penetration is spiritually reductive, favoring political truths for the truth of the soul.

Things are not things, nor do they have essences, by arbitrary declaration. The course of history as a whole is no object of experience; history has no *eidos*, because the course of history *extends into the unknown future*. The meaning of history, thus, is an illusion; and this illusionary *eidos* is created by treating a symbol of faith as if it were a proposition concerning an object of immanent experience (120, emphasis mine).

Later in the work, Voegelin offers a clarifying summary of this fallacy and its practical outcomes:

The truth of gnosticism is vitiated...by the fallacious immanentization of the Christian eschaton. This fallacy is not simply a theoretical mistake concerning the meaning of the eschaton, committed by this or that thinker... On the basis of this fallacy, Gnostic thinkers, leaders, and their followers interpret a concrete society and its order as an eschaton; and, in so far as they apply their fallacious construction to concrete social problems, they misinterpret the structure of immanent reality. The eschatological interpretation of history results in a false picture of reality; and errors with regard to the structure of reality have practical consequences when the false conception is made the basis of political action. Specifically, the Gnostic fallacy destroys the oldest wisdom of mankind concerning the rhythm of growth and decay which is the fate of all things under the sun (166).<sup>13</sup>

In revising the divine context for human practices, progressive and utopian visions resolve their anxieties with the unknown future by reducing spirit to certainty; the move is consistent with the Gnostic departure from the transcendence of the Greek, Jewish, and

<sup>13</sup> One of the clearest examples of the fallacy offered by Voegelin (1987) is Hobbes' civil theology. "Hobbes," writes Voegelin, "saw that public order was impossible without a civil theology," but "He denied the existence of a tension between the truth of the soul and the truth of society; the content of Scripture, in his opinion, coincided in substance with the truth of Hobbes" (160). Voegelin continues "With this idea...of abolishing the tensions of history by the spreading of a new truth, Hobbes reveals his own Gnostic intentions; the attempt at freezing history into an everlasting constitution is an instance of the general class of Gnostic attempts at freezing history into an everlasting final realm on this earth" (160-161). Voegelin emphasizes that Gnostic variants are all around us, and that gnosticism "has by far not spent its drive." In its Marxist variant "it is expanding its area of influence...while other variants of gnosticism, such as progressivism, positivism, and scientism, are penetrating into other areas under the title of 'Westernization'" and the expansion of developing countries (164-165). In my study I will be especially interested in criticizing Gnostic "utopianism" and "progressivism," but the larger point to be made here is that the general impulse of gnosticism as a move away from "the truth of the soul" is productive of several variants that underlie contemporary problems.

Christian tradition. Voegelin writes that uncertainty “is the very essence of Christianity,” (122) and so, we can say, of these other transcendent perspectives too. Voegelin’s description of the Gnostic move toward immanent certainty and perfection, and away from spirit, uncertainty, and the “inner quest for transcendent reality,” serves as a general framework for understanding the implications of attitudes toward contingency for genuine dialogue.

The Gnostic moral quest can be generally conceived as ideological narrative, picturing a perfected end to human history, or progress toward a new age or emancipation. It importantly violates the open-endedness of genuine dialogue by its denial of divine, uncertain futurity. It also endangers the inclusiveness of genuine dialogue by seeing time as movement toward immanent perfection or progress that relies on the death of spirit and transcendence. This becomes a revised *telos* that changes the ethics of dialogue entirely. In the utopian or progressivist vision, dialogue must be manufactured against spirit to meet the ends of the program. Inevitably, this results in the exclusion of arguments, and other-objections that would revise the historical plan and its outcomes. I will argue this point in the next chapter. Retaining the uncertainty of contingency through spirit, on the other hand, promotes both the open-endedness and inclusiveness of genuine dialogue.

This chapter has provided a general framework for dividing between notions of contingency and ignorance according to differing senses of present and future time as certain (immanent, ideological) or uncertain (divine, transcendent). The next four chapters offer specific analyses on the discursive results of conceiving of contingency and ignorance in either of these ways. Chapter four criticizes Rorty’s immanent

“contingency of language” and his resulting proposal for a “liberal utopia” as an example of contingency that shuts down dialogue. The chapter on Rorty will demonstrate how notions of contingency that propose a departure from spirit and transcendence must place limits on dialogic participation, vocabularies, questions, and arguments, in order to accomplish the aims of immanent *teloi*. Rorty will be presented as an example of the intellectual prophet of the new age. Conversely, chapter five describes the operation of contingency as uncertainty in definitional practices, with a focus on Socrates’ “What is F?” question, and advocates this as a concept that makes genuine dialogue possible. The distinction drawn between Rorty and Socrates is that, while Rorty’s proclamation of a *program* for human history demands that he restrict dialogic participation, Socrates’ construction of a *dialogue* based in ignorance allows him to invite argumentative others. Chapters six and seven treat ignorance within the same evaluative framework. Chapters four through seven, then, work through a full theoretical development of contingency and ignorance that begins with my interrogation of Rorty.

## CHAPTER 4

### IMMANENT CONTINGENCY AND THE RESTRICTION OF DIALOGUE

The previous chapter proposed that not all contingent views on language and the *telos* of a human moral life allow for dialogue. This chapter describes how contingency can be ideologically turned to discursive prohibition. The division proposed in the last chapter held that immanentizing transcendent symbols for utopian or progressivist visions represents a closure to the otherness and open-endedness of genuine dialogue. Here I back that claim by the paradigmatic example of Richard Rorty's liberal utopia. Rorty is examined especially because he offers "contingency of language" as the motive for his utopian vision. In doing so he provides a specifically language-based notion of immanent contingency as an ethic of closure in discursive practice. Rorty's prophetic intellectual voice is representative of the "overseer" who reframes real and open dialogue into a fabrication so that ethical talk can, in a predetermined fashion, accord with a desired *end*. Rorty reveals the disingenuous nature of ideological "dialogue" generally, and uncovers that especially troubling aspect of program history that demands programmed talk. My criticism moves from Rorty's proposal for the removal of metaphysical terms for a new moral vocabulary, through the practice of this vocabulary in the public sphere of his liberal utopia. It is aimed at utopianism and progressivism generally, as both produce practices that sacrifice spirit in the name of "progress."

## Rorty's Liberal Utopia and a New Moral Vocabulary

Rorty's (1989) *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* sets out with the ethical aim of directing its arguments toward the alleviation of human suffering.<sup>1</sup> But while the end may be noble, the means are not only suspect, but dangerous to open moral discourse. The agent in Rorty's proposal for reform is the "liberal ironist," liberal because she or he believes, that "cruelty is the worst thing we do," and ironist because she or he "faces up to the *contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires* – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist *to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance*" (xv, emphasis mine). The idea of questioning is not objectionable on its own, but Rorty asks us to question those beliefs having already abandoned the idea that they have metaphysical attachments. Inasmuch as this results in the death of central human beliefs on uncertainty, what questions are left? This seems to be exactly the point, as Rorty will later seek to remove metaphysics from our vocabulary and our catalog of questions.

The liberal ironist, apparently, will be relieved to be done with the religious and rationalist discussions of the masses. Rorty's contempt on this matter is remarkable. Many people believe in and discuss an extra-human order, and "ironist intellectuals who do not believe that there is such an order are far outnumbered (even in the lucky, rich, literate democracies) by people who believe that there *must* be one." This unfortunate reality is due to the fact that "Most nonintellectuals are still committed either to some

<sup>1</sup> All references to "Rorty" in this chapter refer to Rorty, Richard. Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.

form of religious faith or to some form of Enlightenment rationalism” (xv).<sup>2</sup> The ideological alleviation of this problem would be the opening of a space for Rorty’s liberal utopia, which becomes possible in a “postmetaphysical culture,” which seems to Rorty “no more impossible than a postreligious one, and equally desirable” (xvi).

In Rorty’s “liberal utopia” human solidarity would become “a goal to be achieved...not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers.” Solidarity is central to Rorty’s ethics, and is “created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people.” Increased sensitivity results in the inability to marginalize other people because they feel things differently from the way *we* would (xvi).

Rorty’s focus on Solidarity and “otherness” does not make his theory friendly to genuine dialogue. He creates an obvious bind for himself in claiming solidarity as a major ethical term, then defining it as increased sensitivity to “others’” feelings, viewpoints, and humiliation. Consider that Rorty has just split two classes of people: *liberal intellectuals* are the fortunate unbelievers, a smaller class that has the right idea but is unfortunately stuck with a *nonintellectual* class that still clings to ideas of metaphysics and religion. The formation of a privileged class based on the beliefs of *us* versus *them* obviously undercuts solidarity as Rorty defines the idea. Moreover, he repeats the cruelty Solidarity attempts to repair by silencing or making ridiculous the discourse of a whole community of people and their most central beliefs, especially as

<sup>2</sup> It would only be fair to note that this sort of snobbishness is *not* typical of all ideological projects, but the metaphysical classism (which I object to most centrally) is an important component to similar proposals. Nietzsche’s death of God as a release from slave morality, and Marx’s post-metaphysical rise of the proletariat, are examples.

those beliefs and their articulation have, at various historical times, become attached to humiliation and suffering. The ideal of sincere other-turning is most centrally *inclusive*, and a classist solution (designing class division on metaphysical belief) immediately reveals itself as misfit for real, genuine dialogue.<sup>3</sup> The paradox of meeting cruelty with spiritual murder discolours the rest of Rorty's program.

This is most obvious when Rorty actually defines "contingency" in the "contingency of language" by connecting solidarity to narrative. He contributes to the narrative ethical perspective I have described thus far, but trouble lurks. Rorty writes "The process of coming to see other human beings as 'one of us' rather than as 'them' is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like," a task not for theory but instead for narrative genres. Works of fiction such as books, television shows, and movies give us a sense of the suffering of people unlike us, Rorty claims, and this is why narrative forms have increasingly become vehicles for moral change and progress (xvi). In connecting narrative to his liberal utopia Rorty provides comments on discourse and narrative futurity. On replacing "the sermon and the treatise" with narrative as the primary form of moral change, he writes:

In my liberal utopia, this replacement would receive a kind of recognition which it still lacks. That recognition would be part of a general turn against theory and toward narrative. Such a turn would be emblematic of our having given up the attempt to hold all the sides of our life in a single vision, to describe them with a single vocabulary. It would amount to a recognition of what...I call "the contingency of language" – the fact that there is no way to step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary which somehow takes account of *all possible* vocabularies, all possible ways of judging and feeling. A historicist and nominalist culture of the sort I envisage would settle instead for narratives which connect the present with the past, on the one hand, and with utopian futures, on the

<sup>3</sup> For additional criticism see Phillips, Hollibert E. "The Ironist's Utopia: Can Rorty's Liberal Turnip Bleed?" International Philosophical Quarterly. 32 (1992) : 363-368.



other. More important, it would regard the realization of utopias, and the envisaging of still further utopias, as an endless process – an endless proliferating realization of Freedom, rather than a convergence toward an already existing Truth (xvi).

In sum, Rorty is advocating an ejection of metaphysical terms for the sake of narrative *disunity*; in doing so he goes in the opposite direction from Homer. The phrase “there is no way to step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary which somehow takes account of *all possible* vocabularies, all possible ways of judging and feeling” articulates a clear policy of “contingency” as exclusion. Here Rorty is offering but one conception of narrative contingency and a matching role for language; of the multiple stories of language, morality, and future, he is telling the version that would form and vitalize his liberal utopia. Divinity in narrative provides meaning for human practices that relationally move forward into an uncertain future. Rorty’s contingency is a discontinuity that fragments the relational grounds of those practices by undoing the notion that a single, unifying (metaphysical) vocabulary exists that can carry people together toward their uncertain end. The summary problem is that the ends of otherness and other-sympathy symbolized by Solidarity and Freedom are to be built from discontinuity and narrative disunity.

That he proposes an *end*, in the teleological sense, Rorty denies (16); his utopia is an endlessly proliferating Freedom rather than a historical convergence on Truth. But judging by his own examples, Solidarity and Freedom are in fact *teloi*, despite objections. Rorty provides “the discovery of truth,” and “the emancipation of humanity” as examples of *teloi* (17), implying a reference back to his Solidarity and Freedom as *ends* of “Realization” and “Emancipation.” The objection that endless proliferation protects Rorty’s program from a final *telos* falls short because the emphasis on *endlessness*

translates as an immanentization of the transcendent teleological symbol of Eternity in an Afterlife, or, at the very least, as the immanentized achievement of a new, Emancipated Age as an end-time of proliferation. The most important qualification is that Solidarity and Freedom are articulated as the ends of a *language program*; here is the centrality of the “contingency of language.” Rorty envisions his utopian program progressing toward Solidarity and Freedom *after* a moratorium on metaphysical symbolic action. The justification is centrally epistemic: that we cannot position ourselves for the discovery of a unifying meta-language, means we should eject the relevant vocabulary and, with that blockade removed, map a new end through a revised discursive program. Understanding this *epistemic justification* provides a clear view on Rorty’s “contingency” and the discourse ethic of closure it promotes.

Further evidence comes in Rorty’s description of language as a game. Rorty writes that when we rid ourselves of the notion of language as “description of the world,” to a conception of “language games as wholes, games which we do not choose between by reference to criteria, the idea that the world decides which descriptions are true can no longer be given a clear sense,” so that it becomes “hard for us to think that our vocabulary is somehow already out there in the world, waiting for us to discover it” (6). Essentialism is a “temptation” in language produced by the general temptation “to think of the world, or the human self, as possessing an intrinsic nature, an essence...to privilege some one among the many languages in which we habitually describe the world or ourselves.” As long as we hold on to this idea, Rorty argues, we will be caught in the traditional philosophical search for criteria by which to judge these various vocabularies as having the “desirable feature” of “fitting the world,” or “expressing the real nature of

the self.” Justifying resignation in light of the unknown, Rorty argues if we could reconcile with the idea that descriptions of reality and the human self are constructed through vocabulary “rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary,” then we can come to the realization that “*languages* are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences” (6-7).

From this basic stance on language, Rorty makes specific proposals involving the removal of metaphysical vocabulary terms. Consider the following quote as a clear example of his overall proposal on vocabulary:

To say there is no such thing as intrinsic nature is not to say that the intrinsic nature of reality has turned out, surprisingly enough, to be extrinsic. It is to say that the term “intrinsic nature” is one which it would pay us not to use, an expression that has caused more trouble than it has been worth. To say that we should drop the idea of truth as out there waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have discovered that, out there, there is no truth. It is to say that our purposes would be served best by ceasing to see truth as a deep matter, as a topic of philosophical interest, or “true” as a term which repays “analysis.” “The nature of truth” is an unprofitable topic, resembling in this respect “the nature of man” and “the nature of God”...But this claim about relative profitability, in turn, is just the recommendation that we in fact *say* little about these topics, and see how we get on (8).

Rorty’s compromise - that the nature of humanness, God, and truth may be out there, but we should say very little about them and see how we do - only works for one side. Not only does it promote a turn away from vital questions of human existence, it also cuts out an entire argument community and a set of metaphysical terms that could be used in potential, future dialogues. Rorty’s contingency disables dialogic agency at its most basic level - the ability to raise questions and articulate terms of experience and value that have meaning for *me*, and so, potentially, for an *other*. What Rorty either ignores or omits is that a thing not symbolically acted upon in human community atrophies, and eventually, may die from neglect. The same is true for dialogues. If the allowable vocabulary no

longer makes metaphysical terms available for argument and discovery, the meaning of community and “otherness” must go through a steady progression of reduction and decline, until the coming of a symbolically cleansed, argumentative new age. For the surviving dialogues, even those that are seemingly open-ended (rather than pre-fabricated) the potential outcomes will be reduced to an immanent set of possibilities. The prohibition against metaphysical dialogue through “contingency” is necessary for the *end* of Emancipation.<sup>4</sup>

Rorty praises the German idealists, French revolutionaries, and Romantic poets for having the common vision that “human beings whose language changed so that they no longer spoke of themselves as responsible to nonhuman powers would thereby become a new kind of human beings” (7). The method this opens up is one where people “describe and redescribe “lots and lots of things in new ways” until they have created language

<sup>4</sup> The prohibition against metaphysical questions (exemplified by Rorty) is typical of ideological proposals. Consider Marx’s prohibition in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: “The charges against communism made from a religious... standpoint, are not deserving of serious examination” (225). Marx, Karl. “Manifesto of the Communist Party.” The Portable Karl Marx. Ed. Eugene Kamena. New York: Penguin, 1983. Voegelin (1987) has noted that such passages in Marx and similar thinkers mark a recognition of “the validity of metaphysical questions,” but a refusal “to consider them because such consideration would make their irrational opening impossible” (25). Voegelin, Eric. The New Science of Politics: An Introduction. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987. Noting the potentially damaging effects of metaphysical questions on ideological proposals, Voegelin (1968) argues that Marx’s prohibition against them is a “swindle:” “In view of the reality of the order of being in which we live, Marx’s prohibition of questions had to be characterized as an attempt to protect the ‘intellectual swindle’ of his speculation from exposure by reason; but from the standpoint of the adept Marx the swindle was the ‘truth’ that he had created through his speculation, and the prohibition of questions was designed to defend the truth of the system against the unreason of men” (57). Voegelin, Eric. Science, Politics and Gnosticism. Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1968. I am interested in the prohibition in a more general sense as an endangerment to genuine dialogue.

patterns that the new generation will be tempted to adopt.<sup>5</sup> The aim is not to have that new generation work “piece by piece,” analyzing each concept and testing thesis after thesis, but rather to act pragmatically, making recommendations like “try thinking of it this way,” or “try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting questions.” This may sound like a heuristic use of language, and in several ways it is. But it is a strangled heuristic. It is already clear that Rorty proposes we not talk about metaphysical terms and see how we do from there. “Try thinking of it in this way” suggests to the new generation that they *not* think about it *the other way*, and “substitute futile traditional questions with new, interesting questions,” means ask *these* questions from now on, and *don’t ask* the old, meddling (metaphysical) ones. The important point is that Rorty attaches his proposal to a historical method as *progress toward a discursive end*, a new vocabulary with new questions to be passed down generation to generation. If Rorty wishes for progress toward a liberal utopia with an ever-proliferating Solidarity and Freedom as the end, he will have to derive that Solidarity and Freedom from a constraint of public discourse.

Historical progress ( what Rorty describes as a “nonteleological view of intellectual history”) becomes a process of symbolic death and fertilization: “Old metaphors are constantly dying off into literalness, and then serving as a platform and foil for new metaphors,” an analogy which helps us to think of “our language” “as something that took shape as a result of a great number of contingencies” (16). It is important to drop the idea of “language as representations,” and thus “de-divinize the world,” accepting the

<sup>5</sup> Rorty notes that new generations will use terms largely borrowed from the previous generation, so that cultures will adopt new terms, and then have those terms challenged by the “avant-garde,” a process of changing present terminologies in the development of one culture after another (56).

argument that “truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence on vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths,” an abandonment of the “‘intuition’ that truth is ‘out there’” (21). For Rorty if we can avoid (on the impulse of thinkers such as Nietzsche and Freud) treating *anything* as quasi divinity, or worthy of our worship, and treat language, conscience, and community as products of time and chance, that will be the opening of our fate, of history, to chance (22). Again, historical “progress” is marked by a process of dying metaphysical terms and rising (immanent) contingencies in language. Placing a consistent emphasis on *removal* describes Rorty’s language program with great clarity: it is a progressive ejection and deterioration of metaphysical terms to be handed down from generation to generation as a set of questions *not* to ask any more, and a collection of possible dialogues *not* to engage in.

Rorty’s prophetic intellectual voice articulates a discourse program of boundaries and prohibitions to describe and justify movement to a final age of proliferating Emancipation, Solidarity, and Freedom. Immanent “contingency” works in this justification as a necessary departure from the unprofitable *unknowns* and *unknowability* of metaphysical questions, which are traditional blockades to human progress. The obvious violation of genuine dialogue is the denial of discourse as a search for Absolutes, and the related restriction on what questions can be raised, and what terms can be acted upon. The problem for potential interlocutors is a matter of participatory constraint and other-inclusion. By closing off the discourse of “nonintellectuals” and others who wish to speak of and ask about metaphysics, Rorty has shortened the reach of his Solidarity, and created an outside “other” arguer that has no voice or place in the surviving dialogues of

his liberal utopia. The next section will reveal that dialogues formed under constraints against metaphysics (as they would be under *any* constraints) are fabricated and necessarily pre-determined.

### **Moral Discourse in Rorty's Public Sphere**

Rorty's contingency of language produces a contingent moral community pictured within a new public sphere. The product of Rorty's new vocabulary of "redescription" is a separation from the search for foundations, forging a difference between old cultures of metaphysics and new cultures of "liberalism," one which would be "enlightened, secular, through and through... one in which no trace of divinity remained, either in the form of a divinized world or a divinized self." Through a process of de-divinization, this culture would drop the ideas of "holiness," "devotion to truth," and "fulfillment of the deepest needs of the spirit," ideally culminating in "our nor longer being able to see any use for the notion that finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings might derive the meanings of their lives from anything except other finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings" (45). The understanding of language in the de-divinized public sphere finds it trapped in the present standpoint of our current, temporary, and historically conditioned vocabulary without an external standpoint from which to judge the moral qualities of what we are saying (48).

In fact, the term "morality" becomes useful to us only "insofar as we can cease to think of morality as the voice of the divine part of ourselves and instead think of it as the voice of ourselves as members of a community, speakers of a common language" (59). This shift in thinking makes it impossible to consider the question of ours as a "moral society," or that there might be something common to the individual and the larger

community such as “humanity” or “intrinsic nature.” Instead society becomes conceived of “as a band of eccentrics collaborating for purposes of mutual protection rather than as a band of fellow spirits united by a common goal” (59).

Here Rorty commits to a falsified moral pluralism. He seeks to encourage an “increasing willingness to live with plurality and to stop asking for universal validity,” with “freely arrived at agreement as agreement on how to accomplish common purposes... but I want to see these common purposes against the background of an increasing sense of the radical diversity of private purposes...” (67). In this condition we become content to consider “true” whatever the “upshot” of free and open encounters is. Problematically, the way to establish such “*free and open encounters*” is to *remove talk of foundations* which presuppose a natural order of topics and arguments and overrides the need for new vocabularies to confront old ones (52). Typically, Rorty will derive Freedom from constraining dialogue. Of course he has simply repeated the problem. Proposing *these* new secular terms instead of *those* old metaphysical terms will have the inevitable result of establishing a new hierarchy of topics and questions. A close look at Rorty’s “ideal liberal state” reveals a public sphere with questionable potential for a truly “open” speech situation:

A liberal society is one whose ideals can be fulfilled by persuasion rather than force, by reform rather than revolution, by the free and open encounters of present linguistic and other practices with suggestions for new practices. But this is to say that an ideal liberal society is one which has no purpose except freedom, no goal except a willingness to see how such encounters go and to abide by the outcome. It has no purpose except to make life easier for poets and revolutionaries while seeing to it that they make life harder for others only by words, and not deeds. It is a society whose hero is the strong poet and the revolutionary because it recognizes that it is what it is, has the morality it has, not because it approximates the will of God or the nature of man but because certain poets and revolutionaries of the past spoke as they did (61).



In Burkean terms, Rorty has simply re-weighted the old vocabulary of privileged terms. Rorty's distinction between persuasion and force is immediately problematic. It would be naïve to say that persuasion cannot be forceful, and it is troubling to note that rejoining these two ideas reveals the possibility that "might" in speech and argument makes for the moral "right" in Rorty's state. The response may be made that Rorty ensures against this by offering the ideal of placing one argument up against another in a free and open speech situation, "seeing how it goes," and then abiding by the outcome. This is fine, but in Rorty's construct the arguments and dialogues are rigged. In a de-divinized state the arguments have to be on topics *not* metaphysical, and the dialogic investigations have to be directed away from matters of foundations and holiness, so that "abiding by the outcome" means abiding by the decisions of dialogues that have worked through allowable topics employing allowable terms. In Rorty's speech situation the crime is not that some terms and questions have been privileged over other ones, but that they have been removed from consideration altogether. The simultaneous violation of genuine dialogue and genuine community is that inclusion and other-turning are restricted to those arguers and language-users who ask those questions *I* would ask, and use the terms *I* use, and can reach the same potential set of conclusions that *I* might reach. What is to be done with the population of metaphysicians who are moved to the outside of this restrained argument community is an issue Rorty does not address.

The summary idea of this chapter is that Rorty's prophetic intellectual voice articulates a representative ideological threat to genuine dialogue. Whether this threat is articulated through utopian or progressivist variants, the pervasive problem is the sacrifice of spirit in the name of ethical progress. This proposed sacrifice excludes the

“other” metaphysician and metaphysical arguments by portraying these as *oppositional* barriers to human development . Recall Buber’s description of “false” dialogue, where “the participants do not really have each other in mind, or they have each other in mind only as general and abstracted opponents and not as particular beings,” so that there “is no real turning to the other, no real desire to establish mutuality” (Friedman 1987, 143). Rorty’s metaphysical classism, his (de-divinized) narrative disunity, and his proposal to eject metaphysical terms, demonstrate his ethic of “otherness” and “sensitivity” as falsely dialogic. His polemic against metaphysics and his various prohibitions make the establishment of mutuality through other-turning impossible because there exists an enormous group of (“nonintellectual”) others that he must turn *away* from. Considering the description of immanentization in the last chapter, and considering the hope to develop a terrestrial paradise by a reduction of spirit, ideological programs generally mandate this turn away from metaphysical “others” not part of the envisioned solution. Kirk (1969) writes that “For the ideologue, humankind may be divided into two classes: the comrades for Progress, and the foes attached to reactionary interests” (157). Rorty’s classism is an example, and his notion of progress as a successive death of spirit was the target of Voegelin’s general argument against ideological “progress” in the previous chapter. In summary, ideological prophesy is thoroughly antithetical to dialogue. Genuine dialogue, as a search for Absolutes, is rejected outright, and the general ethical spirit of dialogue as inclusive, other-turning, and other-recognizing also suffers under ideological restrictions.

