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THE WOLF AND THE DOG: ERISTIC,  
*ELENCHUS*, AND KINDS OF WISDOM  
 IN PLATO'S *EUTHYDEMUS*<sup>1</sup>

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1. *Introduction: Socrates the sophist?*

The old French saying '*entre chien et loup*' ('between a dog and a wolf') hints at the danger of confusing the warm, loyal and protective with the fierce, ruthless, and predatory. It is used to refer to the time between day and night – dusk – in which we are especially vulnerable to mistaking a wolf for a dog. In a similar vein, the *Sophist's* Eleatic Stranger warns his young interlocutor, Theaetetus, not to let the similarities between the sophist and the practitioner of the elenctic method blind him to their crucial differences, alluding to the resemblance of a wolf to a dog, «the most savage of animals to the most gentle» (231a6). All the same, Plato has the Eleatic Stranger describe the master of *elenchus* – the method for which Socrates was famous – as a sophist, albeit a sophist of noble birth (231b7-8). But if both are sophists, the reader is left wondering why one is called wolf, the other dog. A more

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sustained comparative study of the method of elenctic examination and that of sophistic eristic is found in the tightly structured *Euthydemus*, with its interleaving of sophistic and Socratic episodes. There too, even though it is clear enough who is cast in the role of self-serving predator (i.e. wolf), and who in that of gentle protector (i.e. dog) – the brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus in the former, Socrates in the latter – the reader could once again be forgiven for wondering why. To be sure, as is well documented, the brothers deliberately go in for a style of argument that appears to be littered with semantic and syntactic ambiguity, a sort of ‘fallacy-mongering’, while Socrates’ arguments seem at least to aim at logical validity.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, their respective goals appear to be the same: to cross-examine their interlocutor, unearth contradictions in her views, and make her accept the view the questioner offers. So why paint Socrates once more as the good guy, why suggest that his mode of inquiry is something different, somehow morally or epistemically elevated? One suggestion, to revert again to the *Sophist*, is that Socratic questioning is beneficial because it cleanses the soul of false beliefs (230b-e). As Vlastos pointed out, however, a contradiction on its own furnishes no resource for the identification of falsehood.<sup>3</sup> But if it is not the power of logic that flushes out falsehoods, Socrates must achieve this by other means. And this invites the question whether Socrates is

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<sup>2</sup> The view of the majority of commentators, and one that I endorse here, is that the arguments presented by the sophists trade on various linguistic ambiguities, semantic and syntactical. What is still very much in dispute is what to make of Plato’s intentions in having the sophists present such arguments. Most take the arguments to be fallacies, though there is disagreement over whether Plato had a sophisticated or detailed grasp of their fallacious nature. Many have argued that he did, and was essentially engaged in the same project Aristotle undertakes in the *Sophistici Elenchi* [e.g. Bonitz 1886; Gifford 1905; Sprague 1962, 1977; Hawtrey 1981], while others have argued that Plato did not have the logical resources to properly diagnose the fallacies he presents [Robinson 1942, 1953, Chance, 1992]. For an excellent, very recent discussion of this debate, see Campbell, who argues that the *Euthydemus* provides evidence that Plato did in fact have «the logical resources necessary to expose the linguistic fallacies of the *Euthydemus*» [Campbell 2020]. For the alternative view that the ambiguities in the sophistic arguments do not amount to fallacies, but are consistent with certain radical metaphysical views that are presupposed (but not stated or defended) by the sophists, see McCabe 1994, 2013, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Vlastos 1994, 3 ff.

a wolf after all, albeit one – as perhaps Plato finally saw in the *Sophist* – of a fine and noble kind, less interested in bloodying his victims for his own sake rather than for their own, relieving them, at least, of the conceit of their own wisdom.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper I will argue that Socrates shows himself in the *Euthydemus* to be well cast in the dog-like role of protector in that dialogue (as in the *Sophist*), and to the extent that his method and its epistemic outcome are radically different from and opposed to those of the sophistic brothers in the *Euthydemus*, he is likewise shown to be no wolf, though that characterisation proves apt for the brothers. One central plank of my argument is the claim that Socrates' method of examination, the so-called elenctic method, is primarily beneficial or constructive, and aims at a substantial epistemic outcome within a dialectical context. It proceeds by the questioner eliciting and drawing attention to reasonable or well-founded views or beliefs the interlocutor already holds, relevant to the subject of inquiry, and secures further agreement that additional claims, which follow immediately or almost immediately, express claims the interlocutor was previously committed to, although she was unaware of this fact: the method unearths tacit beliefs of the interlocutor relevant to the inquiry. Revealing such beliefs as belonging to the interlocutor thereby affords a certain kind of self-knowledge to the interlocutor, which I will refer to as 'epistemic self-knowledge'. The primary outcome and goal of the method, epistemic self-knowledge, is also a further source of its epistemic significance: the articulation of well-reasoned views on the topic in question, which in turn, under the right conditions, may conduce to understanding or first-order knowledge on that topic in future investigations. Additionally, I will argue, in the process of elenctic questioning, the interlocutor is revealed as having a prior commitment to certain epistemic criteria or norms. Last, a further frequent outcome of elenctic questioning – itself epistemically neutral but nonetheless beneficial – is the generation of a contradiction.<sup>5</sup> In combination with the constructive outcome of the

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<sup>4</sup> So Nehamas 1990, 9 ff., and before him Robinson 1953.

<sup>5</sup> As indicated above, since the production of a contradiction is not on its own sufficient for evaluating the truth-value of either premise, it is epistemically neutral with respect to knowledge or belief claims.

