SOCRATIC IGNORANCE, INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY AND INTELLECTUAL AUTONOMY

LEANDRO DE BRASI[1]
[1]https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6965-3665
Universidad de La Frontera
Department of Social Science
Temuco
Chile
leandro.debrasi@ufrontera.cl

MARCELO D. BOERI[2]
[2]https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5747-5782
Pontificia Universidad Catolica de Chile
Department of Philosophy
Santiago
Chile
mboeric@uc.cl

Article info
CDD: 183.2
Received: 16.04.2022; Revised: 11.12.2022; Accepted: 04.02.2023
https://doi.org/10.1590/0100-6045.2023.V46N1.LM

Keywords
Stubborn Ignorance
Knowledge Illusion
Cognitive Bias
Division of Labor
Intellectual Virtue

Abstract: A recent stream of epistemology gives special relevance to ignorance within the framework of an epistemological theory. Indeed, some want to give a significant role to ignorance in epistemological theorizing. In this paper, we argue that a particular sort of ignorance, which involves recognition of the fact that one is ignorant, is central to the acquisition of knowledge given the epistemic structure

of society. It is clear, we hold, that Socrates realized the relevance of what we call 'Socratic ignorance' in the acquisition of knowledge and was aware of the division of epistemic and cognitive labor that we find in our society. We shall explain the way we understand this Socratic ignorance, as opposed to what we will call 'stubborn ignorance' and the role this ignorance of Socratic overtones and related character traits can play in the acquisition of knowledge from others and with others.

Introduction

This paper deals with some theses and arguments ascribed to the philosopher Socrates, the character of some dialogues of Plato (especially the character that appears in the early dialogues). We make no attempt to suggest who the philosopher Socrates really is, nor do we endeavor to prove that, despite the many paradoxes we can find among the different dialogues, Socrates is a coherent thinker. One of our starting points is that Socrates displays a certain coherence; as some distinguished Plato scholars have indicated, one of the reasons why Socrates has become the model of the philosopher he became is rooted in the fact that he has been portrayed as someone for whom the coherence of thought, speech, and action were a highest priority (cf. Penner and Rowe, 2005, p.120, pp. 202-3; Brickhouse and Smith, 2010, p. 34). That said, Socrates uses the notions of *knowledge* and *ignorance* in ways that don't always cohere;[1]

[1] Some prevailing views regarding what 'Socratic ignorance' means are meant to account for Socrates' ignorance in relation to his irony, i.e., Socrates' 'dissimulation of ignorance': unlike the certainty of knowledge exhibited by his interlocutors, on one side, Socrates placed himself as an 'enthusiastic admirer' about their

notwithstanding, we attempt to trace some theses and arguments that, although they don't seem to coincide with other dialogues in all their details, a common thread can be found to describe a relatively coherent thought.

A recent stream of epistemology inspires the subject of this paper: an approach giving special relevance to ignorance within the framework of an epistemological theory. Epistemology as a philosophical discipline is usually understood as the theory of knowledge, which aims to explain the nature, scope and value, among other things, of knowledge, but leaves other epistemic goods relatively unexplored unless directly related to knowledge (e.g., some sort of epistemic justification thought to be required for it). Both in the lexicographical definitions that we find in ordinary dictionaries and those that are provided within the technical philosophical sphere, ignorance is the opposite of knowledge; thus, ignorance sometimes is understood as lack of knowledge (indeed this is the alleged standard view on what ignorance is; Le Morvan and Peels, 2016). It is in this

---

wisdom, while on the other he's worried about his total ignorance. As he doesn't know, he questions and wants to know (Giannantoni, 2005, p. 124; also p. 56, n.43). By contrast, others have argued that Socrates is portrayed by Plato as really believing he's ignorant; such views also point out that the real question is what that is supposed to amount to (Bett, 2011, p. 218). Other scholars, in adopting a unitarian rather than a developmentalist view, try to find a solution to the 'problem of Socratic ignorance' by arguing that there is some textual evidence where Socrates makes 'an explicit knowledge claim', and thereby attempt to resolve the problem of Socratic ignorance by maintaining that Socrates' disavowals of knowledge are ironic and must be rejected (McPartland 2013, pp. 95-96). Our view on the problem of Socratic ignorance is much simpler: we emphasize that Socrates recognizes that he is ignorant; we also regard such recognition as a sort of epistemic virtue.

sense that it can be argued that knowledge and ignorance are complementary terms: subject *S* is ignorant of the fact that *p* if and only if *S* doesn't know that *p* (Goldman and Olsson, 2009, pp.19-20). Now, saying that ignorance is lack of knowledge seems to be an appropriate characterization of a kind of ignorance, but it is silent about higher-order kinds and it certainly doesn't say much about its role, if any, in the epistemological domain. Now, it's difficult, and isn't our aim, to provide an exhaustive taxonomy of ignorance, given that the phenomenon of ignorance is as complex and many-faceted as that of knowledge. So, for example, just like there is ability knowledge, there is its corresponding ignorance (for this and other kinds of ignorance, see e.g., Nottelmann, 2016). Moreover, these phenomena are produced and sustained in various ways (see e.g., Alcoff, 2007). Further, often in the literature, the notion of ignorance is mainly applied to particular propositions. Here, however, given that we are concerned with meta-level ignorance (ignorance about one's ignorance) and the fact that often one can be aware that one doesn't know various truths but one cannot be in a position to identify any specific truths one doesn't know, we are also concerned with domains of knowledge (set of propositions). Moreover, if one is ignorant about some domain then one, at least, lacks much knowledge that the expert on that domain possesses. Just as being an expert on some domain has a comparative element (fn.3), so does being ignorant about some domain. And just as one needn't have absolutely all the knowledge on some domain to be an expert, one needn't lack all of it to be ignorant about that domain. Therefore, we can say, mirroring the distinction between propositional and objectual understanding, that our focus is also on 'objectual ignorance' (i.e., ignorance of subject matters). In fact, here, we often focus on the fact that there are some subject matters on which we are ignorant, but we can have awareness of that ignorance, and we consider

the role that Socratic ignorance (understood, roughly, as first-order or object-level ignorance without second-order or meta-level ignorance; cf. Nottelmann 2016, p.54) plays in knowledge practices, particularly in its acquisition *from* and *with* others. [2] We contrast this Socratic ignorance to a particular form of ignorance, which is the product of certain epistemic attitudes and habits such as epistemic arrogance (Medina 2013, p.39), which we label 'stubborn ignorance'.

