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Drawing Distinctions in the *Laches*: the *Elenchus* as search

*Jurgen Gatt**

Introduction

The Socratic Method is a dialectical method, conducted in a question-and-answer format, by which Socrates' dialectical partner is usually led to a realization of a moral or intellectual failure or both.¹ Such a model of the *elenchus* emphasizes Socrates' role as questioner. One recent scholarly trend shifts focus onto the role of the interlocutor in the dialectical partnership.² This paper falls within this tradition of scholarship on the *Elenchus*.

The following is a discussion about the role of 'drawing distinctions' in the progress and overall goal of the *Elenchus* in the *Laches*. This dialogue is marked by the prominence of the interlocutor's role in the discussion *viz.* drawing distinctions to disarm Socrates' refutations. Such dialectical skill is to be found pre-eminently in Nicias, the pupil of Damon and a frequent associate of Socrates, and Critias, the 'sophist'. The usual interpretation given to these 'episodes' of drawing distinctions is well characterized by Laches' own reaction to Nicias' dialectical 'tricks' (*La.* 196a-b). Nicias is 'shuffling' in order to avoid a deserving refutation and disguising his ignorance with empty words. This interpretation is naturally implied by an overall negative function of *elenchus* conceived solely in terms of refutation.

The aim of this essay is to challenge this interpretation. An examination of the relationship of these distinctions to the circumstances in which they arise and to the overall progression of the *elenchus* makes room

¹ G. Vlastos and M. Burnyeat (1994), 4; H.H. Benson (2011), 184.

² M. Stokes (1986); J. Beversluis (2000).

for a different reading. It is argued that the drawing of distinctions in an *elenchus* allows for more than the mere testing of an interlocutor's 'doxastic coherence'.³ Distinctions also serve a positive dimension, allowing Socrates and his partners to strengthen or amend their moral beliefs. This interpretation allows not only for a more charitable examination of these important episodes, but also for a greater appreciation of Prodicus' role in the development of the *elenchus* and of the various positive traits of the *elenchus* in these two short dialogues.

Distinctions in the *Laches*

The *Laches* is an early definitional dialogue.⁴ The moral virtue (F) to be defined is ἀνδρεία, courage. A discussion develops between Socrates and two generals, Laches and the dialectically more experienced Nicias (La.187e-188a).

The *elenchus* of the *Laches* employs distinctions of two basic types, distinctions internal to the *definiens*, and distinctions made between the proper *definiendum* and the proposed counter-examples to the definition. Distinctions of the former type are typically drawn by Socrates in an attempt to overthrow a definition which he considers 'too wide'. The purpose of such a distinction is to show that *definiens* 'contains' a subclass of actions which invalidates in some way the definition. Typically, the result of drawing such distinctions is the modification of the original definition in light of the distinction made. Socrates' *elenchus* with Laches is a series of such distinctions. The second type of distinction is external to the *definiens*. They are drawn by Nicias in an attempt to overthrow an attempted refutation. The purpose of such distinctions is to show that the counter-examples to the definition are different from the cases 'covered' by the *definiens* and are, thus, strictly speaking, not counter-examples. The interlocutor, in other words, charges his dialectical opponent of unfairly blurring a crucial difference between the proposed counter-example and the *definiendum* or, in Aristotelian terms, of equivocating

³ H.H. Benson (2011), 192.

⁴ C. J. Emlyn-Jones (1996), 10; H.H. Benson (2011), 194. A dialogue attempting to answer a 'What is F?' question; cf. G. Vlastos and M. Burnyeat (1994), 2.

on the *definiendum*. It is the use of this sort of distinction which is met with hostility in the dialogue.⁵

Distinctions are made in one of two main ways. Some, notably those occurring between types of knowledge, are *propter quid* distinctions. Subtypes of knowledge are distinguished *propter* their particular scope or sphere. The other major sort of distinction occurs by 'predication', often of contrary predicates. Such distinctions typically divide the *dividend* exhaustively into two groups, each possessing one of a pair of contrary predicates (e.g. μετὰ φρονήσεως καρτερία and μετ' ἀφροσύνης καρτερία, *La.*192c). Such binary contrasts recall Prodicus' own semantic distinctions.

The context for 'drawing distinctions' in the *elenchus* of the *Laches* is either refutation or counter-refutation. Despite this tendency, distinctions are not *merely* a function of a negative *elenchus*. A common product of drawing distinction is a clarified exposition of the definition. This is true of all types of distinctions. This central idea of clarification allows us to characterize the *elenchus* in terms other than a series of refutations related only temporally to one another. Rather, the various suggested definitions form a logical sequence. Definitions are clarifications and modifications of previous propositions on which they are dependent. This sequential examination of increasingly well-circumscribed propositions lends a *zetetic* character to the Socratic *elenchus*.

Turning to the dialogue, Laches is the first interlocutor questioned by Socrates. His first definition (τις ἐθέλοι ἐν τῇ τάξει μένων... καὶ μὴ φεύγει *La.*190e), though largely philosophically uninteresting in itself, plays an important role in the Socratic *elenchus*.⁶ Despite differences between commentator's views about the exact nature of Laches' reply, it is agreed that Laches' definition is rejected by Socrates because it is too 'narrow'.⁷ Despite its inappropriateness as a definition, the narrowness of Laches'

⁵ Cf. *Chrm.*162dff.

