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Plato's Socrates, Local Hermeneutics, and the Just Community of Learners

Socratic Dialectic as Inclusive Democratic Discourse

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Introduction: *Purpose, Theoretical Framework, and Mode of Inquiry*

In previous papers I have brought philosophical hermeneutics in conversation with critical hermeneutics, in order to open the potential for Gadamer's "moderate hermeneutics" to be re-considered as a potential democratic practice of discourse with the potential of transforming social situations that are unjust and inequitable (Magrini, 2015; 2014). Emerging from this conceptual/theoretical "textual" analysis of philosophical hermeneutics and critical hermeneutics, I offer a reading of the ancient Socratic practice of dialectic as a form of critical, inclusive, and constructive democratic dialogue, i.e., an expression of *local normative hermeneutics* grounded in a form of understanding that occurs through consensus and negotiation among, as Plato calls them in the *Seventh Letter*, "well-meaning" and "non-combative" participants.

Reading Plato's Socrates through the lens of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, a form of interpretive discourse emerges that demonstrates the concern for social justice in that values of a democratic society are already constituted, embodied, and instantiated in and through its unfolding, i.e., when we authentically discourse about one or another of the "virtues" we embody and insatiate that virtue in the context of the dialectic, and in doing so we establish an ontological relationship, this prior to an epistemological one, to the ever reclusive "revelation," or *presencing*, of virtue (the Being of virtue), and so in dialectic solidarity we experience the ethical potential to become just and equitable (Gonzalez, 1998, 1995; Kirkland, 2013). Enlisting both Finlayson (2000) and Heidegger (1993), I envisage "ethics" as a "local" phenomenon that is "distributive" and "agent-relative (dependent)" in its double-meaning as the ancient Greeks understood it – in terms of "habituated behaviors" (ἔθος - *ethos*) that develop and evolve in communal dialogue and in the more original sense of "dwelling and abode" (ἦθος - *ēthos*).

To embrace Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, i.e., the "hermeneutics of facticity," is to endorse the conditions that all modes of world-disclosure are always bound up with "prejudice," or more correctly, our understanding is always grounded in and shaped in great part by our pre-understanding (*Vor-urteile*) of things, which "can never be dissolved by critical self-knowledge such the prejudice structure could entirely disappear" (Mendelson, 1998, 53). It is possible to state that critical hermeneutics, in its critique of philosophical hermeneutics, remains trapped in an "illusory rationalism to the extent that it sees prejudice as something entirely negative to be neutralized by scientific method" (53). It is doomed to failure because in order to make and substantiate its claims, like all instances of historical knowledge, it too must draw on the prejudices that are foundational to all forms of understanding. Gadamer's (1989) claim is

that there is no universal form of absolute, abstracted reason, pure, practical or otherwise, that would allow us to stand out and over against our heritage and tradition. Philosophical hermeneutics outstrips the critique of critical hermeneutics because it avoids the re-production of unethical practices, for Gadamer is clear that interpretation does not “simply reconstruct the distant horizon out of which the text speaks,” but rather seeks to “attain ‘a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity, but also that of the other’” (271-2). However, to protect against arbitrary fore-meanings requires a “critical component,” which includes *Destruktion*, making our fore-meanings or pre-understanding “conscious,” examining their origin and validity, while remaining open to the possibility that they might prove empty in the encounter with the text (55), and this calls for “a conscious assimilation of one’s own fore-meanings in order to avoid the ‘tyranny of hidden prejudices’” (238).

Social justice is neither possible through appeals to objective, transcendental reason nor critical strategies seeking to neutralize or transcend the supposed “extra-linguistic” ideological-hegemonic forces constraining and distorting “ethical” communication. Rather, social justice begins *as* possibility within “local” discourse and conversation that is attuned to language and tradition as “factual” conditions for authentic human transcendence, transformation, and emancipation. This calls for the clarification of Gadamer’s (1989) classification of hermeneutics as “universal,” which requires understanding the crucial difference between viewing language as a “universal” phenomenon and the attempt at justifying and establishing objective, “universal” principles of ethics. It is possible to espouse ethical norms, which outstrip the charges of ethical relativism because in and through consensus they are *trans*-subjective or *inter*-subjective, they are at once distributive in nature and agent-relative (dependent) (Finlayson, 2000) and, this is all that is required of or can be expected from claims of an ethical (“normative”) nature – which are expressed through *statements* that are *non-propositional* in nature. Examining Plato’s Socrates in the early dialogues, I focus on particular, or local, manifestations of hermeneutic activity (dialectic-as-dialogue) that serves as the ground from which the “normative” and “ethical” dimension of philosophical hermeneutics take root, growing and flourishing as a form of *phronetic* social justice in *praxis*.¹

