CRITIQUE AND ENLIGHTENMENT:

LEONARD NELSON ON SOCRATIC METHOD

AND THE SHARED PROJECT

OF KANT AND PLATO

by

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I examine Leonard Nelson's (1882-1927) theory of Socratic method as a lesser-known contribution to Neo-Kantian literature on the relationship between Kant and Plato. To do so, I look at Nelson's 1922 essay on the subject, "The Socratic Method" – analyzing it within the context of philosophical problems Nelson wanted to solve, and as an extension of concerns found throughout Nelson's wider thought. Although the pedagogical side of Nelson's Socratic method is familiar to us from its use in various educational settings – most notably in law school instruction – contemporary practice of this technique is very far removed from how Nelson himself understood and practiced it and as such, I argue, cannot satisfy Nelson's original goal of training a responsible, philosophically-adept citizenry. I argue instead that the best way to appreciate these aims is to examine the Kantian and Platonic context Nelson works within, and why he saw these two philosophies as being in agreement. I organize my thesis around Nelson's propositions that Kant and Plato alike are critical philosophers and that both are concerned with realizing enlightened societies, i.e., societies whose laws and ideals proceed according to a pure, rational basis reached through the practice of philosophy. Nelson takes Plato's use of Socratic dialectic to be the model on which Kant's project of enlightenment and moral education can be actualized, and in turn, he views Kant's theory of knowledge as the framework within which Socratic method can accomplish the tasks Socrates and Plato originally set for it. My thesis shows that scholarly inattention to Nelson's work not only holds back our understanding Kant and Plato's relationship, but our conception of philosophy's proper aims and priorities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS OF KANT'S WORKS

CJ .... Critique of the Power of Judgment

CPR .... Critique of Pure Reason

CPrR .... Critique of Practical Reason

GMM .... Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals

MM .... Metaphysics of Morals

Tone .... On a Recently Prominent Tone of Superiority in Philosophy

WE .... An answer to the question: What is enlightenment?

INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of Kant's critical period works, the relationship between his

thought and that of Plato has not only been noted, but investigated with great attention as

a means of understanding both thinkers: according to Alan Kim (2010), we witness the

"major German thinkers after Kant . . . from the German Idealists, Schopenhauer, and

Nietzsche, to neo-Kantians, Phenomenologists and Hermeneuticians . . . debate Kant and

Plato, Plato through Kant, and Kant through Plato."[1] Kant does little to discourage such

comparisons: we find strong Platonic resonances in many of the most important aspects

of his thought – from his transcendental idealism, with its distinction between noumena

and phenomena, to his notion of the Ideas and Ideal of reason,[2] among others. There is a

tension, of course: although Kant discusses Plato favorably in many places, e.g., in his

discussion of Plato's political theory in the First *Critique*, a reader's initial impulse might

be to blame Plato for virtually all of the dogmatic excesses Kant sets out to combat.

Perhaps for this reason, many interpreters have noted a deep ambivalence about Plato in

Kant's thought:[3] Kant's philosophy appears to trace some of its greatest insights, as well

as its greatest obstacles, to Plato.

But what *is* the relationship between the philosophies of Kant and Plato? Although

many earlier interpreters – especially Neo-Kantians like Hermann Cohen and Paul

Natorp[4] – have tried to make the two philosophies commensurate, the exact nature of

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1   Alan Kim, *Plato in Germany: Kant – Natorp – Heidegger* (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2010),
     17.
2   i.e., the *transzendentale Ideen* and the *prototypon transcendentale*.
3   Cf. Henry Allison, General Introduction to Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781* (Cambridge:
     Cambridge University Press, 2002), 23.
4   Alan Kim, *Plato in Germany*, 17.