⁶ Cf. *Euthphr.*5d8ff; *R.* 1.331e1ff; *Hp.Ma.* 297c1ff.

⁷ R. Foley (2009), 216; G. Santas (1969), 440; G. Vlastos (1981), 411. The definition violates 'the principle of co-extensivity for *definiens* and *definiendum*'; cf. Ch.H. Kahn (1996), 172.

definition makes it immune to the sort of distinctions which Socrates draws to criticize subsequent definitions. Rather, Socrates' rejection of Laches' first definition is based on a widening of Laches' horizons by citing actions which Laches identifies as courageous (i.e. part of the *definiendum*), but which his *definiens* does not include.⁸ Faced with this discrepancy between the ranges of the *definiendum* and the *definiens*, Laches attempts to restrict the *definiendum* to hoplite courage alone. Implicit in Laches' reluctance to accept Socrates' broadening is an 'anti-unitarian' view of courage, a belief that 'parts' of courage (e.g. hoplite courage) may be adequately defined in isolation of a general account. Socrates rejects this approach, reinforcing a 'univocal' account⁹ of the whole of courage by producing a model definition¹⁰ (*La.192a*) to which Laches must conform (πειρῶ εἰπεῖν...τί ἐν πᾶσι τούτοις ταύτόν ἐστιν; *La.191e*).¹¹

The belief that the whole of courage can be adequately defined by one single *logos* has an important consequence for the drawing of distinctions. It effectively prohibits interlocutors defining F *elenchus* from drawing distinctions within the relevant class of F-actions. In the *Laches*, by setting up the whole of courage as the *definiendum*, Socrates has prevented definitions of courage which rely on or use distinctions between 'subtypes' of courage. Any distinction accepted by Socrates must respect the unity of the *definiendum*. Definitions based on such distinctions shall be rejected as 'formally inappropriate' and criticized for being 'too narrow' (providing only a sufficient condition for F). Consequently, Laches' first definition is rejected because it uses an illicit distinction internal to the *definiendum*.

⁸ Alternatively, Socrates has shown that Laches' definition is not a necessary condition of courage. Its final refutation rests on a demonstration that it is neither a sufficient condition (*La.191c*).

⁹ R. Robinson (1942), 110; M.C. Stokes (1986), 86.

¹⁰ G. Rudebusch (2009), 80.

¹¹ Socrates insists that Laches has misunderstood the question and provided a fundamentally incorrect response. J. Beversluis (2000), 119, is critical of Socrates answers which he, correctly, considers insufficient.

In contrast to his first definition, Laches' second attempt at defining courage is at once more formally appropriate and vague. The very wording, καρτερία τις τῆς ψυχῆς (*La.192b*), betrays this vagueness. Socrates could demand clarification and ask Laches, as he later asks Nicias (*La.194e*), ποία καρτερία? Instead, Socrates resorts to drawing a distinction within the *definiens* himself (*La.192c-d*), between μετὰ φρονήσεως καρτερία and μετ' ἀφροσύνης καρτερία. This distinction drawn is one of binary contrast, a fact evident by the μέ/v/δέconstruction and the use of the privative ἀφροσύνης.¹² Furthermore, the distinction is dialectically sufficient to undermine the definition when added to another premise, the F-condition¹³ or a property which F necessarily possesses. In *Laches*, both Socrates and his interlocutor are committed to the view that courage is necessarily καλή κάγαθή (*La.193a*). All Socrates needs to do is to draw out an admission that the subset μετ' ἀφροσύνης καρτερία, which is included in the definition, does not possess this F-condition, thereby showing that there is no synonymy between ἀνδρεία and καρτερία *simpliciter*.¹⁴

The fact that Socrates seeks to establish the falsehood of this synonymy is apparent at *La.192c* (οὔτι πᾶσα... καρτερία ἀνδρεία σοι φαίνεται). Further, as required by the argument, he establishes that a subset of 'endurance' does not possess the necessary F-condition at *La.192d*. Yet Socrates goes beyond the cited conclusions and 'establishes' that, according to Laches' *logos*, ἡ φρόνιμος καρτερία ἀνδρεία ἀνεΐη. The reason Socrates attributes for this conclusion is the fact that instances of 'enduring wisely' are 'noble and good' and thus, like courage, possess the F-condition.

¹² The use of the privative suggests an appeal to logical contraries and thus to an exhaustive division. However, the distinction need not be exhaustive for Socrates' purposes.

¹³ D. Wolfsdorf (2003), 271ff.

¹⁴ Socrates thus shows that the sets of instances 'covered' by courage and by endurance are not identical. Another possible argument runs thus: a) (Universal) COURAGE = ENDURANCE (Assumption) b) (Universal) If COURAGE, then NOBLE. (i.e. NOT-(COURAGE and NOT-NOBLE)) c) (Particular) Some ENDURANCE and NOT-NOBLE d) Therefore, NOT-(COURAGE = ENDURANCE).