Socratic contingency and ignorance provide a move away from the discursive *program* of the ideological prophet who, by overseeing dialogues, promotes “progress”

toward a certain final end, and toward a practice of genuine dialogue based on an uncertain, open-ended, and inclusive ethic. The next chapter focuses on *contingency as uncertainty* in definitional practices. In Socratic and Aristotelian notions of definitional practice, I demonstrate that uncertainty and unknowability are not justifications for departing from Absolute searches, but rather, starting points for an ethics of dialogic practice.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONTINGENCY AS UNCERTAINTY: VIRTUE AND ARGUMENTS FROM DEFINITION

The previous chapter revealed the immanentist view on the contingency of language as a justification for departing from symbolic metaphysical action. Violating the uncertain time of the divine moral quest, immanent contingency projects progress, or a perfected end, through restrictions on dialogue. In this chapter I seek an ethic of *contingency as uncertainty* more fitting to the open-endedness of genuine dialogue. Through the example of definitional arguments (arguments that seek essential terms like Justice and Piety), I demonstrate that those who wish to continue investigations of permanence think about contingency as the challenge of an uncertain future. By focusing on the *ends* of definitional arguments as contingent, I describe their successful mediation between the local (especially as they maintain experiential examples as the basis for argumentative discovery) and the Absolute.<sup>1</sup> I begin with an introduction to arguments from definition and their uncertain ends. Next, I analyze Socrates' argument from definition, the "What is F?" question, introducing its form, then moving into a discussion of how it mediates between examples and essences. Finally, to elaborate the claims on contingency made in my analysis of the "What is F?" question, I offer Aristotle's comments on defining virtue terms over time.

<sup>1</sup> I depart somewhat from the Aristotelian tradition in rhetoric that has equated contingency with probability (something probably true or probably likely, as opposed to demonstrative or necessary), an idea that has also largely been tied to opinion. In my study, contingency as uncertainty constitutes a collaborative discovery of contingent truth through a testing of opinion and other materials of experience.

## Introduction to Arguments From Definition

A well-known proponent of definitional arguments in contemporary rhetorical theory is Richard Weaver. Weaver establishes a hierarchy of ethical arguments from most to least ethical, with arguments from genus and definition at the top. For Weaver (1953) genus and definition reveal a way of thinking about reality and experience expressed in the language of philosophy as “being,” where the world is viewed in terms of things belonging to certain classes and having certain essences (86). Summarizing definitional arguments in *Language Is Sermonic* (1970) he writes “Definition is an attempt to capture essence” that deals with “fundamental and unchanging properties” (209). This is the basic aim of Socrates’ “What is F?” question, as we will see momentarily.

Weaver also provides a general description for the examples used in Socrates’ definitional arguments. Socrates targets examples in refuting the proposed definitions of his interlocutors, but examples are also the materials he uses to discover his own responses. This incongruity will be resolved as a matter of mediation in the section of this chapter on definitional knowledge. That resolution is previewed by Weaver’s second most ethical argument, the argument from similitude. Similitude is a way of thinking about reality through “relationship,” where we see that something has a significant resemblance to something else. Implying a fellowship with arguments from definition, Weaver writes that proponents of similitude believe “in a oneness of the world” and look toward “some final, transcendental unity” (57). This idea of “oneness” comes from an emphasis on similarity and relationship, so that “those who argue from similitude invoke essential (though not exhaustive) correspondences” (56-57). We will discover that Socrates binds definition and similitude together in the “What is F?” question: his aims

are essentialist (definitional), and the way he uses examples (similitude) in his refutations employs the materials of human experience in a way consistent with those aims.

Finally, Weaver frames the *uncertain ends* of definitional arguments as a helpful way for my analysis through his description of dialectic as a method of definitional investigation. For Weaver (1953), dialectic precedes rhetoric as an art of defining terms. Dialectic is a method of investigation whose object is the establishment of truth about doubtful propositions.” But, there is also a branch of dialectic that involves “choice or avoidance” and this is where rhetoric is found joined. This is a rhetoric “involving questions of policy,” and the dialectic which precedes it will determine *not the application of positive terms* (what is “iron” or “gold”) *but terms that are subject to contingent evaluation* (what is “good,” or what belongs to the category of the “just”) (16). For Weaver, any piece of persuasion contains as its first process a dialectic establishing terms of policy (17). A term of policy is essentially a term of *motion*, that acts upon the congruency between compulsion and the soul: “The soul’s perception of goodness, justice, and divinity will depend on its proper tendency, while at the same time contacts with these in discourse confirm and direct that tendency.” Dialectical terms “direct” these tendencies by creating motion in the human soul toward the good or the bad (17). Weaver’s description of dialectic hints at the possibility that other forms of definitional investigation - Socrates’ “What is F?” question, Socrates’ elenchos, and genuine moral dialogue - aim at uncertain ends as well. By describing the uncertain ends of the “What is F?” question, and the use of examples for the discovery of arguments and refutations, the next two sections demonstrate the contingency and practicability of Socrates’ version of the definitional argument.

## Socrates' Argument From Definition

The “What is F?” question<sup>2</sup> is articulated by Socrates primarily in Plato’s early dialogues, where Socrates places great emphasis on it. Socrates’ practice of definition is part of the larger Socratic elenchos, which is defined and discussed in the next chapter. In his well-known treatment of Socratic Definition, Richard Robinson (1941) points out that when Socrates asks the “What is F?” question, (asking, for example, what “piety” is in the *Euthyphro*) he demands that his interlocutor tell him what that virtue is “in and of itself,” not what it is in terms of other things (52- 53). Moreover, it is implied in dialogues such as the *Euthyphro* (6e) that our knowledge of F (piety in this case) is prior to our knowledge of its cases (instances of piety). Socrates says that when Euthyphro defines F for him, he will use it as a paradigm to determine which things are F and which are not. Robinson writes that “the impression vaguely given by the early dialogues as a whole is that Socrates thinks that there is no truth whatever about X that can be known before we know what X is” (53).

At *Euthyphro* 4e-5d, Euthyphro claims moral superiority over others when he says he has “precise” knowledge of divine things and how they are structured. This is important because Euthyphro is about to enter court to prosecute his own father for murder.

Consider the importance Socrates and Euthyphro together place on accuracy of a moral thesis in this case (4e-5a):

<sup>2</sup> Different scholars refer to this question variably as “What is F?” (where F stands in for the Greek word, *phusis*, or “nature”), “What is F-ness?,” and “What is X?” When quoting from direct sources I will quote the scholar’s use of X or F verbatim, and these uses should be taken as interchangeable. When I am discussing Socratic definition outside of direct quotations, I will use “What is F?”

SOCRATES: But you, by heaven! Euthyphro, you think that you have such an accurate knowledge of things divine, and what is holy and unholy, that, in circumstances such as you describe, you can accuse your father? You are not afraid that you yourself are doing an unholy deed?

EUTHYPHRO: Why, Socrates, if I did not have an accurate knowledge of all that, I should be good for nothing, and Euthyphro would be no different from the general run of men.

Brickhouse and Smith (2000) note “Euthyphro’s claim of superiority over other people is not just that he has *some* knowledge about divine things but the kind of knowledge that allows him to recognize truths others would miss, or at least misjudge,” meaning that Euthyphro takes himself to be an expert about piety (110). To test his knowledge of what piety is, and hopefully to be taught this for his own improvement, Socrates asks his “What is F?” question of Euthyphro (5c-d):

So, in the name of heaven, tell me now about the matter you just felt sure you knew quite thoroughly. State what you take piety and impiety to be with reference to murder and all other cases. Is not the holy always one and the same thing in every action, and, again, is not the unholy always opposite to the holy, and like itself? And as unholiness does it not always have its one essential form, which will be found in everything that is unholy?

Euthyphro answers that what he is doing now, “prosecuting the wrongdoer who commits a murder or a sacrilegious robbery, or sins in any point like that, whether it be your father, or your mother, or whoever it may be,” is holy and pious (5e-6a). But Socrates refutes these as mere examples of holy deeds, and gets Euthyphro to admit that there a multitude of other holy things as well (6b-e). In his refutation, Socrates demonstrates that the sort of knowledge he is after is not simply specific to one or two cases of piety, but would allow him to judge all instances of piety. On this basis Socrates asks his question again, with a clarification. Recall *Euthyphro* 6d-e:

SOCRATES: Well, bear in mind that what I asked of you was not to tell me one or two out of all the numerous actions that are holy; I wanted you to tell me what is the



essential form of holiness which makes all holy actions holy. I believe you held that there is one ideal form by which unholy things are all unholy, and by which all holy things are holy. Do you remember that?

EUTHYPHRO: I do.

SOCRATES: Well then, show me what, precisely, this ideal is, so that, with my eye on it, and using it as a standard, I can say that any action done by you or anybody else is holy if it resembles this ideal, or, if it does not, can deny that it is holy.

Euthyphro responds that “what is pleasing to the gods is holy, and what is not pleasing to them is unholy” (7a). Socrates famously refutes this definition on the basis that the gods may disagree on what things are right and wrong, and that these disputes mean the gods may love and hate, or be pleased and displeased, by the same things (7d-8a). And so the refutations of Euthyphro’s definitions (via examples) continue in this manner.

Other primary examples appear in the *Laches*, the *Charmides*, and the *Hippias Major*. Consider the exchanges between Socrates and Laches on courage as another example of what Socrates seeks by the “What is F?” question. Proceeding from the agreed-upon need to understand the nature of virtue before it can be taught, the dialogue between Socrates and Laches turns to that part of virtue that is called “courage.” Socrates asks, “Then, Laches, suppose that we first set about determining the nature of courage, and in the second place proceed to inquire how the young men may attain this quality by the help of studies and pursuits. Tell me, if you can, what is courage?” (190e).

Laches responds by saying that he who “does not run away but remains at his post and fights...” is a man of courage (190e). Socrates seems mildly pleased by the answer, but says that he must not have asked the question correctly, because Laches has not answered the question he intended to ask. Moreover, Socrates rejects the *example* of

courage that Laches has offered on the grounds that the Scythians are said to fight and fly, retreating and pursuing, at the same time, so that Laches' response *only* applies to heavy-armored soldiers, but not to *all* soldiers (191a-c). Blaming his own question on Laches' partial answer, Socrates asks again: "...For I meant to ask you not only about the courage of the heavily-armed soldiers, but about the courage of cavalry and every other type of soldier – and not only who are courageous in war, but who are courageous in perils by sea, and who in disease, or in poverty, or again in politics, are courageous, and not only who are courageous against pain or fear, but mighty to contend against desires and pleasures" (191 d-e). By way of clarification, and similar to the request for a *paradigmatic* definition that appears in the *Euthyphro*, Socrates tells Laches "I was asking about courage and cowardice in general. And I will begin with courage, and once more ask what is that common quality, which is the same in all cases, and which is called courage?" (191e-192a). Laches responds "I should say that courage is a sort of endurance of the soul, if I am to speak of the universal nature which pervades them all" (192c), but Socrates rejects this definition based on the claim that not every kind of endurance is to be deemed courage. For example, when one who knows he will be successful in a conflict "endures," this is not an instance of courage (192c-193d).

Similarly in the *Charmides* Socrates asks "In order, then, that we may form a conjecture whether you have temperance abiding in you or not, tell me...what, in your opinion, is temperance?" (159a-b). Charmides' definition of temperance is "doing all things orderly and quietly – for example, walking in the streets, and talking, and indeed doing everything in that way. In a word...I should answer that, in my opinion, temperance is a kind of quietness" (159b). Socrates' refutation of this definition of

“temperance” is, once again, that it is an example that does not apply to all cases. After all, Socrates argues, temperance is held to be in the class of the good, yet in activities such as writing, reading, learning, deliberating, playing the lyre, wrestling, and boxing, quickness, not quietness, are considered goods (159c-160e).

What emerges from these examples is that the importance of knowing the definition of a moral property (its F-ness) is that such knowledge will provide the expertise required to judge *all* cases of F-ness. For this reason, Socrates is committed to defining virtues as essences and paradigms. This is clear from the way he clarifies, via re-statement, his questions to Euthyphro and Laches, especially in his requests for “the essential form,” and “ideal” of holiness in the *Euthyphro*.<sup>3</sup>

But Socrates’ consistent refutations of his interlocutor’s examples seems to insure that he will not get the answers he is looking for. Neither does Socrates seem to have the answers himself. The result is that dialogues in which Socrates asks “What is F?” usually

<sup>3</sup> The claim that Socrates’ “What is F?” question reveals an ontological belief is a controversial one in Socratic studies. John Beversluis (1974) points out that two “radically different accounts” co-exist among scholars as to the commitment that Socrates’ “What is F?” question denotes. One group claims that the question seeks the mere meaning of a word, such as “piety,” so that the request for an *eidos* need not be taken as attached to any ontological commitment. Another group sees the “What is F?” question as centrally and vitally concerned with the discovery of a “real definition,” the *eidos* of the thing “piety,” and that accordingly “the ontological character of the question is to be regarded as central and irreducible” (332). Beversluis, John. “Socratic Definition.” American Philosophical Quarterly 11 (1974) : 331-336. My analysis of the textual examples provided here, as well as Socratic ignorance in the next chapter, defend the idea that Socrates does, in fact, ask a centrally ontological question. For an example of the claim that the “What is F?” question seeks the mere meaning of a word, see Cross, R.C. “Logos and Form in Plato.” Studies in Plato’s Metaphysics. Ed. R.E. Allen. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965. 27-29. For an example argument supporting the ontological stance see Beversluis, John. “Does Socrates Commit the Socratic Fallacy?” American Philosophical Quarterly 24 (1987) : 219.

end in aporia, with an adjournment rather than a conclusion. At *Euthyphro* 15d-16a we have a primary example:

SOCRATES: And so we must go back again, and start from the beginning to find out what the holy is. As for me, I never will give up until I know. Ah! Do not spurn me, but give me your mind with all your might now at length to tell me the absolute truth, for if anybody knows, of all mankind, it is you... If you did not know precisely what is holy and unholy, it is unthinkable that...you ever would have moved to prosecute your aged sire on a charge of murder... But now I am sure that you think you know exactly what is holy and what is not. So tell me, peerless Euthyphro, and do not hide it from me what you judge it to be.

EUTHYPRHO: Another time, then, Socrates, for I am in a hurry, and must be off this minute.

SOCRATES: What are you doing, my friend? Will you leave, and dash me down from the mighty expectation I had of learning from you what is holy and what is not...?

Similarly, having failed to come to an acceptable definition of courage in the *Laches*, (199e-200c), Socrates, Nicias, and Laches together have failed in their task of learning what virtue *is* (by learning that part of virtue called “courage”), so that they could teach virtue well to the young. Socrates’ recommendation on whether he should tutor Niceratus at the end of the dialogue is as follows (200e-201d):

And if I had shown in this conversation that I had knowledge which Nicias and Laches have not, then I admit that you would have been right in inviting me to perform this duty, but as we are all in the same perplexity, why should one of us be preferred to another? I certainly think that no one should... I maintain, my friends, that every one of us should seek out the best teacher whom we can find, first for ourselves who are greatly in need of one, and then for the youths, regardless of expense or anything. But I cannot advise that we remain as we are...

Finally, Socrates’ lamentation at the conclusion of the *Charmides* illustrates the oftentimes frustrating end to his “What is F?” question (175d-176a):

And yet, after finding us so easy and good-natured, the inquiry is still unable to discover the truth, but mocks us to a degree, and has insolently proved the inutility of temperance or wisdom is truly described by a definition such as we have spent all this time in discussing and fashioning together...

But for your sake, Charmides, I am very sorry – that you, having such beauty and such wisdom and temperance of soul, should have no profit nor good in life from your wisdom and temperance. And still more am I grieved about the charm which I learned with so much pain, and so little profit... in order to produce a thing which is nothing worth. I think indeed that there is a mistake, and that I must be a bad inquirer, for wisdom and temperance I believe to be really a great good... I would rather advise you to regard me simply as a fool who is never able to reason out anything, and to rest assured that the more wise and temperate you are, the happier you will be.

What we see by the above textual examples is that the “What is F?” question involves Socrates and his interlocutors in a discourse where the difficult pursuit of an essential moral definition is productive of refutation after refutation leading up to a final adjournment. What ties the discourse in knots is that Socrates refutes a given example for the definition of holiness or courage *with another example*. What Socrates is up to, I argue in the next section, is a practice of mediation. The emphasis for analyzing that mediation falls on *examples* and their epistemic importance to Socrates. From the above, it would seem that examples have little epistemic value for his purpose of defining. But a closer look reveals Socrates’ employment of examples as consistent with the contingent and mediated aims of definitional argument.

### **The Priority of Definitional Knowledge Debate: Resolving the “Socratic Fallacy”**

The Priority of Definitional Knowledge debate (PD hereafter) focuses on the epistemic problem of examples in Socratic definition. A close look at the debate outlines considerations on the epistemic value of examples for Socrates, and the sort of mediation he accomplishes by their use in argument. Peter Geach (1966) began the PD dispute in a famous article where he deemed Socrates’ way of seeking moral definitions a *fallacy*, “a style of mistaken thinking” based on two assumptions: 1) that you must know what the general criterion is for a thing being “F” in order to know that you are predicating it correctly, and 2) that it is no use to try and arrive at the meaning of “F” by giving

examples of it (371). Benson (1990) summarizes the problem of PD as follows: “If A fails to know what F-ness is, then A fails to know anything about F-ness” (19).

Brickhouse and Smith (2000) offer a summary that has closer ties to what I have described as the purpose of the “What is F?” question: (PD) Only if one knows the definition of some quality (F-ness) can one know anything about F-ness or F-things, including whether any instance of F-ness is really an instance” (113).

Scholars who wish to attribute PD to Socrates point to several passages that seem to indicate Socrates’ belief that knowledge of F must be prior to knowledge of anything about F, including whether a particular case is an instance of F. Geach (1966) ascribes PD to Socrates through some example passages I have quoted above, such as from the *Euthyphro*, where Socrates claims that Euthyphro must know what the pious *is* in order to judge his prosecution of his own father as a pious act (4e-5a; 15d-16a). When one adds the requirement that Euthyphro must defend his knowledge of the pious not by means of examples, but by a formal definition, then PD apparently sticks to Socrates. John Beverlsuis (1974) offers one of the more lucid arguments in favor of PD (later he will change his mind). He writes that Socrates’ theory of definition “requires that a knowledge of the *eidōs* is a necessary condition for the ability to recognize instances of it,” yet he continually assesses the definitions offered by his interlocutors based on whether he thinks they are compatible with instances and particular cases (336). By this means, Socrates rejects conventional definitions (based in examples and normative views) on the basis of previously established examples and normative views. Beverlsuis points out that Socrates cannot simultaneously hold that knowledge of the *eidōs* (say, of piety) is “a necessary condition for the ability to recognize instances” (of piety), *and* that a

satisfactory definition will be based on previously agreed-upon instances of piety (336). In short, Socrates cannot devalue the epistemic status of examples and conventional views on things like piety, courage, or justice, then reject the proposed definitions of piety, courage, or justice based on examples and conventions. Here, Beversluis (1974) clearly articulates the issue of mediation relevant to examples and Absolutes in essentialist discourse.

Beversluis would reverse his position (1987) and argue that we *do not* have good reason to attribute PD to Socrates, offering further clarity by his reversal. Beversluis claims that if Socrates truly believes “that it is impossible to search for a definition of *F* by means of examples of things that are *F*, he is guilty of repeated self-contradiction; for that is exactly what he urges his interlocutors to do in every early dialogue in which the What-is-*F* question is raised” (212). Turning to the texts, Beversluis notes *Laches* 190e, where Socrates responds to Laches’ definition of the courageous man – he who “remains at his post and fights against the enemy” – not by immediately rebuking Laches for appealing to an example of a courageous action, but instead by *accepting* his example, then producing additional examples himself, such as courage amid perils at sea, in disease, poverty, and so on (212) (*Laches* 191d-e). “Thereupon,” Beversluis writes, Socrates “exhorts Laches to attend to this inventory of particular cases and search for the common character which is the same in each” (212). Similarly, at *Charmides* 159c-160b Socrates refutes Charmides’ definition of temperance as “quietness,” “by producing examples of temperate actions which do not require quietness but quickness and agility, and then urges him to resume his search for a definition by investigating a wider range of cases” (213). Euthyphro is directed toward further cases of piety as the basis of his

continued examination with Socrates in the same manner (*Euthyphro* 6d9-e1) (213). The claim Beversluis advances on this basis is that Socrates does not shun examples “until he has discovered the definition of the relevant moral or evaluational term,” but rather “habitually operates on the opposite methodological principle that it is by means of a scrutiny of examples that the definition is to be achieved. For only by examining diverse instantiations of *F* can the inquirer be in a position to discern the *eidos* which is the ‘same in all cases,’ ‘includes all the various uses of the term,’ and constitutes ‘the universal nature that pervades them all’” (213; *Laches* 191e-192b).

Beversluis’ argument indicates that Socrates holds examples to be of a much higher epistemic status than advocates of PD claim. This does not mean his practice avoids criticism of examples, as has been made obvious by the foregoing examples of “What is *F*?” quoted from the dialogues. Beversluis notes, however, that Socrates’ rejection of examples occurs only in “one exceptional and methodologically isolated context, namely, whenever his interlocutor offers an example *as an answer* to the What is *F*? question” (213). While he “never tolerates” this move, Socrates does usually accept the example *as an example*, revealing that rather than holding contempt for the particular case, he holds “*a context-dependent and context-provoked protest against confusing definition with enumeration of instances...*” (213, emphasis mine). Here is Socrates’ definitional mediation.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> By “mediation,” I am relying on the definition I provided in the first chapter. By recognizing the locality of argumentative discovery from examples, Socrates makes his definitional practice practical. But he does not overemphasize locality in a way that sacrifices the ideal standards of the discourse.



Beverluis' argument is in concert with the arguments of Gregory Vlastos on this matter, and their combined perspective is notable for its currency in the literature (Benson 1990, 21). Vlastos' (1994) addition to Beverluis can be summarized in his statement that, in Socrates' method of inquiry, "nothing is ever 'known through itself' but only 'through other things' and there is always a security gap between the Socratic thesis and its supporting reasons" (56). There are "knowledge gaps," for example, between the *eidos* of a virtue – piety, courage, temperance – and examples or instances of that virtue. The gaps produced in knowing virtues through examples are not found by Socrates to be debilitating, but rather "exhilarating" (58). Vlastos argues that "At no time does his method require of him that he produce himself the answers to the questions his interlocutors fail to find," but rather to refute "bogus" beliefs, "and this he does by eliciting from them the beliefs which generate the negation of their false answers" (58). Inasmuch as these beliefs are based in examples and instances, Socrates has to employ further examples to keep the dialogue, and his investigation, going.

The evidence above suggests that Socrates holds examples to be of higher epistemic status than advocates of PD claim. If we were to successfully attribute PD to Socrates, we would have to assign him the belief that if one does not know the definition of piety, courage, temperance, or any other thing, then one cannot know *anything at all* about these terms. But a further examination of the relevant dialogues reveals that Socrates affirms knowledge of examples both for his interlocutors, and offers his own example-based knowledge as a form of response to proposed definitions (Beverluis 1987, 211-215). If Socrates were to truly hold that definitional knowledge was *prior to* knowledge of particular cases (as PD would have it), then he could neither affirm nor articulate any

form of knowledge based in instances and examples. That he clearly does both is central to the arguments above that refute PD (Beverluis, 1987; Vlastos, 1994; see also Brickhouse and Smith 2000, 109-120).

Resolving the PD debate in favor of examples-as-epistemologically-valuable has implications for the practicability of definitional arguments. The example of Socrates shows that they are mediated and contingent. They are mediated in the sense that they discover refutations on the *eidoi* of virtue terms from examples of, and experiences with, those terms. They are contingent in the sense that the *ends* they seek are uncertain. This is evidenced by the aporific conclusions of the *Euthyphro*, *Laches*, and *Charmides*, as well as Socrates' commitment to example after example, filling knowledge gaps as a way to further dialogue. Even as Socrates appears frustrated at the aporific ends of these dialogues, he maintains a commitment to continue the discourse, either by revisiting the issue in future (and we can assume, equally uncertain) dialogues, or by seeking out other teachers and interlocutors for the sake of greater learning. Vlastos (1994) writes that Socrates *has to* accept the *uncertain futurity* of his method because it is a limited discourse. If he wins the argument today, that does not mean he will be right for now and forever; it merely means he may be the better debater, but it "could not show that there is no inconsistency within his own set of beliefs..." "Socrates," Vlastos writes, "could not have been unaware of this uncertainty, built into his instrument of research, which infects all its findings" (57). Rather, Socratic definition *recognizes* this contingency and *retains it as part of its practice*; this will be seen in my discussion on ignorance in the next chapter.

Opposite to immanent contingency, Socratic contingency (as uncertainty) *motivates* a continuous and open-ended dialogue on Absolutes, rather than positing a departure based on the unknown or apparently unknowable. Vlastos (1994) writes that the realization of uncertainty allows for a condition where “if an inquiry should run into *aporia*,” Socrates can “reckon the exercise not failure but incomplete success. Nothing has transpired to show that the unfound answer is unfindable, nor yet to invalidate the fragmentary truths unearthed along the way...” (58). Reflective of the *telos* of the divine moral quest, the ends of Socratic inquiry are contingent in a sense productive of genuine dialogue, a relational practice that unifies interlocutors in a commitment to an extensive and open-ended discourse on the terms in question. Contingency as *uncertainty* is especially important to sustaining the open-endedness of genuine dialogue.