Although the issue of ignorance has been much neglected in epistemology (Peels and Blaauw, 2016, pp. 1-3), recent approaches in epistemological debates want to give ignorance an important role in epistemological theorizing (see e.g., Medina, 2013; Le Morvan and Peels, 2016; Sullivan and Tuana, 2007; Townley, 2011). In this paper, we argue that the particular kind of ignorance of Socratic overtones we are considering is central to the acquisition of knowledge given the epistemic structure of society, which concerns the social and institutional epistemic arrangements of society, including, importantly for our purposes, the division of epistemic and cognitive labor to be found in different

[2] Interestingly, Pritchard (2016, p.132) points out that, although ignorance is a *negative* epistemic position, it doesn't follow from this that it is a *disvaluable* epistemic position. Traditionally, ignorance has been taken to be a negative epistemic standing, but within this approach it's regarded as a valuable epistemic standing. Now, if ignorance isn't merely taken as 'lack of knowledge' and if one would like to claim that ignorance can have epistemic value (Pritchard 2016, p.134), there is a way in which this approach is close to the sort of ignorance of Socratic overtones we would like to exploit in this paper. Unlike what Socrates argues, Pritchard states that in some cases knowledge can be disvaluable. But like Socrates, Pritchard thinks that ignorance can be epistemically valuable and related to certain character traits (2016, p.135; pp.141-2).

epistemic practices. These divisions of labor, which seem to be very important and natural facets of the structure of society, are two central social arrangements, which are instantiated across society including in its many epistemic institutions (such as science—where both divisions of labor can be very easily appreciated) and which seem to occur in every society (indeed, some appreciation of this organization is shown quite early in childhood; see e.g., Lutz and Keil 2002; Keil *et al.* 2008).

Of course, we don't intend to suggest that Socrates had already noted *all* the difficulties associated with the (sometimes positive) role of ignorance in an epistemological project and, in particular, in the aforementioned divisions of labor, or that his project was an 'epistemological project' in the contemporary sense of the expression. Nevertheless, clearly Socrates realized the relevance of a certain kind of ignorance in the acquisition of knowledge and was aware of the division of epistemic and cognitive labor that we can find in our society. In what follows, we will explain the way we understand the so-called 'Socratic ignorance', as opposed to what we will call 'stubborn ignorance', and the role that ignorance can be taken to play in Socrates' philosophy and specially in the acquisition of knowledge from others and with others. Quickly put, Socratic ignorance is the explicit acknowledgment of a lack of knowledge in a specific cognitive field, while stubborn ignorance is the kind of ignorance belonging to a 'foolish person' (*Theaetetus* 176e-177a, especially 195a): someone who is unable to recognize that she is ignorant or, more specifically, who suffers, as we'll say, knowledge illusions. We'll discuss the Socratic tenet, according to which the worst kind of ignorance is believing that one knows what one really doesn't know, a view that appears for the first time in the 'Socratic dialogues' (*Apology* 21d) and remains intact until the later dialogues (*Theaetetus* 210c; *Sophist* 229c). As we'll see, while stubborn ignorance

hinders the aforementioned divisions of labor, which are a crucial part of the epistemic structure of society, Socratic ignorance, which is related to both intellectual humility and autonomy, enables them.

As it will be clear in what follows, our main point is a *combination* of historical and systematic aspects. We are aware that this kind of approach may disturb both Plato scholars and 'constructive' philosophers. We hold that Plato can be brought into discussion with contemporary philosophy, inasmuch as he still has something to say in a strong systematic way. Thus, our approach to him will be both 'historical' and systematic. Given that, the paper proceeds as follows. First, we consider the division of epistemic and cognitive labor and introduce the knowledge illusion which the ignorant is likely to suffer and which results in stubborn ignorance. Next, we consider the role of Socratic ignorance in the acquisition of knowledge from and with others and introduce the kind of intellectual humility and autonomy that Socratic ignorance is related to. Both character traits are of course exemplified in Socrates and we show how they are required to exploit the aforementioned epistemic structure and to fight stubborn ignorance. Finally, we offer some brief concluding remarks.

Testimony and knowledge illusions

Socrates says that he is aware that he is not wise *at all* (*Apology of Socrates* 21b4-5); thus, if he doesn't know anything at all, he must turn to the putative experts (or some other epistemic authority[3]). This is precisely what Socrates does in the

[3] Minimally, a genuine expert (and not merely a putative one) has at her disposal an extensive and integrated body of specialist knowledge, relating both to facts and relevant methodologies. An

Apology: given that he considers himself to be ignorant, he seeks people who are supposed to have the relevant expertise. If one is ignorant in a given field of expertise and notices that one disagrees with an expert in that field, one typically should adopt the expert's viewpoint. But what evidence can a layperson have, that someone who declares to be an expert actually knows what she claims to know? Socrates warned us about this issue. In the *Charmides*, for instance, Socrates argues that one may not be able 'to distinguish the one who pretends to be a doctor, although she is not, from the one who actually is, or any other among those who have knowledge of those who do not have it' (170d-e; our transl.). The difficulty that we all have as laypeople is how to evaluate the putative experts (see Goldman, 2001; Coady, 2012).

