

Chapter 2

Method and Structure in Plato's *Alcibiades Major*

Abstract “Method and Structure in Plato's *Alcibiades Major*” evaluates Jaakko Hintikka's claim that the interrogative model is compatible with the Socratic elenchos. After explaining the function of the interrogative model, I argue that Hintikka's claim that Socrates lacks any sort of factual knowledge about a dialogue's interlocutor or its subject matter is blatantly false. Using Plato's *Alcibiades Major*, I show that the dialogues are contrived in such a way that Socrates is always in possession of pertinent, factual information about an interlocutor and a dialogue's subject matter. Contrary to Hintikka's claim, such information, “presuppositions,” motivates the dramatic and philosophical movement within the dialogues and anchors the propositions introduced by Socrates in elenctic exchanges. Consequently, Socrates' strategic knowledge is shown to be derived from his comprehensive factual knowledge.

Recently within Platonic scholarship increasing attention is focused on the methodological issues the dialogues raise. This scholarship is motivated by one central question: *How does Socrates model rational knowledge seeking?* The answer to such a question will be crucial in determining the role Socrates, the interlocutor, and the reader play in the dialogues and in determining to what extent the dialogues' question-and-answer process is reflective of how decisions are made in ordinary conversations. Despite the fact that the recent turn towards methodological considerations is long overdue, the scholarship being produced fails to appreciate the methodological versatility employed by Plato. Commentators have especially overlooked the ways the Socratic dialogues model decision making strategies.

In order to correct these deficiencies I will review and critique the claims of three prominent commentators who offer interesting, but deficient, explanations of Socratic methodology. The commentators I have selected are worthy of discussion because their respective readings of the Platonic dialogues are influential. They each articulate, from a modern perspective, three different approaches to the interpretation of the Platonic dialogues that have been around since Plato's early interpreters.¹ In general, these commentators assume that the dialogues should be

¹ See Harold Tarrant's insightful book, *Plato's First Interpreters* (2000, pp. 1–26; pp. 44–52).

interpreted in light of the role played by one of their structural features (e.g., the interlocutor's answers, Socrates' leading questions, or Socrates' strategic knowledge). Such interpretations end up overemphasizing one aspect of the dialogues while underemphasizing other aspects, such as the relationship between the dramatic and philosophical content within the dialogues. Consequently, I believe that the commentators should receive a critical evaluation.

The commentators I will be critiquing are Michael Stokes, Ian Kidd, and Jaakko Hintikka. In Sects. 2.1 and 2.2 I show how the respective positions of Stokes and Kidd render the dialogues lopsided and unphilosophical and, in principle, of historical interest only. Stokes places too much emphasis upon the interlocutors at the expense of Socrates; while Kidd places too much emphasis on Socrates at the expense of the interlocutors. I conclude these sections by arguing *inter alia* that Stokes' and Kidd's deficiencies can be overcome by appreciating how the reader of a Platonic dialogue is on par, dramatically, with the role played by Socrates and the interlocutor(s). In point of fact, the dialogues are provocative precisely because they are designed to force readers to consider their own solutions to the subject matter under discussion. The ambitions, desires, and prejudgments of the reader are put into play. As with Socrates' questions and the interlocutor's expressed views, the reader's questions and views are essential in generating urgency within the dialogue and moving the dialogue along to a conclusion. Such movement results from the various perspectives brought to bear in the interpretation of a Platonic dialogue. Consequently, the conclusions of a Platonic dialogue are negotiated settlements that are always subject to revision.

In Sect. 2.3, I discuss Hintikka's claim that the Socratic elenchus models many of the same features of the interrogative model of knowledge seeking. Hintikka characterizes the interrogative model as functioning within the context of questioning. The answers to such questioning are deduced solely from the interlocutor's answers, not from factual knowledge about the interlocutor or the subject matter under discussion. As a result, Hintikka claims that Socrates' insistence that he is ignorant rests on the distinction between factual knowledge and strategic knowledge. Socrates practices elenchus successfully because he has strategic knowledge (i.e. he knows which questions to ask), not factual knowledge (i.e. details about who, what, when, where, etc.). I take issue with such a distinction by arguing that if the Platonic dialogues are reflective of rational knowledge seeking through a question and answer process, and reflective of decision making strategies found in ordinary conversations, which I think they are, Socratic questions must be guided by presuppositions about the interlocutor and the subject matter of the inquiry.

My arguments will be illustrated by Plato's dialogue *Alcibiades Major*. This dialogue is worthy of examination because it is especially rich in psychological drama and philosophical content. *Alcibiades Major* lacks scene setting to introduce and justify its subject matter, so the dialogue immediately confronts the reader with a conversation between a reluctant, but arrogant, Alcibiades, and a probing Socrates. Such an abrupt start to the conversation between these two strong personalities proves to be fertile ground for exploring both self-knowledge and the pitfalls of overemphasizing the importance of Socrates or the interlocutor within the

dialogue. Moreover, there are three broad reasons why Socrates' line of questioning in *Alcibiades Major* should be a model for readers: (1) The dialogue teaches us to know ourselves, and that we are really rational soul. The soul is the true self (*auto*) that remains the same and remains the true subject of our actions, whereas the body becomes an instrument utilized by the soul. Consequently, true happiness is to know one's true self; (2) *Alcibiades Major* is a protreptic (*protreptikos*) dialogue. The word protreptic means to turn, to urge on, or to exhort. Alcibiades' gradual realization that he lacks the requisite knowledge to rule himself and the city properly forces him to reevaluate his prior commitments and goals. Witnessing such a reevaluation should urge the attentive reader to conduct an appraisal of the feasibility of his own goals and commitments; and (3) *Alcibiades Major* is a maieutic dialogue. Socrates draws out, as if he were a midwife of ideas, Alcibiades's ideas so that they may come to light. Alcibiades gives birth to the truth within himself that he does not have knowledge of the just and unjust, but supposes he does. The readers of *Alcibiades Major* should benefit from witnessing Alcibiades' inadvertent admission. It teaches us to be aware of the lack of consistency between our true beliefs and our professed beliefs.

