

An Inquiry into Socratic and Contemporary Accounts of Humility

Barbara Cohn

Supervisor: Professor John Palmer

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I want to put forward a humble thesis that has two main points: first, understanding Socrates' disavowals of knowledge is helpful when examining contemporary accounts of humility, and second, examining contemporary humility is helpful when trying to understand Socrates' disavowal of knowledge, and how it relates to some of his other commitments. Regarding the former point, an understanding of Socratic humility leads to the thought that contemporary accounts of this trait may not be adequately documenting all of the benefits that result from the possession of humility. What Socrates emphasizes and they leave out is the way that humility causes desire and love. Regarding the latter point, contemporary accounts of humility argue that humility is a cause of mercy, and with this connection between humility and mercy in mind, it is possible to interpret some of Socrates' commitments as merciful, and as caused by his epistemic humility.

In the first section of this paper I will examine Socrates' disavowals of knowledge and some background theories in his psychology of action. What is emphasized is the role beneficial ignorance seems to play in Socrates' denial of *acrasia*, and how beneficial ignorance is at the root of desire. In the second section, I go over two contemporary accounts of humility, Norvin Richards' and Nancy Snow's. Here I apply the information discussed in the first section, to show how contemporary accounts of humility and Socratic humility can relate. The conclusion is unsurprising in a sense, for an understanding of Socrates would be unlikely to hurt one's understanding of contemporary theories, it would only help. What is somewhat surprising, though, is that attention to contemporary accounts of humility can make way for an interpretation of Socrates' theories which has not always been supported.

I. Socratic Theory

i. Introducing Beneficial and Harmful Ignorance

The first thing to do is to introduce the distinction between the two kinds of ignorance, the beneficial and the harmful. The ignorance that is beneficial for someone to possess, which Socrates calls ‘human wisdom’ in the *Apology*,¹ is a knowledge that one lacks knowledge. Socrates professes this sort of ignorance often in the dialogues, saying, “I am not wise at all,”² or, “I don’t know how these things are.”³ Being aware of the matters in which one is ignorant is part of having an accurate knowledge of oneself, for someone clearly does not have a completely accurate view of herself if she thinks she has knowledge when she does not. Socrates claims that insofar as he has this beneficial ignorance, he is: “wiser than this human being [who possesses harmful ignorance]. For probably neither of us knows anything noble and good, but he supposes he knows something when he does not know, while I, just as I do not know, do not even suppose that I do. I am likely to be a little bit wiser than he in this very thing: that whatever I do not know, I do not even suppose I know.”⁴ When Socrates claims to possess a good ignorance here he contrasts it to a harmful sort: the kind of ignorance where a person is not aware of her ignorance, and so she thinks she knows when in fact she does not know. This is a kind of confusion, and Socrates’ interlocutors are usually people who possess this kind of confused and

¹ Plato, *Apology*, 19e for example

² Plato, *Apology*, 21b

³ Plato, *Gorgias*, 509a

⁴ Plato, *Apology*, 21d

harmful ignorance, as they tend to believe they have some knowledge of what is good and bad when in fact they lack this knowledge.

ii. Acrasia

The distinction just made is between a harmful and beneficial ignorance, and understanding how they are beneficial and harmful requires examining some aspects of Socratic psychology of action. In particular, when we have a better grasp of Socrates' denial of *acrasia*, then it is clearer how the kind of ignorance that Socrates' interlocutors possess can be harmful, in that this ignorance leads to having bad desires and committing bad actions.

Acrasia can generally be thought of as a weakness of one's will. It comes about when what someone desires to do in a situation is different from what she thinks is best to do in that situation. First, a desire is when one wants "to secure [some x] for oneself,"⁵ and it can attach to different kinds of things, like pleasures or honors. People generally take it to be a common occurrence, so that people who are not virtuous just are, "'overcome' or 'defeated' by desires for pleasures"⁶ or honors sometimes. Take as an example the student who knows the better thing to do in her situation is to stay up late to work on her assignment, but her desire to feel pleasant and well-rested is so great that she chooses not to work. This person, someone like Aristotle would say, is falling victim to *acrasia*, a weakness in her will so that it conflicts with what her reason dictates is best.

⁵ Plato, *Meno*, 77c9

⁶ Vlastos, "Acrasia" 79

Socrates tends to be perceived as denying the existence of *acrasia*⁷ because he is thought to view desire as aligned with one's knowledge necessarily. There is difference of opinion on exactly what Socrates' denial of *acrasia* is—as, for example, whether he thinks desire follows only knowledge or also belief.⁸ However, in general there is agreement that Socrates denies the existence of *acrasia* because his theory of desire is in some way importantly cognitivist. This just means that Socrates' theory is one where a person's desire responds to her knowledge (or belief, depending on one's view) about what is good for her, so that if S believes or knows x is good for her, S will desire x. Her desire follows her reason in this way.⁹ Because one's desires align with what she believes or knows to be good for her, there is not going to be any room for *acrasia*, as this is precisely when one's desires go against what one concludes to be good through reason.

It might already seem clear how bad action results from ignorance with this view of desire as having a cognitive component, but what makes it very apparent is emphasizing another related Socratic commitment, that people desire what is *truly good* for them. The view, in basic terms, is that as no one would want what they knew to be actually bad for them. Doing immoral things is, on Socrates' view, incredibly harmful and bad for the person doing the bad actions. This view is pulled from the *Gorgias*, 467a-468e, but this passage seems to contradict one from the *Meno*, 77b-78b. It is a matter of debate, but Penner and Rowe, in particular, defend this reading; they view Socrates as saying that people desire what is actually good for them and what

⁷ Vlastos, "*Acraia*" 88, and Sauvé-Meyer, "Plato and the Pursuit of Excellence" 35, for some examples

⁸ Vlastos, "*Acraia*," 72. He puts forward the view that only knowledge has the right kind of strength, and belief is insufficient. Vlastos references Gulley, who has the view that both knowledge and belief will guide desire.

⁹ Plato, *Gorgias*, 468a-b for example

can actually bring them happiness, even when it appears they desire bad things. They say that, “what one desires as one’s end is one’s *real* happiness, even if that differs from what one thinks it is,”¹⁰ and they interpret Socrates in the *Gorgias*, as well as in the *Meno*, as saying that when we think someone desires something that is actually bad, we are making a mistake regarding the object of her desire. Rather, “What one desires is the benefits and the happiness one wrongly thinks possession of the bad things is a means to.”¹¹ When we take up this claim, the conclusion is that people act badly out of ignorance, for if “no one wants what [she knows to be or believes] is bad,”¹² and as such, “whenever we do something, we do it for the sake of the good,”¹³ then when someone does something bad or appears to desire something bad, this is a consequence of having a false belief about what is actually good. Bad action is a result of ignorance about the good, then, so that it is always a mistake—unintentional—when a person behaves badly and does harm.¹⁴

Harmful ignorance just is the kind that results in bad desires and bad actions. To possess a false belief about what is actually good means that one thinks one has a grasp on the truth when one does not. This kind of ignorance about one’s ignorance is what Socrates identifies as the harmful ignorance, and now it is clear how it is harmful, for it will cause one to desire bad things

¹⁰ Penner, Rowe, “The Desire for Good: Is the *Meno* Inconsistent with the *Gorgias*?” pg. 5

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 23

¹² Plato, *Meno*, 78b

¹³ Sauv -Meyer, “Plato and the Pursuit of Excellence,” 34, referencing in particular *Gorgias* 467c-468b

¹⁴ Plato, *Laws*, 860d-e, for example

and commit actions that are not actually good.¹⁵ In this way, all “mistakes in action...are due to this ignorance of thinking one knows when one does not.”¹⁶ One of the aims of the discussion that Socrates takes part in, his *elenchus*, as Socrates practices it, is to remove harmful ignorance in his interlocutors and audience. One can see this as Socrates “exhorts [the Athenians] to ‘take care’ or ‘be careful’ (*epimeleisthai*) in this pursuit [of excellence].”¹⁷ Helping someone shed her harmful ignorance and be careful in this way just is to make her better,¹⁸ because it means she is closer to grasping the truth of ethical matters, and having an understanding of these means having the right desires.