Reliance on the expertise of others, however, is a pervasive feature of modern life and the above issue is of

---

epistemic authority has some knowledge that the receiver of testimony seeks but needn't be an expert (Croce 2017, pp.2-4; cf. Zagzebski 2012, p.109). An expert, although an epistemic authority, is normally taken to possess a significantly greater store of knowledge about the relevant subject matter than most people (in one's community). Moreover, some non-comparative threshold of knowledge must be possessed, as well as possessing the capacity to form true beliefs to new questions which may be posed within the subject matter (Goldman 2001; cf. Coady 2012). Given that in this paper we focus on the acquisition of knowledge *from* and *with* others, in cases of testimony (as a case of acquisition of knowledge from others), we center on the *audience* as opposed to the *testifier*. More specifically, we consider how the Socratic ignorance, as opposed to stubborn ignorance, of the audience can help in the testimonial exchange, by noticing two-character traits of such an audience. The related character traits of the testifier aren't here considered (cf. Croce, 2017, pp. 19-21—who focuses instead only on those character traits).

course a more manageable one than having to learn a new domain of knowledge. Moreover, given that no one can know everything (or that much, for that matter) and the fact that we live in a society with hyper-specialized knowledge that distributes the epistemic work among different people, it is more desirable to learn the skills to discriminate between good and bad sources (including experts and other authorities) of testimony (as well as contents). If you want to know some health-related issue, then it is a doctor's testimony (i.e., the testimony of the expert physician) that you might want to seek, so to be able to know about it. One needs not know everything, nor can one. Each of us has a role to play in the division of epistemic labor and each can, in principle, rely on others for the specialized knowledge not possessed.

However, at least since Descartes, the focus in epistemology (in part of the Western tradition) has been very much on the individual. Descartes takes an extreme version of epistemic autonomy as a fundamental epistemic value (e.g., AT VI 9, 17). For Descartes, only one's own epistemic achievement can render some belief knowledge, and only for oneself: knowledge is a personal feat. More generally, a given belief can only have a positive epistemic status for its possessor if such status is achieved through the possessor's capacities (e.g., perception, memory and reason). The *Cartesian* ideal of autonomy (metaphorically put, that the individual epistemic agent ought to stand on her own epistemic feet) that lies behind this picture is what seems to motivate the individualism adopted by the tradition. Descartes sets out the view that knowledge can be achieved only if one isn't influenced by traditions or the community. Knowledge requires autonomy as absence of external interference. And traditional analytical epistemology remains since then firmly individualistic in this Cartesian way.

However, one overlap between (much) contemporary social and feminist epistemology is their emphasis on the importance of the social/communal aspects of knowledge-yielding practices, *contra* Descartes. For them, a solipsistic knower is implausible: there is no viable 'Robinson Crusoe' conception of knowledge. The main focus of dissatisfaction with traditional epistemology derives from its neglect of our epistemic interdependence. But taking this dependence seriously isn't just a matter of expanding our testimonial dependence, it also means recognizing the more complex practices of interdependence found in our division of epistemic and cognitive labor that aren't reducible to transmitting knowledge. It's a mistake to take information sharing as exhausting the forms of epistemic dependence to which our beliefs are subjected (Goldberg 2011, Pritchard 2015, Townley 2011). In fact, in epistemic communities, members not only share information, but also act as exemplars, co-operators and trainers, among other things. Some are exemplars and mentors for me as a knower; some enable me to fine-tune and improve my epistemic standards and practices; some assist each other generating and calibrating their arguments and reasons for beliefs (as seen below).

So, our epistemic reliance on others needn't be limited to instances in which one exploits an inter-personal knowledge-yielding procedure, such as testimony. It can be, and it is (Mercier and Sperber, 2017; Simon, 2015; Wagenknecht, 2017) much more pervasive. Indeed, the epistemic structure of society with its range of social and institutional arrangements, including its division of epistemic and cognitive labor, doesn't require us to teach all the facts to everyone and to teach people to think only on their own. This is so if we understand the division of epistemic labor as the distribution, across people, of cognitive work to separately and unidirectionally perform distinct epistemic

tasks required for some positive epistemic status. For example, in testimony, the speaker and the hearer perform different but complementary tasks (competent inquiry and legitimate acceptance, respectively) in order for the hearer's testimonially-based belief to be justified or knowledge. Having said that, it would be a mistake to think that the division of epistemic labor merely concerns the *transmission* of some epistemic good (more on this immediately below). This division can take place, for example, with regard to the epistemic norms or procedures that one exploits (De Brasi 2015). Nevertheless, here we focus on the (less controversial) knowledge-transmission aspect of the division of epistemic labor. Moreover, we understand the division of cognitive labor as the distribution, across people, of cognitive work to jointly and bidirectionally perform a given epistemic task required for some positive epistemic status. For example, in deliberation of the interpersonal form, the interlocutors exchange and evaluate reasons and arguments in order to acquire some epistemic good, e.g., knowledge about some issue (the phenomenon is properly introduced below). In this natural and ubiquitous sort of deliberation, the interlocutors are jointly tackling the same epistemic tasks. Here we focus on this sort of divided but joint production of epistemic goods via deliberation, which is found in much collaborative work (from hunting decisions to scientific research; see e.g., Mercier and Sperber, 2017; Wagenknecht, 2017).

Given our social and cooperative nature, one would expect some such social arrangements to be in place to help us overcome our epistemic and cognitive limitations. So, as seen, in the case of experts (and other epistemic authorities, including those who enjoy some 'positional advantage'— Williams 2002, p. 42), they are there to be exploited and people should learn how to do so in order to guarantee a healthy epistemic community. To ignore expert advice is

simply not a realistic option, at least due to the fact that no one can know everything (or much) and the hyper-specialization found in modern societies. This implies that each one of us is ignorant (or has very little knowledge in relation to experts) about many different domains. But this (partial) ignorance isn't malign, given the division of epistemic labor, where each one of us can, in principle, rely on others for the specialized knowledge one doesn't possess. Therefore, one should learn how to do so in order to avoid certain shortcomings (and so promote a healthy epistemic community). To this end, it's important to be able to recognize that others can know more than oneself about certain things: the domains that they specialize in and one doesn't. More precisely, one ought to be able to recognize one's ignorance and be capable of depending epistemically on others in certain circumstances.