1. Critical Hermeneutics and Philosophical Hermeneutics *Views on Tradition, Language, and Universalizability*

This paper does not rehearse the Gadamer-Habermas debate (Mendelson, 1998; Ormiston & Schrift, 1990), rather, it addresses two critiques of philosophical hermeneutics that

¹ Much has been published concerning the differences between Gadamer and Habermas. Although the intricacies of their extensive debates and subsequent commentaries are far beyond the scope of this paper, I want to make the reader aware that there are commonalities that bind them as philosophers, as hermeneuticists, and, in order to avoid the fallacy of the *false dilemma*, it is possible to argue that we need not take absolute sides, *one or the other*, driven by the mistaken belief that a reconciliation between the two is ultimately impossible. For there are commonalities that bind them as thinkers in this tradition of hermeneutics and these commonalities might contribute to a renewed view of education: E.g., both emphasize the historical and social contexts that influence all interpretation; both emphasize the knowledge of lived *praxis* as above theoretical and technical forms of truth; both reject rigid systematic methods over practice; both reject the Cartesian subject-object divide; and both “assure us of the possibility of a harmonious, universal consensus, although Gadamer tends toward romanticism while Habermas is very much a child of the Enlightenment” (Solomon, 1988, 171). I believe that educators teaching for social justice can legitimately work toward just and equitable classroom *praxis* by attending to what both Gadamer and Habermas have to contribute to the issues of collective agreement within interpretive discourse. See also Bernstein (1982) and Mendelson (1998).

are well known to educators linked to critical hermeneutics, and these are interrelated concerns: (1) the claim to the universality of hermeneutic principles, which includes the belief that nothing exists outside of language, and this, of course, includes tradition and heritage; and (2) the inability of philosophical hermeneutics, despite communal discourse, to arrive through consensus at an *ideally*, agent-neutral rational solution to moral problems. This latter critique is linked to Habermas' original understanding of universalized interests in Discourse Ethics, which has its origins in Kantian deontological Moral Law, and is expressed through the Principle of Universality (U) in terms that are both "collective" and "agent-neutral (independent)" (Finlayson, 2000). This view is grounded in the belief that without such a universal principle, the discourse about ethics is inevitably saddled with an indefensible relativism (Weberman, 2000).

In philosophical hermeneutics, language provides structure to our scientific, psychological, political, and economic modes of human understanding and comportment. Language is the universal medium granting sense and meaning to our entire *Being-in-the-world*. According to *critical hermeneutics*, this view is problematic because it fails to facilitate the emancipation of participants trapped within the distorted, unjust, and inequitable language that ideological/hegemonic forces shape. Here, "political" and "economic" forces are viewed as "extra-linguistic," and thus, "extra-hermeneutical" factors that distort the way in which we use language and hence experience the world. The critique is focused on language housing the tradition in such a way that it inevitably "re-produces" and hence perpetuates trends and institutions comprising the social order, which includes oppressive and unethical ways of being, behaving, and interacting.

In order for hermeneutics to address the critical need for change and emancipation from constraining socio-political forces, interpretation must be aware of both language and its corresponding hermeneutic along with the influence of "extra-interpretive" forces of the social-political. Critical hermeneutics, through "depth hermeneutics," offers an escape from the oppressive forces constraining language and radically modifies the human's anterior relation to the tradition, it allows for both enlightenment and emancipation to occur through practical action inspired by non-coercive "ideal speech conditions" – this is the stage in critical interpretation referred to as "application" (Habermas, 1989; 2005).

