HONESTY, SHAME, COURAGE: RECONSIDERING THE SOCRATIC ELENCHUS

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Abstract: The *elenchus* (gr. ἔλεγχος, literally "argument of disproof", "refutation", "cross-examining") is the core of the Socratic method represented by Plato in his early dialogues. This enquiring technique, employed by Socrates to question his interlocutors about the nature or definition of ethical concepts, is the object of a never-ending scholarly debate, concerning especially its primary purpose: is it a positive method, leading to knowledge, or is it rather a negative method, aiming exclusively at refuting the interlocutor's belief? This paper, through the analysis of some key passages in Plato's early dialogues, focuses on the structural features of the *elenchus* in order to understand *how* the elenctic refutation is developed, *why* Socrates chooses a dialectical method often ending in *aporia*, and *whether* the Socratic method can be considered, not merely an instrument aiming at the recognition of one's ignorance, but primarily a positive search for knowledge.
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The so-called Socratic method, labelled by scholars as *elenchus*, is well depicted by Plato in the early dialogues,[1] unified by the fact that, in each of them, Socrates employs the enquiring method of question and answer in order to cross-examine different interlocutors on some question of moral domain (*e.g.* virtue, justice, piety, courage). He aims at determining the meaning and the truth-value of their first statement, by seeking for an exact definition of the moral value. Most often, Socrates' interlocutors are refuted, and the early dialogues tend to be aporetic, without a positive conclusion; therefore, the *elenchus* comes to be a form of refutation. Paradoxically, Socrates usually declares himself to be ignorant to the ethical values he enquires, only claiming to be aware of his own ignorance (*Ap.* 19b*ff*: esp. 20c–d).

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[1] The chronological division of Plato's dialogues is controversial. Kahn (1998, 124) distinguishes four groups of dialogues and places two of them before middle period dialogues. The first group including *Apology*, *Crito*, *Ion*, *Hippias Minor*, *Gorgias* and *Menexenus* is part of the 'early' or 'pre-systematic' dialogues. The second group – that he calls 'threshold', 'pre-middle' or 'Socratic' dialogues – includes *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Lysis*, *Euthyphro*, *Protagoras*, *Euthydemus* and *Meno*. See also Kahn 1996, 42–48.

The profession of ignorance, the Socratic irony, the *elenctic* method and the denial of teaching (*Ap*. 33a–b) are the object of scholars' disagreement. Is Socrates sincere? Does *elenchus* refer to a process of personal testing? Or rather does it mean a refutation of interlocutor's beliefs? Most of all, is the purpose of *elenchus* primarily positive or negative? This essay aims to analyse scholars' debate about the Socratic method in the early dialogues and to investigate its structural features by focusing on some fundamental passages. The analysis will show that in the *elenchus* the *pars construens* (although it often ends in the *aporia*) justifies the *pars destruens* (the Socratic irony and the profession of ignorance): the *elenchus* "comes to be the appropriate instrument for moral education"[2] and "a positive search for moral truth",[3] the way through which Socrates, likewise Plato, exhorts his fellows to change their life, in particular, to pursue and to achieve moral virtue.

There is no better way to start this investigation than examining what Socrates himself – Plato's Socrates[4] – says about the practice that was the main cause of his death. Among the early dialogues, only the *Apology* clearly explains the Socrates' way of philosophising and, as Benson argues, "provides the least controversial text upon which to base Plato's early view of the Socratic method".[5] Some key features of the *elenchus* become immediately evident through Socrates' defence speech (*Ap*. 29d–30b):