Beneficial ignorance does not result in bad desires the way that harmful ignorance does, for when someone is aware she does not know what is good, she is not wedded to any of her desires in the same way that someone who possesses false ignorance is. The person like Socrates who has beneficial ignorance recognizes she may be making mistakes, and takes precautions and extra measures to avoid making these kinds of mistakes. One such measure is discussed in *Alcibiades I*, at 117b-e. Socrates says that one who knows that she does not know something will entrust the issue to one who does know, and that she will follow the advice of one who knows, or knows more than her. When one trusts one’s superiors, and particularly those with the requisite knowledge in whatever issue is at hand, one will be guided towards performing the right actions

¹⁵ These things in turn are harmful to one’s character in various ways, as having bad desires means one’s soul is disorganized, and committing bad actions habituates one to desire bad things.

¹⁶ Plato, *Alcibiades I*, 117d

¹⁷ Suavé-Meyer, “Plato and the Pursuit of Excellence,” 14

¹⁸ Nozick, “Socratic Puzzles,” 152. He writes that, “To improve the state of someone's soul is to make him more virtuous. That requires (and requires only) bringing him into a state of greater knowledge of the good. (Knowledge is virtue; virtue is knowledge.)”

because one is under the guidance of someone who better grasps the right action. This way of acting is to be contrasted with the way someone who possesses a harmful ignorance acts, as this person comes to a conclusion independently (and incorrectly) about what is good, and does not entrust another or take another's advice because she thinks she already knows. Someone like Socrates, who does not possess harmful ignorance, will not act independently in this harmful way. Rather this person will act well, and make "no mistakes in life,"¹⁹ if she is being given direction by someone with the requisite knowledge.

Unfortunately, though, it is at the very least quite difficult to find people who possess wisdom.²⁰ But when someone possesses beneficial ignorance she still has the potential to have the right desires and perform actions that are good, if she can find someone who can help guide her, or some helpful method by which she can be guided towards knowledge. This brings us to the next step towards a clearer picture of beneficial ignorance: to understand Socrates' ignorance better, we will need to understand what the knowledge is that Socrates thinks he lacks. This is a controversial point, but there are certain things one can say that are less controversial than others. In particular, a variety of scholars understand the knowledge that Socrates aspires to possess as a *techné*, or craft, knowledge.

¹⁹ Plato, *Alcibiades I*, 117e

²⁰ Some think Socrates believes it is impossible for humans to have wisdom (more on this later) and some, like Donald Watt, think that, "Socrates seems to have supposed that such knowledge and rules could be acquired by a careful inspection of moral terms and of the way they are applied in reporting and assessing conduct." (Introduction to *Charmides*, pp. 20)

iii. Techné knowledge

Socrates often makes the analogy between ethical knowledge, the knowledge of good and bad, and the knowledge of a craft or skill, a *techné*. One way to describe it is as a kind of knowledge which is “a systematic, rational procedure, aiming at a clearly-defined goal by clearly-specified steps.”²¹ A paradigmatic craft here can be any sort of productive endeavor that requires skill and practice, like building a house or weaving a basket. In these activities there are steps that need to be taken in a certain order and in a certain way in order to succeed and produce what one intends to produce well. These steps serve a purpose, have a function, and so when someone possesses *techné* knowledge, she will be able to explain and account for things with reference to the function they serve. This function that they serve is the end that she has defined—in other words she can explain why her actions are necessary to achieve her goal.²² Further, the person with this kind of knowledge is able to give an account or definition, a *logos*, of what the desired end is. To be able to give an account is to be able to answer the “what is F?” question. And in order to answer this kind of question—what is justice, courage, temperance, etc.—one needs to know the essential conditions for F, the necessary and sufficient conditions. These conditions “provide a standard that can be utilized to decide whether F applies in any given case.”²³ So, whenever one has a *techné* knowledge of F, one can identify instances of F whenever they appear and pick out why they are instances of F.

²¹ Terence Irwin, “Recollection and Plato’s Moral Theory” pp. 755

²² Plato, *Apology* 22c9-d4, *Gorgias* 465a2-7, and Irwin, “Recollection and Plato’s Moral Theory” pg. 756, and Richard Parry, “*Episteme* and *Techne*”

²³ Nozick, “Socratic Puzzles,” 148

Possessing *techné* knowledge would mean that one understands the goal and how to achieve it in such a way as to actually be able to bring about that goal; it is a knowledge associated closely with success. Socrates associates success in gaining goodness and happiness with possessing the knowledge of good and bad in, for example, the *Laches*, where he claims that, “because of his [an agent’s] knowledge of how to behave properly towards the gods and his fellow men, he alone has it in him to avoid what is to be feared and gain what is good.”²⁴ This kind of claim supports the craft-virtue analogy because it puts forward that the requisite knowledge is sufficient to be happy and succeed in virtue, just as possessing requisite knowledge is sufficient to succeed in any craft. Furthermore, the view that there is a virtue-craft analogy is supported because multiple arguments Socrates advances require taking this analogy very seriously. For example in both Plato’s *Apology*, 24d-25c, and Xenophon’s *Apology*, 20, Socrates compares the moral education of the youth to the craft of doctoring. Recorded in both sources, it seems at least possible that this was something the historical figure Socrates may have said—and if he appealed to the analogy between craft and virtue during his trial, that may speak to the seriousness with which he held the analogy.²⁵ If we take these kinds of claims seriously, it means that what Socrates thinks he lacks is no small matter; it is the knowledge that would lead him to moral success and happiness.

iv. Why we might conceive of the disavowal of knowledge as sincere

²⁴Plato, *Laches*, 199d-e. See also *Euthydemus* 281b2-4, on wisdom bringing success.

²⁵I should note that in this kind of interpretation I am following people like Terence Irwin, pg 755 of “Recollection and Plato’s Moral Theory”. Not everyone does interpret Socrates to take wisdom to be like *techné* knowledge—for example, J. P. A. Gould, *Plato’s Ethics* Cambridge 1955.

Not everyone takes Socrates seriously when he claims he does not possess knowledge, but there is reason to do so. Some, like Norman Gulley,²⁶ think of those claims as tools to encourage Socrates' interlocutor to seek the truth of the matter—Socrates is only saying he lacks knowledge because it makes his partner feel as though he is engaging in a friendly inquiry together with Socrates towards the truth, instead of feeling embarrassed at being educated by one who knows and is looking down on him for his ignorance. The interpretation that Socrates believes he has knowledge and is being insincere when he claims otherwise is certainly useful in explaining the instances where Socrates makes claims about what is good and bad, like that doing harm is worse than being harmed. One great reason to interpret Socrates as sincere in his disavowals, though, is that this view can explain Socrates' persistence in his engagement in elenctic discussion. In a straightforward way, it seems clear enough that one would be more motivated to commit to elenctic discussion if one was personally gaining something out of the activity. In a more complicated sense, if we view Socrates's attitude towards wisdom as one where he recognizes he lacks this good, then he is in a position to love wisdom and be a philosopher, because of his commitment put forward in the *Lysis* and *Symposium*, especially, that it requires a lack to have a desire. If Socrates is in a position to be a philosopher, it makes sense why he would then act as a philosopher acts, examining his views and the views of those around him.