Critical hermeneutics claims that philosophical hermeneutics lacks the so-called "critical" component, which is impossible to achieve because it offers no space for human agency that lives beyond the constraints of language and tradition. Caputo (1987) offers a reading of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics that is in line with Habermas, i.e., philosophical hermeneutics "leaves unmasked the question of whether the tradition is unified, never asking about the extent to which play of tradition is a power play and its unity is something that has been enforced by the powers that be" (112). However, Caputo has no sympathy with Habermas' claim to universality, the "recourse to a transcendental standpoint" in ethics (305). In order to re-conceive a "critical" moment in or component to philosophical hermeneutics, the following issues ground and guide this interpretation:

(1) Ideology and hegemony are not abstract phenomena, they are undeniably linguistic in nature, and all language is already political. It is due to the "misinterpretation" and "misunderstanding" of language that ideological/hegemonic forces are empowered to constrain people – they are not "extra-linguistic" or *extra-hermeneutic* forces; (2) There is no strict ideological reproduction of knowledge, so there can only be partial reproduction and along with it, only partial and limited forms of emancipation or "transformation"; (3) Knowledge itself is

always limited by language and human finitude, thus there can be no mode of knowing that escapes ambiguity and dissembling to some extent; and (4) Principles of social justice that attempt to live at a universal and objective level fail to address normative and ethical approaches that live within “particular,” specific, and unique (local) contexts (the *hermeneutics of facticity*). It is crucial to understand *how* certain and specific oppressive ideological-hegemonic practices are being enabled through language in local contexts, and this concern *is* the manifestation of *social justice*. At this “local” level, it is not only possible, but as well, desirable, to advance the normative (ethical) claim that it *ought not* be the case that a particular manifestation of discourse is discriminatory and exclusionary (Davey, 2006; Gallagher, 1991; Gadamer, 1989; Fairfield, 2012).

2. Socrates and the “local” Democratic Context of Learning *Truth, Finitude, and the Language of Democratic Dialogue in Community*

Reading Socrates through the lens of philosophical hermeneutics radicalizes the traditional, conservative, and philosophical (analytic) reading of Socrates-as-teacher found in views of education, such as “structure of the disciplines,” or *scholar academic ideology*, embracing the “Socratic method” (Adler, 1982). The “Socratic method” as envisioned and practiced in contemporary educational institutions is based on an analytic, doctrinal, and “idealist” interpretation of Plato’s Socrates, manifesting on three interrelated fronts: (1) texts addressing the philosophical foundations of education or “education philosophies” (Ozman & Craven, 2014); (2) texts focused on curriculum studies and aims and purposes thereof (Walker & Soltas, 1992); and, as directly related to my concern in relation to critical hermeneutics, (3) texts advocating “critical pedagogy” or ideological critique grounded in theories of social justice, which are critical of Plato as an “authoritarian” thinker whose philosophy espouses the oppressive origins of “idealism” in education (Spring, 2001).

Rescuing Plato from the questionable and problematic doctrinal (idealist) interpretation by reading his dialogues through the lens of Gadamer’s (1980; 1989; 1986; 1991) philosophical hermeneutics is not without difficulty as related to “critical theory,” “depth hermeneutics,” and “discourse ethics.” For although it is possible to demonstrate that Plato resists the authoritarian label, we are still left with the crucial issue of philosophical hermeneutics so-called “inability” to facilitate an authentic and “critical” discussion concerning ethics as related to “social justice.” By its nature, as the critique runs, which I’ve introduced above, philosophical hermeneutics can neither establish nor facilitate the type of “ideal speech” situations that hold the potential to emancipate participants, facilitating their transcendence from the coercive and oppressive uses of language. This is because of the essential problem at the root of philosophical hermeneutics, namely, the universalizing of language binds it ineluctable with historical traditions and meanings that are scientific, philosophical, political, technical, social, institutional, etc.

It is possible to understand the “critical” component of Socrates’ dialectic-as-dialogue in the following manner expressed as three succinct, salient talking points:

(1) There is a view of language in the early Platonic dialogues (e.g., *Cratylus*) that mirrors Gadamer’s claims to “linguistic universality” and the ineluctable rootedness in tradition (as *doxa*) that we can never outstrip, transcend, or do away with by means of practices that hold the power to live outside of the agent-relative/dependent structure of language – this is the *doxastic* requirement for entrance into the Socratic dialectic. Proximally and for the most part,

for Plato, this tradition is composed of modes of “education” (*paideia*) as the training for the public life in Athens – the social life *as* civic-and-political.