In *Alcibiades Major* Socrates confronts a young, ambitious Alcibiades who cares more about what he has (e.g., wealth, family, honors) than about what he is. Alcibiades' ambition is to present himself to the Athenian people to show them that he deserves to be honored more than Pericles or any other politician that ever was. However, he is in no position to know better than the Athenians what they propose to discuss in the assembly. He is ignorant about affairs of state and ignorant about his lack of awareness. Socrates refuses to remain quiet in the face of Alcibiades' ignorance. It is Alcibiades' talents that blind him to the need of tending to his soul. Only through Socrates' private exhortation, not his guardian Pericles or his relatives, will Alcibiades come to see the great benefit Socrates is attempting to bestow upon him. First Alcibiades must be brought to see that the concern for the state of his soul entails a radical reorganizing of his priorities. With the help of Socrates, Alcibiades gradually becomes aware of his soul's urgent need of cultivation before all competing alternatives.

In many dialogues the interlocutor's presumptive knowledge of X motivates the conversation and determines the type of questions Socrates initiates. Just as often, and more importantly, the reputation of the interlocutor has preceded his conversation with Socrates, allowing Socrates' line of questioning to develop from a tentative familiarity with the interlocutor's point of view. In *Alcibiades Major* Socrates explains to Alcibiades that ever since Alcibiades was a little boy he has observed him because he was unable to talk to him, until now, due to his daimonic voice (103a–105a). Socrates has observed many things over the years regarding him, including the education he has received. The movement of the dialogue gains momentum after Alcibiades is made aware of the fact that his education has not equipped him to advise the Athenians on the issues discussed in the assembly (106d–107e12).

2.1 Stokes' Reading

The thesis of Michael Stokes' book, *Plato's Socratic Conversations* (1986), is that the interlocutors' views are the sole force and motivation of the dialogues. Any worthy interpretation of Plato must see the interlocutors as central to understanding a dialogues' subject-matter. Stokes claims that Socrates' role is to examine the interlocutor's views about his currently held moral beliefs and standards:

Suppose that Plato intended to show that a certain typical person from a certain significant class habitually used ways of thought and expression which laid him open to such reduction or compelled him, in consistency, to adopt a Socratic view. Suppose, indeed, that all Socrates' questions are intended to elicit the respondent's answer, and no question is intended to inform us [the reader] or the interlocutor (28–29).

The interlocutor's views then serve as the basis for formulating further Socratic questioning in the dialogue. The interlocutor's views are habitual ways of thinking or expressions which eventually lead to self-contradiction or to the acceptance of Socratic propositions. Socrates elicits the interlocutor's inconsistent beliefs by asking questions. The interlocutor has the right to answer in the affirmative or the negative, but Socrates' questions "have the aim of eliciting the respondent's view and...any other purpose is, if present at all, of secondary importance" (30). Accordingly, on Stokes reading, Socrates' role is reduced to advancing a series of procedural questions designed not to alter the interlocutor's perspective by having him reflect on substantive doctrines, but rather to ensnare the interlocutor in his own faulty logic. Such a procedure implies that Socrates is more concerned with highlighting the interlocutor's inconsistent belief-sets than he is with the pursuit of truth on the topic explored.

As for gleaned Socrates' views from the sorts of questions he asks the interlocutor, Stokes speculates that Socrates' choice of which inconsistent beliefs he calls the interlocutor on may begin to "build up a picture of what Plato thought" (30). Another tool that may be of some help in determining the contours of Platonic thought, according to Stokes, is assessing Socrates' voluntary premises that are often without "obvious contextual necessity" (30).

However, the abrupt start of *Alcibiades Major* underscores a feature of the dialogues that is overlooked or ignored by Stokes. Socrates always seems to be in possession of information about his would-be interlocutors before he actually enters into conversation with them. Such information determines the aim and scope of Socrates' initial and subsequent questions. These questions tend to be grounded in substantive doctrines.² The logic of Socrates' questions entail goals; they are goal-directed questions. The interlocutor's character, on the other hand, provides the

² One example of what I have in mind is the belief that a human being is a rational soul, and that the body is merely an instrument that is utilized by the soul.

justification for Socrates framing the subject matter in the way that he does.³ Once Alcibiades becomes aware of his ignorance, Socrates proceeds to ask him questions designed to further diminish his self-esteem by calling into question the pride he takes in his material possessions (see 120b10–124b). The interlocutor's beliefs and standards are not the sole force and motivation of the dialogues, rather what also motivates them is Socrates' assessment of interlocutors, like Alcibiades, that suffer from a false consciousness.⁴

A related point that Stokes seems to overlook or ignore is that the dialogues are in a certain sense contrived. Socrates' questions, we can assume, appear to be orderly and progressive because Plato wrote them that way. Even though Alcibiades' affirmative and negative answers in the opening scenes of *Alcibiades Major* portray a young man whose hubris might prove to be a stumbling block for Socrates' intentions, Alcibiades, like other interlocutors featured in the dialogues, holds to form by persisting in discussion and ensnaring himself in inconsistencies and eventually freely confessing his weaknesses to Socrates (106a2–110a).