### **Aristotle’s Practice of Virtue Definition**

Adding to the Socratic tradition of defining virtue, there is an additional classical source for this idea worth noting. Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (abbreviated as *NE* hereafter) is the starting point for most examinations of virtue ethics because that work established the prominence of virtue in moral theory. In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle offers commentary on virtue definition that maintains the sense of contingency I am advocating in this chapter. The additional value of this section is that it offers further descriptions of attempts at virtue definitions and the contingent quality of definitional commitments. I rely upon Martha C. Nussbaum’s (1988) observations on this topic, as well as excerpts from the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Nussbaum’s essay is largely an effort to mediate the relativistic turn in virtue ethics by revisiting Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* for thoughts on how the virtues might be

seen as *universal*, while recognizing that arguments, negotiations, and definitions pertaining to the virtues will inevitably be produced locally. The most interesting aspect of her essay, from a rhetorical standpoint, is the way it reads Aristotle in dealing with the tension produced by the search for universality within a given locality, context, or situation, and how that tension plays out in discourse. Through Aristotle, Nussbaum derives a series of experiential spheres for moral discourse, as well as right actions within those spheres. Through experience and action within these spheres, definitions of the relevant virtues go from “thin” to “thick,” as starting points for further discourse.

A partial list of some of “the most important spheres of experience” recognized by Aristotle is as follows (listed by the sphere and its corresponding virtue): Fear of important damages, especially death – courage; bodily appetites and their pleasures – moderation; distribution of limited resources – justice; management of one’s own personal property, where others are concerned – generosity; attitude to slights and damages – mildness of temper; attitude to the good and ill fortune of others – proper judgment (as opposed to enviousness or spitefulness) (Nussbaum 1988, 35).<sup>5</sup> Nussbaum

<sup>5</sup> Nussbaum derives this list from Aristotle’s treatment of examples of the mean in particular virtues in *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.7, a list that he elaborates from 3.5 to the end of 4. In writing on the various virtues Aristotle describes the sphere within which each is experienced, and attempts to name each of its extremes (its excess and deficiency), and its mean. The mean is important as a central part of Aristotle’s definition of virtue, as indicated particularly at *NE* 1106b18-30, where he writes that experiences of emotion such as fear, confidence, desire, anger, or pity experienced “at the right time, toward the right objects, toward the right people, for the right reason, and in the right manner – that is the median and the best course, the course that is the mark of virtue.” The same is true for actions, and, since virtue is concerned with emotions and actions, “virtue is a mean in the sense that it aims at the median,” avoiding the various ways of going wrong, and finding the one way of going right (*NE* 1106b28-30). For more on the broader Aristotelian view of virtue, see the description from *NE* 2.4 to the conclusion of Book 2, where Aristotle defines virtue in terms of species and differentia, and further describes the mean. For an excellent summary of Aristotle’s account of virtue also see MacIntyre,

indicates that Aristotle isolates each of these as spheres of human experience that figure “in more or less any human life, and which more or less any human being will have to make *some* choices rather than others, and act in *some* way rather than some other,” highlighting the importance of experience and judgment in virtuous choice and action (35). This also illustrates the experiential background for the discursive action undertaken by a particular moral agent. What becomes difficult is finding the proper criteria to make sound decisions and take the “right” direction within each sphere, and this problem becomes a discursive one. There is a specific difficulty with naming the virtues in terms of their excesses, their deficiencies, and their means.

For some virtues, the mean and its extremes appear easy to name. Regarding honor, for example, Aristotle writes that “the mean is high-mindedness, the excess is what we might call vanity, and the deficiency is small-mindedness” (*NE* 1107b23-25). But further on honor, Aristotle writes that it can be desired either too much or too little, and here the criteria for properly describing these extremes become slippery: “a man who exceeds in his desires is called ambitious, a man who is deficient unambitious, but there is no name to describe the man in the middle” (1107b25). As a result of this inability to name the mean disposition, we “sometimes call the middle person ambitious and sometimes unambitious; sometimes we praise an ambitious and at other times an unambitious man” (1107b30-1108a). Aristotle explains why we name (or define) a virtue inconsistently, and why we sometimes praise, and sometimes blame the same virtue, as a necessary attempt “in order to see more clearly that the mean is to be praised in all things and that the extremes are neither praiseworthy nor right, but worthy of blame... most of the virtues

Alasdair. After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory (2nd ed). Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1984, 146-164.

and vices have no name, *but for the sake of clarity and easier comprehension we must try to coin names for them...*” (1108a15-20, emphasis mine). This is an important statement on the purpose of at least attempting to define the virtues, and should ring familiar with the above comments on the purposes and ends of Socratic definition. Both Socrates’ “What is F?” question and Aristotle’s attempt to name virtues within universal spheres of human moral experience serve the similar purpose of providing mediation points in efforts at definition. They also re-describe the moral “progress” of immanent, ideological discourse as progress in articulating contingent (uncertain) definitions that extend into a future unknown.

Nussbaum (1988) describes Aristotle’s approach as beginning “from a characterization of a sphere of universal experience and choice, and introducing the virtue name as the name (as yet undefined) of whatever it is to choose appropriately in that area of experience” (36). This name “as yet undefined” serves as a “thin” or “nominal” definition, described by Nussbaum as “whatever it is that being disposed to choose and respond well consists in, in that sphere” (36). The descriptive and active quality of the initial or “thin” definition points to the idea that the relevant virtue is defined, at this point, through the actions of the moral agent in particular circumstances.

Consider Aristotle’s comments on dispositions in regard to money (*NE* 1107b15-25):

In giving and taking money, the mean is generosity, the excess and deficiency are extravagance and stinginess. In these vices excess and deficiency work in opposite ways: an extravagant man exceeds in spending and is deficient in taking, while a stingy man exceeds in taking and is deficient in spending. For our present purposes, we may rest content with an outline and a summary, but we shall later define these qualities more precisely.

The virtue of generosity is defined as these particular actions in a particular context (giving and taking money), but the sphere of experience described here is supposed to have the universal quality of describing a typical human situation. Even so, the limitation noted by Aristotle illustrates the fact that the thin definition is unsatisfactory for this purpose.

The “more precise” definition comes later at *NE* 4.1. In that first chapter of Book 4, Aristotle begins by establishing “generosity” as “the mean within the sphere of material goods,” by which he means value as measured in money (1119b20). In offering a more precise definition of generosity here, Aristotle goes through a detailed exposition on what constitutes this virtue as a mean between the excess of extravagance and the deficiency of stinginess. Most of the treatment focuses on providing more detail toward a developed definition of generosity. One is generous who gives to the right people and takes from the right sources instead of the wrong sources. Giving to the right person, the right amount, at the right time, makes the act of giving noble rather than base. Moreover, the giving will give the generous person pleasure and not pain “for to act in conformity with virtue is pleasant or painless, but certainly not painful” (1120a20-25). Giving to the wrong people means that the generous person will have nothing to give to the right people, and the same implication is true of giving the wrong amount, or giving at the wrong time. An example of the right place to take from is one’s own possessions (1120a30-1120b5). In addition, generosity is relative to a person’s property, so that a generous act does not rely on the amount given; it is possible that a lesser gift can be more generous if it comes from smaller resources (1120b5-10).

This more developed definition of generosity is contrasted with its excess, extravagance. One who is extravagant has many of the features of one who is generous, giving but not taking, but this is done wrongly. Extravagant people tend to take from the wrong sources “because they want to spend, but they are unable to do so with an open hand, since their own resources are soon exhausted.” Moreover, this appetite for giving causes them to ignore what is noble and take indiscriminately from any and all sources, which makes their gifts neither generous nor noble. These are people of the sort who would “make wealthy those that ought to be poor; they would give nothing to people of respectable character but much to those who flatter them or provide them with other kinds of pleasure” (*NE* 1121b-10).

Stinginess is then defined as the opposite of generosity, a condition much worse than extravagance, as extravagance can be cured through proper training, and turned into generosity. The stingy person is incurable, and marked by “deficiency in giving and excess in taking.” Some stingy people are motivated by a fear of having to resort to a wrong doing as a result of not having enough of their own possessions, which results in their miserliness, an excessive reluctance to not give anything to anyone else. Others take “anything from any source” through wrongful occupations such as pimps, gamblers, and highwaymen, all who are motivated by profiteering and “take from the wrong sources and more than they should” (*NE* 1121b15-122a5).

The point of this detailed example is to illustrate the way Aristotle offers, by comparison to the initial “thin” definition, a much fuller treatment of the virtue “generosity” later in the work. Even though this definition is more elaborate, it still relies on behavioral examples of generosity, as well as its excess (extravagance) and deficiency



(stinginess), and descriptions of the experiences typical of agents faced with decisions within this sphere. Moreover, the definition of generosity is offered partly in *contrast* to extravagance and stinginess, so that the mean is defined in terms of what it is not, rather than what it is, in and of itself. In short, Aristotle offers definitions by example, contrast, and experience, just like Socrates. “Progress” from thin to fuller in Aristotelian virtue definition projects into a contingent future much in the same way that Socrates’ dialogues continue past their aporific endings. The similar role of contingency in both conceptions is the *commitment* to uncertain futurity it promotes as an ethic of practice.

In Aristotle, then, the spheres can be seen not only as typical and recurrent realms of human moral choice, but also rich places for moral discourse to flourish. Virtue definition carries on within these universal spheres of experience as a limited, relational human process of developing moral terms, which suggests that “the reference of the virtue terms is fixed by spheres of choice, frequently connected with our finitude and limitation that we encounter in virtue of shared conditions of human experience” (Nussbaum 1988, 37). Here is another contribution to mediation by Aristotle.

Nussbaum (1988) points out that when Aristotle attaches the actual name, or word, associated with a virtue or vice, to a sphere of shared human experience, he establishes the marker of human moral progress as discursive; progress is measured by progression toward a fuller definition of the name or word of a given virtue: “And we can understand progress in ethics, like progress in scientific understanding, to be progress in finding the correct fuller specification of a virtue, isolated by its thin or ‘nominal’ definition” (37). This notion of discourse- or term-based based progress in ethics is part of Aristotle’s broader conception of ethical progress. In *Politics*, Aristotle defends the argument that

laws should be revisable rather than fixed by pointing to evidence of progress toward “greater correctness in our ethical conceptions,” in politics just as in the arts and sciences (Nussbaum, 38; *Politics* 1268b31). In defense of keeping laws flexible enough to change along with moral progress, Aristotle writes:

There is evidence to be found, one might claim, in the facts themselves, for the ancient laws are overly simple and barbaric: the Greeks used to go about carrying arms and purchased their wives from each other, and, one supposes, everything else that has been left over from ancient customs is altogether simple-minded. There is, for instance, the law in Cyme about cases of homicide, that if the plaintiff can get together a certain number of witnesses to the crime from his own kin, then the defendant is guilty of the murder.

In general, all seek for what is good, not for what is ancestral...

In addition it is not even better to leave written laws unchanged. Just as it is impossible in the case of the other arts to write down everything accurately, so it is also in the case of political arrangement. For one must write in universal terms, but actions concern particulars (1268b31-1269a12).

The most important phrases here are “it is impossible... to write down everything accurately,” in politics as well as in all arts, and “one must write in universals, but actions concern particulars.” Taken together, these claims indicate a method of pursuing ethical progress where particular actions are compared to and judged against what is sought as universal, and that what is written of these things (including definitions of moral terms) must reflect the changeability of all of the elements involved – ethical historical progress, human action and choice, and the elusiveness of universal searching. Here, an *open-ended* legal discourse is maintained as the only proper practice for the maintenance of moral human progress. For the same reason arguments from definition must turn agents back to the discourse to preserve the possibility that we might move past the point where we are now, to fuller, and “thicker” definitions.

The idea of embarking on this long and collective search in ethical theory is summarized very well in a quote from Aristotle at the end of his discussion on human nature in *Nicomachean Ethics* I:

This will suffice as an outline of the good: for perhaps one ought to make a general sketch first and fill in the details afterwards. Once a good outline has been made, anyone, it seems, is capable of developing and completing it in detail, and time is a good inventor or collaborator in such an effort (*NE* 1098a20-25).

### **Conclusion**

The summary idea of this chapter is that arguments from definition in Socrates and Aristotle accomplish mediation by promoting an ethic of *contingency as uncertainty*. Being consistent with the *telos* of the divine moral quest, contingency conceived this way makes genuine dialogue possible as an open-ended and inclusive discourse on *being*. By describing the epistemic value of examples, similarities, dissimilarities, and experiences, I have argued that the aim to *essences* in definitional practices does not spell their impossibility. Rather, mediation can occur when examples are allowed to hint at universals through contingency. Nussbaum (1988) writes that attention to the particular situation is fully compatible with attention to universal standards, as evidenced in Aristotle's treatment of the spheres: "The fact that a good and virtuous decision is context-sensitive does not imply that it is right only *relative to*, or *inside*, a limited context... It is right absolutely, objectively, from anywhere in the human world, to attend to the particular features of one's context; and the person who so attends and who chooses accordingly is making, according to Aristotle, the humanly correct decision, period" (45). For this reason, Nussbaum claims, the perspective she advocates is able to capture much of the sensitivity to local conditions that the relativist would desire, while not sacrificing objectivity. Most importantly, Nussbaum notes a discursive sensitivity to

this approach, one that allows for new circumstances to give rise to newer, more concrete measurements of a previously defined virtue, or changed views as to what the virtue itself is. This sensitivity relies on holding all general accounts of the virtues provisionally “as summaries of correct decisions and as guides to new ones” (45). Nussbaum’s comments, and Socrates’ articulation of future discursive commitments post-aporia, elaborate the ideas of “open-endedness” and “uncertain futurity” so central to genuine dialogue, mediation, and contingency.

The discursive outcome of *contingency as uncertainty* is a recognition that *this present* discourse will posit contingent moral theses (such as virtue definitions) that extend *into an unknown future* where they will be exposed to new discourses, arguments, and dialogic testing by others. In Socratic discourse, what actualizes contingency as uncertainty is the disavowal of knowledge, the subject of my next chapter. The next chapter will introduce Socrates’ elenchos (of which the “What is F?” question is a part), and describe the categorization of moral knowledge as uncertain (versus certain) accomplished by Socrates’ disavowal. Ignorance will be identified as a central utterance for making genuine dialogue an enactment of virtue, especially as the *means* by which Socrates is able to turn to other interlocutors as valuable participants in *being*.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE MEANS OF IGNORANCE: SOCRATES' DISAVOWAL OF KNOWLEDGE

I come to the topic of ignorance after a distinction, made in the last two chapters, between immanent and uncertain contingency. The general movement of the study has been away from *certainty*: proof, program histories, perfected futurity, and, in total, the temptation to translate the limitations of local, human epistemology on *being* into an immanentist retreat. Departing Rorty's liberal utopia and the ideological vision at large brought us to contingency as uncertainty as per the example of definitional arguments in Socrates and Aristotle. In definitional practices, the contingency of human relational action and argumentative outcomes on matters of *being* was the basis for a mutual commitment to genuine dialogue. Definition pictured moral progress not as a succession of dying vocabularies in line with a new program for interaction, but instead as the contingent and relational discovery of terms of unification and order. Immanent contingency offered a false hope for dialogue on the argument that death and restriction could equal proliferation, Solidarity, and Freedom. Definition described contingency in a way that made genuine dialogue possible as a relational and uncertain participation in *being*. With contingency divided this way, I can now discuss its relationship to ignorance.

Through the example of Socrates, this chapter will describe how ignorance actualizes contingency as an ethic in genuine dialogue. My analysis will proceed through a discussion of Socratic ignorance and moral uncertainty as follows: 1) Socrates' disavowal of knowledge will be described as promoting genuine dialogue; 2) the disavowal will be defended as sincere; 3) Socrates' claims to certain types of moral knowledge will be explained, leading to the paradox that Socrates alleges both to *not know*, and to *know*,

moral things; 4) this paradox will produce the categorization of moral knowledge as uncertain versus certain, a distinction important to genuine dialogue.

Where Socrates' "What is F?" question is part of the Socratic elenchos, this chapter takes a broader look at Socrates' moral method as it is affected by the disavowal of knowledge. The elenchos is Socrates' method of questioning and refutation, whereby he attempts to reveal the inconsistent beliefs of others, typically on moral matters.<sup>1</sup> Much of the format of the "What is F?" question, as I have described it, illustrates Socrates' elenctic method and its aims. Gregory Vlastos (1994) writes "Socratic elenchus is a search for moral truth by question-and-answer adversary argument in which a thesis is debated only if asserted as the answerer's own belief and is regarded as refuted only if its negation is deduced from its own beliefs" (4). Although elenchi may vary, the "standard" pattern, according to Vlastos, is as follows: "1) The interlocutor asserts a thesis, *p*, which Socrates considers false and targets for refutation;" 2) Socrates secures agreement to further premises, say *q* and *r*, which is *ad hoc*, as Socrates argues from *q* and *r*, not to them; 3) "Socrates then argues, and the interlocutor agrees, that *q* & *r* entail *not-p*;" 4) "Socrates then claims that he has shown that *not-p* is true, *p* false" (1994, 11; see also Brickhouse and Smith 2000, 77-80).

The purpose of the elenchus is to test interlocutors' knowledge, eliminating false conceit, and bringing them to a realization of their own ignorance (Benson 1990, 61;

<sup>1</sup> Scholars use either "elenchos" or "elenchus" (derived from the Greek word *elenchos*, "which means 'to examine' or 'to refute'") when referring to Socrates' method. Brickhouse, Thomas C., and Nicholas D. Smith. The Philosophy of Socrates. Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000. 47. Throughout the study, I will use "elenchus" only when referring to the arguments of scholars who use the term this way. In all other instances, I will use the Greek "elenchos."

Beverluis 1974, 334). Beverluis describes the moral purpose of the process: “in the absence of both knowledge and true belief, the attempt to live the good life proves abortive at its very inception,” requiring that “the interlocutor’s presumed, but premature, confidence must be undermined; everything must be thrown into question” (334). This is done for *therapeutic* aims according to May (1997), the engendering in the interlocutor of better and better moral understandings of things like “courage,” or “justice” (48). In describing Socrates’ aim to “help one lead a more moral life,” May describes the course of therapy as occurring over time into an extensive and uncertain future (48). Consistent with my claims on the “What is F?” question, she writes on the therapeutic result of elenctic investigation,

Hopefully, our interlocutor would revise her definition accordingly, and hence, have a definition which is not *as* broad. That is, our interlocutor will formulate a definition whose extension is *closer*...than her original definition. The process of definition-attempt, refutation, re-attempt, engenders in the interlocutor an awareness of the characteristics that she associates with ‘courage,’ an awareness that is *sharpened* with each successive definition attempt. Doubtless, our interlocutor may still, like Socrates, fail to say what the one thing common to all courageous acts is - even after many definition attempts, but this does not preclude her sharpening of her conception of courage (48).

This is an excellent summary of the idea of open-endedness, extensiveness, and the uncertainty of future moral outcomes, with the additional idea that the elenchos is a practice of inclusive betterment. Reflective of the purpose of Socratic and Aristotelian virtue definition, May’s view of the elenchos sees human moral development as enabled through an ethic of contingency as uncertainty. The connection between this ethic, and the dialogic outcome of enacted virtue, is ignorance.

## Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge

Recall the definition of ignorance offered in chapter three: 1) ignorance is a form of moral knowledge, where one knows that she does *not* know a moral thing with *certainty*; 2) ignorance is a means in discourse that actualizes contingency (as uncertainty) as an ethic of genuine dialogue. The first part describes a valuable epistemic position for the agent of genuine dialogue, a form of moral self-knowledge that becomes other-knowledge when uttered in the happenings of a relational discourse. The second part describes ignorance promoting a contingent ethic in dialogue that makes it open-ended, extensive, and inclusive of equally contingent and uncertain arguers and arguments. This section will clarify how my definition of ignorance is derived from Socrates' disavowal of knowledge.

In the *Apology*, Socrates makes the famous statements whereby he claims his own moral ignorance. At the beginning of the dialogue we hear of Chaerephon's question to the Oracle at Delphi, as to whether there is anyone wiser than Socrates. When the Oracle answers "no," this causes Socrates to become perplexed:

When I heard about the oracle's answer, I said to myself, What does the god mean? Why does he not use plain language? I am only too conscious that I have no claim to wisdom, great or small (*Apology* 21b).

In order to investigate the oracle's claim, Socrates goes to the politicians, poets, and manual artisans, all reputed to have great knowledge, only to find that those with the greatest reputations were actually deficient (22a). At the end of his examination of the politician, Socrates provides a clear statement of his own ignorance as an important form of moral knowledge, when he tells the jury,



I reflected as I walked away, Well, I am certainly wiser than this man. It is only too likely that neither of us had any knowledge to boast of, but he thinks that he knows something which he does not know, *whereas I am wiser than he is to this small extent, that I do not think that I know what I do not know* (*Apology* 21d-e, emphasis mine).

Two general schools of thought have developed on the debate over what Socrates means when he says he has no knowledge of what is right or good. The first is that Socrates' profession of ignorance is insincere, and designed to encourage his interlocutor to seek the truth, to make him think he is genuinely participating in a voyage of discovery with Socrates (Vlastos 1994, 39). The basic accusation here is that Socrates knows the answers to his questions, and the conclusions of his dialogues, beforehand, and so engages others in a false heuristic.

The accusation of insincerity undercuts the dialogic other-turning of Socrates' ignorance. Opposing this view, I will argue that Socratic ignorance is a genuine turning to an other arguer and a commitment to an open-ended, relational, and contingent search for terms of *being*. It is inclusive of the other and her arguments on the recognition that both she and Socrates share a common epistemic condition of *not* knowing moral things with certainty. Consider Socrates' defense against insincerity at *Meno* 80d-81e as evidence of these claims:

...It isn't that, knowing the answers myself, I perplex other people. The truth is rather that I infect them also with the perplexity I feel myself. So with virtue now. I don't know what it is. You may have known before you came into contact with me, but now you look as if you don't. Nevertheless I am ready to carry out, together with you, a joint investigation and inquiry into what it is (80d).

Here, Socrates defends his disavowal as sincere *and* inclusive (of Meno in this instance) uniting both interlocutors in a committed and uncertain search for the essence of virtue. Meno asks what the point is:

But how will you look for something when you don't in the least know what it is? How on earth are you going to set up *something you don't know as the object of your search*? To put it another way, even if you come right up against it, how will you know that what you have found is the thing you didn't know? (80d-e, emphasis mine).

Unknowing for Meno (on the model of Rorty), is a potential justification for leaving the dialogue.<sup>2</sup> But for Socrates, it is a starting point; ignorance motivates their relational search and promotes a contingent ethic within it. After Socrates responds that Meno has brought up the “trick argument that a man cannot try to discover what he knows or does not know” (80e), he explains that they ought not be led astray by this argument because “It would make us lazy, and is music in the ears of weaklings” (81e). Rather, allowing what is seemingly unknowable motivate dialogue “produces energetic seekers after knowledge...” to which Socrates adds the invitation to include Meno (an open-ended other-turning) “and being convinced of its truth, I am ready, with your help, to inquire into the nature of virtue” (81e).

This passage from the *Meno* describes Socratic ignorance as a good relational to genuine dialogue. Other-turning in Socrates' elenchos is a method of therapy by infection: Socrates “infects” his interlocutors with the same knowledge of ignorance that gives him moral authority in the city, and makes him wiser than those who think they know what they do not know. The example of the *Meno* shows that this is done for the purpose of inclusion in a contingent dialogue: Meno, who before he met with Socrates

<sup>2</sup> It is also worth noting the dialogue within the dialogue here. Socrates is putting himself up against the very arguments, especially the one articulated by Meno, that could undermine the purpose of his entire philosophy. That he takes responsibility for responding to them is a dialogic act of inclusion (including other arguments), and a very different strategy from ideological speech, which might delete such foundational challenges.

seemed sure of the *eidōs* of virtue, now is uncertain. This epistemic revision makes him ready for an uncertain, relational search as an equally contingent “other” with Socrates.

For Socrates, the whole city is ignorant because of the limitations of human knowledge. Not knowing this, however, not everyone is available for genuine dialogue. The elenchos attempts to repair this condition and reveal that the message of the oracle on ignorance as wisdom is meant for the whole city, addressed to potential interlocutors of genuine dialogues. After he professes ignorance at *Apology* 23a Socrates explains the meaning of the oracle, “that real wisdom is the property of God,” and that “human wisdom has little or no value” and reveals the meaning for potential interlocutors in the city: “It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us, The wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect to wisdom he is really worthless” (23b).

The argument that Socratic ignorance provides the grounds for other-inclusion in genuine dialogue demands additional evidence that the disavowal of knowledge is sincere. If Socrates’ claim to lack moral knowledge is genuine, then he is sincerely *uncertain* when it comes to the moral outcomes and essential terms he seeks via dialogue; this would mean the maintenance of the *open-ended* requirement of genuine dialogue. If he is sincerely uncertain, then his profession of ignorance can introduce an ethic of contingency into moral dialogue, making it inclusive of other interlocutors’ arguments, and extensive into an uncertain future; this would mean the maintenance of *contingency as uncertainty*. Ignorance can be seen as the participatory framework of Socratic dialogue, and genuine dialogue generally, but only if *unknowing* is sincerely uttered to

the relational others involved. For this reason, my next section provides a thorough defense of the sincerity of Socrates' disavowal of knowledge.

In addition to the insincerity charge, the second typical response to Socrates' disavowal is that Socrates should be taken at his word: he has renounced knowledge and claims no true belief (Vlastos 1994, 39). If the second position is to be held, that Socrates engages in his searches with no moral knowledge or true belief, then we cripple Socrates as a moral agent by making his lifelong philosophical activity pointless, and his continuous questions on virtue and morality the stumblings of a lost man. Moreover, we leave Socrates without the materials - claims to moral knowledge on *some* level - to lead a practical discourse on ethics. The section following the defense of sincerity indicates that there *are* moral things that Socrates claims to know. In addition to maintaining Socrates' moral agency, these claims also present the disavowal as a paradox: Socrates both knows, and does not know, moral theses. This paradox will produce a categorical distinction between moral knowledge as uncertain, as opposed to certain, that I will describe as important to genuine dialogue.