*elenchus*, however, contradiction facilitates a further use of the method – this time destructive: a critical reappraisal, and potential abandonment of, a previously avowed premise that is in fact opposed to the well-reasoned conclusion that has emerged.<sup>6</sup>

By contrast, I will argue, the eristic method used by the sophistic brothers in the dialogue is destructive. Although it is used, like Socrates' method of questioning, to show that the interlocutor's answers are self-contradictory, unlike Socrates' method, the brothers' procedure does not target the interlocutor's reflected-upon and considered views. Eristic remains studiously indifferent both to what is the case, and to what the interlocutor is inclined, upon reflection, to take to be true by their own lights, or to take as what follows from previously agreed premises. Nor does eristic employ epistemic criteria or norms – standards of rational reflection by which falsehoods may be distinguished from truths, genuine from ersatz knowledge. It seeks instead to elicit a series of utterances, whatever they might mean, in whatever context, and without time for reflection, that formally contradicts an earlier claim of the interlocutor, and so generates the appearance of genuine contradiction. The combative nature of eristic then sees the questioner demand that the interlocutor concede that they were mistaken or wrong in uttering the earlier claim, and the sophist emerges victorious, the interlocutor defeated. The crucial difference between the elenctic and eristic methods, I will argue, is that in the former the interlocutor makes no epistemic progress, while in the latter she does. For, in eristic she is not, as in elenctic questioning, brought to a critical awareness of the truth-functional reasons for her assertions, or to self-knowledge, but is left confused and bewildered by appearances, vulnerable to admission of defeat.

The methodological and epistemological contrast between *elenchus* and eristic can be brought into sharp relief by viewing the procedures employed by each of Socrates and the sophists in the *Euthydemus* as dramatic illustrations of two arts or expertise described in abstraction in

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<sup>6</sup> It is this element that Vlastos overlooks in his assessment of the Socratic *elenchus* as producing no positive outcome, and providing no warrant for Socrates' claims or intimations in the early dialogues that the interlocutor's initial claim is shown to be false [Vlastos 1994]. For further discussion on this point, see Leigh 2020, *passim*.

the *Sophist* – the sophistic art (as characterised in the seventh account of sophistry) and the ‘cleansing’ art of ‘noble sophistry’. The juxtaposition will afford a clear view of the brothers’ practice in the *Euthydemus* as the production of false appearances in the mind of their interlocutor, which production depends only on the beliefs of the interlocutor and exploits their adherence to various epistemic norms. It will also facilitate the comparative view of the Socratic *elenchus* as similarly focused on the beliefs of the interlocutor, but with the constructive aim of revealing to the interlocutor his pre-existing epistemic commitments or beliefs, relevant to the subject of enquiry. We will then be in a position to see that the display of the two methods in the *Euthydemus* each yields a distinct picture of wisdom, the one incompatible with the other, and each highly valued by the method’s practitioners. In presenting these competing methods and conceptions of wisdom, Plato invites the reader to reflect on their differences and relative merits, but with a particular focus, I shall argue, on their divergent effects – the one beneficial, the other harmful – on the interlocutor.

## 2. *Sophistic and elenctic methods in the Sophist*

Although the question whether sophistry is adequately defined in the *Sophist* is widely debated, the seventh attempt to account for it is generally accepted as (at least) offering a true description of the practice, according to Plato in that dialogue. On that account sophistry is the deceptive and persuasive production of false appearances, which present their objects as being some way they are not.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the description of the method of the ‘well-born’ or ‘noble’ (γενναῖος) sophist at 226b-231b has been noted by many scholars to capture many if not all of the essential features of the *elenctic* method practiced by Socrates, as depicted in the early dialogues.<sup>8</sup> I here draw out the main characteristics of each method in the *Sophist*, before turning to their illustration in the *Euthydemus*.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Cornford 1935; Notomi 1999, 119-139; Crivelli 2012, 25-27; Gill 2012, 147-148.

<sup>8</sup> The observation can be found in, for instance, Cornford 1935, 180-81; Nehamas 1990, 13; Vlastos 1994, 17; McCabe 2003, 203; Taylor 2006.

At 232b6, b12ff., the Eleatic Stranger focuses on the sophist's skill as controverter (ἀντιλογικός) able to engage in countersaying or contradiction (ἀντιλέγειν, 232c9, d7, 233a6, b3, c2, d9) about anything whatsoever. Earlier, the more technical kind of debating about general issues such as justice and injustice, eristic, was said to be a sub-kind of such countersaying (225c7-9). The Stranger then claims that the sophist practices mimetic production of images (εἶδωλα) of a certain kind, appearances *phantasmata* (236a-c). In contrast to likenesses (εἰκόνες), appearances are produced with a view to the specific conditions under which the hearer or viewer experiences the mimetic object, and adjusted accordingly. The mimetic producer (artist or sophist) crafts the object with an eye on the appearance he wants to inculcate in the audience, rather than ensuring that the mimetic product (a monumental statue or an argument) remains faithful to that of which it is a copy. So, e.g., the feet of the statue, near the viewer, are made proportionally smaller in comparison to the body of which it is an image (235e-236a). For the sophist, who deals in images in words (εἶδωλα λεγόμενα, 234c6) the faithlessness in question concerns the relation of the content of the propositions offered to his interlocutor and the way the world is. Since the sophist is able to countersay his interlocutors about anything, but necessarily lacks knowledge of everything (232c-233c), inevitably his arguments contain false statements. Moreover, his near boundless skill in producing contradiction in his interlocutor<sup>9</sup> produces the additional appearance of himself as prodigiously wise, effective in recruiting students, who wish to emulate him and his wisdom. What are the conditions of his hearers, which the sophist exploits in producing his brand of appearances? The chief condition mentioned in the *Sophist* is their ignorance, usually arising from their youth and inexperience (234c-e), but since sophists frequently profess to teach virtue (224b-c), the requisite ignorance will on that score be found in anyone lacking moral knowledge, i.e. everyone (or, almost). Another is brought out in the sophist's false projection of himself as wise, together with the Stranger's remark that mimesis is an entertaining game (234a-b). For,

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<sup>9</sup> The limit of the sophist's skill is found in the person who has knowledge of the topic under discussion, and to whom the sophist's objections will not appear sound (233a5-7).

exercising the ability to trap almost anyone in contradiction on any topic can easily amuse as well as impress, and inculcate a desire to please others similarly, by appearing witty and wise.