Although the dialogues are contrived, they should not be seen as lacking flexibility. In the opening scenes of *Alcibiades Major* the views of the reader come into play as well. In these early stages of the dialogue, for example, two specific questions that confront the reader are: *What is more important for the attainment of political prominence—ambition and cleverness or wisdom and truth seeking?* and *Is knowing one's self a prerequisite for the attainment of political power?* The answers to these questions are indicative of the different perspectives that are

³ The modern concept of frames has been underappreciated by Plato scholars. In addition to the dialogues' promoting of philosophical discourse, they illustrate the importance of framing questions to enhance the chances of achieving a desired end. Framing effects occur in decision making when the decision maker's preferences are affected by variations of a relevant cue or cues in options or outcomes. Socrates' decision to speak to Alcibiades is determined by his preference for productive conversations. Socrates would have failed if he had tried to have a conversation with Alcibiades prematurely. Alcibiades' decision to answer Socrates' questions is determined by his preference for power. The success Socrates promises Alcibiades outweighs Alcibiades' impatience with difficult and tedious questions. On frames and their significance, see Simon 1986, p. 26.

⁴ That Socrates is primarily concerned with the type of life entailed by an interlocutor's character is attested by Nicias' comments to Lysimachus in the *Laches*:

You don't appear to me to know that whoever comes into close contact with Socrates and associates with him in conversation must necessarily, even if he began by conversing about something quite different in the first place, keep on being led about by the man's arguments until he submits to answering questions about himself concerning both his present manner of life and the life he has lived hitherto (187e6–188a, Sprague translation in Cooper, 665–686).

The passage under discussion is not commented upon in Stokes' short treatment of the *Laches* (65). Unfortunately, Stokes' omission is symptomatic of his interpretive assumption that Socrates' role in the dialogues is merely procedural. Accordingly, Socrates has no stake in the conversation other than to formulate questions based upon the interlocutor's currently held beliefs. If Nicias' comments are an accurate portrayal of Socrates' questions, which I think they are, then Stokes' treatment of the dialogues tells only half the story.

brought to bear on the interpretation of a Socratic dialogue. Such perspectives are brought to bear by the reader, and they generate a sense of urgency and flexibility within the dialogue by mirroring how topics are discussed and decisions are made in ordinary conversations.

Given what we have argued thus far, Stokes renders the dialogues lopsided and unphilosophical. His interpretive method seems to presuppose an intellectual honesty on the part of interlocutors. In the case of Alcibiades, such honesty requires that Alcibiades' beliefs about his chances of becoming a great Athenian leader should be taken at face value. Socrates and the reader of the dialogue should be able to predict Alcibiades' choices by considering Alcibiades' stated views, without having to consider that Alcibiades may have a distorted view of his own leadership abilities. If Socrates' questions merely "have the aim of eliciting the respondent's [interlocutor's] view" all we need to know to understand the interlocutor is his straightforward series of answers to Socrates' questions and the choices opted for among those offered to him. Knowing how Alcibiades is inclined to construe the aim of Socrates' goal-directed questioning seems to be unimportant to Stokes. However, given Alcibiades' character, to understand him there must be an appreciation of the way his framing of Socrates' questions develops from his dramatic situation.

Alcibiades' character is reflected by his dramatic situation. Plato typically manages to have the interaction of the interlocutors in the dialogues somehow mirror the very the topic under discussion. Their words have implications for and are existentially connected with their intentions. When we witness the dramatic mirroring we are getting a penetrating glance at an interlocutor's most intimate thoughts, at least in terms of his dramatic portrayal within the dialogue.

Alcibiades' intention is to obscure the memory of the other generals and statesmen—to outdo Pericles' reputation and authority—once he concerns himself with public affairs. His deportment in the dialogue shows that he thinks he has the resources to accomplish such a feat. Socrates' description of his qualities seems to confirm Alcibiades' high estimation of himself. Alcibiades is said to be the "best-looking" (104a5); from "the leading family in your city [Athens]" (104a6–b1); to "have plenty of aristocratic friends and relations" (104b–b1); and to "have Pericles son of Xanthippus" as a guardian (104b3).

What is the relationship between Alcibiades' present situation, his chances of achieving his goals, and the role of the dialogue? To answer this question we have to have some awareness of the aim of Socrates' questioning and an awareness of who the questions are intended for. Stokes disregards the aim of Socrates' questioning. Instead he claims that the interlocutor's views should be given center stage. Consequently, the interaction between the reader's views on the topic explored, Socrates' goal-directed questioning, and the interlocutors' framing of the topic under discussion, is lacking in Stokes' reading of the dialogues.

If I have accurately characterized Stokes' thesis, a redeeming aspect of reading the Platonic dialogues in the way he intends is attention to interlocutors in their historical personalities and beliefs. Yet surely Plato intends for us to read the dialogues in a more comprehensive manner.