(a) For Socrates, *doxai* (“opinions”) comprises tradition and heritage, and this includes oppressive, inequitable, and unjust traditions that require “critical examination.” It is the role of the dialectician, who understands the “naming” power of language, to determine whether or not a given name is serving its proper function. The tradition is interrogated through *Destruction*, searching for origins and reasons for how and why the views we hold (*doxai*) have come into their present forms with an ethical eye on the future as we work to reinterpret these views in light of our ecumenical social projects.

(b) Socratic dialectic is intrinsically “political” in an *original* sense of a “politics of the soul,” which is a relentless pursuit of defining and embodying virtue that Socrates views as inseparable from the social realm, which for Socrates, is indivisible from the political. Since it is the search for defining virtue in the pursuit of a life *lived well*, i.e., an examined life, and this occurs through critical encounters with the “public” tradition (*doxa*), it is for Socrates, inherently a political pursuit that *should* both better the individual, and by extension, the state (e.g., the *Apology*).

(c) Philosophy as the pursuit for self-perfection has both ethical and political implications. For “self-knowledge” (*seautou gnothi*) is crucial to determining and judging collective agent-relative (dependent) ethical norms.

(2) There is a concern for responding to the *ti esti* question, “What *is* it?” – “What *is* X?” that includes agent-relative (dependent) reasoning, interests, and motivations that are concerned with an ethical view that is both *contextual* and *circumstantial* – i.e., the process is *phronetic* in that it represents an attuned form of understanding that enhances one’s character (*hexis*), whereby the deliberation and choice of the *phronemos* (one with “practical understanding”) is always instantiated within and determined by *praxis* (e.g., *Euthyphro* & *Republic*).

(a) There is a unique view of knowledge (*philosophical understanding*) as related to the virtues (ethics) that is never reducible to propositional discourse and includes two understandings of ethics – as habituated behaviors that develop in *praxis* through dialectic-as-dialogue (ἔθος - *ethos*) and dwelling (ἦθος - *ēthos*). It is a form of insight (*noein*), or understanding (*verstehen*), that, although emerging from the discursive process of dialogue, is itself non-discursive. It is *non-propositional* and cannot tell us that something is the case, rather it is a knowledge of “how,” or better, an understanding of what we *ought* to do that is *exhibited* and *embodied* within the dialectical inquiry into virtue or excellence (*arête*); It is *manifest*, i.e., it presences in the midst of philosophical inquiry, and it is neither fully *describable* nor *explainable* in terms of providing the necessary and sufficient condition for its veracity. It is neither wholly subjective nor objective; it *mediates* both realms and is intensely “reflexive” in nature, i.e., a form of self-understanding (*Seventh Letter*).

(b) Against doctrinal (idealist) readings, Socrates does not pursue definitions of the virtues, which would ensure their definitions could be substantiated with the veracity of propositions or assertions, which might then be elevated to the level of “objective” universal

principles of morality, such as is found in deontological *a priori* ethics. Thus, in line with Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, Socrates endorses and practices an "interest-based" view of practical reason (*phronesis*), which demonstrates the close connection between moral reasoning, lived experience and the critical pursuit of virtue (*arête*) and offers plausible and legitimate accounts of moral motivation. In such a view, although there can't be "universalizable" ethical norms (agent-neutral prescriptive norms), because these norms are always dependent on agent-relative (dependent) consensus, ethical norms established in and through consensus do avoid "moral relativism" in that the principles are *trans*-subjective or *inter*-subjective. Despite not being "objective," they nevertheless carry substantive "ethical" weight because of the agreement arrived at through the negotiation between Socrates and his interlocutors.

(c) The concern with "philosophical understanding" is related intimately to human finitude, and the hermeneutics of facticity (context-dependent ethics). Here we find the belief in the fallibility and radical limitations of both human knowledge and language. A unique ontological view of self-hood that emerges from the reading of Plato's Socrates is "proto-phenomenological" and hermeneutic in nature, i.e., *the ontology of distanciation* or the view of the human being as always living at a distance from any and all forms of complete or full *disclosure* of the issues it seeks to interrogate (*Seventh Letter*). Importantly, the so-called "ethical truths" emerging from the Socratic practice of dialectic-as-dialogue are never completely free of dissembling, partial concealedness, obscurity, or errancy, and this is wholly consistent with an authentic view of "normative discourse" as it relates to ethical "statements" as opposed to either "assertions" or "propositions."