Ἐγὼ ὑμᾶς, ὦ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, ἀσπάζομαι μὲν καὶ φιλῶ, πείσομαι δὲ μᾶλλον τῷ θεῷ ἢ ὑμῖν, καὶ ἕωσπερ ἂν ἐμπνέω καὶ οἷός τε ὦ, οὐ μὴ παύσωμαι φιλοσοφῶν καὶ ὑμῖν παρακελευόμενός τε καὶ ἐνδεικνύμενος ὅτῳ ἂν ἀεὶ ἐντυγχάνω ὑμῶν, [...] ἐρήσομαι αὐτὸν καὶ ἐξετάσω καὶ ἐλέγξω, καὶ ἐάν μοι μὴ δοκῇ κεκτῆσθαι ἀρετήν, φάναι δέ, ὀνειδιῶ ὅτι τὰ πλείστου ἄξια περὶ ἐλαχίστου ποιεῖται, τὰ δὲ φαυλότερα περὶ πλείονος. ταῦτα καὶ νεωτέρῳ καὶ πρεσβυτέρῳ ὅτῳ ἂν ἐντυγχάνω ποιήσω, καὶ ξένῳ καὶ ἀστῷ, μᾶλλον δὲ τοῖς ἀστοῖς, ὅσῳ μου ἐγγυτέρω ἐστὲ γένει. ταῦτα γὰρ κελεύει ὁ θεός, εὖ ἴστε, καὶ ἐγὼ οἴομαι οὐδέν πω ὑμῖν μεῖζον ἀγαθὸν γενέσθαι ἐν τῇ πόλει ἢ τὴν ἐμὴν τῷ θεῷ ὑπηρεσίαν. οὐδὲν γὰρ ἄλλο πράττων ἐγὼ περιέρχομαι ἢ πείθων ὑμῶν καὶ νεωτέρους καὶ πρεσβυτέρους μήτε σωμάτων ἐπιμελεῖσθαι μήτε χρημάτων πρότερον μηδὲ οὕτω σφόδρα ὡς τῆς ψυχῆς ὅπως ὡς ἀρίστη ἔσται.

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[2] Robinson 1953, 15.

[3] Vlastos 1983a, 31.

[4] "The only Socrates worth talking about" (Vlastos 1971, 2); on the historical Socrates, see Penner 1990; Bryan 2013.

[5] Benson 1995, 50. The difference between Plato's *Apology* and the Socratic dialogues in presenting the *elenchus* lies in the fact that the two (sets of) works have different purposes. The *Apology*, indeed, aims at presenting the actual speech of legal self-defence spoken by Socrates at his trial in 399 B.C. Thus, Socrates' way of philosophising (and living), presented in the first-person perspective, is clearly exemplified within the *Apology* itself.

Men of Athens, I respect and love you, but I shall obey the god rather than you, and while I live and am able to continue, *I shall never cease from the practice of philosophy, exhorting you and expressing my opinion* to any one of you whom I may meet [...], *I shall question and examine and cross-examine* (ἐλέγξω) him, and if I find that he does not possess *virtue* (ἀρετή), but says he does, I shall rebuke him for scorning the things that are of most importance and caring more for what is of less worth. This I shall do to whomever I meet, young and old, foreigner and citizen, but *most to the citizens*, inasmuch as you are more nearly related to me. For know that this is *the command of the god* (κελεύει ὁ θεός), and I believe that no greater good ever came to pass in the city than my service to the god. For I do nothing else than persuading you, young and old, not to care for your persons or your property more than *for the perfection of your souls* (ὡς τῆς ψυχῆς ὅπως ὡς ἀρίστη ἔσται).

As this passage reveals, Plato presents Socrates as the personification of philosophy, ready to live or to die for philosophy alone,[6] because his practice is a divine mission motivated by the Delphic oracle's pronouncement that no one was wiser than he was (*Ap.* 20e–21c). In order to understand or to refute the oracle, since he feels he has no wisdom, he decides to examine (ἐλέγχειν) through question and answer anyone reputed wise either by himself or by others. His aim is persuading of their ignorance those supposed to be wise, if they are not wise, and to learn from them, if they are wise (cf. *Ap.* 22b–23b). There is also a reference to an "inner voice", or δαιμόνιον (*Ap.* 31d), that divinely guides him in his enquiring activity. It is also important to notice the Socratic concern for the soul (ψυχή) identified with the concern for virtue (ἀρετή);[7] furthermore, he is interested most in engaging Athenian people in the *elenchus* in order to persuade his citizens to care about virtue, the only source of goodness.[8]