The argument, as reproduced by Stokes¹⁵ and Beversluis,¹⁶ is clearly fallacious. One might question Plato's discriminatory powers if, in possession both of the motivation and the necessary premises for a valid argument, chooses to put in the mouth of Socrates a patently fallacious one. A number of possible explanations suggest themselves. Firstly, it is possible that Plato was not fully aware of the fallacy which Socrates commits in the present passage.¹⁷ Alternatively, Plato arms Socrates with a fallacious argument to convince his interlocutor *ad hominem* of his ignorance.¹⁸ Both explanations are possible, though unappealing. The analytic tool of 'drawing distinctions' provides a third, more charitable, alternative. Socrates, faced with a demonstrably false definition of courage, modifies it by narrowing the *definiens* in such a way as to remove from the definition a subset of actions, identified by the aforementioned distinction, which is clearly not equivalent to the *definiendum* through lack of the F-condition. More particularly, Socrates invokes a binary distinction between μετὰ φρονήσεως καρτερία and μετ' ἀφροσύνης καρτερία, and immediately excludes the latter from the *definiens*. In so doing, Socrates has 'persuaded him (Laches) to accept a narrowing of his original thesis'.¹⁹

The distinction drawn thus serves several dialectical purposes. Firstly, the distinction is the first step in the refutation of Laches' simple synonymy of courage and endurance. Secondly, by removing a subset of the *definiens* from the definition, it suggests its 'contrary' as an alternative. Thirdly, this movement from one *definiens* to another has imbued the *elenchus* with a forward motion. The distinction drawn explains more clearly the relation between subsequent proposed definitions. Finally, the distinction also provides the *elenchus* with a positive dimension. Laches' proposed definition (καρτερία τις) is not summarily rejected, but modified and rendered more plausible. Socrates thus shows that

¹⁵ M.C. Stokes (1986), 79.

¹⁶ J. Beversluis (2000), 119.

¹⁷ W. Lutoslawski (1987), 203; R. Robinson (1941), 98.

¹⁸ J. Beversluis (2000), 199.

¹⁹ M.C. Stokes (1986), 80.

if καρτερία is to be retained in the definition of courage, it is in need of a qualifying distinction, one which Socrates provides at *La.192d*. The *elenchus* has been propelled forward in the hope of finding a narrower subset of καρτερία which is co-extensive with the set of all courageous actions.

As Beversluis points out,²⁰ the line of questioning which Socrates turns to now is hardly surprising. Socrates now demands a *propter quid* distinction with respect to φρόνιμος (ἴδωμεν ἢ εἰς τί φρόνιμος; *La.192e*) ‘to remedy the vagueness of Laches’ definition’. He does this by showing that φρόνιμος καρτερία *simpliciter* (εἰς ἅπαντα) is again not co-extensive with courage. Actions which possess φρόνιμος καρτερία, namely, the wise endurance of professionals (doctors *qua* doctors; *La.192e*) are not instances of courage. Thus, by an internal *propter quid* distinction within the set of actions defined by φρόνιμος καρτερία (the *definiens*), the definition is again shown to be ‘too wide’. The distinction²¹ in the *definiens* establishes that φρόνιμος καρτερία is not a necessary condition for courage. However, rather than press the point and clarify the sort of knowledge which is a necessary condition for courage, Socrates now turns to refute the definition by showing that φρόνιμος καρτερία is neither a sufficient condition. He does this by showing that in warfare, horsemanship, archery, diving in wells, foolish endurance seems to be more courageous than wise endurance.

This refutation is thought²² to rely on Laches’ inability to draw the necessary distinction between the types of knowledge, a distinction

²⁰ J. Beversluis (2000), 121.

²¹ There is some disagreement as to the exact nature of the distinction made. G. Vlastos and M. Burnyeat (1994), 111-113, taking his cue from καὶ τὰ μεγάλα καὶ τὰ μικρά, argues for a distinction made between specialized technical knowledge (τὰ μικρά) and moral knowledge (τὰ μεγάλα), a distinction which will again re-appear in Nicias’ examination. G. Santas (1969), 446, argues for a distinction between knowledge-of-fact and knowledge-of-value. M.C. Stokes (1986), 82, relates the distinction in Socrates’ investigation of the ‘technical experts’ in *Apology* (*Ap.* 21b-22e) who are shown not to possess ‘knowledge of the most important things.’ Whatever its exact nature, the *propter quid* distinction between two kinds of knowledge is also important in the attempted refutation of Laches’ definition which follows (*La.193a-c*).

²² G. Vlastos and M. Burnyeat (1994), 115; G. Santas (1969), 448.

which would counter Socrates' refutation. Socrates' argumentative success is relative to Laches' inability to draw this contrast and thus relies on an undetected fallacy of equivocation. Socrates is treating 'wise endurance' as a form of technical expertise. The argument would thus be eristic (Arist., *S.E.*170a). However, another reading is possible.²³ Socrates, lacking the necessary linguistic tools to distinguish between cleverness (δεινότης) and moral-knowledge (ἠθικὴ σοφία), must remain content with pointing out apparent counter-examples in the hope of approaching more closely the *logos* of courage. Socrates' eristic refutation calls out for a distinction which Laches is unable to make, but which Nicias will approach more closely. Laches' is ultimately refuted by his inability to draw this necessary distinction, an inability which 'betray(s) that he really did not understand the import of 'wise' in 'wise endurance'.²⁴