By contrast, the cleansing art of cross-examination described in the dialogue (ἐλέγχειν, 230d1), though it also frequently results in the interlocutor contradicting himself, bears a very different relation to the truth. With the aim of education, and preparing the soul for learning, the expert refutes by collecting his interlocutor's opinions during conversation, and, laying them side by side, shows him that they conflict with one another about the same subject, in the same respects, in relation to the same thing, and at the same time (230b6-8, cf. *Apol.* 38a). Consequently, his interlocutor loses his inflated belief about himself – that he is saying something rather than nothing (*Sph.* 230b8-c2; 230b4-5, cf. *Apol.* 23b) – and, generally, beliefs that would interfere with learning (*Sph.* 230c7-d4). In what appears to be a direct reference to the *Apology*, the Stranger says that the soul refuted thus «believes that it knows only those things it does know, and nothing more» (230d3-4; *Apol.* 21d3-6, cf. 29b1-2). An almost universally overlooked feature of the *elenctic* method, however – and which is crucial for my purposes – is that the interlocutor is brought to an awareness of his pertinent beliefs *vis-à-vis* the inquiry, some of which he was previously unaware – i.e. he is brought to an awareness of his previously tacit relevant beliefs. It is not infrequently one of these tacit beliefs that contradicts a belief the interlocutor has previously avowed, in strong terms, on the subject of investigation. So the interlocutor is brought to see that and how he holds contradictory beliefs on that subject, and so is ignorant with respect to it.<sup>10</sup> To the extent that the interlocutor arrives at an accurate, i.e. true, assessment of what he knows and the limit of his knowledge regarding the topic of discussion, the *elenctic* method facilitates a kind of epistemic self-knowledge. Finally, the critical reflection involved in uncovering beliefs of which the interlocutor was previously unaware, as well as uncovering ignorance, invites awareness of the assumption and adoption of certain epistemic principles.

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<sup>10</sup> For examples and discussion of the *elenctic* method facilitating this process of uncovering tacit beliefs, contradiction, and ignorance in the *Alcibiades*, *Laches*, *Charmides*, and *Gorgias*, see Leigh 2020.

We turn now to the *Euthydemus*, in which the methods are portrayed, and contrasted, in the interleaving episodes.

### 3. *The use of eristic in the Euthydemus*

The *Euthydemus* consists of a frame dialogue in which Socrates and Crito discuss the conversation of the previous day, containing five episodes. Of the five, the two Socratic ‘protreptic’ episodes, urging young Clinias to pursue wisdom, are interleaved between – and so vividly contrasted with – three ‘eristic’ episodes of questioning by the brothers. In the frame, Socrates says that the brothers are experts in combat, both bodily combat in wrestling and soul-combat in the courtroom, and also, as of late, in word-combat by way of arguments, refuting (ἐξελέγχειν) whatever is said, true or false (272a-b). Thus, their wisdom is said to be ‘eristic’ (272b9-10).<sup>11</sup> Their promise is wisdom: they claim that they are able in a short time to make anyone clever like them in arguments (δαινός, 272b4), and that they are able to teach virtue (273d8-9). When Socrates asks them to make a display of persuading Clinias to love wisdom and care for virtue, they stipulate just one condition: that «the boy be willing to answer» (275c).

The central role of countersaying or contradiction in the sophists’ method is on display from the start, as they quickly have Clinias, under questioning, articulate the negation of a claim he has just made, and continues to the end of the dialogue. This is just as we would expect from the method’s description in the *Sophist*, which focused on its key characteristic of countersaying (ἀντιλέγειν), and described its practitioner as fond of controverting (ἀντιλογικός). The identification of eristic as a species of countersaying expertise in the *Sophist* is also consistent with Socrates’ characterisation of the brothers’ wisdom as ‘eristic’ at *Euthyd.* 272b9-10. The challenging suggestion to Ctesippus, that there is no such thing as countersaying (ἀντιλέγειν 285d-286b), is also consistent with the *Sophist*’s description of sophistry. For, in the *Sophist* this is the Stranger’s analytic description of the sophists’

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<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Socrates describes the sophistic brothers as ‘wise’ or ‘having wisdom’ numerous times (273e-274b, 274d).



skill, not the way they themselves characterise their skill, which skill, moreover, he says they are able to produce in others (232b). Now, for their own part in the *Euthydemus*, they claim to teach virtue. Thus if, by appearing to their students to possess virtue and in particular wisdom, they take on and teach them the skill of inducing contradiction – but not by that name – they will have taught their eristic kind of wisdom, without explicit recognition of, or commitment to, countersaying. And this is precisely what they do in the *Euthydemus*, via the production of appearances or ‘images in words’, as we can see in the first eristic episode.

At 276a, in answer to Euthydemus’ question, Clinias affirms that in his view it is the wise who learn, rather than the ignorant. When, however, Euthydemus puts it to him that learners are ignorant about the subject of learning, Clinias agrees, since it appears to him (quite correctly) to be the case, before also agreeing to the further inference that the ignorant learn. But then he finds himself, somewhat confusingly, having agreed to an apparent contradiction: that it is the ignorant, not the wise, who learn, and it is the wise, not the ignorant, who learn. Immediately after the applause and laughter of the sophists’ followers dies down, and in response to Dionysodorus’ question, Clinias affirms that wise students, not ignorant ones, learn the writing master’s lessons (276c2-5). Here, context suggests that Clinias’ thought is likely that students who seriously set about learning and thereby succeed are wise, although it could also be that those who have learned become wise. Either way, it now appears to him – quite reasonably – that it is the wise who learn, not the ignorant, and, therefore, that he has once again contradicted himself.