(3) There is already a "critical" and "ethical" component at work in the dialectic as practiced by Socrates as soon as the participants agree on the inclusive terms structuring the context of discourse. The group works for the best solution based on their view which develops respectfully and in tandem with others in and through, as Plato in the *Seventh Letter* makes clear, "critical," yet "non-combative," "well-natured," and "well-meaning" discourse. The dialectic represents a critical "interruption" in the flow and transmission of the *doxai* in and through "conferring" about the problems encountered while working toward potential solutions. When "conferring" we are judging the effects of our own and other's actions with respect to the potential effects on future action – conferring represents the act of "granting" or "bestowing" to the *other* a dwelling space in the dialogue, which in advance embraces, facilitates, and nurtures, and thus preserves, *otherness*. This might be referred to as a form of "hermeneutic justice."

(a) The "critical" component of the dialectic begins within the mode of philosophical *deconstruction*, which expresses the negative function whereby we recognize and face up to our ignorance, our severe limitations as human thinkers. We move through dialectic inquiry to disturb the prejudices, opinions, beliefs, and habituated practices that have a hold on us. The second move is toward *preconstruction*, and in this moment we must be open to reinterpretations, revisions, and the potential of rejecting that which the dialectic has revealed. The final mode of *reconstruction*, which ultimately leads back to the *deconstructive* mode in the ongoing process, as the dialectic continues to develop, represents the moment when there occurs the enlightened transcendence of those engaged in discourse wherein the dialectic makes

possible the appropriation of new forms of understanding that are latent in the traditions (*doxia*) within which we participate.

(b) There is a sense of *Jemeinigkeit*, which is the *individuated*-mineness through which unique and meaningful possibilities come to presence for “my” appropriation that are neither available to nor “owned” by anyone else; there is also a sense of communal or ecumenical possibilities (*unsere Möglichkeit*), or “our possibilities,” that emerge in and through the unfolding “conversation” that transpires as dialectic-as-dialogue. This represents “application” in philosophical hermeneutics – which is the equivalent of *Anwendung* in German, or “appropriation,” indicating a process of gathering and taking up one’s possibilities in such a way that we are transformed, and this is also linked with the notion of finite transcendence – i.e., *becoming other to ourselves in the face of the other*.

(c) There is an interpretation of *doxa* as always already harboring the “appearing” of virtue and this indicates that there are no meanings that reside beyond language/tradition, and that there is no objective “critical” view that we can adopt that resides outside and beyond language, which would be required for an “objective” meta-ethical and meta-linguistic critique of the language we incorporate to express our relationship to virtue, which is, to varying degrees, concealed. Since the meaning of virtue is already present in the everyday *doxai* of virtue, the Socratic dialectic, as interrupting the flow of the *doxai* approaches interpretations of virtue and traditional ethical norms to clarify what exceeds those opinions even in already presenting themselves by way of them.

(d) The context of the dialectic is already, based on a common attunement and the agreement among participants to hold themselves in the critical process of interrogating virtue, a space that instantiates ethics in an *originary* manner in terms of an ethical dwelling (ἦθος - *ēthos*). For example, when interrogating “virtue,” the Being of the virtue, and the understanding thereof, which *presences* in the midst of the discourse, does so only when those involved are dedicated to holding open the discussion, e.g., the so-called “understanding” of courage in the *Laches* emerges and is embodied within the unfolding of the discussion, and does not live beyond the space of the discourse as would an instance of objective knowledge. The meaning of the virtue in question is to be found in the very process of the dialectic, which is inseparable from the practice itself, and not in some answer that would terminate the process – if we inquire properly into the nature of virtue, our inquiry will itself exhibit virtue.

(f) Reading Plato’s Socrates through the lens of philosophical hermeneutics reveals that the critical component of the dialectic-as-dialogue does not seek propositional certainty for justifying ethical claims, rather its goal is to confront unethical practices and inspire and facilitate a change in the ethical “disposition” of those involved in the debate. For example, in Book IV of the *Republic*, Socrates explains that the dialectic is a critical and “courageous” response to the danger of conformism and practices that re-produce and perpetuate unethical, inequitable, and unjust mores and norms of the tradition. The cardinal virtues Plato espouses are the result of critical interrogation. They were not merely transmitted to Plato and accepted *prima facie*. Rather, they were reinterpreted and hence transformed by the collective philosophical community.