Socrates lived a radical lifestyle by constantly engaging in elenctic discussion with Athenians, and his commitment to this radical lifestyle is one of the reasons he was executed, since if he could have agreed to live quietly, without asking people questions about the virtues

²⁶ discussed by Vlastos in "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge," pg 2

and how one ought to live, he would have been spared execution.²⁷ It is difficult to explain Socrates' serious commitment to practicing the *elenchus* without taking him to be someone who is searching for knowledge and genuinely testing his views. It would push one to a view where Socrates' commitment to this behavior is a form of altruism where he would rather be put to death than stop helping his fellow Athenians through the *elenchus*, despite he himself already having the relevant knowledge and not needing to continue to pursue these questions. This would be a strong stance, and it just makes more sense on the face of it to think someone would be more committed to a behavior if he thought he himself was benefiting from that behavior. This thought would be more in line with what has been said on Socrates' psychology of action; that people act based on desire, and people desire what they think is good for them. To make sense of Socrates' behavior, we should see him as someone who believes he is acting in his own interest, and this seems to require saying something about what he will gain from practicing the *elenchus*. If we think of Socrates as someone speaking genuinely when he claims to lack knowledge, we can take him at his word when he further says that he engages in elenctic discussion to test his beliefs and seek out knowledge.²⁸ Socrates considers the good condition of the soul, which comes about when one possesses knowledge of good and bad, to be one of the most important things a person can concern herself with,²⁹ and so if we think that Socrates is aiming at the good condition of his soul when he engages in discussions, and that this is something he thinks is of high value, it is perfectly reasonable why he is so committed to continue this kind of behavior.

²⁷ Plato, *Apology*, 37e-38a

²⁸ Plato, *Apology*, 38a

²⁹ Plato, *Apology*, 29e

Plato does seem to characterize Socrates this way, as being interested in questions related to virtue at least in part because he is concerned with the goodness of his own soul. For example, Socrates says he would be grateful to be refuted in a conversation about the virtues because he considers “being refuted a greater good [than refuting others], insofar as it is a greater good to be rid of the greatest evil from oneself than to rid someone else of it.”³⁰ It is just straightforward to think that if Socrates really believes he lacks the valuable thing that would rid him of the greatest evils, that he would then be extremely motivated to engage in the discussion he believed would help a person gain a better understanding of that valuable knowledge. If he possessed the knowledge already, it is not as clear why he would be *so* motivated to inquire into what it is.

This reading of Socrates’ commitment to the *elenchus* as born out of his beneficial ignorance is not just reasonable on the face of it, but it also smoothly follows from Socrates’ more general views on desire, that one cannot desire what one possesses, but only what one lacks. Socrates claims outright in *Symposium* that, “Of necessity, a desiring subject desires something it lacks, and when it does not lack something it does not desire it.”³¹ In *Lysis*, an earlier dialogue, he gives the argument that it is the presence of a bad (in the right way) that is the cause of a desire to have goods,³² and this too emphasizes how having a desire entails that person is in a state of lacking that desired thing. Here Socrates uses philosophy as an example and argues that, “those who are already wise, whether they are gods or men, no longer love wisdom,”³³ and instead it is only those with beneficial ignorance, people who have a lack and are

³⁰ Plato, *Gorgias*, 458a

³¹ Plato, *Symposium*, 200a-b

³² Plato, *Lysis*, 216c f.

³³ *Lysis*, 218a

aware of it so as not made stupid by that lack, who are true lovers of wisdom. For when someone possesses beneficial ignorance, she is in the same kind of condition as someone who is sick, in need of medicine, and in a state of awareness that she is in need of medicine—she desires the good thing that she lacks because she is aware she is in a subpar state.³⁴

With an understanding of this background, we can say that when Socrates claims to have beneficial ignorance, he is claiming that he is a philosopher, a lover of wisdom. It would be a little odd if Socrates was a founding figure in the history of philosophy despite not considering himself a philosopher. Not only would it be strange that so many centuries of philosophers have looked to Socrates as a paradigmatic philosopher if he did not consider himself to be one, but it also may just seem wrong to claim that Socrates thought of himself as something other than a philosopher. For it is not simply that we know he thinks wisdom is one of the most valuable things that a person can possess,³⁵ but it also seems like Socrates explicitly considers himself to be living the life of a philosopher. He thinks the philosopher's life consists in engaging in a certain kind of discussion—in examining herself and others. He claims, “it would have been dreadful...[if] when the god ordered me, as I thought and believed, to live the life of a philosopher, to examine myself and others, I had abandoned my post for fear of death or anything else.”³⁶ We can understand why Socrates feels motivated to practice the *elenchus*, knowing that this is what a philosopher would do, and that Socrates considers himself to be a philosopher. However we cannot take Socrates to be a philosopher by his own standards if we do

³⁴ *Lysis*, 218a-b

³⁵ Plato, *Apology*, 29e

³⁶ Plato, *Apology*, 28e

not take him seriously when he disavows knowledge, for he considers it a requirement to be a lover of wisdom that one is in a state of lacking wisdom.

It seems, from all this, clear enough that there are real benefits to treating Socrates' disavowals of knowledge seriously. In particular we can begin to understand why Socrates is so committed to practicing the *elenchus*. For he believes that examining one's own views along with others' views is just what someone does when she desires to possess wisdom and truth as the philosopher does.

A further point to make that is important for later on in this paper is that it is not simply the existence of a lack that leads to desire and love, but there must also be an awareness of this lack. In other words, someone who is not aware of her ignorance does not desire and love knowledge.³⁷ This seems right, because if a requirement of desire is that one must lack what one desires, it seems implied that one must also be aware one lacks the valuable thing to form the conscious desire. The thought is that there would be no reason to desire something or aspire towards some goal if you believed you already possessed it or had achieved it. In this way, a person cannot desire something without some awareness of the fact that she falls short of that desired goal. This kind of accurate self-knowledge where one is aware of one's shortcomings has been labeled as the trait 'humility' by some,³⁸ and if we take up this notion, it means that humility is required to come into a desire or love. Socrates' human wisdom, if we think his disavowals of knowledge are genuine, would be an example of a kind of humility in that it is an accurate self-knowledge. It is, in particular, an accurate knowledge of his epistemic situation—

³⁷ Socrates says this at *Lysis*, 218a for example

³⁸ Bernard of Clairvaux, Norvin Richards, Nancy Snow, André Comte-Sponville, to name a few. This will be discussed in detail later.

that he does not possess knowledge of good and bad—so we might call it an epistemic humility. It is understandable why Socrates would be interested in curing his interlocutors and audience of their harmful ignorance when we emphasize that this is the first step in coming to desire the right things, as the first step is to possess beneficial ignorance, Socrates' epistemic humility.

v. Interpretations that do conceive of the disavowal as sincere

There is debate on whether Socrates is sincere when he gives his disavowals of knowledge, and among the crowd of philosophers that take his disavowals seriously there is difference of opinion concerning just exactly how to understand them. Two accounts worth discussing in particular are Gregory Vlastos' and Robert Nozick's, because these authors take Socrates' disavowals as genuine, however they understand him to be denying different things. In other words, they have varying views on what exactly Socrates is professing ignorance of when he makes his disavowals. Vlastos appears to treat Socrates' disavowals as somewhat less sincere, or at least less straightforward, than Nozick and others treat them, by claiming that Socrates believes he lacks 'certain knowledge' but possesses a different kind of knowledge, an 'elenctic knowledge.' Nozick's account treats the disavowal with the most seriousness by interpreting Socrates as claiming not only that he does not possess any kind of knowledge, but also that he does not possess even mere true belief. It is useful to discuss these views just to have an understanding of some of the ways people, when they treat it seriously, view Socrates' particular kind of epistemic humility.