### **The Sincerity of the Disavowal**

Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith (2000) summarize a common objection that readers of Plato's early dialogues have: if Socrates claims to be merely a seeker of knowledge who does not know the answers to his own questions, then why is he so good at "finding just the right issues to pursue and just the right questions to ask to confound his interlocutors and reveal their ignorance"? (58). This protest assumes that Socrates resorts to a kind of trickery by saying he does not know anything about the moral truths he seeks. This frustrates Socrates' critics and we have indications that

Socrates recognized this as the product of his investigations. He articulates his awareness of this in the *Apology* (22e-23c):

The effect of these investigations of mine, gentlemen, has been to arouse against me a great deal of hostility, and hostility of a particularly bitter and persistent kind, which has resulted in various malicious suggestions, including the description of me as a professor of wisdom. This is due to the fact that whenever I succeed in disproving another person's claim to wisdom in a given subject, the bystanders assume that I know everything about that subject myself. But the truth of the matter, gentlemen, is pretty certainly this, that real wisdom is the property of God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value.

The summary conviction is that Socrates' moral discourse is not a real heuristic, but one manufactured to move in a certain direction, toward preconceived conclusions.<sup>3</sup>

Siding with this argument would of course lead one to believe that Socrates' disavowal has an equally cunning purpose, a false invitation to a prefabricated argument.

This very concern is perhaps articulated best by one of Socrates' actual interlocutors.

Consider Thrasymachus' statement in *Republic I* (336e-337a):

(Socrates speaking)...Thrasymachus, don't be harsh with us. If I, and my friend, have made mistakes in the consideration of the question, rest assured that it is unwillingly that we err. For you surely must not suppose that while, if our quest were for gold, we would never willingly truckle to one another and make concessions in the search and so spoil our chances of finding it, yet that when we are searching for justice, a thing more precious than much fine gold, we should then be so foolish as to give way to one another and not rather do our serious best to have it discovered...But you see it is our lack of ability that is at fault. It is pity then that we should far more reasonably receive from clever fellows like you than severity.

And he, on hearing this, gave a great guffaw and laughed sardonically and said, Ye gods! Here we have the well-known irony of Socrates, and I knew it and predicted that when it came to replying you would refuse and dissemble and do anything rather than answer any question that anyone asked you.

<sup>3</sup> This is the accusation Richard Enos (1993) levels on Platonic dialogue in general. Enos' objection is that Plato is deceiving his readers and interlocutors alike. He writes "Plato's use of questioning is a heuristic employed not to discover Truth but rather to create his interpretation of reality in the minds of his readers" (99; see also 93, 100). Enos, Richard Leo. *Greek Rhetoric Before Aristotle*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1993).

Here we have an example form for the objection to Socrates' disavowal: Socrates assures Thrasymachus that any twists and turns in their search for justice are the product of ignorance, the result of "our lack of ability," but certainly not a purposeful or willing effort to "truckle to one another and make concessions in the search," spoiling the whole thing by design. There is also the claim here that Socrates' sincerity is based on the mutual benefit of the quest: finding gold, but even more, justice, would benefit both Socrates and his interlocutor alike. Thrasymachus objects that this represents Socrates' usual "irony," and that if we look closely we might discern a method whereby Socrates credits the interlocutor ("we should far more reasonably receive from clever fellows like you..") and discredits himself, only doing so to dodge answers to questions that, we can assume by extension, everyone knows Socrates has in mind already. This should ring familiar with Socrates' recognition in the *Apology* of the disfavor he has built against himself. The summary of the objection – noted by critical scholars, by Socrates himself, and by Thrasymachus – is that Socrates' ignorance indeed has a discursive purpose, but one that falsely disguises a preconceived moral discourse as an open dialogue.

It is upon me to refute this argument. Defending Socrates' disavowal as sincere is important because I am offering ignorance not as a rhetorical ploy, but as a statement promoting the ethic of contingency central to genuine dialogue. Certainly ignorance can be articulated insincerely, as when a politician, or a defendant, or a student, or a child, "pleads" ignorance in the face of impending trouble. Certain brands can even be dangerous, as when ignorance of "others" different from us produces racism, misunderstandings, and stereotyping. But these, of course, are not the notions that I am after; none of them posit ignorance as a form of moral knowledge. The form of ignorance

I do wish to privilege comes from a greater understanding of Socrates' moral discourse, and how his disavowal invites others into dialogue through contingency. I will begin with the charge that Socrates is "ironic," demonstrating that, in fact, he is, but this irony is of a certain kind.

Vlastos (1991) constructs a workable conception for "irony" by noting that its Greek ancestors *eironeia*, *eiron*, and *eironeuomai*, indicated "the intention to deceive," a meaning foreign to our contemporary usage (23). In its contemporary usage, Vlastos argues, the trope "irony" has "shed completely its disreputable past," its meaning being handed down from Cicero and Quintilian to now denote "speech used to express a meaning that runs contrary to what is said – the perfect medium for mockery innocent of deceit" (28).<sup>4</sup>

Vlastos (1991) provides three examples of irony that remove deceit from its intent. The first type is sarcasm. When, for example, someone remarks in the middle of a downpour that the weather is "fine" today, there is no trouble understanding that the contrary of what is said was the intended meaning. The second is when a joke is put upon someone as a socially acceptable put-down, as when Mae West explains that she is declining an invitation to dinner from President Gerald Ford by saying "It's an awful long

<sup>4</sup> Quintilian comments that "the whole life of Socrates was colored by *irony*: he went about like an ignorant man wondering at the wisdom of others" (9.2.44-47). Quintilian. Institutio Oratoria. Trans. Charles Edgar Little. Nashville, TN: George Peabody College for Teachers, 1951. The accusation of deceitful irony is leveled against Socrates in a particularly severe way in the *Symposium* (216e): "He doesn't care a curse...for any of us either - yes, I'm telling you - and he spends his whole life playing his little game of irony, and laughing up his sleeve at all the world." Plato. Symposium. Trans. Michael Joyce. London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1935. Reprinted in The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters. Ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961. 527-574.

way to go for just one meal” (21). While these are fairly common examples of irony, the third has gone so much without notice “that there is no name for it.” This is a riddling sort of irony. The example Vlastos gives is as follows: Paul, a normally good student, is not doing well today, stumbling through his lesson. His tutor says “Paul, you are positively brilliant today.” In this case, Paul knows he is being scolded, but he is not sure for what particular failing. Instead of being told specifically what he has done wrong, he has “been handed a riddle and left to solve it for himself.” While this third form is not universal, it is not as rare as one might think. Only in the “most artless” forms of irony does it not show up. There is a touch of it in the Mae West example: her excuse is obviously not her real reason for declining the dinner, but she has left it up to President Ford to guess what the real reason is (21-22). Vlastos notes that when “irony riddles it risks being misunderstood,” but none of the above forms should be taken as deception. If deception does occur, it must be contrary to the speaker’s intent, as when the hearer misunderstands or misses the irony altogether. This is because the speaker could not utter an ironical statement that was intended as an obvious contradiction, and simultaneously deceive. The two ends would be at odds. If Paul’s teacher, for example, meant to mock Paul ironically, and Paul thought he had indeed said something brilliant, the deception could not be seen as intentional, because the purpose of mocking would not be met (22).

Vlastos (1991) applies this type of irony to Socrates, claiming that Socratic practice actually changed the meaning of the word, manifesting a form “as innocent of intentional deceit as is a child’s feigning that the play chips are money, as free from shamming as are honest games, though, unlike games, serious in its mockery...dead earnest in its playfulness...” (29). Vlastos identifies the kind of irony Socrates creates as “complex



irony,” to be distinguished from “simple irony.” Simple irony is irony as it appears in Vlastos’ foregoing examples, where “what is said just isn’t what is meant.” 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” (31).

This understanding clarifies some of the paradoxes we find in Plato’s early dialogues, including the disavowal of knowledge. Vlastos (1991) writes that the disavowal “is intelligible only as a complex irony:”

When he professes to have no knowledge he both does and does not mean what he says. He wants it to assure his hearers that in the moral domain there is not a single proposition he claims to know with certainty. But in another sense of “knowledge,” where the word refers to justified true belief - justifiable through the peculiarly Socratic method of elenctic argument - there are many propositions he does claim to know (32).

By this statement Vlastos previews the split in moral knowledge between uncertainty and certainty that I am building to. When Vlastos argues that Socrates’ disavowal is not a form of deceit, then follows that with the argument that he both claims to know and not know at the same time, the concept irony, which started as an indictment, becomes productive of a practice consistent with contingency as uncertainty.

Brickhouse and Smith (2000) come to similar conclusions by claiming that Socrates practices a certain sort of “mocking” irony. Brickhouse and Smith echo Vlastos in saying that Socrates does in fact use a mocking sort of irony, but that this does not make the disavowal insincere. Starting with Thrasymachus, Brickhouse and Smith note that the main focus of his complaint is the thought that Socrates is “cheating at a high-stakes game in which the loser will suffer a certain degree of humiliation in defeat” (61). This is supported by Thrasymachus’ humiliation at his own defeat: (Socrates speaking) “Thrasymachus made all these admissions...with much balking and reluctance and

prodigious sweating...and it was then I beheld what I had never seen before – Thrasymachus blushing” (*Republic I*, 350d). Brickhouse and Smith add that Thrasymachus never accuses Socrates of finding humor in his opponents’ defeat, but instead accuses him of using unfair tactics to avoid defeat himself, as evidenced by the passages between *Republic I* 340d-341a, where he accuses Socrates of arguing like a “pettifogger.” Here, Thrasymachus responds to Socrates’ question “You think, do you, that it was with malice afterthought and trying to get the better of you unfairly that I asked that question?,” by saying “I don’t think it, I know it, and you won’t make anything by it, for you won’t get the better of me by stealth...” (341b). Brickhouse and Smith conclude that the basis of Thrasymachus’ accusation is that Socrates is “cheating by refusing to say what he really believes.” They also detect some evidence that he is objecting to Socrates’ use of mocking irony, as well (61).

Recall that before Thrasymachus’ accusation of irony, Socrates says he himself is inept, yet praises Thrasymachus for his wisdom. Brickhouse and Smith note that Thrasymachus “might sense that in characterizing himself as inept and pitiable, Socrates was, in part, actually mocking others, including especially Thrasymachus himself” (62). There are good reasons for thinking that Socrates does make a habit of using this kind of irony, especially where he deems his interlocutors as deserving of such mockery. In those cases where Socrates claims to want to have others teach him something, this kind of mockery can be cutting, according to Brickhouse and Smith. This is due to the fact, they argue, that Socrates thinks little of human wisdom. Consider a passage on this that I have already quoted from the *Apology* (23a-b): “...real wisdom is the property of God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value.” Brickhouse and

Smith add that at *Meno* 71b-d, Socrates responds to Meno's question as to whether he really does not know what virtue is, by saying "Not only that, you may say also that, to the best of my belief, I have never met anyone who did know."

If Socrates has such a low opinion of human wisdom, it would follow, argue Brickhouse and Smith, that any time we find him praising one of his interlocutors as "wise," attributing knowledge to him, or saying he hopes to become their "student," that "mocking irony" is at work (63). Moreover, Socrates' mockery seems to increase proportionate to his interlocutors' self-assuredness, so that the most pretentious characters, such as Euthyphro and Hippias, are given "the most lavish ironical praise" (63).

This evidence causes Brickhouse and Smith no hesitation in attributing the practice of mock irony to Socrates, but, they stress, this *does not* mean that his disavowal of knowledge qualifies as an instance of such irony. While there is clear mocking irony when Socrates calls others wise or recognizes them as having knowledge that he himself lacks, the mockery does not work through his disavowal. The mockery, they write, "is in the mocking compliments and flattery Socrates lavishes *on others*," but he "is not guilty of mock-modesty; his modesty is genuine" (63, emphasis mine). In other words, Socrates is mocking others who think they know, but his *own* claims to *not* know are sincere.

While I do not wish to propose an ethic of mockery derived from Brickhouse and Smith's argument, this form of irony does raise an important point. If we maintain the therapeutic view of the elenchos, we can argue that Socrates mocks those who need therapy the most - those *most certain* about their moral knowledge, and therefore, *least available* to engaging in a genuine dialogue on the uncertainties of *being*.

Brickhouse and Smith (2000) discuss a “contrast” revealed by mocking irony between Socrates’ customary disclaimers of knowledge and wisdom, and his acknowledgement of others’ knowledge and wisdom (63). “But,” they note, “such a contrast does not require us to assume – as Thrasymachus seems to assume – that Socrates actually supposes that he possesses the knowledge and wisdom he claims to lack, whereas his interlocutors lack the knowledge and wisdom they claim to have.” Rather, the contrast works to highlight the target of Socrates’ mockery: the interlocutor’s presumption to have knowledge. If neither Socrates nor the interlocutor have the knowledge that the interlocutor claims to have, then the real contrast in wisdom is “between one who recognizes his own lack of wisdom and one who does not” (63-64). This is a key recognition in deciphering what I will come to recognize as the kind of “ignorance” that can be morally productive: there is the ignorance of the interlocutor, which is ignorance of her *not knowing* something that she thinks he knows, and this is likely based on her over-estimation of human knowledge in general; and conversely, there is ignorance that comes from understanding the limitations of human wisdom, especially in moral matters, and building a discourse that accords with that recognition. This distinction becomes clear in the next section, where Socrates’ disavowal categorizes between certain and uncertain moral knowledge.

For now, this “contrast” has bearing on the defense of Socrates’ disavowal as sincere. For Brickhouse and Smith (2000), the contrast in knowledge and ignorance shows that nothing in Plato’s texts “supports the idea that mocking irony undercuts or nullifies Socrates’ profession of ignorance,” even though they find that mocking irony is at work when Socrates praises others for their wisdom. Nor does Thrasymachus’ accusation that

Socrates is up to his “well-known” method of irony support the idea that Socrates’ profession of ignorance is itself such a form of irony (64). Socrates’ profession is directed *at himself*, a statement on his *own* lack of knowledge; inasmuch as he mocks the presumption of human wisdom in others, he would not turn around and praise himself for having something that he holds in such low esteem.

Vlastos (1994) also maintains the disavowal of knowledge as sincere, and suggests that if one wished to support the argument that Socrates’ claims to not know were a “pretence,” that person would have a tough time finding textual support.<sup>5</sup> Some may argue that Socrates is using his disavowal in order to maneuver his interlocutor into the role of answerer, keeping the role of questioner for himself. This is part of Thrasymachus’ accusation that Socrates feigns ignorance and is “dissembling,” “saying what he does not believe.” But, Vlastos asks, how can we account for such pretence in cases where Socrates does not mean to bring his interlocutor into the answerer’s role? (41). A notable example, Vlastos writes, comes at the *conclusion* of Socrates’ debate with Callicles in the *Gorgias*. Socrates says at that point in the dialogue “...I do not speak with any pretense to knowledge, but am searching along with you...” (506a). Then, just a few pages later he says “These facts, which were shown to be as I state them some time earlier in our previous discussion, are buckled fast and clamped together...by argument of steel and adamant” (508e-509a), followed immediately by the statement “...what I say

<sup>5</sup> Vlastos (1994) derives “pretence” as a key word when he quotes a definition of “irony” in *Webster’s* dictionary: “A pretence of ignorance and of willingness to learn from another assumed in order to make the others’ false conception conspicuous by adroit reasoning – called also ‘Socratic irony.’” Here, Vlastos makes the point that the charge against Socrates for insincere ignorance has become so “ubiquitous” that it has made its way into the definition of “irony” as a purposeful “pretence” (40). Vlastos, Gregory. “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge.” *Socratic Studies*. Ed. Myles Burnyeat. New York: Cambridge, 1994. 39-66.

is always the same – that I know not the truth in these affairs, but I do know that of all whom I have ever met either before or now no one who put forward another view has failed to appear ridiculous” (509 a-b). Why, Vlastos asks, if Socrates’ disavowal is a false “pretence” designed to manipulate his interlocutors into the answerers’ role, would he “dish out the falsehood at this late moment in the debate?” (42). Although Vlastos does not offer them as examples, the aporific conclusions we find at the end of several dialogues featuring the “What is F?” question make the same point. Why, if Socrates’ disavowal is insincere for the purposes of manipulation or victory, would he articulate *aporia* at the *end* of a dialogue, where it would serve him no such benefit?

While this evidence is compelling, for Vlastos (1994), the strongest reason to claim that Socrates’ disavowal is genuine appears at *Apology* 21b and 21d, passages I have already quoted. Vlastos claims at *Apology* 21b, where Socrates wonders to himself what the god must mean when saying he is the wisest of all men, for “I am only too conscious that I have no claim to wisdom, great or small,” that Socrates could not have said this to *himself* if he thought it were not true. Similarly, when Socrates, at *Apology* 21d, begins to recount the narrative of his investigations of the politicians, poets, and manual artisans, that narrative cannot be fiction because that would violate Socrates’ promise at 20d to tell the jury the “whole truth” (42).

Of course this could all be a big performance. Socrates could be lying to the jury, fabricating his state of ignorance and twisting the story for his own defense, which would make Vlastos’ argument thin. But then we would need to be willing to say that Socrates made a habit of using speech to deceive. If this were so, then the narrative of the *Apology* would not hang together very well, and neither would Socrates’ moral discourse within it.

Especially from a rhetorical standpoint, if Socrates had gone through his whole life using speech dishonestly – as deception, or as a falsification of his own truthfulness and moral authority – why, at the end of his life, would he not use it in the same way to save himself? In the *Apology*, Socrates notes the risk of his investigations, that they have aroused against him “ a great deal of hostility, and hostility of a particularly bitter and persistent kind, which has resulted in various malicious suggestions...” (23a-b). But, he continues, he must keep questioning others in accordance with his divine obligation to reveal in people a lack of wisdom (23c). Moreover, his well-known address at the beginning of the dialogue does nothing to support the idea that Socrates would employ any such self-saving measures as lying or twisting his story. Imagining that the jury might offer to acquit him on the basis that he give up his quest and stop philosophizing, or they would otherwise put him to death (*Apology* 29c-d), Socrates says:

I should reply, Gentlemen, I am your very grateful and devoted servant, but I owe a greater obedience to God than to you, and so long as I draw breath and have my faculties, I shall never stop practicing philosophy and exhorting you and elucidating the truth for everyone that I meet. I shall go on saying, in my usual way, My very good friend, you are an Athenian, and belong to a city which is the greatest and most famous in the world for its wisdom and strength. Are you not ashamed that you give more attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honor, and give no attention or thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul? (29d-30a).

This is followed by more criticisms of what the people of city care for – possessions, bodies, offices – and what they should care for, the state of their souls, as Socrates will continue to persuade them (30a-c). Furthermore, Socrates attests to his commitment to this mission by asking, if he were not sincere, would it make sense “that I should have neglected my own affairs and endured the humiliation of allowing my family to be

neglected for all these years, while I busied myself all the time on your behalf...?,” doing all of this without ever exacting a fee and remaining in poverty (31b-d).

If Socrates is in fact lying, then we have to ask for what purpose? Certainly it would not be to save himself, not by berating the jury and the entire city on moral grounds, as well as refusing to stop philosophizing and engendering anger toward himself, even if it means death. This is not only secured by evidence of his philosophical activity, but also by the importance he places on sincerity in speech, rather than flattery, as indicated near the end of the *Apology*. Socrates claims that his speech fails to persuade not due to a lack of effectiveness in his arguments, but a lack of “effrontery and impudence, and the fact that I have refused to address you in the way which would give you the most pleasure,” such as weeping and wailing (*Apology* 38d-e).

Accusing Socrates of being insincere in his profession of ignorance would rest, in the context of the *Apology*, on assigning his dishonesty a purpose. In a trial, it could only be self-protection, an aim Socrates directly undermines in his speeches. If Socrates had been practicing at deception his entire life through philosophy, why would he not utilize it now, with his life at stake? Additionally, Socrates’ commitment to seeking moral knowledge through philosophy has been a practice *motivated by his own ignorance*; the therapeutic ends of the elenchos are meant for the alleviation of Socrates’ ignorance as well as his interlocutors’ certainty. If this ignorance was simply feigned, would the quest that it motivated be a ruse worth dying for? This also speaks to the greater sincerity of Socrates’ discursive investigations; if Socrates is having his interlocutors on, as some would suggest, then he dies in the *Apology* for a sham rather than a real practice.



Brickhouse and Smith (1984) note that “Socrates claims throughout the early dialogues to be committed to discovering the truth, and in the *Apology* he places the pursuit of this goal at the heart of his philosophic mission in Athens” (126). To dispute the sincerity of Socrates’ ignorance, then, “is to convict Socrates of outright mendacity, and therefore of running afoul of his mission...” (126). The option for an aggressive deconstruction of these texts is there for the scholar, who might choose to see everything that Socrates says as dishonest or deceptive, but this undermines the meaningfulness of the texts that are available to us. Brickhouse and Smith (2000) get at this idea well when they argue that if we are to convict Socrates of “misleading presentations of his own views...we are obviously at serious risk of losing any value we hoped to get from reading these texts to begin with, since what they actually say is now to be ignored...” If this is to be the way of our interpretations, they conclude, “we are probably better off simply abandoning our texts altogether and discussing other matters” (66). In no way is this general stance on interpreting the Socratic disavowal, or Plato’s dialogues at large, an encouragement against imagination. Even a scholar as conservative as Richard Weaver has advocated an imaginative reading of Platonic texts in response to readings that have been “too literal and too topical” (1953, 3). In his essay “The *Phaedrus* and the Nature of Rhetoric,” Weaver advocates a reading of that dialogue guided by “even a portion of that imagination which Plato habitually exercised,” the kind of reading justified by “a work of art which touches on many profound problems” (3). Textual fidelity certainly is not meant to strangle creativity in reading Socratic text; very much to the contrary, those texts call upon us to be as imaginative in our thinking as possible so as to benefit from their rich possibilities. But if we too aggressively deconstruct Socrates as a trickster, a

deceiver, or a liar, then we have to throw out everything he says and read something else for lessons on ethics.

### **Socrates' Claims to Know**

The importance of this section is twofold. First, explaining Socrates' claims to know moral things maintains his moral agency. If he has no moral knowledge whatsoever, he has nothing to contribute to genuine dialogues on virtue, and no basis for refutations and responses. Secondly, Socrates' claims to moral knowledge reveal the manner in which he categorizes that knowledge as uncertain as opposed to certain. This distinction is important to the contingency of genuine dialogue, as I argued in the previous chapter, and is accomplished in the proceedings of Socratic elenchos.

Vlastos (1994) readily helps with a refutation of the hypothesis that Socrates means exactly what he says when he claims that he has no moral knowledge whatsoever. He points out two places in the *Gorgias* where Socrates articulates the moral nobility of coming to know: “we should all be contentiously eager to know what is true and what false in the subject under discussion...” (505e-506a); “For the questions in dispute are by no means trivial, but are, one might say, matters wherein knowledge is noblest and ignorance most shameful – the sum and substance of them being knowledge or ignorance of who is happy and who is not” (472c-d). If the stakes of Socrates' search are that virtue *is* knowledge, and that knowledge leads either to happiness or unhappiness, then, Vlastos writes “If after decades of searching Socrates remained convinced that he still knew *nothing*, would not further searching have become a charade – or rather worse? For he holds that virtue ‘is’ knowledge: if he has no knowledge, his life is a disaster, he has missed out on virtue and, therewith, on happiness” (43).

Protecting himself from this tragic end, Socrates “flatly” states in several instances that “he knows a moral truth” (Vlastos, 43). The most important of these is at *Apology* 29b-c, where Socrates says “But I *do know* that to do wrong and to disobey my superior, whether God or man, is wicked and dishonorable, and so I shall never feel more fear or aversion for something which, for all I know, may really be a blessing, than for those evils which I *know* to be evils (29b-c, emphasis mine).

This *knowledge claim* motivates Socrates’ continued practice of philosophy in service of the god: he *knows* that service to the god is good, and he *knows* that to not do so is evil. Inasmuch as this knowledge motivates the philosophical practice that leads him to his death, how could the claim be insincere? Vlastos (1994) argues that this passage should alone hold enough weight to suffice in showing “that Socrates claims knowledge of a moral truth” (43).

Adding to Vlastos’ example from *Apology* 29b-c, Brickhouse and Smith (2000) cite *Apology* 37b, where Socrates discusses his sentence:

So, being *convinced that I do no wrong to anybody*, I can hardly be expected to wrong myself by asserting that I deserve something bad, or by proposing a corresponding penalty. Why should I? For fear of suffering this penalty proposed by Meletus, when, as I said, I do not know whether it is a good thing or a bad? Do you expect me to choose something *I know very well is bad* by making my counterproposal? (emphasis mine).

“If Socrates had no morally significant knowledge,” Brickhouse and Smith (2000) argue, “the contrast between his lack of knowledge about death with his knowledge that some things are evil” (see, for example, *Apology* 29b-c, *Gorgias* 486e, 512b, and *Republic I* 350c, 351a-b) would “make no sense” (103).

Vlastos (1994) provides additional support from *Gorgias* 486e. Socrates tells Callicles “I am convinced that if you agree with the opinions held by my soul, then at last

we have attained the actual truth,” implying confidence in the epistemic outcomes of his discursive method (Vlastos 1994, 44-45). Vlastos calls upon certain passages on ignorance to make the point that Socrates claims to *know* something moral. In his refutation of the argument of “the multitude” in the *Protagoras*, Socrates maintains that wrong action comes about not because the person has been “overcome by pleasure,” but because of ignorance of the good: “and you *know* yourselves that a wrong action which is done without knowledge is done in ignorance” (357d-e, emphasis mine). Vlastos argues that Socrates cannot say that *they* know this without *knowing it himself* (46).