Therefore, this passage shows the "double objective" of the *elenchus*: "this is a two-in-one operation, Socrates does not provide for two types of *elenchus* – a philosophical one, searching for truth about the good life, and a therapeutic one, searching out the answerer's own life in the hope of bringing him to the truth".[9] These are not two different activities: the former, the *elenctic* cross-examination, is itself a means to reach the latter, the exhortation to care about virtue.[10]

Then, is Socrates a moral reformer and is his dialectical method justified by his paideutic and ethical mission? Before answering, it is necessary to investigate the controversial aspects leading scholars to consider the *elenchus* as merely an

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[6] See Bryan 2013, 114–118.

[7] See Benson 1995, 51.

[8] Cf. *Ap.* 30b: "Not from money does virtue come, but from virtue comes money and all of the other good things for human beings both privately and publicly."

[9] Vlastos, 1983a, 37.

[10] See Irwin 1995, 19.

eristic method. In particular, one of the most striking element is that of twenty-one interlocutors no one proves to be wise and in only seven cases is the interlocutor persuaded of his ignorance.[11]

In the early dialogues Socrates never uses the word *elenchus* nor *methodos* to label his enquiring activity, "he has no name for it; 'elenchus' and his cognate verb, *elenchein* (to refute, to examine critically, to censure) he uses to describe, not to term, what he does; only in modern times has 'elenchus' become a proper name".[12]

Lesher[13] investigates the meaning of *elenchus* from Homer to Plato and shows that it can shift from "shame" to "contest" or "put to the test", to "indicate", "to cross-examine", to "put to the proof", to "refute"; thus, the word *elenchus* is a *vox media* which can vary in different contexts and periods. Parmenides – who deeply influenced Plato's philosophy – uses this term in Fr. 7 where it cannot mean refutation but rather "testing of a person to determine his or her truthfulness or innocence".[14]

Chantraine (*s.v.* ἐλέγχω) testifies to the connotation of "shame" in Homer ("faire honte de", "mepriser") and of "refutation" in the classical period ("chercher à refuter", "faire subir un contre-interrogatoire", "convaincre"). The original meaning was "amoindrir", "rabaisser", he says, "ce qui convient aux emplois homériques et aux emplois juridiques et dialectiques de l'ionien-attique". Although it is evident that the sense of "examining" or "testing" is the most suitable for the Socratic *elenchus*, I suggest also considering the connotation of shame. Indeed, the interlocutor must be brought to shame in order to admit what he *really* believes, recognise his ignorance and purify himself from false opinions. The *elenchus* is "the greatest and most sovereign of purifications"[15] and a psychological process based on two complementary feelings: courage, allowing the interlocutor to continue seeking for truth, and shame, allowing him the moral *elenctic* purification.

In order to subject their interlocutors to *elenchus* and remove their false opinion, Socrates insists on examining people's whole lives and only their *actual* beliefs: in *Laches* 187e–188a Nicias says that

[…] ὃς ἂν ἐγγύτατα Σωκράτους ᾖ [λόγῳ ὥσπερ γένει] καὶ πλησιάζῃ διαλεγόμενος, ἀνάγκη αὐτῷ, ἐὰν ἄρα καὶ περὶ ἄλλου του πρότερον ἄρξηται διαλέγεσθαι, μὴ παύεσθαι ὑπὸ τούτου περιαγόμενον τῷ λόγῳ, πρὶν <ἂν> ἐμπέσῃ εἰς τὸ διδόναι περὶ αὑτοῦ λόγον, ὅντινα τρόπον νῦν τε ζῇ καὶ ὅντινα τὸν παρεληλυθότα βίον βεβίτρόπον νῦν τε ζῇ καὶ ὅντινα τὸν

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[11] *Ch.* 162b; *Cri.* 50a; *Ion* 541e–542b; *La.* 199e–200c; *Prt.* 312e–313c; *Men.* 79e–80b and 84a; see also Benson 2011, 182–183.
[12] Vlastos 1983a, 28–29.
[13] Lesher 2002.
[14] Lesher 2002, 25; see also Scott 2002, 8.
[15] Robinson 1953, 12.