However, the ignorant (understood as the one lacking significant knowledge on some domain, as opposed to the expert) normally lacks the capacity required to recognize their ignorance, as we will see below. This can generate in the ignorant an illusion regarding the amount of knowledge they possess, which is sometimes referred to as a *knowledge illusion*. This phenomenon is widely observed and due partly to the division of epistemic labor, given that people tend to confuse what experts and others know with what they know (Sloman and Fernbach, 2017, pp. 127-9; Fisher *et al.*, 2015). Those who suffer from knowledge illusions are overconfident about how much they know (2017, p.263). Complicating matters, this overconfidence increases as our ignorance does. We all suffer from an overconfidence bias (e.g., Hoffrage, 2017), by which we have the impression to be better informed than we actually are and become more confident about our views than we should. But leaving aside this general tendency, there is the particular Dunning-Kruger effect that the more ignorant (and, in general, incompetent)

one is, the more confident one tends to be that one isn't actually ignorant (Kruger and Dunning, 1999; Dunning, 2022). Ignorant people (understood as the ones that lack significant knowledge on some domain compared to the expert) crucially often lack knowledge about what they don't know. Given their lack of second-order knowledge, they are particularly blessed by overconfidence in their domains of ignorance.[4] Not only do they reach erroneous conclusions but also, and more importantly, their ignorance robs them of the ability to realize how ignorant they are and this in turn allows them to grow in confidence.

Given the above, the worst enemy of knowledge isn't ignorance but the illusion of knowing (i.e., falsely believing to possess knowledge). As seen, for human beings living in hyper-specialized knowledge communities, (first-order) ignorance is inevitable, but this ignorance isn't malign given the epistemic structure of society with its division of epistemic labor. The means exist to outsource knowledge. Therefore, given one isn't ignorant about one's ignorance with respect to some domain (i.e., one doesn't suffer from a knowledge illusion on a given domain) and about the outside suppliers of knowledge (as well as having the skills to discriminate between sources), ignorance (about some domain) isn't the worst state to be in; being in a knowledge illusion is, given that such an illusion would deter one from exploiting the epistemic structure in place to overcome the relevant ignorance.

---

[4] Notice we all lack significant knowledge on some domain compared to the expert, so this claim is likely to apply to many of us, except for those people, for example, who are skeptical of their own cognitive capacities. Yet notice further that, given the division of physical labor (there are doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc.), many have specialist expertise.

We shall see next that Socratic ignorance, understood as explicit acknowledgement of one's ignorance on a given domain (i.e., first-order ignorance without second-order ignorance), allows one's ignorance about some domain not to be malign, since it enables us to exploit the epistemic structure of society and, in particular, its division of labor. However, stubborn ignorance, understood as the result of some knowledge illusion within some domain (i.e., first-order ignorance with second-order ignorance due to one falsely believing to know what one doesn't know), renders one's ignorance malign.[5]

Dialogical discussion and intellectual humility

When one notices that another is 'wiser' or more competent than oneself in a specific area of expertise (and, of course, competent enough on that area) and is aware that one is in disagreement with such a person, one should typically accept her testimony: if your doctor tells you that your lifestyle is harmful to you (you drink and smoke excessively, you don't exercise enough nor take care of your diet) and you acknowledge that your doctor is an expert in that domain, you must accept her testimony (regardless of whether you change your lifestyle; for a similar approach in Plato, but in a different context, cf. *Theaetetus* 178c-d). Accepting the doctor's testimony means recognizing that the content of what she said is very likely true (and, more importantly, more likely to be true than what one, as a layperson, believes). But

[5] As one reviewer rightly points out, this is just on variety of second-order ignorance. For example, one could suspend judgement instead of believing (falsely), but we are here interested in the kind of second-order ignorance entailed by the false belief that one knows.

the Socrates of some Platonic dialogues shows with some frequency the fact that people can be particularly resistant to changing their minds, even when someone shows them that they are or are very likely to be in error. There is a very clear Platonic passage in this respect which describes this fact very well. The character Philebus says: 'I think (Ἐμοὶ … δοκεῖ) and *I will continue to think* (δόξει) that pleasure completely wins' (*Philebus* 12a7; our transl.). This kind of recalcitrant attitude justifies that Plato chooses to leave the character Philebus out of the debate. This character describes a type of person who prefers to dogmatically preserve his beliefs without taking the chance to present them to the scrutiny of dialogical discussion (this shows that he renounces confronting his view 'making use of logical argumentation', which always presupposes receiving criticism and being potentially refutable; Gadamer, 1999, p.187, see also Davidson 2005, pp.252-4). The attitude of persisting in the belief one has and the disinterest in submitting it to examination reveals a very non-philosophical attitude on Philebus' part; it is an epistemically arrogant attitude that shows one's lack of sensibility towards one's fallibility and cognitive shortcomings.

Nonetheless, people in general, like the character Philebus,[6] believe much of what they do believe for the same *proximate* cause: namely, it seems true to them (say, after having considered some evidence). In other words, something seeming true is often the proximate cause for

[6] Socrates was very much aware that humans are often unwilling to get rid of their own beliefs. As he often says or suggests, people believe what they believe because they think it is true. In fact, nobody believes that what he or she believes is false (for evidence see *Charmides* 166d-167a. But see also *Theaetetus* 171a6-7; b1-5; 200a3; *Sophist* 228c-d). For a similar approach in Davidson, see his 2001, p. 4.

forming beliefs, whatever the distal cause is. But our beliefs have different distal causes, and not all epistemically proper ones. Assuming the primary epistemic aim of belief is truth and that (good) evidence for some belief makes the belief more likely to be true, non-evidential causes of belief such as biases (e.g., in-group bias) and emotional factors (e.g., wishful thinking) don't count as epistemically proper distal causes. These non-evidential factors don't increase the likelihood that the belief is true, though most beliefs seem true to one, regardless of their distal cause. So, their seeming correct to one cannot put to rest the challenges raised against them, like Philebus, due to his epistemic arrogance, might seem to believe.