Vlastos aims to reconcile the problem of Socratic virtue “by suggesting that Socrates uses words for knowledge equivocally.”³⁹ He thinks that Socrates differentiates between a knowledge which is based in or justified through the *elenchus*, knowledge_E, and an infallible, certain knowledge, knowledge_C. So, when Socrates “avows knowledge—as we have seen he does, rarely, but unmistakably—the content of that knowledge must be propositions he thinks elenctically justifiable.”⁴⁰ Vlastos further elaborates in the footnote on what it is to be elenctically justified, that, “it has been demonstrated to you by elenctic argument.” Evidence that Socrates might take this view can be found in particular at *Gorgias* 508e6-509b, where Socrates denies knowledge_C but claims that until someone can argue successfully against his conclusion, he will consider his conclusions “bound by arguments of iron and adamant.”⁴¹ This view emphasizes in particular the way the Socratic *elenchus* tests and strengthens Socrates’ beliefs and turns them into something strong in a way that knowledge is thought of as strong. Nozick explains the notion of knowledge_E as the kind of confidence one possesses “when one’s (true) belief has survived repeated testing in the process of elenctic inquiry,”⁴² and we can see examples to support this sort of claim all through the *Gorgias*, as when Socrates tells Callicles, someone who holds systematic false beliefs, that, “if you will agree with me on those things which my soul believes, those things will be the very truth.”⁴³ So the view is that by testing the coherence of his beliefs, Socrates can potentially gain some kind of grasp of the truth, and

³⁹ Wolfsdorf, “Socrates’ Avowals of Knowledge” pg. 76

⁴⁰ Vlastos, “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge” pg. 18

⁴¹ Plato, *Gorgias*, 509a, and Wolfsdorf confirms on pg. 89

⁴² Nozick, “Socratic Puzzles” pg. 144

⁴³ Plato, *Gorgias*, 486e5-6

Vlastos considers these kinds of well-tested true beliefs to be knowledge because of how stable they are.

Knowledge_E, which Socrates has, contrasts with knowledge_C, Vlastos says, because knowledge_C is something one could have “only if one knows with infallibility and certainty.”⁴⁴ We know Socrates does not know things with full certainty, and not only because he professes to personally lack a full *techné* knowledge. For Socrates also appears to claim that for one to be wise one must have powers beyond those of a human being. He claims that those who do not lack goodness in any way are those who understand “all the different kinds of good, and [have] an exact knowledge of the course of these in the past, present and future, and a similar understanding of evil.”⁴⁵ This is certainly not something humans possess. Similarly in the *Apology* he says throughout that only the god can know whether death is good or bad,⁴⁶ and in the *Meno*, at 71b-c, he says he has never met anyone yet who possesses the knowledge of good and bad. If we take these sorts of passages seriously, it strengthens the kind of claim Socrates is making about ignorance; his epistemic humility no longer just concerns his own current lack of the relevant knowledge, but it concerns also the general limit to human moral and epistemic progress. In this way we can interpret Socrates as thinking neither he nor any other human being can possess virtue—full knowledge of good and bad. Some accounts of Socrates’ disavowals of knowledge, like Irwin’s, emphasize explicitly this contrast between human capabilities and

⁴⁴ Nozick, “Socratic Puzzles” pg. 144

⁴⁵ Plato, *Laches*, 199d

⁴⁶ 42a for one example

knowledge and those of the divine.⁴⁷ On Irwin's account, people can only ever possess true belief, and that is all Socrates ever claims to have. Vlastos disagrees with Irwin, and argues "that a Socratic willingness to settle for true belief would make his persistent search for knowledge "a charade" and, in view of Socrates' linking of knowledge and virtue, undermine his claims to possess virtue and happiness."⁴⁸ Both accounts are certainly compatible with the interpretation of Socrates' disavowals as claims about human finitude, where only those who are better than humans and are more like gods could possess the knowledge that Socrates seeks.

Nozick has a view that attributes a higher level of ignorance to Socrates than either Vlastos' or Irwin's, because he interprets Socrates as claiming he has neither knowledge nor true belief when he claims ignorance. Nozick thinks that what Socrates lacks is true belief to the "What if F?" question related to evaluative matters—this of course being the question that Socrates presents to his interlocutors in the early dialogues. So, the knowledge and true belief Socrates thinks he lacks is about what courage or piety or any other virtue, or just virtue itself, is. Nozick can deny even true belief to Socrates, which others like Irwin and Vlastos credit him with, by emphasizing that Socrates did think his accounts were better and closer to the truth than his interlocutors' accounts, but that is not the same as thinking one's accounts and beliefs are true. Nozick writes on this that, "He knew more than his fellows, he knew precisely where their accounts failed, and he could formulate a more adequate account that did not fall to those objections. However, he also knew of or believed there were objections that would show his

⁴⁷ Wolfsdorf, "Socrates' Avowals of Knowledge" pg 114 referring to Terence Irwin in *Plato's Ethics*

⁴⁸ J. H. Leshner, "Notes and Discussions: Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge" pg. 276

current best account to be inadequate, that is, false.”⁴⁹ Not only does Nozick explain Socrates’ avowals of knowledge as claims of having a better understanding than other people on certain matters (though still not claiming to have true belief), but he also thinks that even when Socrates claims to have knowledge, he never claims to have knowledge or true belief about what the virtues and their necessary and sufficient conditions are. Instead, the things he claims to grasp are truths, “about some evaluate matters, e.g. concerning the doctrines that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it, that no one does wrong voluntarily but only out of ignorance, that it is better for someone that he is punished for an injustice he has committed.”⁵⁰ Nozick’s view, then, is one where Socrates’ claims to ignorance should be taken with the upmost seriousness—and we should understand the issues he claims to have some knowledge about as different kinds of things from those objects of which he claims ignorance.

Hopefully the above treatment has made Socrates’ particular kind of humility somewhat clear and shown that his disavowals of knowledge, when taken seriously, have certain interpretive benefits. Specifically, we can explain his behavior and commitment to elenctic discussion, and we can view Socrates as an example of the lover as he discusses him. For it is through developing an epistemic humility that one comes to desire and love knowledge as Socrates does. This next portion of the paper is focused on contemporary accounts of humility and how they relate to the humility we see expressed by Socrates.

II. The Contemporary Discussion

⁴⁹ Nozick, “Socratic Puzzles,” 147

⁵⁰ Nozick, “Socratic Puzzles,” 151

In the contemporary discussion on humility, there have been accounts that characterize this trait, generally, as both an accurate knowledge of oneself and as a virtue, and of these accounts the ones I examine in this paper in particular are Norvin Richards' and Nancy Snow's. It is going to be useful to look at these accounts of humility alongside Socrates'. Two points in particular that arise from comparing the contemporary views to Socrates' views and behavior will be pursued in this section. The first is that because various theories of humility, and Richards' in particular, claim mercy should follow from humility, it implies a way of interpreting Socrates' particular humility as involved causally in some of his other philosophical commitments. The second point to discuss is the way that Snow and other contemporary theorists, although they are arguing that humility is a virtue, do not emphasize a beneficial aspect of humility as a cause of ambition and growth in the way that Socrates does.

There are a few reasons why it would be useful to discuss Socratic humility alongside contemporary accounts. For one, knowing that Socrates' disavowal of knowledge can be conceived of as a kind of accurate self-knowledge,⁵¹ one might think that the contemporary theorists who conceive of the virtue humility in this same way might well consider Socrates an especially important example of the humble person. Because where contemporary accounts predict behavior in a humble person that is not characterized in Socrates it might be taken to be a counterexample to the contemporary theory—or at least, an interesting divergence from Socratic theory that is worth exploring. This is one reason why someone might begin to look into the

⁵¹ Socrates' disavowal of knowledge is going to be discussed in the beginning section of the full paper, before this one

relationship between the two theories. However, once this relationship has been examined, it becomes clear enough that studying contemporary theories with Socrates' simultaneously is beneficial in a more general way, so that it is not only a good thing to do for someone who wants to test the truth of particular contemporary views of humility. Understanding the Socratic conception of humility will offer a way of improving contemporary accounts, because Socrates emphasizes a benefit of humility that contemporary accounts do not similarly emphasize. Understanding the contemporary accounts of humility in turn will allow for a new perspective on Socratic theory—that the disavowal of knowledge may be a more central claim than it seems. So the following discussion is motivated by a few reasons, which appeal to different kinds of philosophers. People interested purely in Socrates will have a reason to study this, but so will people who are only interested in examining contemporary humility. And of course, the person who is interested in both kinds of accounts and the relationship between the two certainly would feel motivated to perform this kind of inquiry right from the start.

i. Richards' account, and humility and mercy

There are many accounts of humility that focus on its relationship with mercy, but Norvin Richards gives one of the first contemporary accounts that suggest that humility is an accurate self-knowledge.⁵² In his article, "Is Humility a Virtue?", Richards characterizes humility as generally an accurate conception of the self which involves stability, so that this accurate sense of self is "sufficiently firm to resist pressures towards incorrect revisions,"⁵³ like temptations of

⁵²Statman, "Modesty, Pride, and Realistic Self-Assessment," 424, for example

⁵³ Richards, "Is Humility a Virtue?" 254

success and praise. Having a firm sense of self means consequently having a firm sense of how one should behave—just as dignified people, even if they hold thankless or demeaning jobs, have firm views about what respect they are due from others and how they will conduct themselves towards others. Richards uses this example to compare to humility, which he sees as being similarly characterized as a stable attitude about oneself. Both dignity and humility, he wants to say, attach to something true: they are proper measures, so that dignity is having proper pride in oneself, and humility is having proper understanding of one's weaknesses and shortcomings.