παρεληλυθότα βίον βεβίωκεν· ἐπειδὰν δ’ ἐμπέσῃ, ὅτι οὐ πρότερον αὐτὸν ἀφήσει
Σωκράτης, πρὶν ἂν βασανίσῃ ταῦτα εὖ τε καὶ καλῶς ἅπαντα.

> […] whoever comes into close contact with Socrates and talks with him face to face, is
> bound to be drawn round and round by him in the course of the argument – though it may
> have started at first on a quite different theme – and cannot stop until he is led into giving
> *an account of himself*, of the manner in which he spends his days, and of the kind of life
> he has lived hitherto; and when once he has been led into that, Socrates will never let him
> go until he has thoroughly and properly *put all his ways to the test*.

The *elenchus* is "a very personal affair, in spite of Socrates' ironical declarations
that it is an impersonal search for the truth [...]; the answerer must believe his
own primary statement; otherwise the refutation of that statement will not convict
him of thinking he knew when he did not [...]; [he] must be convinced of the
logical validity of the argument and must genuinely accept the premises".[16] The
aim of the *elenchus* is finding "premises believed by the answerer and entailing
the contrary of his thesis".[17] Only the answerer must be convinced, and if he does
not accept the premises, the refutation fails (cf. *Euthd.* 294, 298). The result de-
pends only on the *actual* belief of the answerer:[18] at *Men*. 71d Socrates says "let's
leave Gorgias out of it [...], Meno, by the gods, *what do you yourself* say that
virtue is?". Vlastos argues that the "say-what-you-believe constraint"[19] is neces-
sary for the *elenchus*' success; the answerer's duty to be completely honest con-
trasts with the eristic, whose principal object is to win the debate and one can say
everything can give an advantage.[20] In the *elenchus*, since the prime object is the
search for truth, the answerer must express his real opinion (cf. *Grg.* 500b; *Rep*.
I 346a; *Cr*. 49c–d; *Pr*. 331c).

In each discussion, Socrates usually asks a "primary question" about an ethi-
cal problem and, after the interlocutor's answer, he proceeds by means of a series
of "secondary questions", usually entailing the inconsistency of the initial an-
swer. This is the standard pattern of the *elenchus* (cf. *Euthphr.* 6e–8b, 12e–13c;
La. 190e–c).[21] At this point, the interlocutor either revises his initial answer
(*Euthphr.* 10d), offers a new answer (*Hp. Ma.* 289e), admits to being unable to
say what he knows (*La*. 194b), professes his ignorance (*Ch*. 162b), is replaced
by another interlocutor whose wisdom is examined (*Grg*. 461e–462b), or

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[16] Robinson 1953, 15; see also Penner 1990, 139–147.

[17] Robinson, *ibid.*

[18] Cf. also *Grg*. 471d–472c, 474a, 475e.

[19] Vlastos 1983a, 35–36.

[20] On the Socratic philosophy and the sophists, see Penner 1990, 137–139; Vlastos 1994, 135–136.

[21] On the standard pattern of the *elenchus*, see Robinson 1953; Vlastos 1983a; Irwin 1995;
Benson 2011; Bryan 2013. See also Robinson (1953, 20–32) on the concept of "direct" and
"indirect" *elenchus*.

marches off in a huff (*Euthphr.* 15e).[22] The primary question has one of these two forms: either "Is X Y?" (*e.g.* "Is justice better than injustice?", *Rp.* 576b) or "What is X?" (*e.g.* "What is courage?", *Ch.* 190e; "What is pious?", *Eutyphr.* 5d). Of these two forms, the *elenchus* put emphasis upon the What-is-X? question, by which Socrates seeks for a satisfactory definition. He does not ask for a "dictionary-definition", but "a word or a set of words which enshrines the knowledge of the thing X"[23] because, as he says at *Men.* 71b, "if I do not know *what* something is, how could I know *what qualities* it possesses?".[24] The priority of definition is the instrument for Socrates' search for essence, explained in the dialogues by the use of two words εἶδος or "form" (*Men.* 72c; *Euthphr.* 6d) and οὐσία or "essence" (*Men.* 72b; *Euthphr.* 11a).[25]