Socrates now turns to ask Nicias for assistance. The subsequent *elenchus* of Nicias' definition, σοφίαν τινα τὴν ἀνδρείαν (*La.*194d), also turns upon a distinction between two subsets of knowledge. Laches, unable to discern the meaning of Nicias' identification of courage and wisdom (*La.*194d) and armed with his first lesson²⁵ in Socratic *elenchus*, asks ποίαν σοφίαν; More pointedly, Socrates again suggests that some spheres of technical wisdom can be summarily discounted as examples of F-actions – flute-playing and harp-playing – and, thus, that wisdom *simpliciter* is surely not synonymous with courage since it is not a necessary condition. The 'internal' *propter quid* distinction that Laches and Socrates are demanding, formally indicated by the genitive τίνος, represents the proper 'sphere' of the wisdom which Nicias is identifying as courage. Nicias identifies this sphere by saying (*La.*195a) τὴν τῶν δεινῶν καὶ θαρραλέων ἐπιστήμην.

Laches is unimpressed and uses the Socratic 'craft-analogy'²⁶ to criticize Nicias' distinction as a non-distinction, since *all* knowledge and, in particular, *all* technical knowledge may be characterized as τὴν τῶν

²³ G. Vlastos and M. Burnyeat (1994), 112.

²⁴ G. Vlastos and M. Burnyeat (1994), 114.

²⁵ G. Rudebusch (2009), 82.

²⁶ A. M. Michelini (2000), 66.

δεινῶν καὶ θαρραλέων ἐπιστήμην with regards to its own ‘sphere’ (καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι δημιουργοὶ ἅπαντες τὰ ἐν ταῖς αὐτῶν τέχναις δεινά τε καὶ θαρραλέα ἴσασιν: ἀλλ’ οὐδέν τι μᾶλλον οὔτοι ἀνδρεῖοί εἰσιν; 195b-c). Laches’ thus introduces another basic rule for distinctions – any distinction made must actually divide the *dividend* in two in order to be considered effective.²⁷ Further, in reference to a ‘definitional *elenchus*’, any effective division in a *definiens* must lead to a definition which F ‘covers’ a narrower class of actions than originally proposed. It is on these implicit grounds that Laches challenges Nicias’ distinction.

In response, Nicias contends that *qua* professionals, doctors, only know whether a patient will recover or not, but are ignorant as to which is better for the patient. It is this latter species of knowledge alone which constitutes τὴν τῶν δεινῶν καὶ θαρραλέων ἐπιστήμην, a sphere of knowledge distinct from medicine, farming or any craft-knowledge. In other words, ‘courage is not just knowledge (or wisdom), but knowledge of a unique kind: knowledge of what is truly to be feared and not feared’.²⁸ Nicias has, with the aid of the *elenchus*, come closer to drawing the fundamental distinction between normative and non-normative knowledge which troubled Laches’ own definition of courage and led to its refutation.²⁹ Nicias’ response also represents a fundamentally different type of dialectical move. Rather than altering the *definiens* to meet Laches’ criticism, Nicias attempts to disarm the counter-instances. Nicias draws a relevant distinction between *real* instances of courage as he has defined it (the *proper definiendum*), and the counter-examples which Laches’ has *incorrectly* identified as courage (mere instances of craft-knowledge). Nicias thus identifies more precisely the *proper definiendum* and excludes Laches’ counter-examples from it, thereby rendering them ineffective *qua* counter-examples. In this case,

²⁷ The distinctions drawn in the *Laches* are often or easily treated as binary and exhaustive. Neither is logically necessary for effective distinction.

²⁸ J. Beversluis (2000), 128.

²⁹ G. Rudebusch (2009), 82; M. Santas (1969), 450.

Nicias points to a difference in their respective 'sphere of knowledge'³⁰ – he defines courage as a species of normative wisdom. The proposed counter-examples, specific *technai* such as medicine or farming, are part of a species of knowledge altogether different from courage, and are thus irrelevant to the definition at hand.

It is notable that the circumstances which have led to Nicias' distinction in the *definiendum* (external to the *definiens*) are similar to the circumstances which led Socrates to draw distinctions internal to the *definiens* following Laches' second definition. Namely, both definitions are charged as being 'too wide' *i.e.*, to include under their remit instances of the *definiens* which are not instances of the *definiendum*. Yet, both the method of 'counter-refutation' and the results of the two types of distinctions are different. Laches, accepting the counter-instances as valid, qualifies his definition to exclude the counter-instances and thus narrows his definition from endurance to specific subtype of endurance. Nicias, on the other hand, dismisses the counter-examples as irrelevant, and thus need not alter the definition. Rather, the definition is rendered narrower because a subset of instances has been explicitly excluded from the *definiendum*. In this case, 'technical knowledge' of professionals has been excluded from the ἐπιστήμη which constitutes courage which is established as the proper *definiendum*.

Nicias uses this same mode of distinction in the following *elenchus* conducted by Socrates who draws the following logical conclusion entailed by Nicias' definition of courage as a species of knowledge. Nicias must either attribute to courageous animals a species of wisdom rare for men to possess, or he must deny these animals, commonly thought of as courageous, 'the honour of this virtue' (*La.*197a). Nicias' response is once again to draw a distinction between the counter-examples and the proper *definiendum*.

³⁰ Commentators who view Nicias' distinction as successfully differentiating between craft-knowledge and moral knowledge would argue that Nicias has here distinguished between the *type* of knowledge, not merely the sphere.