2.2 Kidd's Reading

The thesis of Ian Kidd's stimulating essay, "Socratic Questions" (1992, pp. 82–92), is that the *arche* or directional quality of Socrates' questions provides the sole force and motivation of the dialogues. Such questions are leading questions designed to arrive at a preconceived end, "but not necessarily a conclusion" (84). Reading the dialogues in this way, interlocutors can respond to Socrates' questions in the affirmative or in the negative, but a "yes" or a "no" is not an independent, autonomous response; rather it is Plato the writer who grants the interlocutors the permission to answer. According to Kidd, if the interlocutors' answers were autonomous and the dialogues were solely dependent on the interlocutors' views, the dialogues would be haphazard, like ordinary conversations. Instead the dialogues are "organically controlled" (85).

Kidd's approach to the dialogues emphasizes the directional quality of Socrates' questions over the answers given by the interlocutor. Consequently, Socrates' questions—particularly the last question "hanging in the air"—are the sole force and motivation of the dialogues (90). As for the function of the interlocutor's views, Kidd argues that "their answers are no more than the matter or *hyle* on which he [Plato] imposed the form of Socratic questioning" (91). In other words, the dialogues are contrived, and it is their contrivance that accounts for their orderly development.

I am in partial agreement with Kidd's arguments regarding the directional quality of Socrates' questioning. The issue I find problematic is his overemphasizing the directional quality of Socrates' questions, and thus downplaying the role the interlocutor and reader play in moving the dialogue along to a conclusion. In the closing remarks of his essay, for example, Kidd makes the following claims regarding the interlocutor's relationship to the dialogue form and the role of the reader:

(A) It does not greatly matter in the *Symposium* who Diotima is; while 'Theaetetus' in the dialogue named after him is simply an intelligent young man, and Plato seems to be arguing mainly with himself. But the dialogue form is retained, and must then be for dialectical rather than for a purely dramatic purpose. (91)

and

(B) The dialogue form illustrates the importance of three things: (1) the elicitation of latent knowledge, which requires prodding; (2) the testing in agreement of each step in the process of the developing argument as it occurs; (3) the direction of the argument. For the movement and development is not haphazard, but purposefully led.⁵ (92)

⁵ These interpretive assumptions are also on display in Kidd's short introduction to the *Laches*:

"I see it [the *Laches*] less as a drama of character, where the beliefs of the generals Laches and Nicias are examined and tested (although certainly those of 'Laches' and 'Nicias' are involved), than a dynamic dramatic philosophical dialogue orchestrated by Plato through the medium of his chief character Socrates to a problem which he feels that we (and he) should face" (85).

Commenting on the perspectives brought to bear on interpreting the significance of Socrates' questions, Kidd claims that:

(B) ...he [Socrates] involves us, his readers and himself. (91)

But presumably the published...Socratic dialogues are mainly directed to the reader, to stimulate us to examine the flow of the argument, and face those ultimate questions to which we are led, for ourselves. (92)

Considering Kidd's position on the role of the interlocutor, it is difficult to see how the topic under discussion in the dialogues would otherwise be justified. If the interlocutor's views are no more than *hyle* given form by Socratic questioning, what motivates the directional quality of Socrates' initial questions in *Alcibiades Major*? Socrates knows precisely how to begin questioning such an ambitious young man because his questions are motivated by Alcibiades' character. Kidd misses the point that in many of the dialogues Socrates' questions are motivated by the interlocutor's intellectual conceit. The interlocutor is either a proclaimed expert at something or has some interest in something. Once the dialogue is under way, the conversation is eventually brought around to the "What is X?" question or "On account of what is X Y" because the interlocutor, along with Socrates' prodding, has established that X is something. Typically the interlocutor's initial confidence that he can answer the question without much reflection is dashed when he has trouble grasping the kind of answer that Socrates is requesting, and consequently an improper kind of definition is offered.

Kidd also misses the point that the dialogues are not merely concerned with exploring the "What X is?" question (i.e., courage, friendship, justice, etc.); they are equally concerned with exploring how the interlocutor frames the subject matter under discussion. Socrates seems as concerned with an interlocutor's subjective understanding of X as he is with getting the interlocutor to appreciate X's objective properties. In defense of this latter point, I again turn to *Alcibiades Major*. There comes a stage in the dialogue where Alcibiades is on the verge of admitting that he lacks the requisite knowledge to advise the Athenians. The knowledge under question is Alcibiades' understanding of justice. The elenctic exchange between Socrates and Alcibiades that will bring about Alcibiades' admission revolves around the issue of whether the just is advantageous (115a–118b). The aim of the elenchus is twofold: it gets Alcibiades to say that the just is always advantageous and it shows that Alcibiades' ambition is conventional.

Alcibiades holds that some just things are advantageous and some just things are not advantageous (115a); but all just things are admirable (*kala*, 115a4). Alcibiades supposes that it is always admirable to do just things but that one might come off much worse by doing them. The question Socrates asks Alcibiades is whether admirable things are good, or are some bad? Alcibiades believes some admirable things are bad, and some contemptible (*aischra*, 115a6) things are good. Alcibiades allows for doing admirable things from which one does not benefit. Socrates suggests the following illustration, which Alcibiades accepts: someone might stay alive in war through not trying to rescue friends or relatives. Trying to help is brave and admirable but could lead to wounds and death. Therefore, trying to save friends

is admirable inasmuch as it is brave, but bad inasmuch as it could bring death. Alcibiades' assent to the conclusion of the elenctic exchange indicates contradictory thoughts about his understanding of justice.