Additionally, at the conclusion of his refutation of Thrasymachus’ argument that “the just man always comes out at a disadvantage in his relation with the unjust” (*Republic I* 343b-344e), Socrates says “Then the just man has turned out on our hands to be good and wise and the unjust man bad and ignorant” (350c). Then, without any intervening comments to strengthen the argument, Socrates adds “if justice is wisdom and virtue, it will easily, I take it, be shown to be also a stronger thing than injustice, since injustice is ignorance – *no one could now fail to recognize that...* (*Republic I* 351a-b, emphasis mine). If everyone knows this, then Socrates must include himself as well (Vlastos 1994, 46-47).

There are two more passages, according to Vlastos (1994), where Socrates implies knowledge without actually saying so. The first comes near the end of the *Gorgias*, where Socrates tells a parable about a sea captain at the end of his argument with Callicles. Socrates’ imagined sea captain thinks, in a Socratic way, about whether or not he has done his passengers a service by bringing them home safely from a perilous journey. He reasons that if any one of them had been “afflicted in the body with serious and incurable

diseases,” coming home alive would be of no benefit for him. Neither would it benefit the person who “suffers many incurable diseases of the soul, which is so much more precious than the body,” to have been returned home alive. The sea captain is especially cognizant of this because, Socrates says “he *knows* it is not better for an evil man to live, for he must needs live ill” (*Gorgias* 512b, emphasis mine). Vlastos argues that because this sea captain is “Socrates’ creature,” made up of his own thoughts and reasoning, “for Socrates to say that the sea captain knows that for an incurably wicked man death would be better than life is as good as saying that he, Socrates, knows this” (47).

The same argument is made in the *Crito*, where Socrates says that life is neither worth living in the diseased body nor in the damaged soul, which he himself articulates from 47d-48a. Vlastos (1994) points out a particular part of this argument, where Socrates refers to following “the one” who knows, rather than following the opinion of the many (47d). Vlastos argues that “the one” who knows, as well as the sea captain, are “constructs” of Socrates’ argument, and that he would have “no ground for imputing knowledge to either figure unless he were convinced that he himself had that knowledge” (48).

By simultaneously disavowing knowledge and claiming to have knowledge, Socrates presents us with a paradox. To understand ignorance in light of this paradox, the kind of moral knowledge Socrates is claiming and disclaiming has to be identified and divided. This way, ignorance is revealed as productive of uncertainty in Socrates’ dialogue method, the *elenchos*. Vlastos (1994) argues that “if we keep looking as carefully and imaginatively as we should, we can satisfy ourselves that Socrates is himself convinced that he has found what he has been looking for: knowledge of moral truth that he avows

openly...programmatically...,” and “by clear implication...” (48). This is not knowledge at the level of moral certainty, but rather, uncertainty.

Brickhouse and Smith (2000) argue that the *Apology*, where Socrates makes his clearest profession of ignorance, categorizes those “most important things” which Socrates has devoted his life to, and which he does not know with any certainty, are *moral* things, thus dividing the moral from the realm of certain knowledge (103). Inasmuch as others do not recognize that these important things escape certainty, they are ignorant of their own ignorance. The next section takes a closer look at the contingent outcomes of ignorance as knowledge in Socrates’ elenchos.

### **The Elenchos and Moral Uncertainty**

Vlastos (1994) notes that the paradox where Socrates denies that he has moral knowledge “while being well aware that he does have it,” is productive when we suppose he is making a dual use of the word “knowing:” “When declaring that he knows absolutely nothing he is referring to that very strong sense...where one says one knows only when one is claiming *certainty*. This would leave him free to admit that he does have moral knowledge in a radically weaker sense – the one required by his own maverick method of philosophical inquiry, the elenchus” (49, emphasis mine). The use of the word “required” previews the importance of uncertainty in making Socrates’ elenchos, and genuine dialogue in general, *practicable* as a discourse of mediation, other-inclusion, and open-endedness.

Vlastos (1994) outlines our basic categories for analysis by describing two types of knowledge encountered in Socratic practice. The first, “certain knowledge” (knowledge<sub>C</sub>), he uses to designate knowledge conceived with “infallible certainty” as its

hallmark (55). The second type, “elenctic knowledge” (knowledge<sub>E</sub>), is the sort of ethical knowledge Socrates thought possible by way of his elenchos. Vlastos argues that “whatever Socrates might be willing to say he *knows* in the domain of ethics would have to be knowledge reached and tested through his own personal method of inquiry...this is his only method of searching for moral truth.” So, when Socrates avows moral knowledge “the content of that knowledge must be propositions he thinks elenctically justifiable” (56). Vlastos implies elenctic knowledge as the limited outcome of local/transcendent mediation when he claims that Socrates could not have expected it to meet the “fantastically strong demands” of certain knowledge, because “In elenctic argument nothing is ever ‘known through itself’ but only ‘through other things’ and there is always a security gap between the Socratic thesis and its supporting reasons” (56). Here we return to the uncertainty of Socrates’ mediation between examples and *eidoi* in the “What is F?” question.

Further reinforcing the connection between uncertainty and Socrates’ method, recall Vlastos’ (1994) argument that Socrates “could not been unaware of this uncertainty, built into his instrument of research, which infects all its findings” (57). This is evidenced, for example, by a remark he makes at *Charmides* 166c-e:

...How can you think I have any other motive in refuting you but what I should have in examining into myself? This motive would be just a fear of my unconsciously fancying that I knew something of which I was ignorant. And at this moment, I assure you, I pursue the argument chiefly for my own sake, and perhaps in some degree also for the sake of my other friends. For would you not say that the discovery of things as they truly are is a good common to all mankind?

Vlastos (1994) sees this passage articulating Socrates’ fear that his moral theses which have fared well in past arguments may in fact be false, but have not yet been revealed as such. When Socrates makes this fear the motivator for his searching “he

reveals the haunting sense of insecurity of knowledge<sub>E</sub> – his awareness that in respect of certainty it is the diametrical opposite of knowledge<sub>C</sub>” (57). John Beversluis (1987) articulates a similar principle as the grounds for elenctic testing: “It is not enough to believe propositions which happen to be true. Until the person holding such beliefs submits them for elenctic interrogation and discovers that they can survive, he necessarily lacks all epistemic warrant for believing them” (217). All moral claims, including those Socrates himself makes, are subject to extensive future testing through the elenchos.

Socratic moral knowledge, Vlastos (1994) writes, may be terribly far from certain knowledge, “full of gaps, unanswered questions,” and “surrounded and invaded by unresolved perplexity,” but Socrates does not find this troubling or debilitating; in fact, he finds it “exhilarating” (57-58). He does not need completeness to make his method work, but rather the ability to test the consistency of beliefs articulated within the dialogue. The elenchos does not require Socrates himself to answer the questions he raises, and that his interlocutors fail to answer. It is upon Socrates merely to refute their inconsistent beliefs on the way to a better understanding of the subject at hand. “So,” Vlastos writes, “if an inquiry should run into *aporia*, he can reckon the exercise not failure, but incomplete success. Nothing has transpired to show that the unfound answer is unfindable, nor yet to invalidate the fragmentary truths unearthed along the way and shake his claim that in their case he does have knowledge<sub>E</sub>” (58). Vlastos summarizes his argument by stating that for Socrates, “in the domain of morals – the one to which all of his inquiries are confined,” when he says he knows something he is referring to knowledge gained through his dialogue method (knowledge<sub>E</sub>); when he says he knows nothing, he is referring to certain knowledge; when he disavows knowledge on a



particular topic “he may mean *either* that in this case, as in all others, he has no knowledge<sub>C</sub> and does not look for any *or* that what he lacks on that topic is knowledge<sub>E</sub>, which, with good luck, he might still reach by further searching” (58).

Uncertainty, then, makes the knowledge aims of the “What is F?” question and the elenchos accomplishable, and, moreover, protects the unknowable and the aporific from becoming justifications to depart from genuine dialogue, or eject its vocabulary of *being*. Going back to the conversation between Socrates and Meno, the “exhilaration” Socrates derives from epistemic ignorance, knowledge gaps, and unresolved perplexity, is an invitation to other arguers and arguments to the open-endedness and contingency of genuine dialogue.

Adding to Vlastos’ knowledge<sub>E</sub>, Paul Woodruff (1990) offers a distinction between expert and non-expert knowledge in Socrates. According to Woodruff, among its other functions, the elenchus guards against the error of taking another person as an expert on something which, in reality, “no one is more expert than another.” On moral questions “Socrates’ audience are all in the same boat,” complete with pretensions of knowing. Every elenctic search leads to an impasse, leaving its audience “near dangerous moral shoals, without a specialist to guide them to shore.” Yet the elenchus finds that the people examined are better resources for moral realization than might have been first thought (80-81). This important point summarizes Socrates’ dialogue as a method that allows him to turn to other interlocutors who have real value as participants in his philosophical searches. On the contingency of this relational practice, Woodruff writes:

The same argument that unmasked the pretenders disclosed an impressive consensus on its moral premises. We have seen that elenchus discovers beliefs the believer never knew he had, and evidently does the same for knowledge... Socrates holds that, in the last analysis, you believe the consequences of whatever views you are left with after

the elenchus has done its work. The elenchus thus exposes what you believe in the last analysis, and simply treats this sort of belief, without apology, as non-expert knowledge... *Discovery, not justification, is the positive legacy of the elenchus* (81, emphasis mine).

I have emphasized this “positive legacy” of “discovery” as participatory and open-ended. Through the common condition of ignorance, interlocutors can participate together in *being*, so long as they choose *not* to make the unknown a justification for closing off an entire set of vital, invigorating questions. Socrates’ genuine disavowal, in short, is an invitation to genuine dialogue.

### **Conclusion: Ignorance and Genuine Dialogue**

The uncertainty of Socratic moral knowledge (knowledge<sub>E</sub>) is a summary statement on dialogic contingency and its relationship to ignorance. Recall the basic idea of genuine dialogue as a sincere turning to argumentative others in an open-ended and uncertain search for Absolutes. For Buber, sincerity was at the heart of genuine dialogue, where participants truly have each other in mind, and establish a living and mutual relationship through interaction (Friedman 2002, 101). Bakhtin (1984) added that “real” dialogue is open-ended, affirming “independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminacy;” it is “unfinished” rather than “finished” or predetermined by its author, and maintained as “an unclosed whole...poised on the threshold” (63). According to these standards, Socratic ignorance allows interlocutors to engage one another in an open-ended and *contingent* discourse on *being*. In doing so it preserves that final element of genuine dialogue that summons its participants “to guard with the innermost power of their souls against the confusion of the relative with the Absolute” (Buber 1952, 155). When, by means of ignorance, Socrates urges Meno or any interlocutor to commit with him to an extensive practice of discovery, he represents the escape from relativist idolatry

and immanence whereby, Buber writes, we “penetrate again and again into the false absolute with an incorruptible, probing glance until one has discovered its limits, its limitedness,” glimpsing “the never-vanishing appearance of the Absolute” (1952, 155-156).

As a form of moral knowledge, ignorance - knowing that one does not know with certainty - is a move away from false dialogue. For Bakhtin false dialogue was “finished,” “finalized,” and “objectivized” by the author (1984, 63), an idea I transferred to Rorty as an “overseer” and “intellectual prophet” of restricted dialogues that accorded with a historical program. For Buber false dialogue was “oppositional,” with no effort to turn to the other, or establish “mutuality” (Friedman 2002, 143), precisely the violation of restricting metaphysical vocabularies and turning *away* from a community of “other,” metaphysical arguers. Socratic ignorance has provided a way to maintain the vocabulary of *being* as a motivation for dialogic inclusion.

As part of the elenchos and the “What is F?” question, Socratic ignorance promotes genuine dialogue because it is situated in local, human discourse. Categorizing moral knowledge as uncertain, it enables the elenchos to accomplish local/Absolute mediation. By preserving the epistemic value of examples and other interlocutors’ arguments (as per the “What is F?” question), it makes genuine dialogue practicable, reconciling with the materials available to participants for the discovery of arguments. The significant accomplishment of ignorance and contingency for genuine dialogue is that they make its *both local and Absolute* practice possible. But not *all* conceptions of ignorance benefit genuine dialogue. The next chapter looks at theories of moral ignorance and virtue after

Socrates that fail to provide interlocutors with the ability to practice dialogue. My criticism of these theories will be based on the Socratic standards articulated above.

## CHAPTER 7

### IGNORANCE AS A DEFICIT OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE DEPARTURE FROM DIALOGUE

The previous chapter described Socratic ignorance as a form of moral knowledge that built dialogic relationships. Recognizing his own ignorance, Socrates turns to (equally ignorant) others so that they might together alleviate, at least in part, their common condition. This other-turning is articulated in the *Apology* as a method of social change: “For I spend all my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your first and chief concern not for your bodies nor for your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your souls, proclaiming as I go, Wealth does not bring goodness, but goodness brings wealth and every other blessing, both to the individual and to the state” (*Apology* 30b). Socrates understands the message of the oracle to mean that “human wisdom has little or no value,” and that the lesson is not just for him, but for the whole city: “It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us, The wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless” (23b). The knowledge of ignorance, then, is extended *to the community* as an ethic of other-turning and contingent discovery. For communal change, a true practice of dialogue requires the presence and participation of others who question, challenge, disagree, and agree about ordering virtue terms. Socrates’ method of social change, the *elenchos*, is motivated when participants begin to take virtue seriously as a matter of self and other examination.

Echoing the contemporary value of this perspective, Tracy Isaacs (1997) argues that if ignorance produces dialogue, rather than reproach, it has potential for “getting people to examine their role in wrongful social practice, their responsibility in perpetuating those

practices, and the potential contribution they may make in helping to effect widespread changes” (677-678). Isaacs recognizes that people will inevitably disagree even when they recognize a moral dimension to a given practice. With this lack of uniformity, those with some insight into the issue “should try to convey to the general population an awareness of the issue” and its relevant moral questions and points of view, as a way to “bring more people into the dialogue, to urge more people to examine what was previously unexamined”(681). Isaacs’ proposal echoes Socrates’ effort in the *Apology*, with the common ideal that moral issues are raised for the community at large; ignorance assures that the discussion will become an inclusive dialogue, with the intended outcome of social and individual change, or “progress” as conceived of in definitional practices. Ignorance as community-building can be evaluated according to its promotion of genuine dialogue.

In this chapter I investigate theories of ignorance and virtue proposed by Nicholas of Cusa, John Rawls, and Julia Driver, as an extension of my comments on Socratic ignorance. My argument is that Nicholas, Rawls, and Driver alike hold positions on ignorance that remove the knowledge base needed by moral agents to engage one another in dialogue. More specifically, Nicholas asks for an end to the “distractions” of discourse, Rawls creates a discourse situation (the original position) in which dialogue becomes impossible, and Driver, while advocating a communal sense of virtue, places the agent in an unrealistic position with self-knowledge. All three theorists compromise the possibility of moral agency in a communal, civic setting, by necessitating ignorance as a deficit of self-knowledge.

By arguing against these proposals, I want to retain a sense of ignorance as a productive, motivating concept. In a series of articles on knowledge and ignorance in the philosophy journal *Diogenes* (1995), ignorance is described as a starting point for both personal and institutional inquiry.<sup>1</sup> Jacques Schlanger (1995) notes that ignorance is a prerequisite to inquiry because, as representative of what we do *not* know, it stands out from what we *do* know: “The desire to know engages with a pre-existing body of knowledge, enabling us to circumscribe the unknown within the frontiers of the known” (169). Calling upon a personal example, Pierre Pachet (1995) notes that he makes efforts to measure his own ignorance not to “dispel” it, but “to profit from it and receive the radiated influence of the things that I do not know and shall never know,” on the idea that there is an “essential affinity between ignorance and the very substance of the human mind.” Moreover, human thought is “shrouded in a grey area” which “enables” it to progress, since thinking “requires the unknowable...behind which hides a great deal of the substance which gives it sustenance” (50). Focusing on institutions, Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent (1995) describes the suggestion by some scientists that ignorance is “active everywhere” in the scientific research enterprise as a heuristic force that enables scientists to leave behind the constraints of convention and false or inaccurate knowledge, and pursue new, innovative paths (140).<sup>2</sup> Introducing his own book-length treatment of the topic, *The Knowledge of Ignorance*, Andrew Martin (1985) assigns

<sup>1</sup> Some of these institutional and personal considerations of ignorance, especially as they affect scientific inquiry, are discussed in Dovring, Folke. *Knowledge and Ignorance: Essays on Light and Shadows*. London: Praeger, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> The entire series of articles covers a broad range of philosophical issues concerning ignorance and knowledge that are outside the scope of my argument. The whole set of articles can be found in *Diogenes* 43 (1995) : 1-197.

ignorance the same sort of innovative energy, as a force able to break the circularity of canonical arguments and texts by “collapsing the putative foundation of the con-text,” thereby constituting “a kind of knowledge, a way out of the hall of mirrors, or at least a change of mirrors” (viii).<sup>3</sup>

While these perspectives reveal a productive view of ignorance, the concept can also be proposed in a way that blocks inquiry as a dialogue. Rather than being an epistemological starting point (knowing that I do not know), ignorance can be proposed as a morally productive *absence* of knowledge, or a *deficit* of knowing. This latter sense is at the heart of Nicholas’, Rawls’, and Driver’s theories, and forms the basis for my objections.

### **Nicholas of Cusa’s “Learned Ignorance”**

Theologian Nicholas of Cusa (1954) has argued that the limitations of inquiries into the divine and the unknown require that a “learned ignorance” be obtained by the searcher. The human intellect has a natural desire to seek the truth, according to Nicholas, yet it is so far beyond human reason “to know the precision of the combinations in material things and how exactly the known has to be adapted to the unknown,” that thinkers such as Socrates, Solomon, and Aristotle have affirmed “that wisdom and the

<sup>3</sup> Martin’s (1985) book offers comprehensive coverage on issues of ignorance and knowledge. He treats everything from the foundations of Western conceptions of ignorance (in Greek philosophy and Christian theology, for example), through to its treatment and operation in contemporary literature and science. Martin’s book (formerly a dissertation on the topic) is excellent general reading on ignorance, although much of it is outside the scope of my argument. Where his commentary is relevant to my project, I have quoted him in the text or in footnotes. Martin, Andrew. The Knowledge of Ignorance: From Genesis to Jules Verne. New York: Cambridge UP, 1985.



locality of the understanding lie hidden from the eyes of all the living” (8). These difficulties are the starting points for the acquisition of learned ignorance:

...then in presence of such difficulty we may be compared to owls trying to look at the sun; but since the natural desire in us for knowledge is not without a purpose, its immediate object is our own ignorance. If we can fully realize this desire, we will acquire learned ignorance. Nothing could be more beneficial for even the most zealous searcher for knowledge than his being in fact most learned in that very ignorance which is peculiarly his own; and the better a man will have known his ignorance, the greater his learning will be (1954, 8-9).

By this definition of learned ignorance, Nicholas (1954) re-articulates the Socratic necessity of beginning any moral search with a consciousness of ignorance and in doing so, similarly makes ignorance a motivating force for contingent discovery. Also reflective of Socrates’ moral philosophy, Nicholas derives a “lesson of ignorance” from the contingency of divine moral knowledge, and turns that lesson *itself* into moral knowledge: “the quiddity of things, which is ontological truth, is *unattainable* in its entirety; and though it has been the objective of all philosophers, by none has it been found as it really *is*. *The more profoundly we learn this lesson of ignorance, the closer we draw to truth itself*” (12, emphasis mine).<sup>4</sup>

Nicholas’ (1954) “lesson of ignorance” and Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge note the epistemic gap between knowledge of particulars and the uncertainty of universals, and both thinkers posit this knowledge of ignorance as a starting point for the moral

<sup>4</sup> What Nicholas actually seeks in terms of universals is controversial because his writing on the subject is so unclear. While he certainly constructs a system by which to seek the (transcendent) unknown, his thoughts on universals oscillate between various contradictory viewpoints. Jasper Hopkins (1980) writes that his thoughts on universals are so “distressingly imprecise,” that he makes “no important contribution to either the articulation or the solution of the philosophical puzzle” (36). For a straightforward discussion of Nicholas’ varying treatment of universals, see Hopkins, Jasper. A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa (2nd edition). Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1980. 32-38.

quest. But here the similarities end. Where Socrates takes the recognition of this epistemic gap as motivation to turn to discourse as the prime mover of a moral quest, Nicholas makes the opposite move. Where Socrates' ignorance attempts to mediate local/Absolute gaps, Nicholas turns mediation down outright. Nicholas' ignorance is a justification to shut down discourse, removing all distractions between the subject and divinity, bringing the individual full circle to a state of perfect ignorance. For Nicholas, ignorance is a description of the inevitable failure to know perfection from a local viewpoint, an inevitability only worsened by the distractions of human thought in the here and now. The attainment of the kind of "learned ignorance" that will help us to apprehend the unknowable, then, compels us to "eject all that the senses or imagination or reason with its material accretions can give us..." (22-23). This would have to include the "ejection" of the very materials of human experience, the examples from which Socratic essentialist discourse derives its agency.

"Learned ignorance" becomes unattainable unless discourse is abandoned, so that Nicholas' moral quest moves in the opposite direction from Socrates'. For Nicholas, the journey begins with the end of dialogue. As Jasper Hopkins (1980) writes, Nicholas' contention that "between the finite and the infinite there is no proportionality...leads him to view the traditional names for God - 'Creator,' 'Justice,' 'Goodness,' etc. - as terms whose meanings are elicited from human experience," that, when employed, make us unable to "reach beyond our ignorance to apprehend the true nature of God" (19). Departing from the employment of such tainted terms is part of a process by which the epistemic desires of the "unruly intellect, which may otherwise allow itself to be deflected from its aim of reunion with God," are disciplined (Martin 1985, 38). Martin

argues that *Of Learned Ignorance* is an “instrument devised by Nicholas for inflicting a mortification and purification of the mind, quelling its epistemophile impulses” (38). Discourse is particularly problematic to this purification because, like a dog, it runs all over the place seeking its master, while God, the master, is “the unmoved mover,” the terminus and personification of the Word “whose presence would render writing redundant,” making the shifting, contradictory text “bereft of authority” (Martin, 39).

Nicholas not only finds the activity of discourse problematic, but also the place where it occurs (the imperfect now), which is irreparably removed from transcendent perfection. Martin (1985) writes that Nicholas “retains Plato’s opposition between the sensible and the suprasensible, but deprives the latter of the qualification of intelligibility” (31). This amounts to the undoing of the epistemic importance Socrates allows examples in his “What is F?” question. In an attempt to “restore transcendence to the transcendent,” Nicholas rejects all secular knowledge (including, of course, examples derived from human experience) as not only imperfect, but “tainted: branded with the stamp of Adam” (Martin, 31). Nicholas’ perspective implies a rejection of the Socratic discursive journey from example to essence by this description of secular knowledge, thus the inevitable failure of the philosopher’s ascent as described in the “lesson of ignorance,” a lesson derived from the acquisition of learned ignorance: “When we seek to know God or essences...we are like owls trying to look at the sun, because there is no ladder of approximations and comparisons connecting the finite world...which we know more or less, to the infinite world...which we cannot know (Martin, 31).

Nicholas’ simultaneous rejection of discourse as the employment of tainted human moral terms, and the possibility that those terms might ascend from the particular to the

Perfect, results most importantly in the removal of moral practice from the community. The community becomes infused with imperfection, its interactions, debates, and dialogues providing no potential sources for moral progress and discovery. By removing the search for moral terms from the community, Nicholas substitutes the Socratic dialogic quest for an *a-communal* state of original darkness and perfect ignorance, an epistemic position from which the individual might glimpse God.

By equating “learned ignorance” with a disciplining of discourse, imagination, even the human intellect, Nicholas makes the same error that Rorty makes with contingency. For Rorty, contingency was a justification for removing metaphysical terms from the community’s vocabulary as the primary catalyst in a procession toward Freedom and Solidarity. My criticism was that the process endangered its own ends, and that freedom and solidarity could not be derived by taking away terms of central moral belief from the community. Nicholas repeats the error, even if his perspective is metaphysically centered.

Closing off discussions based in human experience, from terms derived through human imagination and intellect, has obvious implications for any theological standpoint. If discourse is a dog that causes us to chase about various distractions of imagination and reason, then religion, personal spirituality, or other such journeys come to a halt, as does the moral growth they are intended to encourage. It would be difficult to reconcile Nicholas’ distrust of discourse with the centrally discursive activities of religion and theology, particularly textual interpretations and debates. Also threatened is the productive and pedagogical impulse of things like New Testament parables, textual allegory, personal readings, group studies, and private or public conversations.

Just as important, Nicholas' closing off of "tainted" secular discourse reflects the problems of Rorty's restrictions on vocabulary in that both ideas attack the *terms* of communal moral discussion, thus derailing the dialogue of the moral quest. In Rorty's creation the quest is hardly worth embarking on because the pathways are contrived, the arguments are rigged, and the end is preconceived, not by means of vocabulary *change* (as Rorty claims, implying a certain productivity), but by way of vocabulary *restriction*. In Nicholas' conception the quest is self-defeating. He offers ignorance as the motivator for the quest, but in proposing the acquisition of "learned ignorance" he has to take away the moral terms that the quest is aimed at, plus the means of its practice - human intellect, imagination, and reason. The quest both begins and ends with ignorance, the common starting point being the end of discourse. This circularity defines the relationship, for Nicholas, between the imperfect intellect, discourse, and the realization of perfection. Martin (1985) writes that for Nicholas, "Truth is a circle with which the intellect, merely a polygon of an unlimited number of sides, will never be perfectly congruent; its smooth circumference is resistant to the angular predications of discursive reason" (31). By taking moral discourse out of the community (and in turn dialogue), Nicholas' learned ignorance has little to offer the problem of public morality. While we may question the epistemic status of examples and contingent terms, that questioning cannot render them useless, lest we lose the entire basis for moral discovery through dialogue.

### **John Rawls and Justice Behind the "Veil of Ignorance"**

Nicholas' "learned ignorance" implies movement by the individual toward a position of original darkness where her moral agency meets its greatest possible fulfillment. John Rawls' theory of justice also seeks to place the agent in an "original position" where,

from behind a “veil of ignorance,” the best decisions on justice can be made. In this section I will discuss the relationship proposed by Rawls between the veil of ignorance and the virtue of justice. After a detailed description of the theory, I will demonstrate that Rawls commits to the same sort of *a*-communal discourse that I have criticized above, by privileging a situation in which dialogue between moral agents is shut down.