Summary Remarks

Common to doctrinal interpretations of Plato's Socrates is the search for definitive principles of virtue through the dialectic, which might be said to resemble an "ideal speech" context wherein propositional knowledge of courage, justice, temperance, and piety is established with apodictic certitude (Finn, 1990). This vision of Socrates, grounded erroneously in the very *epistemic-technical* model he critiques in numerous dialogues (e.g., *Charmides*), runs counter to contemporary re-readings of Plato's dialogues, especially the "aporetic" dialogues (Hyland, 1995; 2006; Kirkland, 2013; Fried, 2006; Zuckert, 1999; Gonzalez, 1998; 1995), which have contributed to my attempt at a new reading of Socrates and the dialectic-as-dialogue as instantiating principles of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics based on the *phronetic* model of "practical wisdom" (Magrini, 2014; 2015). This view of Socrates is consistent with both the ancient Greek understanding of *praxis* as the authentic realm of *ethike* (ethics) and a reconceived understanding of contemporary *social justice*, which resists the criticism of critical hermeneutics. Here, as opposed to the "philosopher kings and queens" of the *Republic*, who are philosophers-and-teachers in "possession" of knowledge (*echonic philosophers*), Socrates is a "seeker-of-truth" (*zetetic philosopher*) who resists claims to knowledge possession and eschews the moniker "pedagogue" (*Meno*) – thus, Socrates views the "good life" as a life in transition – "care for the soul" and the soul of others sets Socrates in the *local normative hermeneutic* context within a community of learners. O'Neil (2008) refers to this as "hermeneutic justice" within interpretation, which "leads to creation of more inclusive 'micro-climates' of interpretation" (4), which I label "local hermeneutics."

The Socratic life, concerned with interrogating the virtues, is a life lived in terms of human finitude, transcendence, and ethical transformation. When interrogating the virtues in community with others, the interpretive activity (dialectic-as-dialogue) is grounded in language and tradition (*doxai*), for it is only in and through language that the partial truth, or emergence of the veiled essence of virtue, manifests as a mode of "truth" (*aletheia*) that resists propositional discourse or expression in terms of a single "correct" (*orthos*) and determinative "principle of virtue" (Hyland, 2006; Gonzalez, 1995,1998). Yet, despite the inability of the interpretive activity to produce a sure and certain *episteme* of virtue, there is an understanding (*Verstehen*) that appears in the space of the discourse (*aletheuein*), which contributes to the development and betterment of the participants' ethical dispositions (*hexis*), which is reminiscent of the formation and transcendence that occurs in education conceived and enacted as *Bildung*.

A close reading of the *Apology* reveals that when Socrates, in search of a so-called "wiser" man, sets out to interrogate the various members of Athenian society, the poets, technites, and politicians, he is concerned not only with whether or not the forms of knowledge that they endorse (*aisthesis*, *techne*, *episteme*, respectively) – NB: these forms of "knowing" are not to be equated with philosophical understanding of the virtues (*phronesis*) – can withstand his relentless form of questioning in the context of the dialectic exchange. Importantly, as related to the "critical" aspects of the dialectic, Socrates is also concerned, and this broaches the realm of ethics, with the attitude the Athenians adopt, i.e., the attuned stance that they take in relation to truth and knowledge (*hexeis tou aletheuein*), which might be translated as the "moral" or "virtuous" disposition (*hexis*) of character that manifests in the context of actively participating in (or moving into) truth's revelation (*aletheuein*).

Practice of the dialectic is concerned with the way that communication is structured and it seeks in advance to strengthen our relations with others in an equitable and just manner.

Socrates, adopting the attitude that human understanding is limited, finite, and fleeting, with its tendency toward dissembling, enters the dialectic focused on pursuing an interpretation of virtue in such a way that his resolute participation in the dialectic is already informed in a virtuous manner (*doxastic requirement*), which requires critical and sustained questioning in community to bring into sharper focus, moving ever-closer to dwelling in the Being of virtue (*Apology*). Ultimately, the stance Socrates adopts toward truth in relation to the human condition embodies virtue in the discourse (Gonzalez, 1995; 1998), e.g., in the *Laches* where participants in the dialogue instantiate the virtue of courage within the “well-meaning,” “non-combative,” and inclusive space of the dialectic (Kirkland, 2013). Despite the dialogue’s *aporetic* breakdowns, Socrates maintains the courage to stand firm and inspire others to hold together in the pursuit of the normative understanding of virtue. For Socrates skepticism, dogmatism, and relativism in the face of the pursuit of virtue are all forms of cowardice.