It turns out that Alcibiades is in the same state about justice as the many. As they disagree with themselves, so Alcibiades disagrees with himself. Alcibiades would not wander in his thinking about how many eyes or hands he has, which are things he knows, but he gives wandering answers about the just and unjust, admirable and contemptible, advantageous and disadvantages, which he does not know, but thinks he knows. The questions posed to Alcibiades echo the famous Socratic theme that the worst ignorance is ignorance of ignorance or conceit of wisdom. Alcibiades is not fit to advise the Athenians because he is ignorant about the most crucial issues pertaining to the rule of the city and to the rule of himself.

This elenctic exchange is also significant because it reveals Alcibiades' ambition is still quite conventional, although still quite enormous. Alcibiades is not so unusual that he disagrees with traditional moral notions and how these notions apply to existential situations such as death. His concern for self-preservation competes with Socrates' claim that an objective understanding of justice is a necessary and sufficient condition for the true statesmen. It is significant that Socrates' subsequent questions in the dialogue are not geared toward expounding on the nature of justice; rather they are designed further to elicit Alcibiades' faulty notions of what he needs to know to advise the Athenians. Consequently, we see that the questions in the elenctic exchange are tempered by the characters of the interlocutors in the dialogues, and Plato is not "arguing mainly with himself."

In addition to the problems I have mentioned, Kidd's overemphasis on the directional quality of Socrates' questions necessarily downplays the role of the reader in the dialogues. Although Kidd claims that the Socratic dialogues and their probing questions are mainly directed to the reader, he does not discuss how the reader should read the dialogues or the effect the reader has on the dialogues. The point I am getting at here is that Kidd fails to appreciate that the reader of a Platonic dialogue plays a significant role in the development of the dialogue. Unlike a philosophical treatise, the dialogue form is half of a dialogue's philosophical content. Consequently, a compelling interpretation of a Platonic dialogue does not result merely from knowing Plato's intent in writing a particular dialogue; such an interpretation may also result from the limitations of character or the foresight brought to bear by the reader of a dialogue. In the context of interpreting a Platonic dialogue, understanding the relationship between form and content is crucial for appreciating the role of the reader. Kidd is right when he says that the dialogues are "organically controlled," but he is wrong to think that Plato is the only one in control.

Kidd's overemphasis on the direction of Socrates' questions displays the same type of weakness seen in Stokes. It renders the dialogues lopsided and unphilosophical. With regard to the urgent concern generated by the interlocutor's answers and the reader's views bearing on the topic explored, Kidd's reading is unclear. Yet surely his discussion implies that the dialogues will have something to offer the contemporary, sympathetic reader.

2.3 Hintikka's Reading

In contrast to Stokes and Kidd, Hintikka focuses less on the dramatic role played by either Socrates or the interlocutor(s) than he does on the nature of the questions asked. Notwithstanding his minimal concern with the drama of the dialogues, Hintikka's account of Socratic methodology in *Socratic Epistemology: Explorations of Knowledge-Seeking by Questioning* (2007) argues that the elenchus should be construed as a presuppositionless interrogative process whereby rational knowledge seeking must be sought through a question and answer process. According to Hintikka, such a process is not limited to the dialogues because the dialogues also reflect how knowledge is sought, and choices made, in ordinary conversations (17–30 and 97–106).

Although I am delighted to see that Hintikka explicates the elenchus within the context of contemporary decision theory, his interrogative model typifies the aridness that characterizes many decision-making models. The models assume unbounded rationality on the part of the participants in decision making contexts. The deficiency of Hintikka's characterization of the elenchus lies in the claim that the elenchus operates without presuppositions both in terms of what the interlocutor presupposes and in terms of what Socrates presupposes. The following two passages summarize Hintikka's thesis:

One reason why Socrates is asking yes-or-no questions is that they do not need presuppositions. They are the only questions that an *eirōn* who professes ignorance can consistently ask. (96)

and

To say that Socrates does not need any presuppositions in his inquiry amounts to saying that he does not need any factual knowledge in his enterprise. He does not need to know anything. Here we have an explanation of Socrates' ironic profession of ignorance. Such professions serve to highlight one of the merits of Socrates' method—namely, its freedom from presuppositions. (97)

My critique of Hintikka will (1) explain how the interrogative model works; (2) explain the Socratic elenchus and what it is supposed to accomplish; and (3) show that the interrogative model is incompatible as an interpretive approach to the dialogues because of the necessity of presuppositions for the effective use of the elenchus.

The interrogative model takes seriously Socrates' professed ignorance. Socratic ignorance justifies the yes-no questions he obliges the interlocutors to consider during a typical elenctic exchange, and is premised upon two types of questions—principle and operative (95). A principle question is usually a definitional one that orients the smaller or operative questions in a dialogue towards the elaboration of a concepts extension, e.g., friendship (*Lysis*), piety (*Euthyphro*), bravery (*Laches*),

law (*Minos*).⁶ A conclusion is then reached as a result of logical inferences having been deduced exclusively from the interlocutor's answers to the yes-no questions (95). Hintikka's interrogative model further argues that the reason why the dialogues consist mainly of yes-no questions "is that they do not need presuppositions" (96). That is, the questions can be raised without any need for acknowledging or justifying the questions' presuppositions. The Socratic elenchus needs no factual knowledge of the sort that would indicate who, what, when, where, and why about the interlocutor or the dialogue's subject matter. However, the epistemic logic at work in the interrogative model does require that Socrates have strategic knowledge. Although Socrates does "not know anything," he knows which questions to ask during an elenctic exchange (97).