Scholars have suggested that Plato’s purpose is to point up the fallacy of *secundum quid* here and elsewhere in the dialogue (e.g. in the argument that Socrates wants Clinias dead).<sup>12</sup> Certainly it is plausible to think that Plato would have expected his readers to notice that, for instance, the truth of the conclusion Euthydemus articulates at 276b4-5 ‘the ignorant learn’, without qualification and so taken *simpliciter*, does not follow in respect of every aspect of learning, since it only follows

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<sup>12</sup> E.g., Sprague 1962, 5-8.

in respect of learners not knowing about the subject of their learning.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, in light of the characterisation in the *Sophist*, we can add that the role of suitable qualifications, as either present or absent, helps to explain the plausible but ultimately suspect way that things appear to Clinias. For, with respect to that which they do not know before learning it, it is true that the ignorant learn and the wise do not, and with respect to applying oneself assiduously to learning, it is true that the wise learn and the ignorant do not. Moreover, it is true for all students in these respects, not merely a subset of them. So, the unqualified statements, ‘the ignorant learn’, and ‘the wise learn’ put Clinias in mind of appearances that are not only plausible, but within their context true, and true for all learners.<sup>14</sup>

However, absent specification of context or qualification of respect, these statements also appear to contradict one another, and thereby imply that Clinias was twice mistaken in the discussion. This, I suggest, is the point at which the content of the appearance generated by the sophist’s questioning is *not true*, but is, rather, in an important sense *false*. For, it has not been shown that Clinias’ claim, that the wise learn, suitably qualified as *per* the brief encounter with Dionysodorus, contradicts the claim that it is the ignorant who learn, suitably qualified as *per* Euthydemus’ questioning. Thus, it has not been shown that Clinias was mistaken in saying to Euthydemus that the ignorant learn (276a-b), as Dionysodorus claims at 276c7. So *this* appearance, generated by Dionysodorus – of Clinias being mistaken – appears true, but is in fact spurious. Indeed, we might want to say that the appearance that Clinias is mistaken at 276c7 is false, and obviously so – that is the point of Plato having the sophists so ostentatiously drop the qualifications and appearing to trip up young Clinias. Nonetheless, since, by Clinias’ own epistemic standards of consistency (evident throughout the encounter), the unqualified claims he has agreed to are not as they stand (i.e. in their unqualified form) consistent, it appears to him at 276c7 that he has made some error in making contradictory statements. But of course he has

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<sup>13</sup> And likewise, Dionysodorus’ conclusion at c6-7 taken *simpliciter*. *Contra* Robinson 1942, 105-106.

<sup>14</sup> But see McCabe 2019 for the alternative view that the argument does not involve equivocation on ‘learning’.

no opportunity for critical reflection, since Euthydemus immediately resumes his questioning.

In this short section of the first eristic episode, then, we are given an illustration of the sophistic method as described in the *Sophist*: Clinias is put in mind of appearances that are plausible and seem true to him – some of which appear true because he is understanding them in their suitably qualified form, while another of which (the appearance that he has contradicted himself) appears true but is in fact false. Moreover, we can observe that the content of the beliefs that generate the false appearance that he is mistaken at 276c7 are not claims that the sophists have convinced him to adopt, but are instead his own. Insofar as they exploit his pre-existing beliefs, then, the sophists produce their appearances in a way that uses and adjusts for facts about their interlocutor. Equally, the sophists rely heavily on Clinias' assumption of and commitment to certain epistemic norms of rational reflection and deliberation: His commitment to the principles of consistency and logical entailment lead him to accept that since learners lack knowledge of what they learn, in the process of learning they learn while ignorant, then drive him to the conclusion that the ignorant learn, and, finally, make it appear to him that he has been mistaken in making inconsistent statements. This method is repeated by the brothers throughout the dialogue, which each time makes use of the interlocutor's pre-existing beliefs, and functions by holding him to his own epistemic standards or norms. We turn now to the depiction of the Socratic elenctic method in the *Euthydemus*.

#### 4. Elenchus, tacit belief, and self-knowledge in the Euthydemus

The two protreptic or Socratic episodes in the *Euthydemus* are not generally thought to employ the elenctic method. This, however, is a mistake, induced by the suggestion that Socrates supplies contentful claims of his own, rather than eliciting the views or beliefs of his interlocutor.<sup>15</sup> The suggestion, however, fails to notice the effect of the

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<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Vlastos 1994, 30. Cf. Sprague 1962, 8-12; Hawtrey 1981, 18-36, regards the method used in the protreptic episodes as 'dialectic', which, however, he regards

fact that the dialogue is not centred around a ‘what is F?’ question, as the so-called ‘early’ dialogues are. As such, Socrates’ use of the method of cross-examination in the *Euthydemus* does not begin with his interlocutor’s claim to know what some property, such as piety or justice, consists in. Instead, the method arises in the course of his demonstration of ‘protreptic’ – a conversational encounter that aims to persuade Clinias to pursue virtue and wisdom. This begins at 278e-279c with Socrates determining, by asking questions, that Clinias possesses a number of beliefs, that all men want to do well, that they think the means of well-being is possession of many good things, and that good things include wealth, health, and so on. To be sure, it is Socrates who articulates the content of many of these beliefs, to which Clinias merely agrees. But as Plato has Socrates make plain,<sup>16</sup> these are popular beliefs, very widely held, so it is entirely unsurprising that Clinias holds them too. Indeed, such beliefs are frequently offered to Socrates’ interlocutors in dialogues widely agreed to contain *elenchoi*.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, as we will see, Socrates pointedly asks for Clinias’ own beliefs concerning the value of virtues, considered apart from what others think, at 279b. Nor should the absence of a ‘what is F?’ question give us pause, since, as we have seen, the description of the elenctic method in the *Sophist* does not specify this as the necessary context for the *elenchus*.

