

Dissertation Abstract, *Socratic Method and Moral Motivation*

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I argue for a new account of the role of philosophical argument in changing a person's core values within the context of Plato's dialogues. As philosophers, we tend to think it is possible to cause someone to change her values by reasoning with her. But that is often naïve, as can be seen by the trajectory of many political disputes: one side takes an argument to be persuasive, and the other refuses to accept it. As it happens, this is the exact progression of many Platonic dialogues. Socrates argues that his interlocutor's core values are mistaken, and his interlocutor remains unmoved. This pattern has led many scholars—including Martha Nussbaum, Gregory Vlastos, and Alexander Nehamas—to endorse two broad claims: that Plato thinks philosophical argument incapable of reforming a person's life; and that Plato rejects Socrates' project, as outlined in the *Apology*, of using argument to persuade his interlocutors to value wisdom more than money, honor, and everything else. These are distressing upshots for those who want to believe in the power of argument, for, perhaps of all philosophers, Plato is concerned the most with how philosophy can be useful in the public sphere.

Against this standard view, I argue that Plato offers a compelling account of how argument can be effective at transforming a person's values. I focus on his depiction of Socrates' methods of refutation and exhortation. As has not been appreciated by other scholars, Socrates uses these methods not to advocate wisdom's overriding importance, but rather to motivate pursuing wisdom merely for its instrumental value. In cases of refutation, Socrates shows that his interlocutors fail at their role-based epistemic duties (e.g., *qua* teacher of virtue, one must know what virtue is), thus damaging their reputation and self-esteem; to repair these, they must do philosophy. In cases of exhortation, Socrates motivates his interlocutors to do philosophy just for the sake of succeeding at some non-philosophical goal (e.g., acquiring rhetorical expertise). These tactics are surprising, however, for Socrates does not want his interlocutors to value wisdom merely as a temporary resource; he wants them to dedicate their lives to it. What explains his argumentative restraint?

There are two answers, I argue. One is a point of Platonic moral psychology: due to the influence of ruling desires—which I show to be desires for objects *qua* constitutive of happiness—any more ambitious strategy will arouse motivated reasoning, and is thus likely to fail. The interlocutor's "bodyguard beliefs" (cf. *Republic* 8.560b-e) will protect his ruling desire from rational opposition. The other is an empirical observation: often pursuing something only as a means can lead to valuing it as an end. Socrates' strategy, then, is to incentivize pursuing wisdom initially only as a means so that, eventually, his interlocutor will come to value wisdom as an end. I show that Plato thinks this transformation can happen by two main mechanisms: the power of repeated arguments to persuade where isolated arguments fail, and the ability of intellectual pleasure to reshape one's fundamental evaluative beliefs. Thus, Socrates' overall strategy is not unlike that of the professor who recruits a student to philosophy with the promise that it will improve her LSAT scores, all the while anticipating that, once the student experiences the thrill of abstract, intellectual inquiry—once she experiences the transformative power of philosophy—she will lose her legal ambitions and devote herself instead to philosophical studies. What justifies this strategy, in our eyes and Plato's, is that, in some important contexts, including the choice of a way of life, the right reasons can come into view only after taking up some practice, and so the practice cannot be motivated by the right reasons until it is taken up on some other basis.