Hintikka concludes his discussion of the interrogative model and the elenchus by likening Socrates' strategic knowledge to logical knowledge of strategies of logical deductive reasoning. Similar to a trial lawyer cross-examining a witness, the response an interlocutor gives to Socrates' question requires Socrates to figure out which question to ask next or which proposition he should use as a premise of the next logical inference (98). For Hintikka, the elenchus is significant precisely because it highlights the distinction between factual and strategic knowledge.

I find the interrogative model to be at odds with the goal of the elenchus. That the interrogative model is incompatible with the Socratic elenchus is attested to by the elenctic process on display in the dialogues. The "standard elenchus" has been schematized in the following five steps:

- (1) An interlocutor makes a statement or assertion (p) that gives Socrates a target for refutation;
- (2) Socrates begins the refutation by introducing propositions (q & r) which are not argued for but usually accepted by the interlocutor;
- (3) Socrates then gets agreement that $(q \ \& \ r) \rightarrow \sim p$ (The argument brings about the negation (denial) of the interlocutor's original statement);

⁶ Hintikka has in mind a question asked by Socrates that first seeks definitional content (e.g., a principle question), but then transitions into a yes-no question (e.g., an operative question). An illustration of such a question can be seen in the dialogue where Socrates questions Alcibiades' knowledge of the just and unjust:

But surely it's disgraceful if when you're speaking and giving advice about food—saying that a certain kind is better than another, and better at a certain time and in a certain quantity—and someone should ask you, "What do you mean by 'better', Alcibiades?" [**principle question**] you could tell him in that case that 'better' was 'healthier', though you don't even pretend to be a doctor; and yet in a case where you do pretend to understand and are going to stand up and give advice as though you knew, if you aren't able, as seems likely, to answer the question in this case, won't you be embarrassed? [**operative question**] Won't that seem disgraceful? [**operative question**] (108e4–109a3).

- (4) Socrates subsequently assumes that (p) has been negated and $\sim p$ shown to be true (the interlocutor may withdraw agreement to q or r, but he hardly ever does);
- (5) The interlocutor is shown to be in a state of aporia (i.e., confusion or perplexity brought about by having recognized he has inconsistent belief sets).⁷

The general idea behind the elenchus is first to get agreement from the interlocutor *that* the subject matter is before determining *what* it is. After having received agreement, if the interlocutor claims to know moral concept X, Socrates believes that the interlocutor should be able to give an account of X (the definition of X). The interlocutor often cannot give an account of X (that withstands refutation), so Socrates infers from the interlocutor's inability to say what moral concept X is that he does not know moral concept X. The Greek word elenchus (ἐλεγχος) means "to disgrace," "to refute," or "to examine" an interlocutor's pretense to knowledge. Only when the interlocutor is made of aware that the extent of his ignorance is in direct proportion to his steadfast claim to know X will his actions be more consistent and transparent to himself. The Socratic elenchus promotes self-awareness.⁸

Contrary to Hintikka's interrogative model, the effective use of the elenchus requires that Socrates begin with several presuppositions regarding the dialogue's subject matter and the dialogue's interlocutor(s). Such presuppositions are facts known about the interlocutor. The presuppositions get the dialogue off the ground and provide limits to the discussion within the dialogue. Step (2) of the elenctic process is crucial in this regard. Accepting the presuppositions Socrates introduces often proves fatal to the unsuspecting interlocutor because presuppositions are beliefs that the interlocutor holds to even more strongly than his avowed beliefs. Socrates is able to introduce presuppositions without justifying them because they are especially pertinent to the interlocutor's character. The presuppositions are based on endoxa to the extent that that the interlocutor has certain deep seated

⁷ Vlastos' (1983, pp. 27–58) formulation of the elenchus is worthy of attention, but the recent scholarship on the elenchus better appreciates its sophistication. For example, Gary Alan Scott's book (2002), *Does Socrates Have a Method?*, is a collection of essays written by various scholars offering interpretations of the Socratic elenchus. One of the more compelling essays in the collection, written by Carpenter and Polansky (89–100), argue that the elenchus is not a particular method at all, but the Socratic dialectic generally. They show that there are a number of refutations, such as refutations of definitions, behaviors, proposed procedures, and substantive doctrines. Due to the variety of contexts in which refutations appears, Carpenter and Polansky conclude that any attempt to establish a general method or logic for the elenchus is futile. Robert Metcalf's (2004, pp. 37–64; esp. 41–46) interpretation of the elenchus is persuasive and very much in line with my interpretation. Metcalf emphasizes the *ad hominem* aspect of the elenchus that is on display in the *Crito*. Like *Crito*, *Alcibiades* in *Alcibiades Major* is one of the few interlocutors that explicitly reverses course in the span of the dialogue from having been initially skeptical of Socrates to feeling "shame" in the face of his arguments.