By contrast, for Plato, the healthy intellectual attitude and commitment to dialogical discussion presuppose being able to review one's beliefs and, if necessary, modify them. One can then understand Socrates as promoting a sort of intellectual humility. This holds true if intellectual humility is understood as the virtuous mean between epistemic arrogance and self-deprecation: neither does the intellectually humble person overestimate her knowledge and epistemic capacities, nor does she underestimate them. In particular, intellectual humility reduces epistemic arrogance (without underappreciation of one's knowledge and epistemic capacities) by promoting a doubting attitude owing to the recognition of our fallibility (due to biases, prejudices, etc.) and our knowledge limitation (due to finite cognitive power, time, etc.). This dimension of intellectual humility makes clear how it can help us recognize one's ignorance (both about some particular proposition and, more generally, about some domain). Moreover, intellectual humility also seems to involve a disposition to change and make up one's mind even on the basis of others' opinions. After all, it seems that if the recognition doesn't impact on one's opinions, then it is difficult to think of it as such. This

dimension of intellectual humility makes clear how it can help us depend epistemically on others in certain circumstances. Given the above, intellectual humility can, at least, be understood as some sort of confidence management (of one's beliefs and epistemic capacities) that allows us to make epistemically proper use of others (cf. Baehr, 2015; Church and Samuelson, 2017; Kidd, 2016; Roberts and Wood, 2007).

Furthermore, according to Plato, 'search is shared' (Gill 2004, p. 286, n.7; p. 289, n.13; 2007, pp. 64-5) and refutation shouldn't be understood as an insult, but as a kind of a corrective of one's error. It is what guarantees that one is capable of reviewing one's own opinion and, if necessary, correct it (cf. *Gorgias* 458a2-b1—discussed below; see also *Euthydemus* 295a and *Sophist* 230b-e). So Socrates also seems to be suggesting we learn to exploit some division of cognitive labor. It is together, by presenting different reasons for and against a thesis, that we argue towards the truth. This sort of division of cognitive labor is seen in all sorts of deliberations, not merely philosophical, and increases the chances of reaching the truth. In fact, the confirmation (or 'myside') bias, as Hugo Mercier (2017) and Mercier-Sperber (2017, pp. 218-219; 317-318) show, applies to collecting and seeking reasons, not evaluating it. This is a bias to confirm whatever view one happens to be entertaining. But arguing involves both producing arguments and evaluating them and when it comes to evaluating arguments, people can accept others' good arguments. Even when people are extremely confident about some view, they can change it if the arguments suggest it (Mercier and Sperber, 2017, pp. 295, 307, 318 *et passim*; see also Fishkin, 2011 and Hess and McAvoy, 2015). So, given argumentation—and more generally deliberation—evolved to work in an interactive setting (Mercier and Sperber 2017, p. 228), the confirmation bias becomes part of an elegant and useful way of dividing

cognitive labor. This bias makes each subject come up with a (relevantly strong) case in favor of their views, like two opposing lawyers in a trial, to then evaluate (as non-battling sides) the arguments together, where each party controls the quality of the reasons provided by the other and tailors their arguments to the specific objections raised. This interactive process of argument production and evaluation involves a division of cognitive labor that in fact renders the confirmation bias a useful feature of the mind, as opposed to a mere bug (that is, a systematic tendency that prevents us from believing what we epistemically ought to believe).

We have emphasized above the relevance of a division of cognitive labor; in particular, the Socratic view that inquiry or research is 'a shared task' shows, as argued, that both producing and evaluating arguments together can help us improve our epistemic performance, not least because the dialogical discussion helps to put our own beliefs under review. An interesting aspect of this emerges once again from Socrates. Apparently, he isn't willing to accept the testimony of the oracle of Delphi regarding his own wisdom. When in the *Apology* the oracle tells Chaerephon that no one is 'wiser' than Socrates (21a6: σοφώτερον) and that he is 'the wisest' (21b5: σοφώτατον), Socrates seems to have doubts. But the gods aren't liars and aren't wrong; Socrates doesn't seem to be skeptical about what was said, but rather is trying to understand the meaning of what was said, given that he has a firm conviction regarding his ignorance (*Apology* 21b7; see also Brickhouse and Smith 2000, p.77). Socrates thinks that what the god says is true although he doesn't understand it yet. So he examines what the oracle says in order to try to understand it.

After questioning the putative experts (politicians, poets, artisans) to 'examine' the god's *dictum*, Socrates warns that he understands why he is 'the wisest', as the god says. He has been able to reconcile what the god says ('Socrates is the

wisest') with what he believes about himself (that he is ignorant) through an interpretation of the Delphic *dictum*: he is the wisest partly because he doesn't think he knows what he doesn't know (*Apology* 21b2-d5-7).[7] In other words, he doesn't suffer from knowledge illusions and, more importantly, he reached that conclusion through the shared research or inquiry with the Pythia (the spokesperson of the Oracle).