Consequently, knowledge of X requires a prior definition of *what* X is; however Socrates is never satisfied with his interlocutors' definitions, so that it seems impossible to make progress in the *elenctic* discussion, which ends in *aporia*.

Thus, is Socrates genuinely inclined to be refuted by his interlocutors as he claims in *Gorgias* 506a ("you must refute me [χρὴ...ἐλέγχειν]")? There is no general agreement. Vlastos[26] focuses on a "crucial text" in which Socrates tells Polus that his thesis that suffering injustice is better than inflicting injustice has been "proved":

ΣΩ. Οὐκοῦν ἀποδέδεικται ὅτι ἀληθῆ ἐλέγετο;

Socrates: Then has it not been *proved* that this was a true statement?" (*Grg.* 479e)

Other striking passages support his thesis:

i) ΣΩ. μὴ οὖν μηδὲ νῦν με κέλευε ἐπιψηφίζειν τοὺς παρόντας, ἀλλ' εἰ μὴ ἔχεις τούτων βελτίω ἔλεγχον, ὅπερ νυνδὴ ἐγὼ ἔλεγον, ἐμοὶ ἐν τῷ μέρει παράδος, καὶ πείρασαι τοῦ ἐλέγχου οἷον ἐγὼ οἶμαι δεῖν εἶναι. ἐγὼ γὰρ ὧν ἂν λέγω ἕνα μὲν παρασχέσθαι μάρτυρα ἐπίσταμαι, αὐτὸν πρὸς ὃν ἄν μοι ὁ λόγος ᾖ, τοὺς δὲ πολλοὺς ἐῶ χαίρειν (*Grg.* 474a)

Socrates: So do not call upon me again to take the votes of the company now; but if, as I said this moment, you have no better disproof than those, hand the work over to me in my

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[22] See Benson 2011, 184.
[23] Robinson 1953, 53.
[24] Cf. also *Men.* 86d–e, 100b; *Prt.* 360e; *Rp.* I 354.
[25] On the "Priority of Definition", see Robinson 1953, 49–60.
[26] Vlastos 1983a, 44–56. See also Parry 2015.

turn, and try the sort of refutation that I think the case requires. For I know how to produce one witness to my assertions: the man against whom I am arguing.

ii) ΣΩ. ἐγὼ γὰρ δὴ οἶμαι καὶ ἐμὲ καὶ σὲ καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους ἀνθρώπους τὸ ἀδικεῖν τοῦ ἀδικεῖσθαι κάκιον ἡγεῖσθαι καὶ τὸ μὴ διδόναι δίκην τοῦ διδόναι (*Grg.* 474b)

Socrates: I believe that I and you and the rest of mankind believe that committing injustice is worse than suffering it, and escaping punishment worse than incurring it.

iii) ΣΩ. ἢ οὖν ἐκείνην ἐξέλεγχον, ὅπερ ἄρτι ἔλεγον, ὡς οὐ τὸ ἀδικεῖν ἐστιν καὶ ἀδικοῦντα δίκην μὴ διδόναι ἁπάντων ἔσχατον κακῶν· ἢ εἰ τοῦτο ἐάσεις ἀνέλεγκτον, μὰ τὸν κύνα τὸν Αἰγυπτίων θεόν, οὔ σοι ὁμολογήσει Καλλικλῆς, ὦ Καλλίκλεις, ἀλλὰ διαφωνήσει ἐν ἅπαντι τῷ βίῳ (*Grg.* 482b)

Socrates: So you must either refute her saying those very things that I was asserting – that to commit injustice and do so with impunity is the greatest of evils – or, if you leave this unrefuted, then, by the dog, god of Egypt, Callicles will disagree with you, Callicles, and will dissent from you your whole life long.