⁸ The elenchus either deals with the result (shame) or the process (investigation). A version of the elenchus is found prominently in fragment 7 of Parmenides poem *Truth*. See Curd 1995, pp. 46–47.

beliefs. The endoxa are not just what the many or wise hold but most crucially what the interlocutor holds. Knowing which dialectical premises an interlocutor will accept or reject requires that the right type of questions be asked.⁹ Like a good psychologist, Socrates can see and exploit the tensions in the belief set of the interlocutor. Only after the presuppositions are introduced can logical inferences be deduced exclusively from the interlocutor's answers to yes-no questions.

The opening scenes of *Alcibiades Major* provide a vivid illustration of Socrates' elenctic presuppositions at work. Socrates explains to Alcibiades that he was the first of Alcibiades' lovers and still is chasing him though all the others have stopped and given up. Moreover, Socrates has observed that Alcibiades resisted the other would-be lovers by being arrogant and holding himself in higher esteem than his pursuers. However, Socrates makes it clear to Alcibiades that his worldly advantages (i.e., good looks, wealth and prominent family, 104a–c) pale in comparison to his political ambition. Alcibiades is not content. Were Alcibiades as content and self-sufficient as he would have his pursuers believe, Socrates would have no interest in him. Socrates discloses to Alcibiades his real ambition:

Alcibiades, if I saw that you were content with the advantages I just mentioned and thought that this was the condition in which you should live out the rest of your life, I would have given up on you long ago.... Suppose one of the gods asked you, "Alcibiades, would you rather live with what you now have, or would you rather die on the spot if you weren't permitted to acquire anything greater?" I think you'd choose to die. What then is your real ambition in life? I'll tell you. You think that as soon as you present yourself before the Athenian people—as indeed you expect to in a very few days—by presenting yourself you'll show them that you deserve to be honored more than Pericles or anyone else who ever was.... When you were younger, before you were full of such ambitions, I think the god didn't let me talk to you because the conversation would have been pointless. But now he's told me to, because now you will listen. (105a–e4)

Alcibiades does listen and, by doing so, confirms Socrates' assessment of his having grand political ambitions and lofty goals (106a2). Alcibiades' acquiescence also highlights Socrates' ability to see and exploit the inconsistencies in the belief set of the interlocutor(s). Likewise, Alcibiades' self-sufficiency and show of confidence is seen to be youthful posturing.

⁹ Smith's (1999, pp. 57–62) comments on Aristotle's discussion (*Topics* I. 1, 100b21–23) of dialectical arguments is further evidence that Hintikka has misconstrued the Socratic elenchus. Smith defines dialectical arguments as,

...arguments directed at another person which proceeds by asking questions....Now, people are generally likely to answer in accordance with what they believe; therefore, dialectical argument can be described as based on the opinions of the person at whom it is directed. (60)

Dialectical argumentation is precisely what the Socratic dialogues display. It is because the dialogues are highly contrived works of art that an efficient use of Socrates' and the interlocutor's time require that certain facts about the interlocutor's situation be presupposed by the questions Socrates asks him.

The presuppositions at work within the passage under discussion are: Alcibiades is not content with his advantages and his political ambition makes him receptive to how Socrates could be indispensable to the realization of his goals. This type of procedural refutation is unusual because its target is not a substantive doctrine or assertion or proposition offered by Alcibiades, rather its target is Alcibiades' behavior.¹⁰ Procedural refutations often employ counterfactuals, thought experiments or hypothetical questions in order to render an interlocutor's goals and priorities transparent, and to assess the degree of commitment to the realization of his goals. Once the interlocutor's priorities and goals are made explicit, Socrates usually proposes a specific attitude and behavior that proves decisive to the interlocutor's eventual success. However, to the consternation of the interlocutor, Socrates' definition of success often differs from the interlocutor's.

By disclosing the immensity of Alcibiades' ambitions, Socrates makes clear that it is he, not Alcibiades' advantages, that offer him some chance for the influence he craves (105e1–4). Socrates' admission provides the motivation for the dialogue insofar as Socrates recognizes that Alcibiades does not as yet have such clear ambitions. Giving voice to Alcibiades' ambitions suggests that Socrates has enough factual knowledge about him to ask his questions strategically. In ordinary conversations presuppositions prevent the discussants from having to tread ground that would render the question and answer process inefficient and artificial. In most of the Platonic dialogues, assumed factual knowledge about an interlocutor makes it possible for Socrates to formulate pertinent, elenctic questions.¹¹

Over the course of the dialogue Socrates introduces three themes that will give shape to Alcibiades' ambitions. Socrates convinces him that: his ambition must be clarified in order give birth to truth within himself (113a–114a5); his soul is the true "self" (*auto*) that remains the same and is the true subject of his actions, with the body as its instrument (128b–131b1); he must turn towards philosophy (132b–133d1).

Not only do the presuppositions get the dialogue off the ground, they provide limits to the discussion within the dialogue. The limits are established to prevent Alcibiades from lapsing into a sophistic stance (i.e., making long speeches and introducing irrelevant subject matter), and to encourage the protreptic experience of Alcibiades by having self-knowledge be the goal of his ambition. At 106a7–106b9

¹⁰ Examples of procedural refutations are discussed in Carpenter and Polansky (2002, pp. 95–98). One such example is found at 120c–d in *Alcibiades Major*. Socrates employs two arguments to refute Alcibiades' view that his primary political competitors, the kings of Sparta and Persia, are no different from any other run of the mill politician. Socrates offers a *pragmatic* argument that highlights the bad consequences of Alcibiades' view of the kings; and he offers an argument to show that Alcibiades' view of the kings is *likely* to be false (95). Both of Socrates' arguments are designed to reform Alcibiades' behavior by having him appreciate just how formidable his competitors are. Socrates is attempting to prepare Alcibiades, both intellectually and character-wise, to compete.