When Socrates begins to put into practice his method to examine if someone who claims to be an expert in a given field of expertise actually is, he begins with the politician (*Apology* 21c3). He starts by emphasizing the fact that he addressed 'one of those who *seemed* to be wise' (probably, in the sense of 'one of those who had a reputation as a wise person'; cf. *Apology* 21b8: ἐπί τινα τῶν δοκούντων σοφῶν). After putting into practice the method of examination consisting of questions related to the supposed knowledge the putative expert is meant to possess, Socrates concludes that he is wiser than the politician because, although neither of them knows anything worthwhile, the politician believes that he knows something, although he doesn't. As Socrates recalls, when conversing with the politician (21c5) it seemed to him that not only many other people believed that the politician was wise, but *especially the politician himself*. Surely this emphasis isn't trivial (the alleged expert thought he was an expert). In fact, the politician, a putative expert, displays the psychological state of the individual who has no doubts about his own knowledge after being examined and not

[7] As a reviewer has pointed out, merely not falsely believing that one has knowledge doesn't really make one wise; otherwise, a skeptic would turn out to be wise. We agree with this but Socrates is not, unlike the skeptic, closed (in principle) to acquiring knowledge, plus, as we shall see, Socrates' ignorance is related to intellectual humility and autonomy.

being able to answer Socrates' questions successfully, thus revealing a certain epistemic arrogance. Socrates, on the other hand, doesn't know, nor does he think he knows (*Apology* 21d4-7), leading him to conclude that he is wiser than the politician 'because of this small detail' (21d6: σμικρῷ τινι): he doesn't think he knows what he doesn't know (cf. Plato, *Apology* 41b; *Alcibiades* I 117d; *Theaetetus* 201c; *Sophist* 229c). In section 21b-d of the *Apology*, the 'consciousness' Socrates claims to possess from the beginning of the passage, an awareness according to which he isn't wise at all, is contrasted later with the stubborn ignorance he mentions again in *Apology* 29b1-2 ('the most blameworthy ignorance –ἀμαθία ἡ ἐπονείδιστος– is to believe that one knows what one doesn't know') and to which, as we'll see, it returns with peculiar emphasis in the *Sophist*. This dialogue surely is very late in the philosophical production of Plato, but it maintains intact a powerful idea of an early dialogue such as the *Apology*.

Dialogical discussion and intellectual autonomy

Socrates, as it was already mentioned, says that he is aware that (*Apology* 21b4: σύνοιδα) he is not wise at all (he doesn't have first-order knowledge) and that he doesn't think he is (i.e., he doesn't think he has first-order knowledge; 21d5-6).[8] He thought that was basic to the philosophical task: one of the starting points from which one begins to philosophize.

[8] This makes Socrates wise in the sense that, although he lacks first-order knowledge, he doesn't have second-order ignorance (ignorance about his first-order ignorance), and so he has Socratic ignorance. Once this second sense is noted, it isn't paradoxical to say that Socrates' awareness that he isn't wise (i.e., he doesn't have first-order knowledge) makes him wise (in this second sense).

In the *Sophist* he repeats it again and with a slightly more dramatic emphasis, when he says that knowing in the strict sense is *believing* (ἡγούμενον) that one knows just the things one does know and no more (230c8-d5).

A little earlier in the dialogue the topic of ignorance as a certain deficiency in the soul had been discussed; the Visitor concludes that it is 'a huge (μέγα) and difficult (χαλεπόν) kind of ignorance' (ἄγνοια) to believe that one knows if, in fact, one doesn't know (*Sophist* 229c1-5).[9] It seems that stubborn ignorance can be linked to epistemic arrogance that prevents a person from being able to properly understand a better argument or reason. The one who is in that psychological state is incapable of doubting himself; arguments aren't likely to be persuasive against the stubborn ignorance of someone (this ignorance being understood as the result of some knowledge illusion regarding some domain). It is quite clear that the stubbornness (which is tantamount to stupidity, a sort of stupidity that could be associated with ignorance) implied by Plato in many passages of his dialogues (see notably *Theaetetus* 176e-177a) cannot be understood in terms of lack of certain cognitive contents, but it should be considered as a state consisting of being incapable of admitting one's mistake and in believing oneself to know what one doesn't really know (for this interesting point see *Republic* 585b3-4, where ignorance and stupidity are understood as 'emptiness' of a psychic condition). In other

[9] At *Meno* 84a, Plato shows the two moments of the philosophical conversation and the psychological state of the one who is interrogated: before the conversation the slave didn't know what an eight-foot surface was ('he doesn't know *yet*'; 84a5-6), but 'he believed he knew and he answered with confidence as if he knew' (ὡς εἰδώς; 84a6-7). After the philosophical debate, the slave is at odds (*aporia*), and although he doesn't know, he doesn't believe he knows.

words, failing to possess intellectual humility (which helps us avoid knowledge illusions).[10]

In a memorable passage of Plato's *Gorgias* (458a2-b1) Socrates states that he is pleased to be refuted if he says something untrue, but not more displeased to be refuted than to refute, because he believes that the greater good (μεῖζον ἀγαθόν) is to be refuted, for there is no evil so great for someone as false opinion (δόξα ψευδής) about the subject discussed. That Socrates is glad to be refuted displays the proper humility that is necessary in order to advance the search for truth. That he is pleased to refute someone else shows autonomy on Socrates' part, but such intellectual autonomy shouldn't be understood in the sense that his own view is unquestionable (below we explain how this autonomy should be understood). Any belief is potentially refutable, but if one has some strong reasons to believe what one does, one can allow oneself to correct another person's belief.

Now, to take advantage of the benefits of exploiting the divisions of epistemic and cognitive labors (as Socrates was aware), a particular intellectual character is required. Such character not only requires the subject to be intellectually humble, as seen above, but also intellectually autonomous. Autonomy is not a matter of sheer independence, but of what one does with one's dependence. In the case of epistemic autonomy, it reduces sheer epistemic dependence on others, by promoting a willingness and ability to think critically for oneself in judging views (as Socrates does), without capitulating to hyper-individualism (cf. Baehr 2015; Roberts and Wood 2007; Siegel, 2017, pp. 89ff.). Given that,

[10] The claim here is that this stubbornness implies the lack of intellectual humility (as understood above). But lack of intellectual humility need not imply stubbornness. After all, one can also be *too* humble.

in the shared research or inquiry, each party controls the quality of the reasons and arguments provided by the opposing party and tailors their reasons and arguments to the objections raised, this virtue thus also plays a central role in it.