He opts for the latter prong of the dilemma and immediately draws the ‘sensible’³¹ distinction (τὸ ἄφοβον καὶ τὸ ἀνδρείον οὐ ταῦτόν ἐστιν; *La.* 197b) differentiating courage, still defined as τὴν τῶν δεινῶν καὶ θαρραλέων ἐπιστήμην, from irrational fearlessness which animals and children possess. Nicias’ definition thus still stands because animals are not *really*³² courageous but fearless (ἄφοβον). Unwise mock-courageous animals are not part of the *definiendum*, and thus do not constitute proper counter-examples to his definition.

Nicias’ present distinction disarms a different sort of refutation. His definition has been charged of either leading to a counter-intuitive attribution of wisdom to animals, or of being too *narrow*, *i.e.*, animals generally considered to be courageous are not ‘covered’ by his *definiens* of courage. His response, however, establishes that the counter-examples fail to show that the definition is too narrow, since ‘fearless’ animals do not represent genuine instances of courage, are not part of the proper *definiendum* and thus are not valid counter-examples. Nicias’ *definiens* need not ‘widen’ to admit them into his definition.

There is also evidence which suggests that the distinction between ‘courage’ and ‘fearlessness’ does not ‘merely’ disarm a Socratic refutation, but contributes to a more correct definition of courage. R. Foley,³³ noting the similarity between Nicias’ definition of courage and Socrates’ own (*R.* 4.429c-430b) interprets this would-be refutation (197a) as an attempt “to make ‘Nicias see for himself’” the necessity of this distinction. Furthermore, Glaucon’s resort to a similar distinction in response to Socrates’ definition of courage (*R.* 4.430b6-c1) supports Foley’s claim. Nicias, having drawn an important distinction, has saved himself from refutation, but more importantly has allowed the *elenchus* to progress forward toward the scrutiny of a more defensible definition of courage,

³¹ A. Tessitore (1994), 121.

³² Nicias’ present distinction explicitly (179d) departs from common parlance (*R.* Foley {2009}, 223). This departure from the common modes of expression to one more precise also features in other early works of Plato; cf. *R.* 1.340dff. This tendency has much common ground with the Sophistic program of linguistic reform and with Socrates’ disdain of resorting to opinions of οἱ πολλοί.

³³ R. Foley (2009), 224.

one which has come to terms with one of its logical conclusion which Socrates has mapped out.

Laches' and Socrates' reactions to Nicias' distinctions are noteworthy. Laches' assessment is straightforward; Nicias is trying to conceal the fact that he has contradicted himself (ἐπικρυπτόμενος τὴν αὐτοῦ ἀπορίαν) by over-subtle evasions (στρέφεται ἄνω καὶ κάτω) and by empty words (κενοῖς λόγοις).³⁴ Implicit in this assessment is the natural hostility of a practical man who has no patience with men whom he sees as engaged in mere word-play which has no bearing on their actions. Though this reaction bears some similarity to the ironic comments passed by Socrates in other dialogues (e.g., *Chrm.* 163d), Socrates never charges Nicias of quibbling. Socrates never directly questions Nicias' distinctions, and the ultimate refutation of Nicias' definition does not turn on them. Furthermore, Socrates knows well what the origin of these distinctions is, the Sophist Damon, to whom he has introduced Nicias, and ultimately Prodicus, ὃς δὴ δοκεῖ τῶν σοφιστῶν κάλλιστα τὰ τοιαῦτα ὀνόματα διαιρεῖν. Yet, Socrates' partial reservation to Prodicus' *diaeresis* is evident at the end of the dialogue. While the refuted Nicias is convinced that any deficiency in his argument can be adequately made up by Damon's skill, presumably by drawing further verbal distinctions, Socrates remains convinced of his own intrinsic ignorance.

In summary, distinctions in *Laches* arise in the context of refutation with which the definition must come to terms. This is accomplished by a narrowing of the *definiens* or by a clearer elucidation of the 'proper' *definiendum*. This immediate aim, however, influences the overall direction of the *elenchus*. Definitions are not merely refuted, but amended and clarified. This sequential clarification lights upon fundamental propositions which must be accounted for in any satisfactory definition

³⁴ Laches 'sarcastically' (G. Santas {1969}, 450) concludes that Nicias' definition ascribes courage only to seers or gods (*La.* 196a). Such purposeful misunderstanding of a proposed definition is a technique used by Socrates in his *elenchus* (see below). A. M. Micheleni (2000), 67) further notes that Socrates replicates this exact 'misunderstanding' in response to Critias' definition to temperance in *Chrm.* 173c-e. Such purposeful 'provocation' lends forward movement of the *elenchus* by forcing Nicias to draw a further distinction between technical knowledge and normative knowledge which constitutes courage (G. Rudebusch {2009}, 83).

of F. Furthermore, an important aim of the investigation is the discovery of a stronger candidate for a true definition of F. It is this process which underlines the *zetetic* nature of distinctions.