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as closely related to the elenctic method, of which it is a development. In relation to the early dialogues, scholars diverge on the question of the sense in which the beliefs that emerge from *elenctic* questioning ought to be attributed to Socrates’ interlocutors: Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 73-83, argue that the *elenchus* shows them what they should believe; Kamtekar signals broad agreement with Brickhouse and Smith, but also suggests that *elenctic* questioning draws out beliefs we can regard as tacitly held, in the sense that «believing it involves accepting its entailments, acting on it, and so on» [Kamtekar 2017, 36]. Compare Benson 2000, 47-56, who argues that premises in *elenchoi* are most plausibly attributed to Socrates’ interlocutor.

<sup>16</sup> 278e3-6; 279a3-4; 279a5-8.

<sup>17</sup> In the *Laches*, for instance, Socrates asks Laches if he thinks those willing to endure in cavalry attack and well-diving despite being unskilled or lacking knowledge are more courageous than their skilled and knowledgeable counterparts (193b); in the *Euthyphro*, Euthyphro affirms that everyone thinks wrongdoers ought to be punished (8c-e).

#### 4.1. *The elenchus and avowed beliefs*

I suggested above that a central element of the constructive use to which Socratic questioning is put is to isolate and make explicit to the interlocutor a series of views or beliefs, relevant to the subject of inquiry, that they (the interlocutor) already hold, that is, prior to being questioned by Socrates. Such use is on display in the first Socratic or protreptic episode. The question under investigation is what doing well consists in, since doing well is what everybody wants (278e) – and where doing well is treated synonymously with being happy (εὐδαιμονεῖν) from 280b onwards. They then quickly agree that the end would be achieved through the possession of many good things, including wealth, health, good looks, sufficient bodily necessities, noble birth, power, honour, being temperate, just, courageous, and wise. Last, they agree that good fortune should be added to the list (279a-c).

It is worth pausing to note that each of the claims Clinias agrees to thus far are presented by Plato as expressions of views or beliefs he already held. Socrates introduces the claims that everyone wants to do well and that this is achieved through having many goods, as accepted truths or as what everybody – so themselves included – would say, and as what is obviously the case (279a3-4). They are presented, that is, as widely held, shared public views about what is obviously the case. So too, Socrates says, everybody would avow that wealth is one of these goods (279a7), and likewise with the other non-aretaic items on the list. Clinias agrees, indicating not only that he, like everyone else, holds these views and is aware of doing so, but also that along with Socrates he takes them to be shared public views.

When Socrates gets to possession of the virtues – first the character virtues and then wisdom – however, he takes care to acknowledge that some people may well disagree with the suggestion that they are goods, making the question of ‘how things seem’ to Clinias and ‘what he thinks’ a genuinely open one.<sup>18</sup> The use of the present tense in both cases, moreover, makes it clear that Socrates is asking what Clinias presently takes to be the case, and how things presently, i.e. already, seem to Clinias, as opposed to whether he would (in the future, after

<sup>18</sup> ἤγη (‘you think’), 279b6; σοὶ δὲ πῶς δοκεῖ; (‘but how does it seem to you?’), 279b8.

considering the question) agree with the claim. Clinias' answer in the affirmative, then, reveals his view to be one he already holds, and is, once again, aware of holding.

After Clinias has assured Socrates that they haven't left out any goods worth speaking of from the list of those that lead to doing well, Socrates – who is, within the fiction of the dialogue, narrating the story to Crito the next day – says he then remembered a good they had omitted, viz., good fortune. Given that their list consists of goods, through the possession of which one does well or attains happiness, a genuine omission from the list would be of a good that is necessary for happiness, as well as, together with the others, jointly sufficient for it. Socrates' reason for nominating good fortune as a good of this kind is that everybody says it is the greatest of goods (279c). Clinias again agrees, thereby indicating that he, along with everybody else, believes that good fortune is a good necessary for happiness, and that his previous omission of it had been an oversight. So, in this early part of their conversation, Socrates' aim is to draw out a series of views and beliefs that already belong to the young man, and which he is aware of holding.

#### *4.2. Ordinary tacit beliefs and 'elenctic' tacit beliefs*

During the rest of the first Socratic episode, Clinias will agree with a series of claims: that wisdom is good fortune, that happiness also requires the use of good things, that such use in turn requires knowledge, and that wisdom alone is good on its own, while the other goods are not. For my purposes, it will be sufficient to restrict myself to the first claim. The majority of readers understand this claim (as well as the others mentioned) as one that Socrates introduces to Clinias, who is led to accept it, adopting it as one of his own beliefs (at least for the course of the argument).<sup>19</sup> This interpretation, however, is mistaken. For, as I will maintain, careful attention to the text shows that Socrates not only continues to identify and draw attention to beliefs Clinias already self-consciously holds (beliefs he has avowed and is aware of holding),

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<sup>19</sup> E.g. Irwin 1995, 55-56; Russell 2005, 30-31.

Socrates' central purpose is to show him that he possesses further beliefs relevant to their investigation into what it is to do well, which, however, he was previously unaware of holding – tacit beliefs.

Socrates frames the second phase of the discussion by telling Crito he reconsidered a second time (279d), and reports that he next suggested to Clinias that they had, in effect, double-counted by including good fortune, since they had already counted wisdom among the goods. This is because, he says, wisdom is good fortune. Clinias' amazement makes it clear that this is not a belief he counts among his own. Indeed, as mentioned above, most commentators assume that it is not one of Clinias' beliefs at this stage of the discussion. As I will argue shortly, however, there is good reason to think that this is not so – that in fact it is one of his beliefs, although one that he is not aware of holding, i.e. that it is one of his tacit beliefs.