Richards makes a further distinction concerning what it means to have a proper understanding of one's weaknesses and failures—it is not to reject all pride. Richards explicitly rejects the kind of view that Bernard of Clairvaux and Martin Luther hold, where the accurate and therefore humble belief is that nothing human beings can accomplish deserves any pride. This view stems, Richards claims, from having a belief in a God whose “works are so magnificent, whatever you are or have done is trivial by comparison, and your human pride in it is laughable.”⁵⁴ Richards contrastingly claims, in a more secular route, that some pride is warranted of human successes. It is just that one must “take less pride than a far greater accomplishment would have merited.”⁵⁵ This is a claim that Socrates would likely support—he takes some pride in having beneficial ignorance instead of harmful ignorance, for example, yet he is certainly not as proud or happy about his accomplishment as he would have been for one that was more impressive, like actually gaining knowledge.

⁵⁴ Richards, “Is Humility a Virtue?” 255

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 255

Once Richards has set up his account of humility, he argues that there are beneficial consequences to possessing it, and this is why one can think of it as a virtue. Specifically he argues that humility incites “an inclination to forgive, good judgement of others, and reasonable expectations of oneself.”⁵⁶ Out of these consequences he spends by far the most space on describing the relationship between humility and forgiveness.

Richards follows Bernard of Clairvaux in general on his conception of mercy and the inclination to forgive and his conception of the connection between these and humility, despite the way that Richards’ own conception of humility is different from Bernard’s. Bernard holds that humility causes mercy, and that it is the only thing that will cause mercy. Richards cites him:

“...observe what you are, that you are wretched indeed, and so learn to be merciful, a thing you cannot know in any other way. For if you regard your neighbor’s faults but do not observe your own, you are likely to be moved not to ruth but to wrath, not to condole but to condemn, not to restore in the spirit of meekness but to destroy in the spirit of anger.”⁵⁷

Richards agrees with Bernard that at least some limited degree of humility is required in order to possess the kind of understanding and sympathy for wrongdoers that Bernard and Richards conceive of as mercy. They have, however, different conceptions of humility, because while they both think humility is an accurate estimation of oneself, Bernard will say that when one has real self-knowledge one will know that no pride in human achievements is ever warranted. Richards thinks this claim that mercy is caused by humility is compatible with his account of humility as

⁵⁶ Richards, “Is Humility a Virtue?” 259

⁵⁷Clairvaux, *Step of Humility*, as quoted by Richards pg 257

simply an appropriate and accurate pride. So Richards follows Bernard in his definition of mercy, generally, where being merciful means “reacting in a tolerant, sympathetic way to behavior which was faulty and would ordinarily make one resentful and inclined to retaliate. Only the humble will...think: ‘He’s only human—none of us are perfect.’”⁵⁸ Richards and Bernard do differ in their view of what the mean of mercy is that hits the virtue, just as they differ in opinion about where the mean lies in regard to the virtue of humility. Where Bernard thinks that there should be no pride in any human accomplishment and that the virtue of mercy has no excess, Richards has a view of humility as an appropriately limited self regard, and he thinks this results in the right kind of *limited* mercy towards those who harm us. He says of this kind of behavior, that it is intuitively, “not only respectable but positively admirable.”⁵⁹

It will be good to say now about this account of mercy that it enables many kinds of bad actions to be the subjects of mercy. Any faulty behavior that would normally make another person angry, whether it is done consciously or not, is able to result in a person’s mercy and forgiveness. Richards commits to this general view about mercy when he discusses how some harms, like the minor ones that most people do very often, do not deserve resentment as a response, but rather limited mercy is the reaction that is just in these cases. He writes that, “There is such a thing as recognizing that the other person is (merely) human, like oneself, and therefore *bound* to err in minor, perhaps familiar ways.”⁶⁰ This quote references erring—making mistakes. Not every conception of mercy sees the trait as one that relates to errors in judgement/mistakes, though, and in particular we can think of Jankélévitch’s account as a foil for Richards’ broad

⁵⁸ Richards, “Is Humility a Virtue?” 257

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 258

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 258

account. Jankélévitch says that if one errs and acts badly out of ignorance, there is nothing to forgive. “To excuse a person because he or she is ignorant or sick or otherwise not accountable is not to be gracious towards him or her. It is purely to give him or her justice.”⁶¹ Jankélévitch’s account of forgiveness is one where it goes counter to penal logic, so it cannot simply be justice, where Richards’ account has no such constraint.

The second of the three consequences of humility that Richards discusses, relative to his discussion of mercy, is not discussed at length, and this is perhaps because it appears straightforward to him. Richards says that humble people are going to be able to accurately value not only their own achievements, but also the achievements of others, because it is the same kind of thing being evaluated, just in different people. He writes that, “the ability to resist overestimating the relative importance of having won the race or published the article should assure a similar accuracy of judgement when the accomplishment is another person’s. After all, it’s the same thing being judged, this time without the psychological pressure to overvalue it.”⁶² He adds to this that the humble person will not be prone to undervalue others’ achievements, because her ego will not be offended or wounded; being humble eliminates the need for a person to be defensive in the way that makes one angry or upset if others succeed in the same way as her.

The third consequence Richards discusses is that humility causes one to have a reasonable expectation for oneself. This discussion does not take up even one full paragraph in his paper. It is more like a suggestion at the end as to how humility might be beneficial. When someone is humble about some trait or ability, she has no illusions of grandeur about that trait—

⁶¹ Looney, *Vladimir Jankelevitch: the time of forgiveness*, 58

⁶² Richards, “Is Humility a Virtue?” 258

this seems to straightforwardly fall out of what it is to be humble. A result of this attitude, Richards writes, is to “defer to the more able or, in their absence, understand both how serious my effort has to be and how limited my chances are.” He continues that with this strategy, there is, “a better chance to succeed, and if we do fail through my efforts the disappointment should be more manageable.”⁶³ This view seems right, and it appears to align with Socratic and Platonic views. First, it echoes the principle of specialization that is put forward in Plato’s *Republic*, and second, it echoes the Platonic view about what to do when there are no experts available, which is discussed in *Statesman*. The principle of specialization is the view that labor should be divided so that each person does the work that suits her, as “different people are equipped to perform different tasks.”⁶⁴ So when Richards says humility encourages one to defer to people who have more ability, this is a direct agreement with what Plato and Socrates would want to claim a useful trait would encourage. What Richards says about deferment is also very much in line with what Plato wants to hold for political situations, so that if the lawgiver who had the requisite expertise arrived, a city ought to defer to that person’s judgement instead of the law code written down.⁶⁵ In the absence of an expert though, Plato argues that a city must take on extra commitments to imitate as best as it can the genuine constitution.⁶⁶ Richards’ claims are at least compatible with what Plato wants to say here, because they both claim there is difficult work to be done in order to succeed when one is without a knowledgeable teacher or ruler. And it seems like a reasonable thing to attribute to Plato that some awareness of the way in which one’s city falls short—

⁶³ Richards, “Is Humility a Virtue?” 259

⁶⁴ Plato, *Republic*, II.370b

⁶⁵ Plato, *Statesman*, 296a

⁶⁶ Plato, *Statesman*, 293e

whether in aristocratic, timocratic, democratic, or tyrannical ways—is required in order to make the appropriate changes to better it.