Discussion

A. The ‘Refutation Model’ of Distinctions

It is generally agreed that the central function of the elenchus is refutation.³⁵ This fact is even implied in the etymology of its ‘name’.³⁶ Despite this general consensus, there is a protracted scholarly debate about the nature of Socratic refutation. Positions can be divided into two. Constructivist commentators (Vlastos, Brickhouse and Smith) propose that *elenchus* aims to show that a *refutand* (P) is false. Non-constructivists (Robinson, Stokes, Benson), on the other hand, have argued that the *elenchus* is unable to determine any particularly proposition to be false.³⁷ Nor is Socrates to be burdened with the belief that he had done so. All the *elenchus* can show is that a conjunction of the apparent *refutand* (P) and the further premises Socrates elicits from the interlocutor (Q, R, S) is false. In other words, all that the *elenchus* can show is inconsistency of a premise set contemporaneously believed in by the interlocutor. The realization of this inconsistency results in the experience of *aporia*.

On this reading, the *elenchus* is also believed to be a thoroughly ‘personal affair’.³⁸ Firstly, the ‘say what you believe’ requirement is the only requirement for a premise to be included in the *elenchus*. It is both

³⁵ H. Tarrant (2006), 256; R. Robinson (1941), 28.

³⁶ G. Vlastos and M. Burnyeat (1994), 4, argue that ἐλέγχειν ‘suggests’ but ‘does not entail’ an adversary procedure. Tarrant (2002), 63, sees this as a rather cavalier solution. Less contentiously, G. Vlastos and M. Burnyeat (1994), 4, argue that *elenchus* is not a unique term by which Plato characterizes Socratic ‘method’.

³⁷ H.H. Benson (2011), 186ff.

³⁸ R. Robinson (1941), 15ff.

a necessary and a sufficient condition.³⁹ It is also argued that some episodes of the dialogues adequately prove the *ad hominem* nature of the *elenchus*. In *Laches*,⁴⁰ Nicias warns Laches that a conversation with Socrates always turns into a discussion about one's own life (*La.* 187e-188a). The dependence of the *elenchus*' success on the testimony of the interlocutor alone (*Grg.*472b-c) is also taken as an admission for the *ad hominem* nature of the *elenchus*.⁴¹ Tarrant⁴² has also argued, after a survey of verbs used to describe Socrates' method, that the direct object of a refutation is almost never an isolated proposition but a person.

Strong evidence for the non-constructivist position is to be found in *Apology*, where Socrates admits that his aim is to expose the conceit of wisdom of reputedly wise people and to re-orient their priorities toward their soul's well-being. Socrates' primary goal is thus *moral*, and not intellectual improvement.⁴³ On this reading, the *elenchus* is an *ad hominem* examination of the 'doxastic coherence' of a particular interlocutor. As has been discussed, distinctions bear a close relation to attempted refutation, and a discussion of the possible use of the drawing of distinctions in examining 'doxastic coherence' leads to a 'Refutation Model' of drawing distinctions.

Methodologically, refutations can be a product of Socrates' drawing distinctions. Thus, in the *Laches*, a model argument based on distinction, a definition is criticized because a distinct subset of the class of actions delineated by the *definiens* does not possess an F-condition for the *definiendum*. The argument, rendered somewhat more abstractly, is as follows:

1. F = G (Definition)
2. ALL F possess F1-condition.
3. G consists of G1 and Gnot1 (Distinction, commonly by the appeal to contrary

³⁹ H.H. Benson (2011) 187.

⁴⁰ J. Beversluis (2000), 116.

⁴¹ R. Robinson (1941), 15ff.

⁴² H. Tarrant (2002), 63ff.

⁴³ R. Robinson (1941), 14.

properties) 4. Gnot1 does not possess F1condition 5. Then, Not ALL G possess F1condition 6. Then $F = G$ is incoherent with 2/3/4.

Yet, the most notable distinctions are not used in this way, but as a method of countering a Socratic refutation (true of *definiendum* and *counter-epagogical* distinctions). As has been argued, one prerequisite for a distinction to be accepted as effective is the *actual* division of a set into two subsets. Further, in a definitional *elenchus*, this distinction is followed by the exclusion of one subset from the set of 'proper *definiendum*'. Thus Nicias' distinction between courage and fearlessness leads to the exclusion of the latter, as does Critias' distinction between 'doings' and 'makings' in *Charmides*. One immediate consequence of these distinctions is a narrowing of the concept under examination. This entails that courage is defined in relation to fewer instances.

Distinctions, whether purposefully invoked in Socrates' arguments (as Tuozzo and Foley argue), or a product of refutation and counter-refutation, have the role of rendering definitions more precise. This occurs firstly because the serially modified *definiens* refers to an increasingly narrow subset of terms contained by an original equivalence claim⁴⁴ and, secondly, because distinctions often have the role of disarming possible counter-instances and coming to terms with the logical conclusions of the definition under examination. Thus, the progress of the *elenchus* and, in particular, the drawing of distinctions play a role in the explication of an original proposed definition.