Note that the aforementioned Cartesian ideal of autonomy promotes one of the vicious extremes: hyper-individualism or sheer epistemic independence (the other one being sheer epistemic dependence). It is worth noting this since one might otherwise think that intellectual autonomy is in tension with intellectual humility. However, intellectual autonomy involves some sort of dependence management; after all, it enables us to discriminate between the good and bad contributions of others. So not only is intellectual autonomy not in tension with intellectual humility (the former involves the management of our epistemic dependence and the latter of our epistemic confidence so to be open to epistemic dependence), but it is also required to identify trustworthy sources (including experts) and plausible contents (just like Socrates does), when having to depend epistemically on others. In fact, this epistemic monitoring is part of the skills we require in order to successfully exploit the division of epistemic labor already in place.

Socrates' view that the 'unexamined life is not worth living for a human being' (*Apology* 38a5-6) may suggest that everyone must scrutinize their beliefs on their own. But this passage shouldn't be read as invoking a hyper-individualistic approach, given that he speaks of examining himself *and others* (38a4-5) and that such examination involves a dialogical discussion (see, e.g., *Theateteus* 165e-167a, where the roles of the interlocutors are swapped). As suggested, there is no tension between humility and autonomy and, in fact, the above Socratic autonomy involves the ability to distinguish a trustworthy from a non-trustworthy source of

knowledge. If Socratic ignorance, understood as the recognition of one's ignorance in a specific field of expertise, is to be virtuous—as Socrates thinks it is (as well as the Oracle, who claims he is the wisest)—it must involve intellectual autonomy, understood as the willingness and ability to critically judge the content of one's beliefs and those of others as well as the ability to discriminate between trustworthy and untrustworthy sources, so to take advantage of the divisions of epistemic and cognitive labor. Socratic ignorance, as a state that promotes the acquisition of knowledge from and with others, requires both intellectual humility and autonomy. Furthermore, given that intellectual humility and autonomy make us wiser because of the proper acknowledgement of our limitations, which opens us to depend epistemically on others and so exploit the divisions of labor found in the epistemic structure of society, and the appropriate critical assessment of others' views, which hinders credulity (see also Oakes *et al.*, 2019; Ryan, 2012), it is then easy to appreciate how Socrates, who enjoys this Socratic ignorance, is the wisest.

Conclusion

Socrates continuously questions beliefs. In the *Charmides* he is, like in other early dialogues of Plato, the implacable interrogator, who asks the most difficult questions and, after examining the answers given by his interlocutors, presents the most devastating objections and refutes the answers of the one who was interrogated. He is also the one who professes his ignorance (165b) and declares that he asks because he doesn't know and that his only purpose in

questioning is 'to examine himself' (cf.166d-e).[11] In addition, the dialogue (understood as an argumentative debate) is the shared search or inquiry and supposes the abandonment of a solipsistic approach. But for the dialogue to be effective as a shared activity, it must be a conversation without rivalry (φιλονικία), because if one is involved in a philosophical conversation (Socratically conceived), one is not competing or giving battle, so that one or the other prevails. The truly philosophical speakers 'are allies for the sake of the truest' (Plato, *Philebus* 14b1-7; see also *Laches* 194a), and they need to exploit the division of epistemic and cognitive labor that is already in place and for which they require at least the above two character traits.

It's important to make clear that none of the above is limited, nor is it intended to be limited by Socrates, to philosophical beliefs or opinions. In all domains of life (given our need for truth and our limitations), we are meant to be able to exploit the above divisions of labor. To both

[11] The same idea can be found in *Laches* 186d-e. Besides, if as Plato says through his spokesman Critias, knowing yourself isn't a mere greeting, but it is the same as 'be sensible,' and if being sensible is being able to assess the limits of one's knowledge, being sensible and knowing oneself is the same as recognizing one's own ignorance, an ignorance one always will have to the extent that one will never be able to know everything. In asking questions, Socrates, as recently pointed out by Croce (2017, p. 17), doesn't tell anyone that such and such is the case. Socrates' questions guide interlocutors to understand things for themselves in the framework of a 'maieutic process'. This procedure, Croce maintains, provides people with reasons to expand their understanding 'in a very indirect way'. However, in a sense this practice cannot be 'indirect' at all. A Socratic conversation supposes a very close involvement between the two interlocutors; additionally, Socrates' 'maieutic powers' have no effect without the feedback of the other interlocutor.

consume and produce knowledge (or, minimally, be more likely to arrive at the truth), we depend on others. Therefore, the proper regulation of our beliefs goes hand-in-hand with certain attitudes and dispositions that the intellectually humble and autonomous subject possesses, which make the epistemically positive Socratic ignorance possible.[12]

References

Alcoff, L. 2007. 'Epistemologies of Ignorance: Three Types' in Sullivan, S., Tauna, N. (eds.) *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, pp.39-58.

Baehr, J. 2015. *Cultivating Good Minds: A Philosophical and Practical Guide to Educating for Intellectual Virtues*. (MS) http://intellectualvirtues.org/why-should-we-educate-for-intellectual-virtues-2-2/

Bett, R. 2011. 'Socratic Ignorance', in Morrison, D.R. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 215 -236.

Brickhouse, T.C., Smith, N.D. 2000. *The Philosophy of Socrates*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

Brickhouse, T.C., Smith, N.D. 2010. *Socratic Moral Psychology*, Cambridge, CUP

Coady, D. 2012. *What to Believe Now*. Chicester, Wiley-Blackwell, 212p.

Croce, M. 2017. 'Expert-oriented abilities vs. novice-oriented abilities: an alternative account of epistemic

[12] This article has been sponsored by the Fondecyt #1200213 (ANID, Chile)

authority', *Episteme* 1-23.