Rawls basically defines justice as fairness. He conceives of fairness through contract theory (with a self-described familiarity to Locke, Rousseau, and Kant)<sup>5</sup> so that the principles of justice are those that would be part of an “original agreement” by society: “They are the principles that free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial position of equality as defining the fundamental terms of their association” (Rawls 1971, 11). Rawls’ contractual definition of justice as fairness consists of two parts: “(1) an interpretation of the initial situation and of the problem of choice posed there, and (2) a set of principles which, it is argued, would be agreed to” (15). The two basic principles of justice proposed by Rawls are The Equal Liberty Principle and the Principle of Democratic Equality (see Katzner 1980, 42-43). The first states that “each person is to have the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others;” the second states “social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone’s advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all” (Rawls 1971, 60-61).

<sup>5</sup> For more on Rawls’ “Kantianism” see Blocker, H. Gene and Elizabeth H. Smith (Eds.). John Rawls’ Theory of Social Justice: An Introduction. Athens: Ohio UP, 1980. 309-345 and Wolff, Robert Paul. Understanding Rawls: A Reconstruction and Critique of A Theory of Justice. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977. 106-118.

What this means is that society is to arrange inequalities of wealth and authority in ways consistent with these principles of fairness (43).

The vital component of this theory of justice is what Rawls calls the “original position,” and its most important aspect is the veil of ignorance. Rawls writes that the original position “is the appropriate initial status quo which insures that the fundamental agreements reached in it are fair” (17). Katzner (1980) notes that its primary function “is to define the fair situation” where choices can be made on the principles that will structure society (53). Katzner further clarifies that Rawls looks to the original position as a way to arrive at just social rules by beginning with an “initial situation which is characterized by fairness,” so that rational persons in such circumstances will agree to just principles (43). The important element of the original position, then, is how moral *agency* is to be affected by it.

Equally important is the *kind* of moral agent that Rawls places in this situation. Buchanan (1980) notes Rawls’ affiliation with the Kantian idea of the autonomous moral agent as a “noumenal self,” which for Kant is an agent “whose will is determined by rational principles rather than by particular desires,” rational principles being those that serve as principles “for everyone, not merely for this or that agent, depending upon whether he has some particular desire” (15). One of the vital components of Rawls’ original position is that it provides universal grounds for the moral choices of rational agents, principles that “must hold for everyone in virtue of their being moral persons.” Rawls assumes that agents will understand and use these principles in their deliberations (Rawls 1971, 132). The original position thus enables fair moral choice by putting rational individuals in a situation where they can employ their natural ability to choose

just principles; these principles are not emergent from personal desires but rather the universal standards of rationality.<sup>6</sup> On the importance of this idea, Rawls writes,

Assuming, then, that the reasoning in favor of the principles of justice is correct, we can say that when persons act on these principles they are acting in accordance with principles that they would choose as rational and independent persons in an original position of equality. The principles of their actions do not depend upon social or natural contingencies, nor do they reflect the bias of the particulars of their plan of life or the aspirations that motivate them. By acting from these principles persons express their nature as free and equal rational beings subject to the general conditions of human life. For to express one's nature as a being of a particular kind is to act on the principles that would be chosen if this nature were the decisive determining element (252-253).

The summary idea is that the original position enables the type of moral agency that will ensure just choices by unlocking the rational nature of autonomous moral agents.

The primary principle that allows for the expression of freedom and equality in the original position is the veil of ignorance.<sup>7</sup> In the above quote, Rawls argues that agents will not, for the basis of their actions, choose principles from personal biases and desires, nor rely upon the advantages of their social status and natural ability. The veil of

<sup>6</sup> This basis for universality grants Rawls' idea of the original position much of its Kantianism. Rawls' own connection to Kant on this idea is discussed in the "Kantian Interpretation" section of A Theory of Justice, from which this quote is pulled. Rawls, John. A Theory of Justice. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1971. 251-257. Michael Sandel (1982) argues that the original position is Rawls' response to Kant, his "alternative to the route represented by the *Critique of Pure Reason*." He writes that by describing an original condition of fairness with just principles that rational persons would agree to, Rawls wishes to enable us to view our objective from afar "but not so far as to land us in the realm of transcendence" (24). Sandel, Michael J. Liberalism and the Limits of Justice. New York: Cambridge UP, 1982.

<sup>7</sup> This basic description of the original position will suffice for my purpose, which is to focus on the veil of ignorance. For more details on the components of the original position, and its contract elements, see the clear description offered by Katzner, Louis I. "The Original Position and the Veil of Ignorance." John Rawls' Theory of Social Justice: An Introduction. Ed. H. Gene Blocker and Elizabeth H. Smith. Athens: Ohio UP, 1980. 43-53. See also Kukathas, Chandran and Philip Pettit. Rawls: A Theory of Justice and its Critics. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990. 17-35.



ignorance is how this seemingly selfless agent is put to work. Rawls (1971) writes of the purpose of the veil of ignorance, “Somehow we must nullify the effects of specific contingencies which put men at odds and tempt them to exploit social and natural circumstances to their own advantage. Now in order to do this, I assume that the parties are situated behind a veil of ignorance” (136). This veil keeps individuals from knowing how “various alternatives will affect their own particular case,” so that they evaluate principles on the basis of what is good generally (136-137). The basic idea is that one becomes unconscious of personal advantages, motives, and social conditions, so that good moral choices become those that would be made by a rational person in the absence of individual desires. As Wolff (1977) summarizes, the veil of ignorance “is intended to make calculations of probabilities impossible...” (83). This amounts to the removal of all personalized criteria for moral judgment. On this, Rawls (1971) writes,

It is assumed, then, that the parties do not know certain kinds of particular facts. First of all, no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength, and the like. Nor again, does anyone know his conception of the good, the particulars of his rational plan of life, or even the special features of his psychology such as his aversion to risk or liability to optimism or pessimism. More than this, I assume that the parties do not know the particular circumstances of their own society. That is, they do not know its economic or political situation, or the level of civilization and culture it has been able to achieve. The persons in the original position have no information as to which generation they belong. These broader restrictions on knowledge are appropriate in part because questions of social justice arise between generations as well as within them, for example, the question of the appropriate rate of capital saving and of the conservation of natural resources and the environment of nature (137).

By placing the agent in the original position, behind a veil of ignorance, Rawls formulates a direct response to the problem of emotivism. The washing of personal knowledge of advantage, socio-economic position, concept of the good, and intergenerational conflict, becomes, most importantly, the removal of individual desire as

the basic motive for moral argument. Rawls substitutes the problems of plurality for an ideal of positional equality, not only of status, but of epistemology and rhetorical invention. Argument now extends into a community bound together in common interest by way of their rationality. It is assumed that people know “general facts about human society,” such as political affairs, economic principles, “the basis of social organization,” and the “laws of human psychology,” and indeed they know “whatever general facts affect the choice of the principles of justice” (Rawls 1971, 137). The important thing is that this knowledge is *general*. As long as it is, Rawls imposes no limitations on it because “conceptions of justice must be adjusted to the characteristics of the systems of social cooperation which they are to regulate...” (138). While the parties in the original position are “ignorant of their particular ends, they are all assumed to be motivated by the desire for certain primary goods” (Sandel 1982, 25).

By offering this distinction between individual knowledge and general knowledge, Rawls seems to protect moral agency in the same way that Socrates does by preserving the epistemic value of examples: in Socrates, knowledge of examples allows for others to participate in dialogue; in Rawls, knowledge of general needs, goods, and social structures, enables agents to understand the basic framework for their decisions on justice. But despite this apparent protection, actual discursive practice is still stifled by the way Rawls positions the agent with self-knowledge.

For Rawls the original position and veil of ignorance is a “hypothetical choice situation” that relies first on a description that can produce a fair discourse, then a process of choice by which that discourse can be guided. Buchanan (1980) writes that the “hypothetical choice situation must be described in such a way that,” given the

description, it could be expected that rational persons in that situation would choose one set of principles over another (18). The choice situation is hypothetical in the sense that *actual contracts* are “inescapably embedded in the practices and conventions of some particular society,” while the contract in the original position “is imagined to occur before the principles of justice arrive on the scene,” so that it is able, as a hypothetical contract, to “realize the ideal of pure procedural justice” (Sandel 1982, 125).

The resulting process of choice is guided by uncertainty, which in Rawls is an epistemic *absence* that positions the agent *previous to* knowledge of social conditions and motivations. Given Rawls’ positioning of rational agents under the “informational restraints” of the veil of ignorance, “the problem of choosing principles of justice in the original position is...a problem of rational choice under uncertainty” (Buchanan 1980, 21). Individuals, Buchanan writes, are to choose principles that will govern the distribution of liberty, wealth, authority and other “primary goods” in their society, with no knowledge as to how their choice will affect them personally: “The parties are to choose principles which will profoundly influence their life prospects, but they are to do so in a situation in which the outcome of the alternatives is uncertain” (21).

The main problem is that this uncertainty of outcomes has to be completely individual, rather than communal. Once others enter the discourse, the outcomes of *our* discussions of justice on *each other* would violate the line drawn against knowledge of individual fate in the original position. This is so, because knowledge of peoples’ positions as compared to one another (according to talent or social standing) would become part of the discourse, thereby lifting the veil of ignorance. Put another way, when people become aware of each other, they also necessarily become aware of their

comparative positions in terms of talent and fate. The best that Rawls' theory can do is offer a guide to policy choices, but not a real investigation of the terms of justice, or any terms of *communal order* for that matter, because potential interlocutors have to remain removed from the epistemic position that would make dialogic agency possible.

For this reason, *individual* choice in the original position represents (or replaces) *collective* choice. Rawls insists that the original position *not* be thought of "as a general assembly which includes at one moment everyone who will live at some time," nor "as an assembly of everyone who could live at some time. It is not a gathering of all actual or possible persons." To imagine an assembly such as this would be to "stretch fantasy too far." Rather, the original position must be interpreted so that "one can at any time adopt its perspective." It does not matter when one takes up its viewpoint, or who does, but only that the restrictions mandate that "the same principles are always chosen" (139).

All parties in the original position can be expected to be persuaded by the same arguments and "to vote the same way, since each is assumed to be equally ignorant, and equally rational" (Kukathas and Pettit 1990, 21). Rather than being a basis for dialogic inclusion, ignorance makes one individual choice, made outside of dialogue, representative of all choices by every potential person. Rawls (1971) argues that we can view choice in the original position "from the standpoint of one person selected at random." If any one individual "after due reflection prefers a conception of justice to another, then they all do, and a unanimous agreement can be reached" (139). Note that this unanimous agreement is not reached by way of argument and dialogue, but rather by the universalizing power of reason, plus the condition of fairness invoked by the veil of ignorance. In this way ignorance does not exist to promote a discourse, but to make it

unnecessary. Rawls states this explicitly: “The veil of ignorance makes possible a unanimous choice of a particular conception of justice. Without these limitations on knowledge the bargaining problem of the original position would be hopelessly complicated” (140). The solution to the “bargaining problems” of plurality and individual desires, then, is to offer principles of rationality, minus personal motives, making the choice of one the choice of everyone. But by this solution, Rawlsian ignorance shuts down dialogue and takes the discussion of moral terms out of the community.

By this violation Rawls’ ignorance takes morality out of human, relational practices in contingent time. As Wolff (1977) criticizes, “human existence is not accidentally temporal; it is essentially temporal,” and what makes it a matter of justice when a subgroup chooses for the whole society is “the fact that in principle the entire group *could* be included in the choosing.” Moreover, he argues that “The veil of ignorance creates a choice situation in which the *essential* characteristics of human existence are set aside along with accidents of variation. What results...is not a moral point of view, but a nonhuman point of view from the perspective of which moral questions are not clarified but warped and distorted” (97). In short the original position is too far removed from the human lifeworld to be made meaningful to actual people in principle or practice. Michael Sandel (1982) writes that this objection views the original position as “too abstract” to yield determinate principles for justice, and that the veil of ignorance “excludes morally relevant information, information necessary to generate any meaningful results” because the person in it is “*too detached from contingency to account for the requisite motivations*” (27-28, emphasis mine).

Noting that agents cannot make moral choices in accordance with a social contract without knowledge of individual motivations, Sandel (1982) adds that no two people could ever really be so identically situated as to have identical interests. Sandel reiterates the idea that Rawls' original position deprives the relevant parties of a true discursive plurality. While Rawls notes this problem and proposes as a solution the idea that the decision of one person represents a unanimous decision of *all* persons, this does nothing to protect true moral agency, nor otherness, behind the veil of ignorance. Sandel writes:

...once *all* individuating characteristics are excluded, the parties are not merely *similarly* situated (as persons in real life with similar life circumstances and certain overlapping interests), but *identically* situated...The notion that not persons but only a single subject is to be found behind the veil of ignorance would explain why no bargaining or discussion can take place there. It would also explain why there can be no contract or agreement in the voluntarist sense. For contracts, like discussions, require a plurality of persons, and when the veil of ignorance descends, this plurality dissolves (131-132).<sup>8</sup>

So, bargaining and discussion go with the removal of otherness, and genuine dialogue disappears. The resulting condition is nonhuman, especially as it pictures the individual moral agent. As Kukathas and Pettit (1990) note in their summary of Sandel's critique, "In the real world, we cannot detach ourselves from the interests and loyalties which not only determine our obligations but also establish our identities." Despite his insistence that by personal detachment we can derive right principles, Rawls' theory makes no sense because "it presupposes a capacity we do not have: the capacity to choose or

<sup>8</sup> Sandel's (1982) use of "plurality" here should not be taken as a defense of public moral "plurality" (in the problematic sense as it is presented by MacIntyre's and my own argument). Rather, Sandel is participating in a more general attempt (along with MacIntyre and other like-minded thinkers) to restore a stability to virtue by emphasizing actual practices in human community. For more on this see Kukathas, Chandran and Philip Pettit. Rawls: A Theory of Justice and its Critics. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990. 92-118.

construct a morality without self-knowledge or, indeed, moral experience” (96-97, 154). To summarize, Rawls incapacitates the moral agent by divorcing her from her own moral fate and experiences not only as necessary self-knowledge for making moral choices, but also as *motives* for seeking the good of the community. In Socrates, the local materials of argumentative discovery are retained, and ignorance motivates an other-turning for the sake of mutual elenctic “therapy.” In Rawlsian ignorance both the motivation for dialogue and the materials that would make it possible are removed. Rawls copies the problem of Nicholas by offering a conception of ignorance that functions to remove self and communal knowledge from moral agency, ending argument, bargaining, and discussion on terms of order.

### **Modesty and Ignorance: The Problem of Relational Sincerity and Self-Knowledge**

In her research Julia Driver has maintained that some virtues require or depend on ignorance in order to maintain as virtues. Driver’s work has produced a debate on the idea that *sincerity* is vital to the relationship between virtue and ignorance. This is an especially important point in my study, as sincerity has been central to my arguments on the disavowal of knowledge. While Driver’s ignorance supports some of the claims I have made, and is friendlier to communal discourse than Nicholas’ or Rawls’, I will argue that it too lacks the potential to produce genuine dialogue.

The paradigm virtue in the category of what Driver (1989) attempts to establish as the “virtues of ignorance,” is modesty. Driver is interested in concepts of modesty “associated with self-deprecation, or an underestimation of one’s worth,” defining the modest person as one who underestimates her self worth (374). Moreover, modesty relies on the “*epistemic defect* of not knowing one’s worth” (374, emphasis mine). Modesty and

ignorance connect at Driver's *underestimation account of modesty*. This account holds that the modest person underestimates his self worth: "If he speaks, then he understates the truth, but he does so *unknowingly*. This entails that the modest person is *ignorant*, to a certain degree, with regard to his own self-worth" (376, emphasis mine). Driver's account is quite similar to Rawls' veil of ignorance, since both require that the agent not know his or her own individual talents and standing. She writes "for a person to be modest, she must be ignorant as to her own self-worth," thinking of herself as "less deserving, or less worthy, than she actually is...Since modesty is generally considered to be a virtue, it would seem that this virtue rests upon an epistemic defect" (377).<sup>9</sup> But where Rawls posits an emptiness of self-knowledge as an epistemic position from which to make choices, Driver offers it as a personal characteristic productive of utterances. Modesty, for Driver, is a partly internal "attitude of ignorance" that leads to "modest patterns of behavior" (377).

Just as soon as Driver (1989) locates modesty in behavioral outcomes, however, she notes the problems with equating modest *behavior* with sincere modesty. After all, one might simply exhibit modesty insincerely, or by not talking about herself. These would constitute cases of "false modesty," the first because it is merely an exhibition, the second

<sup>9</sup> In a footnote in this article Driver (1989) writes that in the virtues of ignorance "It is not the ignorance itself which is valued. Rather, it is the underlying state that is necessarily connected to the ignorance in a certain type of context" (384). My understanding is that Driver argues ignorance is to be valued for its virtue outcomes, specifically as it produces sincere modesty behaviors. In a later article "Modesty and Ignorance," Driver takes her argument a step further, claiming that when someone behaves modestly it *is* the ignorance itself that we value, especially as a marker for sincerity that would gain a positive response. Driver, Julia. "Modesty and Ignorance." *Ethics* 109 (1999): 829. While Driver's theory does picture moral agency and self-knowledge in a problematic way, her work in connecting ignorance and virtue has been valuable in forming my own opinions on the subject.



because it is modesty by “omission” rather than “commission” (377-378). Driver implies that sincere cases of modesty are those that constitute genuine underestimations of self-worth (378). If we simply equate modesty with modest behavior without accounting for sincerity, Driver warns that we will include some of the false cases, and miss some of the real cases. The distinction between real and false cases rests on the self-knowledge behind the behavior. Modesty that is simply “polite” or “expedient” is not a moral virtue because it is “too self-conscious an act” (380). Rather, modesty is only a virtue when it comes from sincere underestimation of one’s worth by way of self-ignorance. For Driver, sincerity and ignorance are interdependent, just as they were in Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge. She is right to require sincere ignorance in her conception of modesty, but her requirement for the role of *underestimation* in this account casts doubt on the possibility that modesty is morally productive, or even realistic, as an utterance.

In his response to Driver, Owen Flanagan (1990) emphasizes the point that the underestimation account is unrealistic. He writes that there is something “deeply problematic about a characterization of the virtue of modesty in terms of a ‘dogmatic disposition to underestimation of self-worth’” (425; Driver 1989, 378). On Driver’s view, notes Flanagan, all modest people possess this disposition. But this is counterintuitive on the grounds that “The truly modest person cannot be so systematically in the dark about her worth” (425). Flanagan’s suspicion is that the modest person, by Driver’s description, would be falsely modest because she would have to *practice* this sort of underestimation of self worth rather than coming by it naturally (425). This is an obvious violation of Driver’s sincere underestimation requirement, especially as this underestimation position requires her to argue that “Since modesty necessarily involves ignorance, it is also

necessarily involuntary in nature” (Driver, 381). From this statement, Flanagan attributes to Driver the view that “only modesty that arises spontaneously, from a person’s temperament, is true modesty,” since working at being modest would require that person to “practice self deception” (Flanagan, 426; Driver, 382). This means, for Flanagan, that the person who is not now modest would have to work at obtaining a vice, “the vice of not seeing the self accurately” (426). Flanagan’s proposed solution to this paradoxical situation is a “nonoverestimation account” of modesty, where working at becoming modest is possible because it does not require obtaining a dogmatic disposition of underestimation. Instead one “simply needs to learn not to overestimate one’s accomplishment and worth.” This way, one does not need to be ignorant of one’s own modesty in order to be modest (426). But, of course, Flanagan’s proposal removes the requirement that modesty be the product of ignorance, rendering the most important connection posited by Driver moot.<sup>10</sup>

As per my argument on Socrates’ sincerity and other-turning, I agree with Driver’s requirement of sincere ignorance as a source for virtuous action. She maintains that underestimation, when sincere, results in truly virtuous utterances of modesty. But Driver (like Nicholas and Rawls), conceives of ignorance as a *removal* of the agent from self-

<sup>10</sup> Driver (1999) responds by maintaining that underestimation has the benefit of distinguishing between sincere and false instances of modesty, although she proposes what she considers a “more plausible” account based on “combination modesty.” Under combination modesty “an agent is modest if he is disposed to underestimate self-worth to some limited extent, even in spite of the available evidence” (830). The intent is to avoid personal “overranking,” as this person “exhibits ignorance of self-worth without falling into the vice of self-deprecation” (831). This becomes yet more confusing, since the person would have to be separated from enough self-knowledge of talents and social position to not overrank, yet know enough of this information to not self-deprecate. Driver’s response does not satisfy the objection that discursive moral agency cannot be derived from this divorce of self-knowledge, nor that the divorce seems unrealistic.

knowledge, a divorce that problematizes genuine dialogue. In order to engage in genuine dialogue, one disavows knowledge not as a removal of information about who she is in terms of talents and accomplishments, but as a recognition of her uncertainty. The plain difference is between ignorance as a *defect* or *absence* of knowledge, and ignorance recognized as a *type* of knowledge. One of the arguments concerning Socrates' disavowal of knowledge was that he meant it literally when he said he had no knowledge whatsoever to speak of. Driver's sincerity casts ignorance as this very absence. The problem, as it would have been for Socrates, is the loss of agency for the person with this deficit. By putting the individual in a position of habitual absence of self-knowledge, Driver's agent would be no less able to participate in genuine dialogue than Socrates would have been under the same limitations.

### **Conclusion**

For Nicholas, Rawls, and Driver alike, ignorance is used as part of a larger *positional* argument, where the moral agent is placed in a particular relationship with self-knowledge. From various positions of epistemic *defect*, moral agents are to make the best possible choices as produced from what is *not known*. So, for Nicholas, ethical communication is talk with the self, as the product of a position of "learned ignorance" where the agent *loses* the distractions of local knowledge and discursive chasing. For Rawls, ethical communication emerges from behind the veil of ignorance, where the moral choice of one person who has been *removed* from a position of self knowledge in terms of personal talents and ends (and thus comparisons against others in community), becomes a representative discourse for *all* rational persons who can benefit from the ordering power of justice. For Driver, the basis of the ethical utterance is *underestimation*

of one's self-worth, talent, and accomplishments as an epistemic *defect* where one lacks the knowledge that would inform her as to her personal capabilities (as compared to the abilities of others) and the worth of her accomplishments within her community. The problem common to all three positions of ignorance is that none of them places a capable agent in a realistic discourse community. Nicholas' conception is flatly non-discursive and a-communal. Rawls' veil of ignorance creates a discourse situation in which deliberation upon terms of order cannot take place. And Driver follows Rawls in the error of unrealistically removing the agent from self-knowledge as a *requirement* for producing moral utterances: where Rawls does so by maintaining that the agent must be unaware of his motives for choosing principles of justice, Driver does so by insisting on underestimation as a necessary condition for virtuous modesty. All three accounts remove the raw epistemic materials for genuine dialogue, whether they be personal or communal. Conceptions of ignorance that take away the epistemic materials of communal dialogue take the cultivation and investigation of virtue terms out of the settings and activities of rhetorical practice. For this reason the ignorance of Nicholas, Rawls, and Driver undermines the very motivation and practicality of genuine dialogue.

I have drawn definitional boundaries around contingency (immanent versus uncertain) and now, ignorance (dialogic versus a-communal). The next chapter returns to Socratic ignorance and contingency as uncertainty to reveal how these advocated senses of my main terms make genuine dialogue an *enactment of virtue*. We can get a sense of how we have finally arrived at enactment by revisiting virtue as craft. The craft analogy provides identifiable standards of accomplishment for moral discourse. The standards by which a craft can be said to be pursued well or badly depends on its point or purpose and

the difficulties its practitioners encounter (Wallace 1988, 223). I have identified the purposes of genuine dialogue as a search for Absolutes, the inclusion of other arguments and arguers, and the maintenance of open-endedness; its challenge has been identified as mediation. Inasmuch as participants in genuine dialogue accomplish these standards by their mutual activity, and meet this challenge, they are *doing* virtue, as the craft analogy goes. Just as one may ask what ethics would promote excellence in flute-playing or carpentry, so I have asked what ethics promote these “excellences” of genuine dialogue. Those concepts of contingency and ignorance that were demonstrated as ethics promoting the standards of genuine dialogue have been advocated against their counterparts. We are now in a position where I can demonstrate how ignorance promotes the *doing* of genuine dialogue as an enactment of (or craft of) virtue, by the example of Socratic piety. As I have been implying an enacted perspective throughout by my emphasis on practice, Socratic piety will summarize my foregoing comments on contingency and ignorance.

## CHAPTER 8

### PIETY, IGNORANCE, AND THE ENACTMENT OF VIRTUE: THE EXAMPLE OF PLATO'S *EUTHYPHRO* AND *APOLOGY*

In an attempt to demonstrate the moral operations and outcomes of contingency and ignorance in actual discourse, I offer the examples of the *Euthyphro* and *Apology* in this chapter. My aim is to provide a textual example of how virtue - in this case piety - becomes enacted in dialogue, and how this enactment is contributed to by contingency and ignorance. I will build my case first by deriving a definition of Socratic piety from the *Euthyphro*. Next, I will demonstrate how Socrates' elenchos is a discursive enactment of his own sense of piety. Finally, I will illustrate the relationship between this practiced piety and ignorance by citing passages in the *Apology* where Socrates disavows knowledge in connection with his activity of philosophy. From these passages I will offer broader implications for moral dialogue and ignorance based on what is revealed by Socratic practice. The discourse I provide in this chapter is pious on the model of Socratic ignorance, a motivation for dialogic other-turning intended to build a deeper level of coherence and unification for moral, communal problems. For Socrates, piety puts all arguments to the test and envisions the people of the city as potential interlocutors on matters both local and divine, if only by recognition of their ignorance they are willing to commit to each other in dialogue.