The relationship of such distinctions to a negative *elenchus* is varied. Firstly, it is possible that such distinctions are drawn *merely* as a sophistic attempt to escape the demonstration of 'doxastic incoherence'. Laches thus accuses Nicias in resorting to distinctions for precisely this reason. If so, a survey of Socratic dialogues reveals that such methods are inevitably unsuccessful in the course of a whole *elenchus*. Indeed, it can be argued that distinctions ultimately assist Socrates in the eventual refutation of the original thesis and its modifications. As in the dialogue discussed, in *Charmides* it is Critias' distinctions which embroil him in taking a position

⁴⁴ E.g., Courage = Endurance --> Courage = Wise Endurance --> Courage = Wise-propter-morality Endurance.

which he does not successfully defend. The distinctions also assist Socrates' understanding of the interlocutors' position sufficiently to be able to refute it better. Thus, Critias' distinction between 'doings' and 'makings' leads Socrates to understand the thesis (*Chrm.* 163d) and then refute it (*Chrm.* 164a-d).

More generally, an unambiguous position, the result of drawing distinction, is harder to defend than an ambiguous one since the latter can be defended by equivocating on the terms used or altering one's interpretation of the definition. Furthermore, an ambiguous position requires Socrates to examine all the possible interpretations of the definition and refute them serially.⁴⁵ In other words, a more exact position is more susceptible to 'unambiguous' Socratic refutation. Thus, methodologically, distinctions, forced upon or elicited from interlocutors, ultimately allow Socrates to clearly demonstrate 'doxastic incoherence' and thus to refute the conjunction of premises as inconsistent.

The role of the disambiguation of propositions in refutation also has bearing on the *ad hominem* model of the *elenchus* as a refutation of knowledge-claims. Firstly, it must be noted that the relationship between wise men and ambiguous propositions is a complex one. Wise men can promulgate ambiguous propositions as 'riddles' (*Chrm.* 162a-b), as can the Delphic god.⁴⁶ Clarity of expression was thus not considered a necessary condition for wisdom. Yet, as is clear in the *Charmides* (*Chrm.* 162eff.), a wise man must be able to defend his 'riddle' against Socratic 'misinterpretations' and, in so doing, re-interpret and disambiguate the proposition in order to defend it. It is this disambiguated form which must stand up to a Socratic *elenchus*' test of the author's 'doxastic coherence'. Thus, it is 'doxastic coherence' of the disambiguated beliefs of an interlocutor which is the real necessary condition for wisdom.

⁴⁵ M.C. Stokes (1986), 78. Socrates' method of 'misunderstanding' or 'provocation' is related to this 'riddling' quality of definitions. Socrates interprets such definitions in ways which force the interlocutor to take a more definite (*saphesteron*) position.

⁴⁶ M. McPherran (2002), 114ff., views Socrates' reaction to Apollo's riddle as a model *elenchus*. Such an *elenchus* is simultaneously an attempt to refute and understand the god's mysterious pronouncement. Indeed, it is Socrates' inability to refute Apollo's riddle which ultimately cracks the riddle.

In conclusion, the ‘Refutation Model’ of distinctions holds that Socrates can himself use distinctions to refute definitions or elicit distinctions from interlocutors in an attempt to discover ‘doxastic incoherence’ by a disambiguation of beliefs.

Criticism of the Refutation Model

The minimal view for the use of distinctions in the *Laches* and *Charmides* can cite sufficient textual evidence to demonstrate that distinctions are indeed used in and intrinsically related to refutation and counter-refutation. Yet it ultimately fails to convince because distinctions in these dialogues accomplish more than just this.

Firstly, as has been argued, distinctions offer a way of better understanding the progress of *elenchus* from one definition to the next. It often happens, as Benson acknowledges,⁴⁷ that definitions are not entirely refuted by one *elenchus* and survive in a modified form. Furthermore, key distinctions introduced may survive beyond one *elenchus*, as does the distinction between *techne* and moral-knowledge in the *Laches*. This progress may be read not merely in terms of disambiguation in an attempted refutation, but also as a more profound investigation of a proposed truth-claim.

Secondly, the *Laches* is importantly ‘proleptic’⁴⁸ – it anticipates, in important ways, themes that emerge in the Middle dialogues (see above). Critias’ definition of temperance as ‘doing one’s own things’ is one other such example. Distinctions, such as the distinction between ‘technical’ and moral knowledge are fundamental to this conceptual elucidation. Furthermore, the dialogue, despite ending *aporetically* is also importantly positive. Several commentators have remarked that *Laches* and *Nicias* come within a short distance of a definition of courage which sounds eminently defensible.⁴⁹ The *Laches* (as does *Charmides*) also ends

⁴⁷ H.H. Benson (2011), 184; G. Santas (1969), 439.

⁴⁸ Ch.H. Kahn (1981), 311.

⁴⁹ A.M. Michelini (2000), 72.

with the consideration that a central theme of morality is a specialized knowledge of good and evil.⁵⁰

Thus, a minimalistic view of distinctions as a function of an *elenchus* which aims only at refutation leaves several issues unexplained. The shortcomings come from an essentially negative view of the role of *elenchus*. The *elenchus* is not a method of discovery, but merely a method of testing of belief. Thus, non-constructivist commentators are forced to admit that Socrates' positive beliefs are derived from a different source.⁵¹ Even the Socratic pre-occupation with 'What is F?' questions is explained as a mere instrument⁵² which draws an interlocutor into refutation. The non-constructivist position frees Socrates from a logical blunder of mistaking inconsistency with falsity, but burdens him with a greater ill, an inflexible dogmatism achieved by some mysterious method of which little trace is left by which he has gained insight of a premise set which the *elenchus* can do little to elucidate or alter in any significant way.