Davidson, D. 2001. 'First Person Authority', in D. Davidson, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. OUP, 2001, 3-14.

Davidson, D. 2005. 'Dialectic and Dialogue', in D. Davidson, *Truth, Language, and History*, Oxford: OUP, 2005, 251-259.

De Brasi, L. 2015. Reliability and Social Knowledge-Relevant Responsibility. Transformacao 38(1):187-212.

Dunning, D. 2022. 'The Trouble of Not Knowing What You Do Not Know: Psychological, Philosophical, and Societal Implications', in N. Ballantyne and D. Dunning, *Reason, Bias, and Inquiry*. OUP, 2022, 205-226.

Fisher, M.; Goddu, M.; Keil, F. 2015. Searching for Explanations: How the Internet Inflates Estimates of Internal Knowledge. *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 144(3):674–687

Gadamer, H.-G. 1999. *Die Idee des Guten zwischen Plato und Aristoteles*, in Gadamer, H.G., *Gesammelte Werke 7. Griechische Philosophie III*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1999.

Giannantoni, G. 2005. *Dialogo socratico e nascita della dialettica nella filosofia di Platone* (edizione postuma a cura di B. Centrone) Napoli: Bibliopolis.

Gill, C. 2004. 'Afterword: Dialectic and the Dialogue Form in late Plato', in Christopher Gill, Mary M. MacCabe (eds.) 2004. *Form and Argument in Late Plato*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 283-311.

Gill, C. 2007. 'Form and outcome of arguments in Plato's *Gorgias*', in Michael Erler, Luc Brisson (eds.) *Gorgias-*

Menon. Selected papers from the Seventh Symposium Platonicum, Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 62-65.

Goldberg, S. 2011. The Division of Epistemic Labor. *Episteme* 8:112-125.

Goldman, A. 2001. Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust? *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63(1):85–110.

Goldman, A.I, Olsson, E.J. 'Reliabilism and the Value of Knowledge', in Adrian Haddock, Alan Millar, & Duncan Pritchard (eds.) *Epistemic Value*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009: 19-41.

Hoffrage, U. 2016. Overconfidence. In POHL, R. (ed.) *Cognitive Illusions*. London, Routledge.

Keil, F.; Stein, C.; Webb, L.; Billings, V.D.; Rozenblit, L. 2008. Discerning the Division of Cognitive Labor: An Emerging Understanding of How Knowledge Is Clustered in Other Minds. *Cognitive Science* 32(2):259–300.

Kidd, I. 2016. Educating for Intellectual Humility. In Baehr, J. (ed.) *Intellectual Virtues and Education*. London, Routledge. pp.54-70.

Kruger, J.; Dunning, D. 1999. Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77(6):1121-1134.

Le Morvan, P., Peels, R. 'The Nature of Ignorance: Two Views', in R. Peels, M. Blaauw (eds.) *The Epistemic Dimensions of Ignorance*, Cambridge: CUP, 2016, 12-32.

Lutz, D.; Keil, F. 2002. Early Understanding of the Division of Cognitive Labor. *Child Development* 73(4):1073–84.

McPartland, K. 2013. 'Socratic Ignorance and Types of Knowledge', in J. Bussanich & Nicholas D. Smith (eds.) *The Bloomsbury Companion to Socrates*, London-New Delhi-New York-Sydney: Bloomsbury, 94-135.

Medina, J. 2013. *The Epistemology of Resistance*. Oxford, OUP, 332p.

Mercier, H. 2017. Confirmation bias-myside bias. In Pohl, R. (ed.) *Cognitive Illusions*. London, Routledge

Mercier, H.; Sperber, D. 2017. *The Enigma of Reason: A new theory of Human Understanding*. London, Allen Lane.

Nottelmann, N. 2016. 'The Varieties of Ignorance' in R. Peels, M. Blaauw (eds.) *The Epistemic Dimensions of Ignorance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.33-56.

Oakes, H., Brienza, J., Elnakouri, A, and Grossmann, I. 2019. 'Wise Reasoning: Converging Evidence for the Psychology of Sound Judgement', in R. Sternberg and J. Gluck, *The Cambridge Handbook of Wisdom*. CUP, 2019, 202-225.

Peels, R., Blaauw, M. 'Introduction', in R. Peels, M. Blaauw (eds.) *The Epistemic Dimensions of Ignorance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016: 1-11.

Penner, T., Rowe, C. 2015. *Plato's Lysis*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Pritchard, D. 2015. Epistemic Dependence. *Philosophical Perspectives* 29:305-324

Pritchard, D. 'Ignorance and Epistemic Value', in R. Peels, M. Blaauw (eds.) *The Epistemic Dimensions of Ignorance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 132-143.

Roberts, R.; Wood, J. 2007. *Intellectual Virtues*. Oxford, OUP, 340p.

Ryan, S. 2012. 'Wisdom, Knowledge and Rationality'. *Acta Analytica* 27, 99-112.

Simon, J. 2015. Distributed Epistemic Responsibility in a Hyperconnected Era. *In:* L. Floridi (ed.), *The Online Manifesto*. Dordrecht, Springer, p.145-160.

Siegel, H. 2017. *Education´s Epistemology: Rationality, Diversity and Critical Thinking*. Oxford, OUP, 296p.

Sloman, S.; Fernbach, P. 2017. *The Knowledge Illusion: Why we never think alone*. London, Macmillan, 296p.

Sullivan, S., Tauna, N. 2007. *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*. Albany, SUNY Press, 276p.

Townley, C. 2011. *A Defense of Ignorance*. Lanham, Lexington, 152p.

Wagenknecht, S. 2017. *A Social Epistemology of Research Groups*. Dordrecht, Springer, 187p.

Williams, B. 2002. *Truth and Truthfulness*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 344p.

Zagzebski, L. 2012. *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief*. New York, OUP, 304p.