Socrates ought to be an example, perhaps even a paradigmatic example, of the humble person for Richards, and so we can try to apply what Richards says about mercy to Socrates. Richards conceives of humility to be the kind of thing that Socrates claims to possess—an accurate self-knowledge—so Socrates should be an example of the humble person. One consequence of trying to understand Socrates on a contemporary theory of humility is that it becomes possible to recognize another perspective on, or interpretation of, the relationship between Socrates' disavowal of knowledge and his psychological theory of action. Richards and others will claim that humility causes mercy and enables a person to forgive; as such Richards will want to claim that Socrates' humility induces a kind of mercy. Mercy is not always considered a trait of ancient philosophies,⁶⁷ so this would be an interesting claim. Richards might say that Socrates' disavowal of knowledge is playing a role in supporting his particular views in his psychology of action, and especially the thesis that there is no *acrasia*. If we remember from the discussion on *acrasia*, Socrates' denial of this is very much related to his views on ignorance. Bad action for Socrates is a result of ignorance, not of *acrasia*, and so it may seem like at least one reason he denies the existence of *acrasia* is that he has his particular views not just about what beneficial and harmful ignorance are, but also about what they cause. On this view, it is Socrates' commitment to the value of humility, and to the danger of its lack when one possess harmful ignorance, that results in his commitment that there is no *acrasia*.

⁶⁷ Compte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*, 123

It is possible for Richards to credit Socrates with mercy because of Richards' conception of mercy and forgiveness. To be merciful and forgiving to Richards, as already discussed, is just to react in generally tolerant and sympathetic ways to behavior that would normally make a person resentful. It seems like most, if not all, the theorists working on humility consider the possession of mercy to be a beneficial consequence of being humble,⁶⁸ but they have their own definitions of mercy. Some, like Jankélévitch's, require extra constraints. For Richards, though, there does not seem to be an issue in describing Socrates' theory of action as a merciful one, although it may sound strange. What Richards will say is that Socrates' claim that any wrong action is born out of ignorance is a view that inspires tolerant and sympathetic behavior, in that it discourages a person from anger and desire for retribution in situations where those reactions would be expected. For when somebody wrongly acts out of ignorance, this seems to count as an excuse—this is why Jankélévitch thinks Socrates does not instantiate mercy: he thinks there is simply nothing to forgive when one considers a wrong done to oneself to be caused by a mistake.⁶⁹ By contrast, the way Richards sees things, if something is excused, there is no reason to resent or seek retribution, and that is enough to count as forgiveness. It is still very much the case that mistakes harm people, it is just that Socrates, if he is merciful by Richards' standards, does not resent people who make mistakes as much as pity them.

This seems right; by Richards' standards, Socrates does in fact put forward theories that inspire mercy. We can see he puts forward a kind of sympathetic view towards those who do

⁶⁸ Montaigne, Bernard of Clairvaux, Jankelevitch, Martin Luther and Compte-Sponville are just a few who emphasize this, but most theorists will at least mention that mercy is a consequence of possessing humility

⁶⁹ Compte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*, 123

wrong when he makes claims like that harming someone is much worse for a person than being harmed.⁷⁰ By saying the wrongdoer is the one who is harmed the most, this makes the wrongdoer a victim in an important way, and seeing the wrongdoer as a victim can reasonably inspire some sympathy or compassion. For Socrates, doing harm is a result of desiring bad things, as was discussed earlier, and this goes against what one actually would want if one possessed knowledge of what was good. This just is another way of characterizing his denial of *acrasia*. With this framework, the person who does wrong does not do what she really wants and in fact is miserable and unenviable,⁷¹ and Plato's Socrates holds that, "you're not supposed to envy the unenviable or the miserable. You're supposed to pity them."⁷² This belief, that one should pity the unjust tyrant, certainly seems to support the claim that humble people manifest mercy, if we consider Socrates an example of the humble person. And the view that Socrates espouses a theory that is actually quite merciful seems perhaps more reasonable when one compares Socrates' theory to another ancient theory, like Aristotle's. Aristotle commits to the existence of *acrasia*, unlike Socrates, in that Aristotle claims people can desire to do bad things despite actually knowing those things are bad. With this change, it is not as obvious that the proper attitude to take towards people who do bad things is one of pity—for doing bad things is no longer viewed as making a grievous mistake in rational judgement.

The way Socrates's behavior and theories can fit onto Richards' account of humility is particularly interesting because it looks to imply an interpretation where Socrates' disavowal of knowledge supports and has a role in causing some of his more 'merciful' philosophical

⁷⁰ Plato, *Apology*, 30c-d

⁷¹ Plato, *Gorgias*, 468e, and as was discussed earlier in this paper.

⁷² Plato, *Gorgias*, 469a

commitments. If someone wants to agree with Richards' view of humility as a quality that brings on mercy, and also agree that Socrates is an example of someone who possess the relevant humility, then this person will want Richards' account to track some features of Socrates and his theories and show that they can be described as merciful; it looks like Richards can do this. Since Richards can do this, it seems like a reasonable move for him to make to then suggest that Socrates' humility is actually what supports and leads to this forgiving behavior, given his account would predict this generally. Giving Socrates' humility this kind of weight would be an interesting interpretive move to make, for it would mean treating his disavowal of knowledge not just as a consistent tenet that Socrates holds, but as a central tenet that does some causal work in forming his other central views.

One reason this is an interesting consequence is because it is not universally held. For there is the view, put forward by Vlastos, that "Socrates' flaw is...a failure of love"⁷³ towards his fellow Athenians and in general towards those who he cannot persuade out of their harmful ignorance and bad behavior. Vlastos gives this position up at one point but without an explanation for why, as Nozick mentions. And I agree with Nozick when he says this position is still worth discussing despite not being held by Vlastos any longer.⁷⁴ If Socrates is not loving towards his fellow Athenians, it would seem odd to call him merciful towards them, as mercy seems to be a kind of love, on the face of it. For, "when love exists and survives the discovery of

⁷³Nozick, "Socratic Puzzles," 152 on a view that Vlastos puts forward in "The Paradox of Socrates" pg. 15-16. He quotes Vlastos as well on this point, that, "One feels there is a last zone of frigidity in the soul of the great erotic; had he loved his fellows more, he could hardly have laid on them the burdens of his "despotic logic," impossible to be borne." (Vlastos, "The Paradox of Socrates" pg. 44)

⁷⁴ Nozick, "Socratic Puzzles," 152

the wrong, obviously it leads to mercy,” Comte-Sponville says,⁷⁵ echoing La Rochefoucauld who says that, “we forgive so long as we love.”⁷⁶ If we take this route, there seems to be difference of opinion on the character of Socrates’ doctrines, and Socrates himself, where someone like Vlastos would claim Socrates is not loving and merciful, and someone like Richards would claim he is. On the other hand, perhaps it is not so clear that love and mercy are connected if we take an approach more like Jankélévitch’s and claim that love inhibits mercy, because there is, in a sense, nothing to forgive when one feels love.⁷⁷ Maybe we can reconcile these views if we interpret love and mercy as not as closely bound. This would require much more in depth treatment of love and mercy and Socrates’ thought, but the point to emphasize here is that thinking about the relationship between humility and mercy as it is discussed by contemporary philosophers like Richards can lead to a great deal of discussion among scholars of ancient philosophy on how Socrates might manifest these traits, if he does at all.

ii. Snow’s account, and humility and ambition

Besides allowing for a new perspective on ancient philosophies, examining ancient and contemporary discussions side by side leads to learning more about the contemporary accounts and how they might be lacking. Examining Socrates’ brand of humility and certain contemporary accounts together particularly leads to the thought that Socrates’s conception of humility

⁷⁵ Comte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*, 120

⁷⁶ François La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims and Reflections*, maxim 330, pg. 80

⁷⁷ Comte-Sponville, 121

supports and adds to the view held by contemporary theorists that claim humility is a virtue. For accounts like Nancy Snow's aim to persuade the reader that humility is a virtue, however there is little mention of, or weight attributed to, the power humility has to motivate a person towards a desired end. So, understanding how Socrates thought humility had this ability to instill desire is going to help contemporary theorists fill out persuasive accounts of this trait as a virtue.