The virtue of piety can be defined from a variety of perspectives.<sup>1</sup> In rhetoric, Kenneth Burke (1954) has defined piety as a "system-builder, a desire to round things

<sup>1</sup> Historical and philosophical changes in the meaning of piety are outside the scope of my argument. For a thorough treatment of what piety meant for the Greeks, see Nilsson, Martin Persson. *Greek Piety*. Trans. Herbert Jennings Rose. Oxford: Clarendon, 1948.

out, to fit experiences together into a unified whole...*the sense of what properly goes with what* (74). As a “schema of orientation,” Burke writes, “it involves the putting together of experiences” in a way that “may be right or wrong,” guiding or misguiding (76). Rosteck and Leff (1989) extend the description, writing that for Burke, pieties “function as stable frames of reference which direct human perception and determine our judgments about what is proper in a given circumstance” (329). For Burke “pieties arise out of the impulse for order.” When interests conflict, they “struggle to organize matter at the expense of rival perspectives” through rhetorical practice (330). For Rosteck and Leff, Burke’s secularized piety is ethically directed at “propriety,” reconsidered as a “principle of local integration...that coordinates what is said with how it is said within some particular context” (329). The limitation of this sense of piety is that it is not directed at *being*, but rather a sort of perspectival appropriateness and coherence. Burke’s piety is enactment and order with an overemphasis on the local. Weaver (1948) keeps piety in the realm of divinity by defining it as “a discipline of the will through respect” that “admits the right to exist of things larger than the ego, of things different than the ego” (172), but his discussion of the virtue at the end of *Ideas Have Consequences* does not offer any clear comments on rhetorical practice. In this chapter I look for a sense of piety that is both enacted and Absolute, a virtue that is practicable according to the standards of genuine dialogue.

My analysis will be restricted to a Socratic definition of piety for two reasons: 1) I will be claiming that Socrates’ dialogic practice is pious according to his contingent sense

For a more general historical review of piety, see Garrison, James D. *Pietas From Vergil to Dryden*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1992.

of the *eidos* of that term; this demands gaining a sense of what values surround piety for Socrates, and how he might maintain contingency and ignorance as a preservation of those values in contributing and exposing his own view to the testing function of his elenchos; 2) Socrates' sense of piety reveals his dialogic ethics, and so, is consistent with the aim of my study, as well as the characteristically Socratic conceptions of contingency and ignorance that I have advocated.

### **Defining Socratic Piety**

In defining Socratic piety, I rely on Gregory Vlastos (1991) and Mark McPherran (2000). For both thinkers, Socrates' activity of philosophizing is aligned with (and motivated by) his sense of piety. The first step to understanding this is grasping Socrates' notion that the gods and their aims are wholly good.<sup>2</sup> For Vlastos, the primary textual evidence for attributing this view to Socrates comes in Book II of the *Republic*:

And is not God of course good in reality and always to be spoken of a such?...  
But further, no good thing is harmful is it?...  
Can what is not harmful harm?...  
Can that which does not harm do any evil?...  
But that which does no evil would not be the cause of any evil either?...  
Once more, is the good beneficent?...  
Is it the cause, then, of welfare?...  
Then the good is not the cause of all things, but of things that are well it is the cause - of things that are ill it is blameless...  
Neither, then, could God...since he is good, be, as the multitude say, the cause of all things, but for mankind he is the cause of few things, but of many things not the

<sup>2</sup> This is one of several religious considerations that can be raised in this discussion, many of which are outside the scope of my study. Socrates' religion is a controversial topic, and will be discussed in this section only insofar as is needed to understand the way Socratic piety motivates Socratic dialogue. For more detailed discussions on Socrates' religious views, see Brickhouse, Thomas C. and Nicholas D. Smith. *The Philosophy of Socrates*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000. 231-265. Also see McPherran, Mark L. "Piety, Justice, and the Unity of Virtue." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 38 (2000) : 299-328 and Vlastos, Gregory. *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1991. 157-178.



cause. For good things are far fewer with us than evil, and for the good we must assume no other cause than God, but the cause of evil we must look for in other things and not in God (379b-d).

The last of these inferences is the most important, as Socrates makes God the cause of only good, and never evil things, in human matters. Vlastos (1991) explains what Socrates is up to as a rationalization of the gods in order to make them moral. He has to do this, according to Vlastos, because he is situated between two apparently opposing positions. On the one hand, he promises to follow reasoned moral argument wherever it leads, being persuaded only by those propositions arrived at by reason (157). “On the other hand, he is also “committed to obeying commands reaching him through supernatural channels,” as evidenced by several references in the *Apology* to the demand from the god to do philosophy (157). Vlastos points particularly to 33c, where Socrates says the death penalty cannot scare him from continuing to philosophize because “This duty I have accepted, as I said, in obedience to God’s commands given in oracles and dreams and in every other way that any other divine dispensation has ever impressed a duty upon man.” Negotiating these simultaneous commitments, Vlastos argues, does not demand Socrates abandon his reasonable method of moral inquiry for metaphysics, but he can neither “insulate his religious faith from the formidable energies of his critical intellect.” His response is to require that his gods meet “not metaphysical but ethical standards...*His gods can be both supernatural and rational so long as they are rationally moral.*” So, Socrates derives a moral theology, “investigating the concept of god no further than is needed to bring it into line with his ethical views” (162). This leads Vlastos to argue that for Socrates, every virtue, including piety, had an essence of its own, regardless of what any god or human thought of it, making it normative for gods

and humans alike.<sup>3</sup> This determines “what virtue is in their case as strictly as it does in ours...if knowledge of good and evil entails moral goodness in a man, it would entail the same in a god” (165).<sup>4</sup> This is because both are bound to be rationally moral, according to the guidelines of Socrates’ moral philosophy.

By binding both god and human alike to the normative power of moral reason, Socrates can be simultaneously attentive to reason *and* divine command as arbiters in the moral domain. Thus, the apparent paradox of being guided by these two voices is resolved. They “cannot conflict,” writes Vlastos, because “only by the use of his own critical reason can Socrates determine the true meaning of any of these signs” (171). The important result is that Socrates relies upon his discursive method of moral reasoning (elenchos) to investigate the meaning of both reasoned argument and divine command. This is precisely the journey he embarks upon in the *Apology* after the Oracle says he is the wisest of all men. The requirement to investigate divine inspiration in order to evaluate it as true knowledge also shows up, for example, in his arguments on poetry in the *Ion* (see especially 533d-535a, 537c-539e, 540a-541a, and 542a).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This is shown by Socrates’ argument that the holy is not holy because it is approved of by the gods, but that the gods approve of it because it is holy (*Euthyphro* 10a-11b).

<sup>4</sup> Vlastos (1991) uses this argument, in part, to explain why Socrates’ gods were in such violation of the gods of the city. If gods were to be held to the “norms of Socratic virtue which require every moral agent, human or divine, to act only to cause good to others, never evil...the city’s gods would have become unrecognizable” (166). By way of “ethical transformation” the old gods, who through divine activity torment and destroy the innocent and guilty alike (for example, Hera’s persecution of Heracles in retaliation for Zeus’ infidelity) would be destroyed for the creation of new ones. Of course this is one of the charges (being a maker of gods) against which Socrates must defend himself in the *Apology* (165-166).

<sup>5</sup> In that dialogue, Socrates allows that Ion and other poets are “god-possessed,” inspired by a divine voice, but he objects to the idea that Ion has true knowledge through divine

It is important to note that this wish to reasonably investigate the inspired discourse of diviners, oracles, poets, and so on does not reflect a pessimism toward the purpose of the gods, but rather a desire to submit to the elenchos interpretations of what these divine signs *mean*. This is what motivates Socrates to do “street philosophy;” attempting to read divine signs as a quest for moral truth becomes his duty to the gods. According to Vlastos (1991), when the god says that Socrates is the wisest of all men, he is not lying, for lying is an evil and Socrates’ theology (god is “invariantly good”) does not allow for this. Rather, Socrates has been given the job of spreading the god’s good will for the city (and Socrates himself) that they should put the perfection of their souls above all else. The god would do this himself, through dreams and oracles, but unless the people “brought the right beliefs to the interpretation of those signs, they would not be able to read them correctly.” And they would not even be able to start on this process if they weren’t “engaged in the quest for moral truth” (173). Socrates’ responsibility, then, from which we can derive a definition of Socratic piety, is to impose upon the city the method of moral reasoning, elenchos, by way of “street-philosophy,” in order to motivate a moral

inspiration because what he receives is mindless. As Vlastos (1991) puts it, Socrates sees diviners, seers, oracles, and poets having the same problem: “All of them in his view are know-nothings, or rather, worse: unaware of their sorry epistemic state, they set themselves up as repositories of wisdom emanating from a divine, all-wise source. What they say may be true; but even when it is true, they are in no position to discern what there is in it that is true” (170). Vlastos contends that Socrates would not hold the view that there are two orders of knowledge, one rational and inferior (reached by elenctic argument), one extra-rational and superior (reached by divine inspiration). If he held this view, he would take the divine commands given him as true moral knowledge “apart from reason and superior to it, yielding the certainty which is conspicuously lacking from his elenctic searches” (167). This view seems supported by textual evidence, especially Socrates’ motivation to disprove the oracle, and his distrust of the divine inspiration of poets as constitutive of true knowledge.

quest toward improvement of the soul. This is the “other-turning” of ignorance that I have identified previously.

By the evidence in the *Apology*, Socrates believes this duty has been uniquely imposed upon him because he is the wisest of all men, but we must remember that he is “wisest” because he has knowledge of his own moral ignorance. When we re-introduce the idea of ignorance here, we see it motivating the moral quest: the words of diviners and oracles may be true, but they *do not constitute certainty* and must be investigated through elenctic argument. Putting the specifics of Socrates’ theology aside, the important point is the *uncertainty* imposed upon both humanly reasonable (argumentative) and divine (inspired) moral discourses. It is the will of the god to have the city care first for virtue and the state of their souls, but if the word on this is spread through divine signs, the threat is that the people of the city will lose sight of the *meaning* of these signs by taking them as certain moral knowledge straight away; there will be little, if any, reasoned interpretation or dialogue. Vlastos’ statement that the people would not bring the “right beliefs” to the interpretation of divine signs can readily, I think, be used to say “they would not bring a proper attitude of ignorance” to the interpretation. And his following statement that they “could not have come by those right beliefs unless they had already engaged in the quest for moral truth” (173) strongly implies that the moral quest, guided by elenctic uncertainty, puts one in the proper frame of mind for such interpretations. So, the god cannot simply offer divinations and trust that these will direct the city toward self improvement and virtue. Instead, Socrates is employed for this job, because of his ignorance.

At this point a definition of Socratic piety can be given.<sup>6</sup> Vlastos (1991) writes that “piety” in Socrates’ life means “doing on the god’s behalf, in assistance to him, work the god wants done and would be doing himself if he only could” (175), or, “Piety is doing god’s work to benefit human beings” (176). McPherran (2000) offers a very similar definition: “Piety is that part of justice that is a service...of humans to gods, assisting the gods in their primary task to produce their most beautiful product...” (303). This definition previews, and is supported by, Socrates’ comments at *Apology* 30a, where he promises he will test those who say they care more for virtue than for money or reputation, for “This, I do assure you, is what my God commands, and it is my belief that no greater good has ever befallen you in this city than my service to my God. For I spend all my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your first and chief concern not for your bodies nor your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your souls.” This passage provides a clear connection between Vlastos’ and McPherran’s

<sup>6</sup> These definitions are tied to key arguments in the *Euthyphro*. Euthyphro offers that part of piety consists of service to the gods (12e). Socrates pushes Euthyphro on what he means by “service” (13a) and gets him to agree that it entails “care...given for the good and welfare of the object that is served” (13b). But Socrates warns against where this argument is going: “Then holiness, which is the service of the gods, must likewise aim to benefit the gods and make them better? Are you prepared to say that when you do a holy thing you make some deity better?” (13c). Socrates offers a similar challenge to Euthyphro’s contention that piety is an art of commerce between humans and gods (14d-e) by asking what advantage the gods could possibly gain by receiving anything from humans (15a). McPherran (2000) points out that the question Euthyphro has failed to answer is, “what is that ‘most beautiful product’...in whose production the gods might employ our assistance?” (302). Euthyphro’s unsatisfactory answer at 14b “If anyone knows how to say and do things pleasing to the gods in prayer and sacrifice, that is holiness...” causes Socrates to tell him he has simply “slipped away” at the point where he could have revealed what piety is (14c). McPherran (2000, 302) and Vlastos (1991, 175) take this as a significant point for the definition of piety they end up offering: service of human beings to the gods in their primary work - producing virtue and improving souls. Euthyphro does not catch on to this hint, Vlastos argues, because “the notion that the gods have work to do, work in which human beings could assist them, is foreign to Greek religion” (175).

definitions of Socrates' piety and the discursive activity of his moral philosophy: his elenchos is a method of moral dialogue for the purpose of instilling virtue in souls, in assistance to God. A longer quote from McPherran makes the connection between piety and elenchos yet more explicit:

Socrates would have reasoned, since the gods are wholly good, their main project and product must be wholly good. But since the only or most important good is virtue...it is likely that the only or most important component of the gods' chief product is virtue; and hence, *our* primary service to the gods - the one we are best situated and suited to perform - is to help produce virtue *via* the protection and improvement of the...human mind/soul. Because elenctic examination of oneself and others is for Socrates the key activity which helps to achieve this goal *via* the improvement of moral-belief-consistency and the deflation of human presumptions to divine wisdom...elenctic philosophizing is, then, a preeminently pious activity. The life of philosophy for Socrates is thus a prime case of pious, anti-hubristic, "street preaching" activity; activity whose aims include the rational re-establishment and revisioning of the traditionally-warranted metaphysical/epistemic gap that separates mortal human from gods (303).

When McPherran claims that Socrates' elenchos is itself a pious activity, he makes explicit not only the connection between virtue and dialogue, but also assigns the elenchos in particular the potential to be an enacted piety. In addition, McPherran assigns the value of uncertainty (pious, anti-hubristic) to its practice, and points to the city audience (street preaching) for whom this discourse is intended. For Socrates, piety consists of working on the gods' behalf to remove false certainty, by recognition of ignorance, for the inculcation of virtue in souls. Socrates' elenchos is the instrument of choice because it aids others in recognizing their common ignorance and the contingency of their arguments, which must be tested and retested to count as significant moral knowledge. Socrates' elenchos, then, is an *enactment* of piety: by practicing the elenchos Socrates practices piety, according to the aims, standards, goods, and outcomes specific to pious accomplishment.

The uncertainty of elenctic argument is a relational good because Socrates and his interlocutors can only embark on a contingent search for moral terms if Socrates' own recognition of ignorance is matched in attitude by his argumentative "other," who, not recognizing her ignorance and the inconsistency of her beliefs, might be made by argument to see these flaws and open herself to genuine dialogue. In the next section I offer an investigation of what Socrates' enacted piety looks like in his speeches in the *Apology*.

### **Piety as Enacted in the *Apology***

By the time he speaks in the *Apology* it is fairly clear that Socrates feels secure in what he believes piety consists of, and that he is practicing it by doing the work of the gods that they cannot do themselves, for the sake of the city. That this work is done by way of elenctic philosophy, and that the elenchos is therefore an enactment of piety, has been claimed above. Socrates' discussion of piety in the *Euthyphro* is at once an investigation of what piety *is* for the sake of securing that term elenctically in preparation for his defense in the *Apology*, and an actual practice of the virtue itself. This uniformity between discursive *practice* - dialogically raising the question of piety, and engaging an other in argument, refutation, and testing - and *enactment* - "doing" piety by the maintenance of ignorance and contingency in the discourse - reveals that the extensive search for the *eidoi* of moral terms can be a practice of the very virtues sought by practitioners.

This also reveals something important about the *praxis* of Socrates' dialogue form. The notion of piety that he is operating with is secure enough that he proceeds, with confidence, to say in the *Apology* that he is doing piety for the positive benefit of the

people he encounters. Of course his notion of piety remains in the category of uncertainty, as it has been justified by elenchos, but this *does not* mean that Socrates cannot put this contingent sense of what piety *is* to practical use in a speech defending himself against its opposite. Socrates' provisional judgments are intended to influence decision-making by members of the polis. The outcomes of Socrates' dialogues, no matter how partial and contingent they may be, move his interlocutors forward on their moral quest in a way that makes them capable of practical action.

At *Apology* 23a-b, Socrates explicitly describes the purpose of his pious mission as the inculcation of ignorance: "That is why I still go about seeking and searching in obedience to the divine command, if I think that anyone is wise, whether citizen or stranger, and when I think that any person is not wise, I try to help the cause of God by providing that he is not." Socrates is enabled to practice piety because he recognizes his own ignorance. Just as important, Socrates describes ignorance as a discursive condition for *other* potential agents who would engage in dialogues on moral matters (including those he might investigate and learn from), moving the focus from his individual agency to the agency of ignorance itself: the god has not meant that only he (Socrates) is nothing compared to wisdom, but that this is the condition of the entire city (*Apology* 23a-b). The "wisest" of all people are those who recognize that they are nothing in respect to wisdom, and this connects to the *practice* of "seeking and searching in obedience to the divine command" and helping "the cause of God" by providing that those who think they are wise, are really not. Here, enacted piety is pictured as the furthering of ignorance in others, which will enable them as participants in genuine dialogue with one another.



In this way ignorance could contribute to the expansion of a community of agents as participants in dialogue on the essential moral terms that order their lives. This expansion consists in Socratic practice of the removal of false and unreasonable beliefs, as well as the hubris of thinking that human wisdom on moral matters constitutes a certainty as to their *being*. Reconciling with the epistemic gap between the local and the perfect, ignorance targets certainty as a barrier to genuine dialogue. In enacting piety, Socrates especially targets those who consider themselves the most wise, or, most certain.

Reporting the results of his investigation of the oracle's claim that he was the wisest of all men, Socrates says "It seemed to me, as I pursued my investigation at the God's command, that the people with the greatest reputations were almost entirely deficient, while others who were supposed to be their inferiors were much better qualified in practical intelligence" (*Apology* 22a). Here, Socrates pictures the expert as the one who has the least potential to engage in genuine dialogue, and assigns the greater "intelligence" to those who recognize what they don't know. As an example of the kind of person Socrates sees as being in the worst condition for dialogue, consider Euthyphro, who sees himself as an expert on piety, and must be since he is so confident in his conception of that virtue that he is ready to prosecute his own father on its basis (*Euthyphro* 4e-5a).

Rather than attempting to place moral knowledge in the category of certainty, practices like the "What is F?" question, the argument from definition, and Socrates' elenchos (which we now see as an enactment of piety) seek to secure contingent conceptions of the Good, Justice, Courage, and so on, within a practice of dialogue that makes these conceptions available for practical matters in the present, but also for

retesting and revision given the results of future dialogues. Recognizing this we understand that to say a term is contingent, or to say it is categorized in the uncertain through ignorance, is *not* to say it is devoid of any moral epistemic content; nor does it discount the idea that the moral knowledge constituted by that term can be made useful for present decisions. Socrates, for example, is confident enough in his ever-contingent sense of what piety *is*, that he is willing to practice philosophy as an enactment of that virtue, maintain the value of these philosophical pursuits in the speeches of the *Apology*, and ultimately, accept execution because he is unwilling to *stop* enacting the pious. Socrates' promise at the end of the *Euthyphro* to never stop searching for what the pious *is* extends past the time of his trial in the *Apology*, and, in fact, past his execution. When we take the promise to continue dialogic questioning at the end of the *Euthyphro* and trace it through the *Apology*, we see that the future trajectory of investigations into the *eidos* of piety, or any virtue, is potentially endless, extending into the future as long as Socrates can do philosophy. Indeed, at the end of the *Apology*, Socrates envisions the continuation of elenctic searches after his death:

If on the arrival in the other world, beyond the reach of our so-called justice, one will find there the true judges who are said to preside in those courts, Minos and Rhadamanthus and Aeacus and Triptolemus and all those other half-divinities who were upright in their earthly life, would that be an unrewarding journey? Put it in this way. How much would one of you give to meet Orpheus and Musaeus, Hesiod and Homer? I am willing to die ten times over if this account is true. It would be a specially interesting experience for me to join them there...*And above all I should like to spend my time there, as here, in examining and searching people's minds, to find out who is really wise among them, and who only thinks that he is.* What would one not give, gentlemen, to be able to question the leader of that great host against Troy, or Odysseus, or Sisyphus, or the thousands of other men and women whom one could mention, to talk and mix and argue with whom would be unimaginable happiness? (41a-c, emphasis mine).

Here, Socrates plans to keep the promise of continued elenchi made in the *Euthyphro* even after he has passed from this world to the next. I have italicized the sentence where he explicitly describes his intentions to continue examining others in the afterlife as elenctic. Of the great names listed in this part of the speech, great judges who “apart from the other happiness in which their world surpasses ours...are now immortal for the rest of time,” all are potential candidates to participate in examinations of moral wisdom, and Socrates will talk to them by the same method with which he approached interlocutors in his present life. By describing his potential dialogic action in the afterlife, Socrates does not complete the moral narrative of his life, but rather points it to its uncertain future as the *telos* of activity in the human ethical sphere.

In this chapter I made the case that Socratic piety was an enactment of virtue according to the standards of genuine dialogue. The enactment of piety through Socrates’ street philosophy accomplished the ends of genuine dialogue by inculcating ignorance in his interlocutors, inviting them into a collective, community-building discourse. The themes of other-turning, inclusion, and open-endedness were all illustrated through the example of Socratic piety. In my final chapter, I continue another theme started here, *praxis*. Framing a set of implications for future research, I discuss the practicality of the discourse I have proposed in this study and some contexts where relevant issues might be examined. Matters of *praxis* also extend into a broader conversation on ideal rhetoric and what has been implied for its practicability by contingency and ignorance.

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In closing the study, I wish to offer a set of future directions for similar research on genuine dialogue, contingency, and ignorance, with an emphasis on possible contemporary contexts for investigation, and issues of *praxis*. I will end with a series of general conclusions from the study, explaining how these conclusions restore some received notions of moral rhetoric while challenging others, and how my arguments fit into the general body of knowledge on the problems I have addressed. It will be most helpful to begin with a summary of where I have been.

As a response to contemporary problems of moral pluralism, I have offered an essentialist notion of moral discourse that recognizes the epistemic limitations of human practices without lapsing into relativism. In my proposal I have advocated the introduction of notions of contingency as uncertainty and ignorance as a form of moral knowledge to promote a genuine practice of dialogue. My primary goal has been to demonstrate how contingency and ignorance make genuine dialogue an enactment of virtue, defining virtue as a “craft” or *techne*. Through the examples of definitional argument, the “What is F?” question, and Socrates’ elenchos, I have argued that contingency as uncertainty, and ignorance as moral knowledge, are ethics that help to further the values and ends of genuine dialogue: other-inclusiveness, open-endedness, and essentialist searching. I have criticized notions of immanent contingency and a-communal ignorance that endanger these same values and ends. Enacted virtue was exemplified by the activity of Socratic piety in the *Euthyphro* and *Apology* in the previous

chapter. In that chapter, I also raised the issue of *praxis*, which I examine more closely below.

### **Future Research and the Issue of *Praxis***

The recovery of a classical sense of ignorance has been proposed as a potential repair for the contemporary accent on relativity in moral rhetoric. For this reason I have focused on classical arguments as well as texts. But the proposed form of dialogue that emerges from an attitude toward contingency is not merely limited to the *Euthyphro* and *Apology*, nor to Socratic articulations. The problem I proposed as my target was “emotivism,” an ill of contemporary civic activity and debate. I have built a case to address the dual demands of that problem: 1) discuss theoretical principles that deal with the central problem of moral epistemology that plagues disputes on terms of order in civic community; and 2) describe a civic discourse practice that mediates between considerations of the local and the Absolute. The first demand concerns what is really knowable in the moral realm, and what kind of communication practices might be motivated by the *unknown*. The second demands a description of what this mediated practice looks like, what its actual aims are, and how moral agents might accomplish these aims given their human limitations. I have addressed the first with a thoroughgoing treatment of contingency and ignorance. Comments directed at the second have focused on dialogue practices that stress uncertainty without sacrificing the search for Absolute terms, a mediation that raises the central question of *praxis*.

The question naturally arises “if these dialogues are uncertain and extensive into an unknown future, where do agents stop in order to propose policies?” To this point the response has been that genuine dialogues, along the lines of Socrates’ *elenchos*, result in

“dialogically secured” positions on moral terms that can be acted upon now. But these terms are always left exposed to re-calculation and revision in future dialogues. They are contingent, but this does not deny that they can be powerfully invoked for moral direction and order in human practices. I have tried to make this point evident by the example of Socratic piety, a contingent virtue that orders Socrates’ entire philosophical activity and directs him toward *practical* civic action. Future research should continue to focus on how contingent terms of order can be made useful for present needs of choice and policy in civic settings. Here I will propose two possible contexts for additional research: one metaphysical - social-economic policy in the Catholic Church - and another secular -the pedagogy of medical ignorance. In future investigations it will be important to go looking for ignorant/contingent dialogues in both metaphysical and secular settings for the sake of examining the broader applications of genuine dialogue. These examinations may also be useful for highlighting similarities and contrasts of dialogic practice according to the ethic that orders particular communities, institutions, and individuals. The two contexts I offer here reveal the possibility that Socratic values of dialogue may appear in both metaphysical and secular settings. Appearing here as example contexts, they are not intended to be fully developed analyses.

My discussion of Catholic social teaching and medical ignorance is intended to offer a contingent response to some basic questions on *praxis*: is the discourse practical, or, can people learn it and do it?; and, does the discourse build relevant communities around an order of beliefs and values? My description of both contexts below suggests that the set of practices I have proposed is already being approximated by major institutions (medical, religious), through the practices of people unified by value systems and

practical goals. If people in these institutions are “doing” ignorance, it suggests that success in social reformation and practical accomplishment through ignorance is possible.