Of course, given Clinias' state of amazement, it cannot be a tacit belief in the ordinary sense of that term in contemporary philosophy: Commonly understood, a tacit belief is such that, although the subject is not consciously aware of holding the belief (it might never even have occurred to her), once it is put to her she immediately and unhesitatingly assents to it, since she sees that it follows immediately or in a very short number of inferential steps from beliefs she has previously avowed and is aware of holding.<sup>20</sup> For instance, I may never have considered whether Queen Elizabeth II weighed less than the Eiffel Tower, but when asked, I will immediately affirm that I think she did weigh less. The belief does not represent something I have just learned, or even something I have figured out in response to the question, but in an important sense

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<sup>20</sup> Dennett 1978, 1987, Lycan 1986. Tacit beliefs may also play a role in judgement formation: imagine a person explaining that why she stepped out in front of the near-silent electric car without looking is that she had assumed that if a car was coming, she would hear it. Even if the agent had never directly contemplated the conditional claim, such an explanation strikes us as eminently plausible and acceptable, since it is an entirely reasonable generalised impression to form on the basis of (what is presumably) her previous experience of cars as distinctly audible. Note that this sense of 'tacit' or 'implicit' belief is distinct from Hawthorne's conception of 'implicit' belief, which is a belief the content of which the subject is not disposed to judge to be true, but which is manifested in the subject's actions or inferential behaviour [Hawthorne 2000].

was antecedently part of how I viewed the world, and in that sense something I already believed. In this way tacit beliefs can be attributed to the subject, each being something she was already in an important sense committed to, given the set of her self-conscious or previously avowed beliefs. By contrast, in our passage of the *Euthydemus*, Clinias does not assent but instead expresses amazement. Thus, the thought that wisdom is good fortune is not one of his tacit beliefs in the sense ordinarily intended. Nonetheless, I will argue, we ought to understand it to be amongst his tacit beliefs. I will suggest, that is, that it is a belief that, by Clinias' lights, follows immediately or in a short number of inferential steps from his self-consciously held beliefs, and is in this sense something he is already committed to, and part of his epistemic world view. All the same, it is a belief that he needs to learn (or discover) that he holds, since he is not disposed to assent to it when it is presented to him as one of his beliefs. Socrates' questioning is aimed at precisely this – revealing to Clinias that this belief, which I shall call the 'target belief', is one of his tacit beliefs in this non-ordinary sense. Indeed, since, as we will see, the kind of elenctic questioning commonly associated with Socrates in the literature, particularly the Socrates of the early dialogues, is the method through which the interlocutor discovers this non-ordinary sub-set of tacit beliefs, I will call them 'elenctic' tacit beliefs, in contrast to the more ordinary kind ('ordinary' tacit beliefs), familiar from contemporary philosophical discussions.

Notice first the way that Socrates immediately describes the target belief, that wisdom is good fortune: he says at 279d that even a child would know it. Taken at face value, Socrates' assertion here is that everybody – including Clinias – not only shares the view, but knows it. At the very least, then, Socrates claims that the belief is true and ought to be ascribed to Clinias. In the context of Clinias' amazement, I take Socrates' claim to be an announcement of the thing to be established – that the target belief is indeed among the things that Clinias believes, despite his being unaware of it. Socrates commences his demonstration by asking whether Clinias knows that flute-players have the best fortune playing flute, and writing masters have the best fortune at reading and writing. The perfect indicative active form of the verb, οἶσθα, 'you know' (279e1), together with Clinias' quick assent, strongly suggests



that these are beliefs he already holds, and is aware of holding. He next agrees, without hesitation, that ‘as a general rule’ (279e6) he doesn’t think (οἶεἰ, 279e5) – this time note the present tense – that any pilots have better luck than wise pilots, and that, were he to be at war, he would prefer to do so with a wise general than an ignorant one, and last that, were he to be ill, he would be content to take a chance with a wise doctor rather than an ignorant one. Socrates then puts it to him that the generalisation, that it is better fortune to do things together with a wise person than an ignorant one, belongs to him as something that he thinks (οἶεἰ, 280a4).<sup>21</sup> Clinias’ easy agreement here, both to beliefs concerning possible future scenarios and to the generalisation at 280a4-5, suggest that Socrates has articulated either beliefs the youth is already aware of holding, or beliefs that he tacitly holds in the ordinary sense. So, e.g., Clinias may already self-consciously believe that doctors who are knowledgeable about medicine, and so are wise in the relevant sense, have considerably more success in treating patients than ignorant doctors, generally speaking.<sup>22</sup> If so, and if it happens to be the case that Clinias has never contemplated the scenario involving himself before, then the further belief, that he, Clinias would be better off if treated by a knowledgeable doctor, would be an ordinary tacit belief. Finally, we ought to note that the content of these beliefs is explicitly said to range over the long term in such a way as to be beliefs about what is the case

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<sup>21</sup> There is the question of whether Socrates equivocates over the use of εὐτυχία and εὐτυχεῖν. See Sprage 1962, 10-11, for the view that any equivocation is benign.

<sup>22</sup> Understanding this claim, and others like it in the text, as beliefs that Socrates ascribes to Clinias rather than propositions Socrates is advancing allows us to construe the claim as an impressionistic (i.e. vague) and unreflected-upon opinion about the general correlation between expert knowledge (i.e. wisdom) and success in that expertise over the long run. If this is the sort of epistemic state in view, Socrates is not attributing to Clinias the claim that wisdom guarantees success, and the question of how wisdom could be thought to do so does not arise. So we need not examine (as some scholars do) whether, in speaking of success, Socrates has in mind a kind of success internal to agents (i.e. successfully performing the actions called for by their expertise), as opposed to the outcomes of the actions, which are vulnerable to factors external to the agent and her control (see e.g. Russell 2005, 30-31). That is, it is plausible for the young man to believe the general correlation holds without distinguishing between these alternatives.

for the most part, or ‘as a general rule’ (ὡς ἐπὶ πάντων εἰπεῖν, 279e6). So understood, the good fortune that someone with knowledge or expertise of the relevant practice or craft enjoys ranges over their practice as a whole and its outcomes in general, over time.