The first thing to do is again lay out the account. Nancy Snow, in her article "Humility," endorses Richards' view and adds to it. In her paper she characterizes two kinds of humility, narrow and existential. She considers Richards' view to be a theory about narrow humility, a "humility about specific personal traits perceived as deficiencies."⁷⁸ Snow puts forward her own view then, that there is a second kind of humility, an existential humility. This is a humility about the human condition—finitude—generally. Snow develops this account with its two forms of humility in order to explain the situations where people are humbled, because she thinks that an adequate theory of humility will explain this experience.⁷⁹ She begins making a case for a kind of theory that can do this by claiming that being humbled occasions humility, so that, "the awareness of having wrongly exaggerated your merits is a consequence of the encounter."⁸⁰ As such, narrow humility is brought on by an acknowledgement of a personal failure or weakness. Acknowledgement is not enough, though, because, Snow claims, we need to care that we have failed. In order to be truly humbled, "we must acknowledge and care about our flaws. We must take them seriously and, whether mildly or deeply, be disturbed by having them."⁸¹ This is going

⁷⁸ Snow, "Humility," 206

⁷⁹ Snow, "Humility," 203

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 205

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 207

to be a painful experience, especially when one is humbled in the narrow sense, because narrow failings are personal by nature. Snow connects the two kinds of humility by claiming the experience of existential humility can be brought on by the experience of narrow humility, as it is natural to think that “an experience of personal failure or inability can give rise to more extensive reflections about the nature of the human condition.”⁸² So, on this account, recognizing a personal failing and caring deeply about it can often lead to the realization that this failing is a shared human failing. Through this relationship, Snow claims that existential humility will help alleviate the pain someone experiences when humbled in a narrow sense, because existential humility, “goes beyond humility about specific personal characteristics to include an aspect of the human condition in general, human finitude.”⁸³ Becoming concerned with general human limitation alleviates the pain that is brought on by acknowledgment of personal flaws, “by reminding us that limitations are part and parcel of the human condition, not the exclusive bane of individuals.”⁸⁴ Existential humility normalizes limitation in this way, so that it is not something to feel too dejected over when one fails, as everyone else also fails.

We can see these thoughts reflected in the behavior of Socrates and his interlocutors, I think. For Socrates could be construed as aiming to supply a humbling experience to his interlocutor, through having him recognize a personal failing, a lack of knowledge on whatever subject of which he claimed expertise. Socrates himself, we might think, has existential humility by Snow’s standards, if we take his claims seriously from earlier in the paper that only the god possesses the knowledge of good and bad. We see how the interlocutors take humbling

⁸² Ibid., 208

⁸³ Ibid., 207

⁸⁴ Snow, “Humility,” 208

experiences very badly by becoming embarrassed and angry, and we see how Socrates embraces the opportunity to be refuted. Snow would probably take this as evidence for her view, that we can see the behavior she predicts in someone who ought to be an example of the humble person.

To possess the virtue of existential humility is to possess a real understanding of the limitations of the human condition, Snow says, but also, “a feature common to such humbling experiences is an appreciation of the value of the reality that extends beyond your circumstances or transcends limitations imposed by the human condition.”⁸⁵ What this means is that when someone possesses the stable trait of existential humility, that person will also value something independent of herself, because there is an entity, reality, or goal by which she is consistently humbled. We can see for an example of this the way that Socrates values not only the best possible state of his soul, but also truth independent of his grasping of it.⁸⁶

On Snow’s view, humility is valuable both intrinsically and for its effects. Humility is valuable intrinsically because it is a kind of knowledge, and this is a claim based off the consent on the matter that knowledge just is intrinsically valuable. But even if one does not hold this view—for perhaps knowledge of trivial or bad things is not intrinsically valuable—still, self knowledge is usually considered an intrinsic good.⁸⁷ In this way Snow says potential negative consequences of humility, such as despair, do not make much of a difference to the way we should treat humility as a good. And she wants to say there are beneficial consequences which should simultaneously encourage someone to practice this trait. The beneficial effects of humility that Snow discusses are the same benefits the other authors writing on humility tend to mention

⁸⁵ Ibid., 208

⁸⁶ Plato, *Apology*, 29e

⁸⁷ Snow, “Humility,” 210

—she says humility fosters “compassion, the propensity to be forgiving, and the ability to ask forgiveness when appropriate, and checking vices, including improper pride, boastfulness, vanity, arrogance, and conceit.”⁸⁸ These benefits tend to follow from having humility because this is a view where humility just is “defined as the disposition to allow the awareness of and concern about your [personal or existential] limitations...have a realistic influence on your attitudes and behavior.”⁸⁹ This seems right, and does seem to be reflected in Socrates’ behavior as well. That is, Socrates’ epistemic humility manifests in his behavior and attitude in different ways, such as his desire to seek out and question others. Less obviously we might think what was said regarding Richards’ view and how it relates to Socrates brings out that Socrates’ awareness of his ignorance manifests in more of his attitudes and commitments than we may originally imagine, if we think it leads to merciful attitudes and doctrines.

Snow then goes on to respond to an objection to humility that is very relevant for our purposes. The objection is that humility, when continually exercised, reinforces a conception of oneself as limited and unsuccessful and in that way it curbs ambition, and hinders progress and acquisition of good qualities.⁹⁰ This is an objection that has been put forward by Hume, Nietzsche, and Spinoza in particular.⁹¹ The idea seems right; if a person is constantly aware of her limitations and taking them seriously so that she is “disturbed by having them,”⁹² it is bound

⁸⁸Ibid., 211

⁸⁹ Ibid., 210

⁹⁰ Snow, “Humility,” 212

⁹¹Snow, 211, when she frames this objection, cites Hume, *Treatise*, pp. 277; 598-599; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), pp. 204-205; and Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 185

⁹² Snow, “Humility,” 207

to lower the level of confidence she has in herself. This can become seriously problematic because low levels of confidence or self-esteem can stop a person from taking risks to pursue what is valuable or to achieve happiness. Nietzsche describes this phenomenon: “The trodden worm curls up. This testifies to its caution. It thus reduces its chances of being trodden upon again. In the language of morality: Humility.”⁹³ This criticism puts forward the view, then, that humility is a detriment to one’s flourishing because it leads to a wearing-down of proper pride, autonomy, self-respect, and other such qualities that reflect a good and right opinion about oneself, qualities which Snow labels ‘positive.’

Snow’s response to this objection is twofold. The first defense she gives is to say that if self-respect and other positive traits which contribute to success and happiness are already stable aspects of the person’s psychological makeup, then these can “keep reasonably in check the negative and potentially damaging psychological effects of humbling experiences.”⁹⁴ Snow does agree that humbling experiences can cause discouragement for a person with stable positive character traits, but she wants to argue against Nietzsche, Hume, and Spinoza by claiming that this distress will not result in debilitating effects. Instead, the traits that (if firmly developed) temper these bad effects have this ability to temper because these traits supply “a sense of merits and strengths that logically and psychologically counterbalances the awareness of and concern about deficiencies.”⁹⁵ Her defense, then, is the person who possesses self-respect and other such traits in a firm and stable way can, when she becomes humbled, keep her flaws in a proper

⁹³ Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*, Maxims and Missiles

⁹⁴ Snow, “Humility,” 213

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 213

perspective so that she does not become overwhelmed by her limitations. However, for someone who possesses a character that does not have stable or developed positive traits such as confidence or self respect, Snow is fine conceding that humbling experiences and the exercise of humility can impact the progress and development of positive traits, and that this can be detrimental. She says that this is one reason we see young children receive a great deal of encouragement from family and teachers—this is needed to counterbalance the potentially bad effects of humbling experiences because children do not yet have their own firm sense of pride or esteem to keep them encouraged.