Consequently, Vlastos attributes to Socrates two assertions:
  (A) "anyone who ever has a false belief will always have at the same time true beliefs entailing the negation of the false belief";
  (B) "the set of moral beliefs held by Socrates at any given time is consistent".

From these two assertions derives that (C) "the set of moral beliefs held by Socrates at any given time is true."
  To sum up, Vlastos states that Socrates claims his premises are true, as they are supposed to be "proved", and the interlocutor is not really free to refuse them; or, if he does but at the same time has a false belief (or "cover belief"), he will always have a contradiction in his system of beliefs ("uncover beliefs"). Now, how does Socrates *prove* his premises are true, if the only way to prove a proposition is to deduce it from others?
  Vlastos' interpretation has been criticized by scholars.[27] Kraut suggests a "less arrogant" thesis, since "this would be a wildly overconfident claim" for Socrates, who is rather "confident of his ability to distinguish moral truths from falsehood"[28] and, in these cases, he claims their premises are *proved* as psychologically compelling to his interlocutor (*e.g.* "pleasure is not the good" [*Grg.* 495]). However, whenever the dialogues end in *aporia* he is genuinely "troubled by inconsistencies in his beliefs system" (*e.g.* in *Protagoras*, *Hippias Minor*, *Gorgias*).[29] "Consistency is not so important", Kraut rightly concludes, "he

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[27] Kraut 1983, Brickhouse-Smith 1984, Polansky 1985, Benson 1995; see also Vlastos 1983b.
[28] Kraut 1983, 67.
[29] See Kraut 1983, 68–69.

strives for it, of course, but he does not think he *has* to achieve it [...]. His interlocutors can always challenge his assumptions, but this does not reveal a weakness in his method, nor does not deprive him of proofs [...]. All arguments and all proofs rest on assumptions open to challenge, and no argument loses its forces because the speaker has inconsistent beliefs".[30]

Lastly, although Socrates' denial of conducting an *elenchus* is clearly insincere (*Ch.* 165b; *Ap.* 23a; *Euthd.* 293b), Plato justifies the Socratic irony as a necessary and "drastic shock, a practical demonstration of ignorance accompanied by shame" and followed by "a violent reversal of situation".[31]

In conclusion, it is possible to argue that the *elenchus* is a positive instrument of moral education: the interlocutor faces a psychological obstacle course which requires honesty, shame and courage. Only if he says what he *really* believes and, ashamed for living wrongly, has the courage to recognise his ignorance, he can purify his soul and achieve the virtue. Socrates' purpose is sincere, as his ironic profession of ignorance makes possible the maieutic discussion[32] and the interlocutor's intellectual curiosity. As Foucault rightly states, "*bios* is the focus of Socratic *parrhesia*. Socrates tests the relation to the truth of the interlocutor's existence. His aim is to lead the interlocutor to the choice of that kind of life (*bios*) in accord with *logos*, virtue, courage and truth".[33] Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the Socratic method is literally an ἔλεγχον τοῦ βίου (*Ap.* 39c).

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[30] Kraut 1983, 70. Thus also Mogyoródi (2013, 104) in her analysis of Socrates' refutation of Gorgias: "Socrates is not only, or rather, not fundamentally dealing with the conceptual coherence of his interlocutors' beliefs, but their moral integrity: his *elenchus* is meant to explore 'whether their life is in agreement with their avowed principles' (Kahn 1996, 133) [...]". Therefore, she concludes, "Socrates' argument is *ad hominem*, but it is designed for cleansing his interlocutor of a special variant of false belief, notably, self-deceit, rather than producing it as oratory does" (*ibid.* 119).

[31] Robinson 1953, 18–19.

[32] The maieutic method, however, is explicitly mentioned for the first time by Socrates in the *Theatetus* (148d–151d).

[33] Focault 1983, 43.

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