Socrates then draws two closely related conclusions in quick succession, and in the frame conversation with Crito reports that he and Clinias finally agreed to the second, though he says he ‘doesn’t know quite how’. The first conclusion has a distinctively causal tone: that wisdom makes a person fortunate in each case, since qua wise nobody would err. The second is that if a person has wisdom he has no need of good fortune in addition (280b). Although the text does not tell us either way, I submit that it is plausible to think that Clinias must have agreed to the first conclusion immediately, rather than after further discussion. For, the previous generalisation that we saw him confirm as one of his own – that it is better to do things in the company of the wise than the ignorant – together with his beliefs about particular cases, strongly suggests that he antecedently possessed a belief not mentioned in the text – that insofar as they are exercising their wisdom, people do not err, as opposed to people who act from ignorance, who do err – either avowedly or tacitly (in the ordinary sense). That is, if we attribute to Clinias the general view that knowledge is the difference-maker between cases of the most success over the long run and other cases, it is a short step to the conclusion that knowledge and wisdom *make* a person do well through not erring, when exercised. This conclusion then would articulate one of Clinias’ (ordinary) tacit beliefs. If this is right, the beliefs articulated in the reasoning from 279e-280b, including the first conclusion, are beliefs that Clinias is either aware of holding already, or are tacit in the ordinary sense.

Once he has seen that he thinks that wisdom makes a person fortunate, Clinias is primed to see that he thereby possesses very strong reason to think that a person who has wisdom does not need good fortune besides. For, since the person who is wise will, on Clinias’ view, reliably enjoy good fortune in virtue of being wise, it follows that they will have no need of good fortune in addition. So, the person who attends to the former, when it is one of their beliefs, will immediately assent to the latter – if it is put to them, as Socrates evidently puts it

to Clinias. Moreover, if they have not considered it before, they will assent to the latter belief – that the wise person has no need of good fortune in addition – as something that in an important sense they already believe, i.e. as a tacit belief. That is, they will not assent to it as a claim that they have now learned is true, and which represents a new item of knowledge they have acquired, on the basis of newly acquired information or observation, or on the basis of acceptance of a principle or a novel theoretical claim recently introduced to them. And indeed it seems that Clinias cannot previously have seriously considered the question, whether the wise person also has need of good fortune, in light of his amazement at Socrates' suggestion that including both wisdom and good fortune is double counting. But once Clinias' (ordinary) tacit belief that wisdom makes a person have good fortune has been revealed, and becomes one of his avowed or self-conscious beliefs, he is able to attend to it. And, attending to his belief concerning the productive role of wisdom in securing good outcomes, he is in a position to recognise that the thought or claim that good fortune is not needed in addition to wisdom is, in an important sense, something he is already committed to, i.e. that it is one of his (ordinary) tacit beliefs. And once this tacit belief is brought to his awareness, given the context of their discussion, it will be obvious to the young man that he already has good reason to think that including good fortune on the list of goods required for someone to do well, when wisdom is already on the list, amounts to double-counting. So he is able to see that, for the purposes of the list, he was already committed to the thought that listing wisdom suffices to list good fortune. That is, in this context, he was already committed to the target belief, as part of his epistemic world view, that wisdom is good fortune: it was one of his tacit beliefs, and he is now able to come to a second-order awareness of this fact about his beliefs. But as his amazement when this claim is initially put to him attests, it cannot be an ordinary tacit belief, but must instead be an elenctic tacit belief, something that he is at first unable to see as one of his own commitments. It is only when other of his avowed beliefs are elicited and drawn to his attention as relevant to the inquiry, and further ordinary tacit beliefs, also relevant to the discussion are revealed thereby, that he is able to grasp his pre-existing commitment to the target belief. It is therefore to

be considered one of his (previously) tacit beliefs – not in the ordinary sense, however, but in a distinctively critical self-reflective or ‘*elenctic*’ sense.

Although considerations of space mean that I am unable to provide more than a brief sketch as a promissory note for future investigation, I would like to suggest that in the remainder of the first Socratic episode, Socrates continues to deploy the elenctic method in his discussion with Clinias. The discussion concludes with the claim that wisdom is the only good thing by itself, alone worthy of serious, sustained pursuit – a substantive claim to be sure, but one that, if it is indeed the fruit of elenctic questioning as I have understood it, a belief that the young man is brought to see that he was, in an important sense, committed to all along.

#### 4.3. *Elenchus and epistemic norms*

Throughout the first Socratic episode, Socrates relies on Clinias’ adherence to epistemic norms, i.e., standards or criteria for reasoning in inquiry taken to be rational and conducive to truth. He depends, for instance, on Clinias’ acceptance of the principle of logical consistency in raising the worry of ‘double-counting’ when they initially conceive of good fortune as an additional good at 279c. (One cannot consistently regard a good as additional to those already listed if one also takes that good as already included or brought along by another on the list.) Clinias’ willingness to investigate whether wisdom is after all good fortune, which willingness Socrates (correctly) takes for granted, strongly suggests Clinias’ antecedent acceptance of the epistemic standard of reasoning that one consider conditions under which a claim would be false. Finally, Socrates relies on Clinias’ commitment to logical entailment when he suggests that they investigate what bearing the newly emerged belief at 280a-b (that the wise person has no need of good fortune in addition) has on what they previously agreed. The application of these norms or standards in their conversation is in this way productive of the young man arriving at awareness of his beliefs and the underlying grounds for them – arriving, that is, at epistemic self-knowledge.