Her second response to the worry is to remind us that on her account, humility is intrinsically valuable. As such, the potential detrimental consequences of humility do not matter as much as one might think to the question of whether one should practice humility. That it is intrinsically valuable is reason enough, “just as the intrinsic value of morality gives...reason to be moral in general. These reasons are independent of any advantages that the manipulation of humility or morality might afford oppressors, or disadvantages that it might cause for the oppressed.”⁹⁶

Snow concludes her paper by claiming that humility does not have to be in conflict with ambition. She gives an example case to argue this, of a student who is advised by a professor not go to law school but to become a paralegal. The student can ignore this advice and pursue a career in law with humility as long as this decision is based on accurate self-knowledge. And further, someone like this manifests humility in her behavior “by not being offended by the

⁹⁶ Snow, “Humility,” 214

advice, taking it in the spirit in which it was intended, and not showing wounded pride or vanity.”⁹⁷ In this case a person does not have to have a view of herself as limited in order to act humbly, so this shows that humility of character is compatible with ambition and high standards.

With these responses Snow takes herself to have sufficiently deflected the worry that Hume, Nietzsche, and Spinoza have put towards humility. Perhaps she has done this. Either way, it would certainly help persuade a reader that humility is a virtue to not stop at the claim that humility is merely compatible with ambition, aspiration, and having high standards.

Compatibility between these things is definitely something one would want to hold if one considers Socrates to be an example of a humble person, because we know that he has high aspirations and a great desire to gain knowledge. So it is good that Snow claims this. However, we know that viewing humility as merely compatible with ambition or aspiration is a weaker stance than Socrates’—for him, humility is not just compatible with having high aspirations, but it is in fact a source of these things, because humility is a source of desire. Snow is not alone in her departure from this Socratic view on humility, and among the theorists advocating for humility as an accurate conception of self, some do even accept the stronger claim that humility tends to result in a kind of contentment, in that it does not facilitate action.⁹⁸ However, when one wants to claim that humility is a virtue, then it seems clear that a useful theory to emphasize is Socrates’. Emphasizing how this trait plays a particular causal role in one’s possessing desire will be helpful to persuade people of its status as valuable, because one common complaint people voice against humility is usually that it hinders one’s motivation and desire. Humility’s

⁹⁷ Ibid., 214

⁹⁸ Kupfer, “The Moral Perspective of Humility,” 266, for example

role in desire is also just useful for contemporary theorists to emphasize because it seems true— if Socrates does have an accurate conception of himself, then when the reader sees that he is motivated to continue learning, it is not so unreasonable to think that this motivation is the result of his accurate conception. At least, if Snow or other contemporary theorists working on humility think this view is incompatible with their own conceptions of the trait, there should be some explanation for why humility as they conceive of it is merely a neutral trait, and not something that produces desire.

III. Conclusion

In the first section of this paper the goal was to introduce and explain Socrates' epistemic humility, and this humility, his beneficial ignorance, was explained through a discussion of his psychology of action. In particular his beneficial ignorance was addressed through a discussion of *acrasia*, or weakness of will. Understanding Socrates' denial of *acrasia* helps one understand his distinction between beneficial and harmful ignorance because it emphasizes his claim that bad action is done from ignorance. And of what is Socrates ignorant? Generally, one can say he lacks a *techné* knowledge, where if he had this knowledge he would be able to give an account, a *logos*. Here, when Socrates disavows knowledge, he is denying he has an adequate account where he could list the essential attributes of the thing. There are reasons to interpret Socrates' disavowal of knowledge as genuine, and the reason addressed in this paper is that one can explain Socrates' behavior, his commitment to practicing the *elenchus*, very smoothly when we take his disavowals seriously. This is because, on the interpretation where Socrates lacks

knowledge and is being genuine when he claims he lacks knowledge, he himself is an example of the desiring lover that he discusses in multiple dialogues.

Of the interpretations that do take Socrates' disavowal of knowledge seriously, I have discussed only two, Vlastos' and Nozick's, which interpret Socrates in very different ways. Vlastos views Socrates as using the term 'knowledge' equivocally, to describe a knowledge that is infallible which he does not possess and a knowledge which he does think he possesses, based on what he has learned through practicing his elenctic method. Nozick sees Socrates as denying not just knowledge full stop, but also true belief, in the sense that Nozick does not think Socrates believes his views to be true, but only to be better than his contemporaries'. Discussing these interpretations brings out, in particular, the way Socrates can be interpreted to have a humility about the capabilities of humanity in general—as saying that only the god is wise.

In the section on contemporary humility I attempted to show that there are real benefits to comparing Socrates' epistemic humility to contemporary theories of humility, for they illuminate and bolster one another in at least two interesting ways. First, studying contemporary theories of humility can make way for new kinds of interpretations of Socrates' theories. For in light of what Richards and others say about humility's causal relationship with mercy and forgiveness, one can develop an interpretation on the way Socrates' theories are related so that his disavowal of knowledge is a central feature that supports and leads to other important Socratic doctrines. Second, understanding Socrates' views on humility is very helpful when approaching the contemporary debate on it. This is because there is disagreement over whether humility is a virtue, and if one wants to advocate for its status as a virtue, in order to make the most persuasive argument, one should describe the reasons humility is good and should be cultivated. These

reasons will include the benefits of having the trait, and we can supply an impressive benefit by drawing from Socratic views on the matter. Furthermore, Socrates' position on how humility causes desire can seem reasonable, and if we are trying to get at the truth of what humility is, it would be good to entertain this thought more in the contemporary debate—at least to discuss why we should not be holding to it, if that is the general thought that Snow and others would take.

Looking forward, there is much to consider. In the realm of ancient philosophy, if we take up the view that Socrates has philosophical doctrines and behavior that could be described as merciful as Richards might say, then we seem to come into conflict with a view that Vlastos at one point advocated: that Socrates lacks love. A more in depth inquiry into mercy and love is required to explore this issue, but it is interesting to think that a discussion of humility might lead to a greater debate on the character of Socrates' philosophies, which seems like a much loftier result than a discussion on humility would cause. And in this same line of thought, if we take humility to be a cause of some of Socrates' doctrines (such as his view that all wrong action is done from a place of ignorance), then we are interpreting Socrates' philosophies in a new way where his disavowal of knowledge is central, with causal power. This seems like an important claim, and interesting on its own. An inquiry into how this conflicts with, or agrees with, other existing accounts about what Socrates' central doctrines are would be required to really put weight on this view. And if the foremost scholars on the subject argue that the text does not lead to this kind of interpretation, it might be a reason to doubt the contemporary theory that humility is supposed to cause mercy.

Beyond this, in the realm of the contemporary debate, emphasizing Socratic humility can help change the way humility is discussed. Right now one benefit often mentioned of humility is that one will have “reasonable expectations of oneself.”⁹⁹ This thought emphasizes that humility causes a kind of contentment so that, “humility enables us to accept success and failure, or simply competence and mediocrity, with equanimity.”¹⁰⁰ When one emphasizes the way that humility causes us to get better, as Socrates does, though, this version of humility as equanimity may be questioned, and scholars in this discussion might have to rethink their position on how humility and motivation are connected.

Overall, it has hopefully been emphasized persuasively that humility is an interesting and important trait for both ancient and contemporary philosophers to study.

⁹⁹ Richards, “Is Humility a Virtue?” 259

¹⁰⁰ Kupfer, “The Moral Perspective of Humility,” 266

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