¹¹ For example, see the opening scenes of *Gorgias*, *Ion*, *Greater Hippias*, *Menexenus* and *Timaeus*. The opening scene of the *Apology* is an interesting example because Socrates' assumed factual knowledge is not about a particular interlocutor but about the Athenians as a whole.

Socrates establishes the dialectical limits that will inform his questions to Alcibiades, while also showing Alcibiades the proper way to answer.

Alcibiades: But supposing I really do have these ambitions [to be a great Athenian leader], how will you help me achieve them? What makes you indispensable? Have you got something to say?

Socrates: Are you asking if I can say some long speech like the ones you're used to hearing? No, that sort of thing's not for me. But I do think I'd be able to show you that what I said is true, if only you were willing to grant me just one little favor.

Alcibiades: Well, as long as you mean a favor that's not hard to grant, I'm willing.

Socrates: Do you think it's hard to answer questions?

Alcibiades: No, I don't.

Socrates: Then answer me.

Alcibiades: Ask me.

Before Alcibiades merely had to listen carefully (104d), now he has to answer questions through conversation, not through long speeches.¹² Socrates turns the questioning to what Alcibiades will say before the Athenians. The conversation revolves around three claims Alcibiades makes regarding knowledge, justice, and the soul. In response, Socrates limits Alcibiades' claims by making claims of his own regarding knowledge, justice, and the soul. Regarding knowledge Alcibiades believes he has the knowledge to speak to the Athenians and instruct them in their "own business" (107d). Socrates makes the counter claim that there was never a time when Alcibiades learned about justice, what the better tend towards, "or in keeping the peace or in waging war with the right people" (109a6).

Regarding justice Alcibiades claims that when the Athenians are conducting their business they are not, in fact, concerned with what is just so much as they are concerned with what is advantageous, and the just is not the same as what is advantageous (113d3). Socrates makes the counter-claim that the just is always advantageous. In making this claim Socrates argues indirectly that despite how the Athenians and other Greeks think of justice, Alcibiades must always see justice as advantageous and admirable (115–116e).

Regarding the soul Alcibiades tacitly claims that the user of a thing is not different from all the things he uses. A user cultivates what he uses, not his true self. Socrates makes the counter-claim that the user of a thing is different from all the things he uses because the soul is the true self. The body is an instrument of the soul.

Socrates' counter-claims, initiated by Alcibiades' inability properly to articulate his ambitions, appear in Socrates' elenctic exchanges directing Alcibiades' ambition towards self-knowledge. Not only do these counter-claims limit the conversation within the dialogue to themes applicable to Alcibiades, they highlight the factual knowledge Socrates has already gained by talking to him and by having observed his conduct prior to their conversation. This knowledge has guided

¹² The passage under discussion is also significant because it shows that Socrates' methodological preference for short speeches presupposes that such speeches are productive. It also argues against Hintikka's presuppositionless account.

formation of the questions to which the interlocutor answers yes or no. Once the facts are known about the interlocutor a determination can be made about what the facts entail and the direction of the discussion.

For the reasons I have elaborated, Hintikka's interrogative model is incompatible with the Socratic elenchus because it typifies the aridness that characterizes many decision-making models by claiming that the elenchus operates without presuppositions both in terms of what the interlocutor presupposes and in terms of what Socrates presupposes.

The Socratic dialogues and the Socratic elenchus, on the other hand, are reflective of rational knowledge seeking by a process of question and answer. They also reflect ordinary conversations. The dialogues are able to accomplish these two tasks because presuppositions are crucial to their functioning. Hintikka has not appreciated this point.

2.4 Conclusion

The methodological issues raised by Plato's dialogues highlight the enduring relevance of the Socratic approach to intellectual inquiry. Their question and answer process consists of several elements that make for a productive inquiry. One of these elements is the recognition of the importance of presuppositions. Another element is the recognition that the interlocutor, the reader, and Socrates have distinct roles within the dialogues. These work in tandem to make the Socratic elenchus productive and persuasive. Michael Stokes, Ian Kidd, and Jaakko Hintikka have not paid sufficient attention to the complexity of the dialogue form and what it might teach us about rational knowledge seeking. My reading of the dialogues has tried to account for some of the complexity.

I have presented the Socratic elenchus as an efficient and effective way of modeling rational knowledge seeking. Like ordinary conversations, the elenctic exchanges in the dialogues presuppose a degree of autonomy on the part of its participants. Socrates' line of questioning often seems pertinent to a particular interlocutor because he is well aware of the fact that the interlocutor has goals and ambitions or is reputed to be an expert at something. In turn, Socrates' line of questioning reflects his own goals and ambitions. In *Alcibiades Major* Socrates is trying to turn Alcibiades towards a greater awareness of his limitations. The reader, too, is a participant in the dialogues. His questions and prejudgments are essential in generating the urgency of the subject matter within the dialogue. Plato's dialogues force readers to consider their own solutions to the topics introduced in them. Consequently, the autonomy of a dialogue's participants requires that interpreters not exaggerate one aspect of a dialogue's structural features at the expense of other aspects. This chapter has been an attempt to show the advantage of avoiding any such exaggeration.

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