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What Does Socrates Know? An Analysis of Socrates’ Wisdom in Plato’s Apology and Gorgias

In Plato’s Apology and Gorgias, there is an apparent inconsistency in Socrates’ words regarding wisdom. Socrates encourages practicing excellence to live the best way of life during his discussion with Callicles in Gorgias, implying he knows what excellence is. However, at the trial in Apology, he claims to lack wisdom in what is worthwhile, and comments on the little worth of human wisdom. This paper is an attempt to analyze Socrates’ words, as presented by Plato in these two dialogues, in order to clarify what Socrates’ claims to know and not to know, as well as his attitude on human wisdom in general. Then the inconsistency will be examined more closely to explore possible explanations.

In Apology, Socrates started off on the topic of knowledge as a possible explanation of why he was convicted by earlier accusers long before the trial. “…I will try to show you what has caused this reputation and slander…is none other than a certain kind of wisdom. What kind of wisdom? Human wisdom, perhaps….” 1 Then Socrates mentions the oracle at Delphi to show the god Apollo thinks Socrates is the wisest man. 2 He then states he does not consider himself as possessing the wisdom. Socrates uses the oracle and the first quote to justify his actions in searching for a wiser man through questioning people, as well as to introduce his thoughts on human wisdom. These thoughts, which are crucial to the inconsistency mentioned, are first expressed in the following quote: “I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know.” 3

This statement, which sounds incredibly like one of Confucius’ sayings on learning, 4 is stating Socrates realizes how little he knows, and doesn’t pretend to know what he does not know, thus he is wiser than the people he questioned. What sets him apart from them is the fact that he alone is aware of the limitations of human wisdom. This idea is supported by Socrates saying “human wisdom is worth little or nothing.” 5

On the other hand, during his discussion with Callicles in the last part of Gorgias, Socrates claims to know the best way of life – “So let’s use the account that has now been disclosed to us as our guide, one that indicates to us that this way of life is the best, to

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2 Socrates’ attitudes towards Greek gods and the divine in general will not be examined in this paper.
3 Plato, Apology, 21d.
5 Plato, Apology, 23a.
practice justice and the rest of excellence both in life and in death.”6 Then he argues self-control is a way to practice excellence and thus achieve the best way of life mentioned. “… a self-controlled soul is a good one” (507a); and “…a person who wants to be happy must evidently pursue and practice self-control.” (507c). In these statements Socrates implies he possesses the wisdom of the best life to live, what excellence is, and introduces self-control as one way to attain it.

Now we can reexamine the inconsistency. It’s evident in Gorgias that the ultimate goal – living the best way of life - is something worthwhile to Socrates, despite him stating in Apology that human wisdom has little worth. In other words, the inconsistency occurs because Socrates is claiming to know “the best life” and “the practice of excellence” in Gorgias, which contradicts with his statement in Apology that he, possessing only the limited human wisdom, does not know what is worthwhile.

One explanation for the inconsistency is that by practicing the self-control mentioned in Gorgias, Socrates avoids what he knows to be bad. After abandoning the lifestyle he knows to be bad – for example, the life of the orator praised by Callicles – he, as well as anyone else, can move towards excellence and the best way of life. In other words, he is moving towards an unknown direction after turning away from what he knows for sure to be bad. This explanation is supported by the following quote from Apology: “I do know, however, that it is wicked and shameful to do wrong...I shall never fear or avoid things of which I do not know, whether they may not be good rather than things that I know to be bad.”7

A problem with this explanation is avoiding what is bad may not always directly lead him to the opposite – what is good, such as the practice of excellence. Some issues simply don’t have opposites to turn to; it is also possible that abandoning one bad practice might lead to another bad practice. Other issues can be defined based on the individual’s opinions. If Socrates only encourages people to avoid what is bad without knowing what is good, the best way of life could be different for every person, defeating the original purpose of Socrates’ discussion in Gorgias. Then how can Socrates practice excellence and promote the best way of life without claiming to possess human wisdom in that area?

Another possible explanation is the “best way of life” Socrates is promoting in Gorgias is a component of the extremely small amount of human wisdom. Although the way of life appears unimportant and negligible when placed in the realm of what is unknown to humans, it’s still the best possible lifestyle human beings can choose with their limited wisdom. So it’s probable that Socrates is speaking on two difference scales regarding wisdom in the dialogues – using the larger, universal scale in Apology to show limitations of human wisdom in the vast, unknown world that cannot yet be explained; and using the smaller, specialized scale in Gorgias to present “best way of life” (527e) as a product within the limits of human wisdom. The best way of life Socrates follows can be seen as one of the few worthwhile things he knows through his human wisdom.

Some other issues worth examining include the accuracy of the dialogues. We have no way of knowing whether the sayings recorded by Plato matches Socrates’ exact thoughts at the time. But since this problem exists in most ancient works of literature, and

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7 Plato, Apology, 29b-c.
there exists no clear way of overcoming it, it is largely ignored. Another issue is Socrates’ attitude on human discoveries, or the expansion of the limited human wisdom. It appears unclear from the text whether Socrates expects to discover the broadening of human wisdom through traveling and questioning more people in his lifetime, if he were not accused and later sentenced to death. He does mention his wish to continue “testing” people after death, if possible. However, he doesn’t provide his opinion on possible developments in human wisdom in the future. It is interesting to think that, centuries away from Socrates, the modern technologies we are proud of could still be within the tiny area of human wisdom that Socrates considers unimportant – that is, compared to the unknown. But since there isn’t any textual evidence of Socrates denying the possibility of increase in human wisdom, one can be optimistic and think it’s possible to expand the limits on human wisdom over time. There is also the comparison and contrast between Socrates’ and Confucius’ attitudes on human knowledge, which is a fascinating research topic and could offer many insights on human thoughts on the divine, as well as cultural differences between Ancient Greece and Ancient China.

In conclusion, Socrates claims ignorance in Apology mainly to stress human wisdom is of little worth, and he is only wiser because he knows he lacks human wisdom; in Gorgias he states one should practice self-control and excellence to strive towards the best way of life. One explanation for this inconsistency is Socrates avoids what he knows to be bad by practicing self-control, and tries to approach the best way of life without claiming wisdom on what the good is. Another explanation is the best way of life, which Socrates knows, is one of the few worthwhile things within the limits of human wisdom. Thus it’s the best result that can be achieved by humans. There are still other possible explanations for the apparent inconsistency, as well as further issues that remain unexamined.

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8 Plato, Apology, 41b.
Bibliography