### Catholic Social Teaching

One of the ways Catholic social teaching has become part of the public dialogue on civic issues has been through the issuance of papal social encyclicals, generally addressing issues of “human freedom and its embodiment in culture, economics, and politics” (Weigel 1992a, 1). Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* (1891), written as a response to the increased movement of working-class Catholics away from the Church in the midst of growing attitudes toward individualism, as well Marxist and socialist temptations (Pawlikowski 1985, 1-4), began an extensive conversation on where the Church stood on specific economic and social issues, including workers’ rights, class struggle, and private property rights. The centenary of *Rerum Novarum* was notably marked in May 1991 by Pope John Paul II in the encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, a letter that reviews *Rerum Novarum*, where Church social policy has gone since that encyclical, and where it is going in the future. Catholic social-economic policy serves as an example context where the Socratic ethics of dialogue I have described are prominent. By evidence of general precepts of Catholic debate and dialogue, as well as specific statements within *Centesimus Annus*, the Catholic conversation on economic policy is a promising context for future investigations of contingency and *praxis*.

Scholarly commentary on Catholic social debate emphasizes an overarching theme of dialogue. “Continuing conversation” and “controversy” are described as part of Catholic (and generally Christian) social teaching (Neuhaus 1991, xiii), and in conversations such

as those opened by the encyclicals “disagreement does not imply disrespect” since all such debates are “open-ended” and “may lead in surprising directions” (Weigel 1992b, xi). The Catholic attitude toward history that ensures this commitment to conversation is marked by an emphasis on uncertain futurity and a partial understanding of divine action in the social realm (Royal 1992, 175). Royal writes that the Christian future is “an open field” since human political progress relies upon the frailties of human effort and knowledge, a “truism” that denies the ideological vision of social perfection for the reality of our contingent end (170-171). Moreover, this attitude toward contingency and ignorance maintains a dialogic ethic in Catholic social teaching and political action.

In *Centesimus Annus*<sup>1</sup> John Paul II notes human imperfection and the contingency of Christian truth as bases for engaging others in dialogue, rather than the construction of dogmatic social schema:

*Christian truth* does not claim the right to impose on others [one] concept of what is true and good. Since it is not an ideology, the Christian faith does not imprison changing socio-political realities in a rigid schema. Human life is realized in history in conditions that are diverse and imperfect. Further, reaffirming the transcendent dignity of the person, the Church’s method is always that of respect for freedom. While paying heed to every fragment of truth he encounters [elsewhere], the Christian will not fail to affirm in dialogue with others all that his faith and the correct use of reason have enabled him to understand (46).

A good part of this statement is a direct denial of the ideological effort to perfect human history by the imposition of rigid rules for speech and action, one of the values of genuine dialogue that I have stressed throughout. But other affirmations appear here as well, primarily, the recognition that the moral agent must operate in a place of

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this chapter I cite the *Centesimus Annus* from its reprinting in Weigel, George (Ed). A New Worldly Order: John Paul II and Human Freedom. Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1992. 29-57. The numbers appearing in parentheses after each direct quote note the passage numbers in the original encyclical.



imperfection, using imperfect materials (for Socrates this was the compromise between example and *eidōs*) for the discovery of moral arguments. This emphasis on imperfection motivates not the false repairs of a “rigid schema,” but rather an openness to the contingency of conversation in diverse and imperfect social settings. The turn is away from the impulse of the ideologue, and toward that characteristically Socratic discourse that pays heed to socially encountered truths, and *affirms in dialogue* with others, those understandings that the faculties of faith and reason have provided.

Catholic social teaching comments on present challenges in accordance to ordering (transcendent) moral terms. At the beginning of *Centesimus Annus* John Paul II lists some of the “fundamental principles” of Christian “social and political organization” furthered in past encyclicals - “friendship,” “social charity,” “love” - as various articulations of the virtue upon which his own commentary is based, “solidarity” (10). Much of Catholic social thought and debate also centers around what “justice” means given the precepts of the Christian faith and their relevance for present social issues and political organization.<sup>2</sup> Potentially, the Catholic version of the “What is F?” question may look very much like its Socratic manifestation. This makes the Church’s search for what “friendship,” “solidarity,” and “justice” *are* in present human society a prospective place for investigating contemporary manifestations of Socratic form. Important questions of policy may also be addressed here, as gaps between the perfection of these ideas, and the

<sup>2</sup> In *Rerum Novarum*, for example, Pope Leo XIII rejects the socialist emphasis on class struggle, shared property, and the parental function of the state as unjust violations of natural order (12-28). Here I am citing the passage numbers from the original encyclical as reprinted in Byers, D.M. (Ed). Justice in the Marketplace: Collected Statements of the Vatican and the U.S. Catholic Bishops on Economic Policy, 1891-1984. Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1985.

imperfection of human knowledge and society, challenge the Church's ability (and desire) to offer specific social mandates.

On the issue of *praxis*, some critics argue that the Church's social teachings are too general to be politically and economically useful (Royal 1992, 172). In *Centesimus Annus* John Paul II writes that part of Catholic social teaching is resisting the "theocratic temptation" of passing "definitive judgments on complex social issues," as such impositions are outside the domain of the Church's teaching function (3). The Church does comment on specific issues, but hesitates to do so, preferring to speak from generalities. But Royal argues this policy does not constitute a drawback from society; nor does it mean that Catholic social teaching does not have "significant, real world consequences" (172). By "pointing out false views of man and history" the Church has served a "boundary-setting function" with actual historical, social, and political implications. For example, Pope Leo XIII's initial objection to socialism, then only a social philosophy and not yet a fully official system of government, turned out to be an accurate warning given the sufferings of Polish, Russian, and Czechoslovakian workers, and the eventual fall of communist governments (Royal, 172; John Paul II, 12).

Future investigations of Catholic social teaching may reveal that institutions practicing dialogue with an attitude toward contingency and ignorance can make historically influential comments on proper social/political order, as well as propose specific policies on the issues of the day. John Paul II writes that the Church "formulates a genuine doctrine, a *corpus* that enables her to analyze social realities, to make judgments about them, and to indicate directions for the just resolution of problems" (5). To say that dialogues such as those proposed by the Church have uncertain ends is not to

say that the contingent principles they posit and test cannot be *practical* materials for the formulation of a directive social doctrine. What needs to be asked in future research is, “how are both general commentaries on social problems, and specific guidelines for action, articulated within a dialogue form that maintains an ethic of ignorance and contingency consistent with the social teaching values of the Church?” The additional question then becomes, “what tangible historical evidence can be provided that links the outcomes of these dialogues with social/political change?” Several of the answers may be found in a more thorough analysis of Catholic social encyclicals for their stated dialogic values, plus a tracking of historical changes associated with their public reception.

#### Medical Ignorance in Pedagogy and Practice

The stated dialogic values of medical ignorance are accessibly Socratic. The ethics of medical ignorance that I will cover here concern training, and their Socratic heritage makes this context an excellent direction for future research. My comments will center on the University of Arizona College of Medicine’s curriculum on medical ignorance; with a brief treatment I will illustrate the potential for further research on particulars of the school’s program, course content, comments from professors and students, guest lectures, and pedagogical outcomes.

In an article appearing in the *Western Journal of Medicine*, Witte, Witte, and Way (1990) write that the University of Arizona College of Medicine’s curriculum on ignorance has the following aim: “To promote a spirit of inquiry, rather than the mere memorization of syndromes and treatments...” (17). Students “are taught that which is not known,” a category of medical knowledge that includes “things which *we believe we know, but in actuality do not*” (17, emphasis mine). This emphasis on false belief

constituting “knowledge” recalls the target of Socratic elenchos; in the same way that Socrates’ disavowal makes moral ignorance a form of knowledge, so too does this basic statement provide medical ignorance a positive categorization. The ethic of ignorant inquiry is also strikingly similar, expressed in the claim that “Indeed, the belief that one understands a subject is usually, if not always, an indication that one simply has not dug far enough into the area” (17). Finally, the therapeutic function of the discourse is characteristically Socratic. The removal of false beliefs in medical certainty is realized by way of recognizing the limitations of medical scientific knowledge, and this is done for the inculcation of ignorance in order to train better practicing doctors. Witte, et al. (1990) write “With hard work, dedication, and a great deal of reading and careful thought, the finest students at the University of Arizona are managing to graduate more ignorant than when they enrolled” (17). The purpose of this rigorous inculcation of ignorance is “learning how to question, rather than how to answer, whether about the basic biology of an illness...the diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment of specific diseases...or related socioeconomic, legal, and ethical issues...” as a reversal of most medical curricula (18).

Future examinations might focus on the particular courses and their stated values, as well as the more specific desired outcomes for students as related to the ignorant journey described above. At the University of Arizona, students learn an ethic of continuous questioning in dialogue with other students, professors, and guest lecturers, who together “explore the cutting edge of the unknown” (Witte et al., 18). Begun in 1985, the curriculum helps students “develop the needed attitudes to recognize and deal with ignorance” understanding “the things we know we don’t know, the things we don’t know we don’t know, and the things we think we know but don’t” (18). Important to this

process is a recognition of the historical contingency of medical “facts” and “knowledge” that proceed in a nonlinear fashion through past and future successes and follies (18). Reflecting the basic ethic of ignorance that promotes continuous questioning, students are graded “not by short-answer tests, but primarily by the progression of their questions” (18). All of this training on questioning is connected to medical *praxis*. Students record their questions in weekly “ignorance logs” as they perform analyses, have discussions, conduct research, and “practice making clinical decisions where lives may hang in the balance” (18-19). How ignorance training leads to better *practical* capability in diagnosis and treatment would be a primary question to pursue in future research.

In this article Witte, et al. (1990) describe the role of medical ignorance concerning AIDS and lymphatic diseases, illustrating the issues of treating illnesses with unknown aspects, as well as the historical uncertainties of discovery and analysis that plague medical findings. Other contexts can be similarly explored for procedures and outcomes according to an ignorant dialogic ethic. What is important to note is that ignorance in this context has clear *practical* applications; the training is intended to make better doctors, and their treatment of patients is likely to be an *enactment* of the virtues gained from their ignorance work.<sup>3</sup> An investigation of what those virtues are - fairness, patience, or humility, for example - how they are defined and negotiated by practitioners and

<sup>3</sup> An essay appearing in *The Lancet*, for example, advocates continuous questioning as a way to better administer medicine to patients, implying an ethic of ignorance by the recommendation that an attitude of omnipotence be replaced by a recognition of impotence. Pickering, William G. “Does Medical Treatment Mean Patient Benefit? (Benefits of Therapy Need to be Continually Evaluated).” *The Lancet* 347 (1996) : 379-380.

professors, and what their practical outcomes are in doctor/patient relations, would be likely areas of focus.

A related area for future inquiries could be medical research, where the values of ignorance, especially as they are based on scientific unknowns, may affect the way researchers work, form policies, and publicly describe the outcomes of their research.<sup>4</sup> Here, the Absolute aims of genuine dialogue could potentially be examined by focusing on religious conflicts in medical research, for example, in stem cell and human cloning debates. The matter of public reporting, of course, would also be a problem of rhetorical interest.

Finally, it is important to identify medical ignorance as further evidence that contingency does not deny *praxis*. The University of Arizona is attempting to train “more ignorant” doctors as capable practitioners of medicine; discovering how this is accomplished, and what it means to be a “capable, ignorant doctor” may provide a rich description of what actual practice looks like when contextualized within a continuous medical dialogue on ignorance.

### **Contingent, Ignorant Conclusions**

My study has centered around, and given thorough treatment to, two main terms: contingency and ignorance. It would only be appropriate to cast my conclusions in their language. I have applied contingency to a description of moral rhetoric as a search for the ordering terms of community - justice, piety, courage, fairness, equality, and so on. Genuine dialogue has been described as an attempt to discover the *eidoi* of these terms

<sup>4</sup> In a *New Statesmen* article, for example, an ethic of ignorance is proposed as a repair for various problems of medical research. Le Fanu, James. “Why Doctors Should Admit Their Ignorance (Pseudo Explanations by Physicians Betray Their Scientific Ignorance).” *New Statesman* 128 (1999) : 28-29.

for the stabilization of public moral argument. Genuine dialogue mediates the epistemic gap between imperfect human knowledge and perfect (divine, essential) knowledge by forming a practice that compromises neither, a practice aimed at positing, investigating, challenging, and re-testing, moral theses over time into an open-ended future. A characteristic form of disagreement with this statement holds that idealist practices are forms of manipulation in contingent clothing: Socrates knows the answers to his questions before he asks, making his interlocutors into marks and reducing Socrates to a (basely) ironic trickster character. This interpretation ignores important textual evidence to the contrary (as I have argued), and transforms the values of genuine dialogue - openness, inclusiveness, uncertainty - into a set of baited traps and dishonest stances. Moreover, it closes off scholars of moral rhetoric from a dialogue tradition that makes it possible to mediate between the contemporary theoretical accent on individualized-truths-made-in-historical-context, and the idealist voice that this accent has made sound naive, or worse yet, manipulative.

To recognize the contingent ethic of essentialist moral dialogue is to preserve its actual dialogic integrity as a response to charges of impossibility and manipulation. The defense has worked on several levels in my project. First, I have demonstrated that contingency as uncertainty is an enabling principle of genuine dialogue, making its practice extensive into uncertain ends/futures, and therefore, reconcilable with the practical imperfections of local human experience, conventional language, and historical moment. The actual ends of genuine dialogue, being uncertain, are not problematized by these limitations but rather become a realistic description of potential argumentative outcomes. Second, I have turned the charge of manipulation against immanent versions

of ethical contingency. When “contingency” is made a motivation to eject the vocabulary of entire traditions of moral dialogue, as Rorty proposes in his “contingency of language,” the result is not that the dialogues left over will proceed toward uncertain ends. Rather, those dialogues remaining are manufactured against the very arguments that threaten whatever political or historical project they are meant to further. Ideological efforts represent a truer form of contingency-based manipulation since they shape discourse according to the aims of a preconceived program for human ethical “progress.”

Ignorance has been defined in two senses: as a form of moral knowledge, and as a rhetorical means. The particular value of Socratic ignorance is that it categorizes moral knowledge as uncertainty and makes its discovery and testing the project of contingent dialogue. Socrates’ ethic of dialogic ignorance was intended for the whole city, and its basic target was certainty in several variations; I expanded Socrates’ criticism of certainty to utopian and progressivist discursive programs. I have implied Socrates’ individual ethic as metaphysical, but the condition of ignorance could be therapeutically imposed upon any interlocutor, inviting persons of diverse opinions and values into dialogues on a wide range of topics. The therapeutic aim of the elenchos was to make Socrates’ condition of (ignorance-based) wisdom the condition of his dialogic “others,” and this could apply equally, I think, for the staunch pragmatic sophists Polus and Callicles, as it could for Socrates’ student Plato. The potential value of ignorance given our contemporary theoretical and public condition is that it equally infects theorists and practitioners on both sides of the metaphysical divide. For this reason ignorance can open dialogues and include participants in contexts with varying value systems, with the lone requirement that everyone knows what they don’t know.



Another key idea in the study that becomes relevant here is that of a *relational good*. According to Farrell (1991), relational goods “require another person in order to be practiced and thereby cultivated,” making rhetoric a “coherent, creative activity admitting to certain standards of accomplishment” (187). As a good *relational* to genuine dialogue, ignorance requires the inclusion of people who disagree, submitting challenges from diverse perspectives. The counterexample of ideological discourse demonstrates one possible form that results when dialogues are built on manufactured certainties designed to silence particular voices. The role of the expert in the contemporary public sphere has caused similar problems, especially by the articulation of guru knowledge through technical jargon. Ignorance has the potential to rescue the privileges of debate away from technocrats, intellectuals, medical scientists, and analysts by imposing contingency on their conclusions, and calling into question the certainty of their specialized rationalities. Socrates’ method provides a model, as it was directed with the greatest force against those who considered themselves “experts” on moral wisdom, for example, the politicians, and Euthyphro.

As a recognition and inclusion of the “other” in contingent civic contexts, ignorance also contributes to conceptions of *phronesis*. Recall that Johnstone (1980) assigns *phronesis*, through Aristotle, the task of mediating between considerations of concrete situation and universal. Johnstone writes “The objective of practical wisdom...is the apprehension of *moral* truth, of truth in the probable and contingent realm of action” (3). Socratic ignorance fits this function of *phronesis* precisely, first by dividing “moral truth” off into the category of uncertainty, then by promoting a practice fitting for the “contingent realm of action,” a description we can apply to genuine dialogue. Further

research could investigate fuller forms of integration between ignorance and *phronesis*. The question could be asked “is ignorance a form of practical wisdom?” The early answer is a tentative “yes.” By his disavowal of knowledge, Socrates “apprehends” the moral truth that he is nothing compared to wisdom, and his resulting practice of philosophy occurs in a morally contingent realm of civic action, a description that corresponds with Johnstone’s definition. Describing the relationship between *phronesis* and ignorance may be another way to get at the mediation between the ideal and local accomplished in genuine dialogue.

Finally, the outcome of genuine dialogue, virtue, is an important matter for future research. Defining virtue as craft I have focused on the “doing” of moral dialogue, a creative process formed from the considerations, materials, and limitations specific to it. Just as medicine and law admit of certain standards of practice for the production of their desired ends, so does genuine dialogue have standards for its procedures - inclusion and open-endedness accomplished through contingency and ignorance - as well as outcomes in moral choice and policy. Craft virtue is connected with the above ideas of *phronesis* and *relational goods*, since these make the creative “doing” of genuine dialogue possible. The purpose of the “craft” of Socratic dialogue, and the difficulties it faces, are unified under ignorance: those who don’t know must be made to know that they don’t know, so they can engage one another for the sake of growing in virtue. Seeing virtue as craft helps us as rhetorical theorists to focus on the purposes, standards of accomplishment, and difficulties that define ethical practices, including the practice of rhetoric itself. Through the craft perspective, we can usefully ask what various participants in dialogue can do relationally in order to further the values and ends of their community. Further research

should take a closer look at what it means to accomplish a “craft” of virtue from a rhetorical perspective. The metaphor is useful to rhetoric not only because of its emphasis on *practice*, but also because it binds together considerations of form, content, context, purpose, and limitations, all considerations that rhetorical theory is uniquely capable of examining.

### **Implications**

In ending the study I return to the problem in order to frame a set of implications. The problem was framed around “emotivism,” the contemporary attitude that “all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character,” so that “moral judgments, being expressions of attitude or feeling, are neither true nor false; and agreement in moral judgment is not to be secured by any rational method,” (MacIntyre 1984, 12).

MacIntyre’s definition can be expanded into a general statement on the denial that contemporary moral pluralism launches against truth-seeking discourses in the public realm. Genuine dialogue has been my attempt to recover essentialist discourse as a repair for the fragmentation of competitive, pluralistic arguments on public, ordering terms. My proposal has been for practical mediation between the local and the Absolute, with the warning that overemphasis in either direction can lead to trouble.

An overemphasis on locality yields various forms of moral relativism (for example, emotivism, or moral plurality), as well as more specific manifestations such as ideology and immanentist discourse programs. Conversely, an overemphasis on the Absolute can yield discursive proposals impractical to human moral endeavor, as exemplified by Nicholas’ wholesale departure from discourse. Among its several possible meanings,

“mediation” involves matters of emphasis and overemphasis. These matters provide useful guidelines for how the local and perfect are negotiated in ethical rhetoric, and how these emphases regulate moral dialogue in particular - making it possible or impossible, revealing whether it is in service to the larger polity, or small and exclusive communities, and creating a standard for how “dialogic” it really is. In another sense “mediation” could denote a sense of comfort with imperfection. The metaphysician and ideologue alike propose various dialogue forms in order to address the common target of imperfection, but those proposals, and especially their aims, reflect different states of comfort. The ideologue’s attempt to “clean up” language is reflective of a discomfort with imperfection - social, political, and linguistic - and the formation of language programs can become the chosen therapy. The metaphysician is equally troubled by social and political maladies, but her action in the social realm is not aimed at perfection, but rather, as a form of service within a contingent frame of present and future time. Attitudes toward imperfection become relevant for those parts of social action that are discursive (public moral argument), especially as standards for dialogue. Comfort with imperfection underlies several elements of genuine dialogue - Socrates’ willingness to argue from examples, the categorization of moral wisdom as uncertainty, and, of course, Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge. The implication is that varying levels of comfort or discomfort with imperfection motivate differing forms of moral dialogue, and the motives for dialogue proposals can be tracked along these lines of mediation.

A primary motive for offering a “mediated” solution has been to revive classical and metaphysical forms of ignorance in order to make them possibilities in contemporary rhetorical practice. In this way my study may contribute to the debate between ideal and

pragmatic rhetoric begun in Ancient Greece that continues today. Gorgias' tenets of communication stand as enduring objections to the type of discourse I have proposed in this study. They are: nothing actually exists; if anything actually did exist, it would be incomprehensible to human beings; if it were comprehensible, it could not be communicated to others (Enos 1993, 81-82). The first statement is a denial not of physical reality, but of the existence of essences. Enos writes "Gorgias so strongly opposed the belief in essences" that "Platonic notions of ontological 'essences' (for example, the ideal rhetoric) were absurdities..." (81). I have demonstrated how this denial can become a basis for ejecting metaphysical vocabularies, and so, a blockade to dialogue generally. I have argued that the importance of including consideration for essences in moral dialogue is that such consideration motivates an ethic of contingency and ignorance that acts to preserve the integrity of genuine dialogue as inclusive and open-ended.

Gorgias' second statement refers to the limitations of human sensory perception. It confronts ideal notions of rhetoric based on the misconception that these notions demand "perfect knowledge" in order to be practiced. For Gorgias, Enos writes, Plato's idealized rhetoric was a fantasy because the existence of Perfect things have no referents in the physical world attainable by human sensory perception: "In short, total knowledge of any subject (including rhetoric) would be impossible and what would appear to be knowledge would be thoughts about observations that could only be partially understood through interpretations of our finite senses and cognitive preconceptions" (Enos, 82). This argument is based on the misconception that idealist practices demand "perfect knowledge" of their subjects in order to meet their own standards of accomplishment, an

argument that is denied by the ethic of uncertainty central to Socrates' "What is F?" question, elenchos, and disavowal of knowledge.

The third tenet holds that, even if the Perfect were experienced, language could not articulate it, since speech can only communicate "references to experience" (Enos, 82). Enos attributes to Gorgias the belief that "even if it were possible to acquire an understanding of an ideal rhetoric, it could never be communicated to others, since it could have no referent to anything which could be perceived" (83). This is the problem mediated by Socrates when he asks the "What is F?" question. Inevitably, answers to what piety *is*, or what courage *is*, have to be based on examples and human experiences, imperfed by individualized perceptions and articulations of sensory reality. We have seen, however, that Socrates reconciles with this by accepting examples and even using them himself, as the material for responding to, accepting, and rejecting, the arguments of his interlocutors. This acceptance comes with the recognition that examples are the only materials available to them as human beings, and the outcomes of their arguments toward essential definitions will be contingent as a result.

My study has not implied *proof* that an ideal rhetoric is possible; nor has it *disproved* the denials of critics. But by pointing out some of the misconceptions underlying stances critical of idealist proposals, I have implied the possibility for a more dialogic ethic in this overwhelming debate. Based on concepts of contingency and ignorance, I have argued that the purposes of idealist practices such as the argument from definition, the "What is F?" question, and Socratic elenchos have been largely misunderstood by critics, whether they be Thrasymachus or Richard Enos. In supporting this stance I have responded to claims of Socrates' insincerity in disavowing knowledge, Socrates'

insistence that one has to know the *eidos* of a thing in order to have moral knowledge (claims that attribute the Priority of Definitional Knowledge (PD) to Socrates, and hold that he denies the epistemological value of examples outright), and the general perception that arguments from definition actually aim of positing *final*, rather than contingent, definitions. A greater understanding of the dialogic ethic of idealist practices may come through a better conversation in the field on ignorance. Part of this conversation might consist of discovering points of similarity between the social concerns and proposals of theorists on both sides of this enduring debate, especially as they are found in dialogue. In short, genuine dialogue may be a decent form to impose upon debates internal to the discipline on matters of *being* and immanence.

Finally, whether this contingent and ignorant dialogic ethic becomes part of scholarly, or public, debate, important issues of symbolic violence can be addressed by it. In the same way that the ideologue does violence to metaphysical vocabularies, the scientist does violence to arguments from mystery and religion, the engineering professor does violence to arguments in the philosophy department, and the materialist does violence to spiritualist objections, all based on certainties about fact, measurement, or visions of progress. If, as James Herrick (1992) has argued, contemporary rhetoric has become directed not at seeking consensus, community, or humanness, but rather “victory, ideological hegemony, or...’having the last word’” (1992, 133-134), then violence is its only logical outcome. Practices that *do* seek “consensus,” “community,” or “humanness” are not insured against violence by their nature, but the addition of an ethic of contingency and ignorance could go a long way toward the inclusion of arguments,

vocabularies, and diverse “others.” By this ethic the dialogic revisioning of one term of order for another may become an act of collective sacrifice rather than murder.



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## VITA

Daniel A. Grano was born in Alexandria, Virginia, on February 12, 1973, and grew up in Ridgewood, New Jersey. He earned a bachelor of arts degree in journalism at the University of Memphis in December of 1995. In August of 1997, he earned a Master of Mass Communication degree from Louisiana State University.

After completing his master's studies, Daniel moved back to Memphis in pursuit of a career. Following a brief stint as a community newspaper Editor and Reporter, he donned a suit and went to work for Physiotherapy Associates, a public healthcare company. Life in a cubicle, however, wore away at his soul, so he left the private sector to enter the deeper folds of the Academy.

Daniel was accepted into the doctoral program in the Department of Communication Studies for the Fall semester of 1999, and settled on a concentration in rhetoric and public address, with minors in political theory and philosophy. In August, 2002 he became an Instructor in the department. He earned the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in August, 2003.