The method and results of drawing distinctions allow one to focus on the positive *zetetic* nature of the *elenchus* as a search either for 'unambiguous doxastic coherence' (weak *zetetic* model), or truth (strong *zetetic* model).

The *Zetetic* Model

The progress of the *elenchus* of the *Laches* disambiguates propositions. The drawing of distinctions, either by Socrates or in response to Socrates' refutation, is one central method of disambiguation. While the minimalist model regards this process as part of the overall negative aim of the *elenchus* as a test and refutation of 'doxastic coherence', and thus the 'knowledge-claims' of an interlocutor, the *zetetic* model, attempting to explain the positive features alluded to, interprets the drawing of distinctions as a method used by Socrates as part of a search.

⁵⁰ *Chrm.* 174c; *La.* 199cff.

⁵¹ H.H. Benson (2002), 107ff. This does not hold true of all non-constructivist positions.

⁵² H.H. Benson (2011), 195.

The positive aspects of drawing distinctions are manifold. Firstly, the narrowing of a proposed equivalence claim by drawing distinctions is an attempt to find the elusive co-extensivity of *definiens* and *definiendum*. Thus, by amending definitions through distinctions in the *definiens* or rejecting counter-examples to a definition by the identification of the proper *definiendum*, the interlocutor lights upon a more defensible position to hold. Secondly, distinctions often result in a transition from vague equivalence claims to clarified expositions. Coming to terms with the logical conclusions of one's previous statements is an important element of this verbal and conceptual 'clarification'. Thirdly, distinctions themselves often light upon important considerations for morality, such as the distinction between 'techné' and 'moral wisdom' and the association of 'temperance' and 'nobility'. These distinctions are themselves part of the positive aspect of the *elenchus* – any correct *logos* of a particular virtue must take these distinctions into consideration. Lastly, as argued by Ch. H. Kahn (see above), the drawing of distinctions forms part of an overall project which reflects critically on the heritage of Socrates and his distinctive argumentative techniques such as *epagoge* or the *techné*-analogy.

Two candidates immediately present themselves as objects of the *elenchus* as ζήτησις. The weaker version also views the *elenchus* as a test of 'unambiguous doxastic coherence', the highest goal of ἀνθρωπίνη σοφία. It is this test which Socratic interlocutors repeatedly fail. In addition, however, the weak *zetetic* model argues that the positive aspects of the *elenchus* also assist in achieving this worthwhile goal. Thus, the identification of key components of correct definitions (e.g., καρτερία; knowledge of good and evil), the awareness and tackling of the logical conclusions of one's views, the criticism of 'pre-philosophical' conceptions of virtue and the positive aspects of the distinctions themselves, form a road map on the way toward such a goal.

The ultimate aim of engaging in *elenchus* thus is to test and develop a coherent and mutually consistent set of propositions which one can defend in an *elenchus*. 'Unambiguous doxastic coherence' is the true Dorian mode (*La.* 188d), a self-knowledge which comes not by the comfortable unquestioned co-existence of vague and mutable beliefs,

but by the demonstration of a thorough ‘doxastic coherence’ of clear and cogent propositions.

An even stronger version of the model would claim that the *elenchus* is not merely a truth-searching, but truth-finding activity. Firstly, this is true materially – a disambiguated and narrower equivalence claim, which discovers co-extensivity of *definiens* and *definiendum*, lights upon a fundamental prerequisite for the true *logos* of a virtue. Secondly, the defence of one’s views against repeated attempted refutations, the coming-to-terms with the logical conclusions and the rejection of patently false interpretations of one’s definitions, and the disambiguation of one’s beliefs go a long way to *justifying* one’s true beliefs. Thus, the *elenchus*, under the strong *zetetic* model, is a method for Socrates and his interlocutors to light upon a strong candidate for true belief and, simultaneously, a method of justifying it.

These models take some aspects of the textual analysis of the dialogues to their logical conclusions. Just as one *elenchus* has led to the establishment of positive results and to the elucidation of the interlocutors’ views, repeated *elenchi* may be expected to drive toward the confirmation of such positive ‘doctrines’ and to an elucidation of more of the interlocutors’ (and Socrates’) views, revealing their flaws, their interconnectedness and the principles underlying them. Though it is by no means necessary that such results would follow, such a model equips Socrates’ educational program with a convincing positive dimension, one that will be considerably strengthened in later dialogues such as *Gorgias* and *Meno*.

Socratic Ignorance and Distinctions

One criticism the strong model must face is that it seems to make short work of Socratic ignorance. This criticism is especially cogent in view of *Laches*’ scepticism of the truth-finding potential of drawing Prodicus’ distinctions. Furthermore, in the *Charmides*, the ability to draw distinctions belongs to a ‘great man’ who does not merely use distinctions in refutations and counter-refutations, but can discriminate between kinds of *things* and thus establish with certainty the existence and nature

of objects. Socrates, we might suppose, was skeptical of the possibility of any man possessing such a godly ability.

This, then, is the reason for the life-long duration of the ζήτησις which Socrates pursued *via* the *elenchus*. The *elenchus*, armed with drawing distinctions, is a tireless process of testing and justifying one's own views and an endless *rapprochement* towards the strongest humanly available candidate for moral truth, 'unambiguous doxastic coherence'.

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