The tension between knowing and not knowing, the desire to pursue the “good” without the possession of definitive principles of virtue, actually represents the true and proper sphere of courage, and beyond, the entire realm of *ethike*. The authentic manifestation of ethics emerges within the dialectic’s interpretive movement, social justice in Socrates’ pursuit of “truth” is inseparable from the practice of the dialectic, and it is not found in abstract principles or propositional truths that would terminate the process (Magrini, 2014). On the *phronetic* model of philosophical hermeneutics, focused on the unfolding of the human’s communal life at the local level, *phronesis* inspires comportment of an ethical nature, for *phronesis* structures the life lived well in relation to others. Within local or particular situations, *phronesis* is always a “judging-with,” a judging that is informed by what is held in common, by what is revealed in communal interpretive acts, by what facilitates human transcendence and the continued transformation of values (Gadamer, 1989; Risser, 1997; 2000).

3. Conclusions and Significance of the Interpretation

Reconceptualizing Philosophical Hermeneutics as a Practice of Social Justice

Based on my reading, social justice is inseparable from the Socratic pursuit of the virtues and represents a context of what might be termed “authentic learning in community” – self-knowledge is crucial for the temporary establishment of distributive and agent-relative (dependent) ethical norms and emerges in the pursuit of the ethical life with others in and through a process that is “educative” – *paideia*. Here, the political life and social life are inseparable from the pursuit of the “ethical life.” The dialectic of Socrates, structured by language and its use, represents the context where understandings and traditions merge and coalesce, and through the various approaches employed in the interrogative process, the dialectic is at once *descriptive*, *explanatory*, and tentatively *prescriptive* – it is in its own important, albeit limited, way “critical” and, hence, “ethically productive.”

Thus, much like Gadamer’s hermeneutics, which includes the crucial and serious understanding of “play” (*Spiel*) in interpretation, Socrates’ dialectic is neither a “game” (*elencus* or *forensic* sport) nor a theory-method of interpretation, but rather the serious *practice* of “care for the soul” driven by the overarching concern for social justice, i.e., normative questions concerning the best way to live ethically. Socratic dialectic as interpreted engenders the three key moments of interpretation consistent with philosophical hermeneutics: (1) *meta-interpretation* generated by analysis (*descriptive/explanatory*) of a local hermeneutic situation; (2) *existing interpretation* or what is *descriptive/explanatory* in the *meta-interpretation*; and (3)

prescribed interpretation resulting from the process of interpretation or the interplay of moments (1) and (2), and these components of the dialectic lead to the “critical moment” required for the initiation of change to our existing social problems. Thus, it rises to the level of a “critical” process in that it analyzes the interpretation taking place within certain circumstances and then moves to prescribe how it *ought* to take place, the manner in which it *should* change or remain the same (Gallagher, 1991).

True, this “critical moment” is based on a consensus that can never lead to universal principles of ethics, however, in line with the *phronetic* model of hermeneutics, to attempt to establish universally binding canons of morality would betray the authentic nature of ethics and heedlessly equate it with a “sophistic” exercise in the technical application of principles, reducing ethics to the realm of *techné* (Mittelstrass, 1989). Whereas critical hermeneutics seeks to neutralize and transcend the constraints of tradition and language in order to achieve emancipation through socially just practices informed by *communicative* discourse, philosophical hermeneutics takes a far more tempered view of the way critical, ethical transformation might potentially become a reality. We live within language, and language always carries the potential for distortion, misinterpretation, and misuse. Rather than seek to eradicate these possibilities, which would be impossible, the attempt must be made to live with them in a “critical” manner without unduly inflating their effects (Gallagher, 1991; Davey, 2006).

Philosophical hermeneutics teaches us that the ethical life is not experienced in the abstract, but rather lived in specific historically dependent contexts, within “living” situations that call for a case by case assessment and critique of the social practices in place at *this* time, in *this* vicinity or *habitus localis*, among *these* participants. Emancipation or transformation is possible, but it is always limited, it is always ongoing and in need of better interpretations and deeper understandings. Social justice *is* a life committed to self-improvement and the continued transformation and betterment of the world and those with whom we share it.

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