## 5. Conclusion

We have seen that the sophistic eristic method is entirely destructive: it is parasitic upon Clinias' pre-existing beliefs and commitments to various epistemic norms, purely for the sake of making things appear a certain way, regardless of how things really are, and even when the appearances are false. For example, Clinias' appears to himself to directly contradict himself (over and over again), and the sophists – seemingly able to reveal his being repeatedly mistaken in what he thinks – appear to Clinias as being prodigiously wise. Socrates' elenctic method also relies heavily upon Clinias' pre-existing, previously avowed beliefs and his acceptance of epistemic norms. Unlike the sophists, however, his goal is to carefully and explicitly draw these beliefs out, and, presenting them sequentially for Clinias to reflect upon, to allow him, while deploying the relevant epistemic norms, to come to an awareness of his previously tacit beliefs, relevant to the subject of inquiry. Some of these tacit beliefs will be immediately available to his awareness – I have called these ordinary tacit beliefs – in contrast with those that require effort and reflection to identify as something he was in an important sense committed to all along – what I have called *elenctic* tacit beliefs. Insofar as it is productive of this kind of epistemic self-knowledge, Socrates' method is constructive: it allows his interlocutors to grasp at a higher-order level that they have a range of first-order beliefs they were previously unaware of holding, that are grounded by other beliefs they have excellent reason to regard as true, at the first-order level. By contrast, the sophists' destructive method is an obstacle to first-order knowledge regarding the subject of discussion and, through the confusion it induces, produces a destabilization of their interlocutors' higher-order grasp of their own beliefs on the topic in question – those the sophists question, while they question them, find that they don't know *at all* what they think, or why.

The practice of the two methods in the *Euthydemus* in turn invites the reader to discern the two disparate conceptions of wisdom and knowledge at play in the dialogue. The 'eristic wisdom' that Socrates attributes to the sophists at the start of the dialogue turns out to consist in the ability to have one's interlocutor appear to herself to contradict herself, and thereby reduce her to silence, regardless of the actual

content of the beliefs that lie behind her statements, and their truth value (an ability, as Socrates says towards the dialogue's close, to 'stitch up' people's mouths, 303e). This cleverness, therefore, is a kind of wisdom that does not require first-order knowledge of any subject beyond that of the technique and its effect on the interlocutor, which technique can be picked up quickly by anyone willing to imitate the method and emulate the sophist (as Ctesippus does, 303e-304a). In contrast, Socrates' not inconsiderable epistemic accomplishment in practicing the *elenchus*, in line with the method's characterisation in the *Sophist*, is to facilitate the interlocutor's awareness of her pre-existing beliefs and, significantly, to make plain her grounds for commitment to them. This kind of self-knowledge of her epistemic states – a certain sort of wisdom – is a positive result of the elenctic or Socratic method of cross-examination, which ought therefore to be understood as an essentially constructive method aimed at improving the interlocutor's epistemic condition.

We return, finally, to the *Sophist*, and the motif of the dog and the wolf, liable, under certain conditions, to be mistaken for one another. I have argued that the similarities between the two are, in several crucial respects, merely apparent. Nonetheless, it must be conceded that the Stranger does accept that the practitioner of *elenchus* is a kind of sophist, and therefore that there must be some significant respect in which the practitioner of *elenchus* is the same as the sophist. This respect, I want to suggest, is the appearance of the practitioner's wisdom concerning the topic or subject under investigation, which both methods induce in the questioner. For, being limited to a cross-examination of the questioner's pre-existing beliefs about the topic of discussion, the Socratic *elenchus* does not require its practitioner to possess first-order truths about that topic. All the same, and despite Socrates' continual disavowal of this sort of first-order knowledge in the early dialogues, the practitioner of *elenchus* is apt to appear wise to his interlocutors. This, we may conjecture, is perhaps why Plato has Socrates at the start of the *Sophist* wonder aloud whether the Stranger is a kind of god or divinity fond of *elenchus* (216a5-6). For, Socrates' remark turns out to exhibit a kind of prescience, since, as Plato will go on to depict him, the Stranger perceives clearly, as Socrates' interlocutors do not, both the limits and the achievements of the elenctic method.

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## Keywords

self-knowledge; sophist; *elenchus*; *Euthydemus*; tacit belief

## Abstract

In Plato's *Sophist*, the Stranger warns Theaetetus not to let the similarities between the sophist and the practitioner of the elenctic method blind him to their crucial differences, alluding to the resemblance of a wolf to a dog, «the most savage of animals to the most gentle» (231a6). All the same, Plato has the Eleatic Stranger describe the master of *elenchus* – the method for which Socrates was famous – as a sophist, albeit a sophist of noble birth (231b7-8), leading scholars to ask whether Plato in his later period regarded Socrates' method as essentially sophistic, and to that extent dubious and destructive. In this paper I argue that by looking to the illustration of the elenctic and sophistic methods in the *Euthydemus*, we can see that in several significant respects, Plato regarded the similarities as merely apparent. In particular, I argue, the elenctic method is presented as a constructive method, which facilitates the interlocutor's articulation and awareness of tacit beliefs about the subject under investigation. Some of these beliefs are tacit in the familiar sense that the interlocutor is already disposed to affirm their content. Other beliefs, however, are a special kind of tacit belief, in that although they follow immediately, or in a very small number of inferential steps from the interlocutor's pre-existing, explicitly held beliefs, they are not beliefs the interlocutor is disposed to affirm at the outset of the enquiry. The elenctic method is, therefore, able to bring the interlocutor to self-knowledge concerning their own beliefs, and the relations of entailment between them, concerning the subject of inquiry.

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