Kant and Plato's agreement seems to elude even the most careful analysis. Today this topic is still, of course, debated in great depth and with great acuity.[5]

I do not want to add anything new to this already well-trod ground; with this thesis I set myself the more limited task of discussing an existing, though mostly overlooked interpretation, and one that I believe will contribute a great deal of clarity to the question of Kant's relationship to Plato if it is given due attention. This interpretation is found in the work of Leonard Nelson (1882-1927), a German Kantian philosopher writing in the first decades of the 20th century, who used what he perceived as an overlap between Kant and Plato to formulate a refined Socratic method – a style of pedagogy which remains in use in a wide array of educational settings today, though in modified form.[6]

Nelson's work remains very much marginal in Kantian and Neo-Kantian scholarship of today. Where he is mentioned at all in contemporary treatments on this period, it is brief and perfunctory,[7] and quite often inaccurate.[8] In his own time, however,

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5   More recent discussions of this topic can be found in Tom Rockmore (2013), Nicholas Rescher (2017), Christopher J. Insole (2018), and Manfred Baum (2019).

6   "Socratic dialogues in the Nelson-Heckmann tradition take place [today] in institutes of higher education as well as in community centres, businesses, prisons and living rooms . . . The terms 'Socratic method' and 'Socratic dialogue' describe a wide variety of practices, ranging from ruthless questioning in Law Schools to critical thinking exercises with children. Yet . . . [these] denote a distinctive method that does not necessarily match [Nelson's]" (Hannah Marije Altorf, "Dialogue and discussion: Reflections on a Socratic method" *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education* 2019, Vol. 18 [1], 60-61).

7   "Though neglected by standard histories, the [neo-Friesian School and the] group surrounding Nelson was especially eminent . . . Histories of the Southwestern and neo-Friesian schools are desiderata of future research [in studies on neo-Kantianism]" (Frederick C. Beiser, *The Genesis of Neo-Kantianism 1796-1880* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014], 2, n4).

8   A prominent and oft-repeated example of such an inaccuracy is describing Nelson and Fries as proponents of "psychologism", i.e., the thesis that the metaphysical knowledge forming the object of Kantian critique is "merely subjective". For instance, Beiser (cited above), although he provides probably the most thorough portrait of Fries available in English-speaking scholarship, nevertheless comes to this conclusion and extends it to Nelson. We find the same assessment in Breidbach and Burwick, ed. (2013). The prominence of this objection has been helped by Popper's discussion of Fries' psychologism in *Logic of Scientific Discovery*. To fully explore the nature of these inaccuracies lies well outside scope of my present study, but Nelson's dissertation *Jakob*

Nelson was no minor figure: he applied Kantian theory in writings on jurisprudence and international law; he was an associate of Hermann Minkowski and David Hilbert, among other pivotal mathematicians of the era; he identified the Grelling-Nelson paradox of semantic self-reference along with Kurt Grelling. Indeed, until the fortunes of Neo-Kantianism changed with the Second World War, Nelson was an intellectual of note among German scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers.[9] As Hacohen (2000) and Milkov (2012) argue, Nelson's treatment of Socratic method and his liberal socialism alike had a lasting influence on Karl Popper, whose falsificationism and defense of open society can be viewed as direct products of Popper's engagement with Nelson's thought.[10] As well, Nelson's concerns and how he approached them – and given the historical period and milieu within which he approached them – can be said to earn him the title of analytic philosopher *avant la lettre*, although his readers will get the sense that Nelson would have deep disagreements with how modern analytic philosophy tries to achieve its goals.[11] I mention the preceding only to show that, while historical contingencies have left Nelson's work largely ignored, especially in English-speaking scholarship (contingencies which, incidentally, included Nelson's heated enmity with more prominent Neo-Kantians and

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Fries and His Latest Critics (1904) contains ample textual evidence to weaken the charge of psychologism against Fries, and by association, himself. Kubalica (2017) is a rare exception to this trend, and does much to clarify the subject.

9   "In 1912 Nelson organized the Jacob Friedrich Fries Society, in many respects the forerunner of the Berlin Society for Empirical/Scientifi c Philosophy . . . Th e aim of the Fries Society was to attract leading mathematicians, scientists and philosophers of the time by providing a forum whereby they could pursue interdisciplinary philosophical studies. On this count, the Society achieved its end brilliantly. Its sessions drew many of the top mathematicians and scientists of the day – Max Born, Ernst Zermelo, Richard Courant and Paul Bernays, to name only a few of them" (Nikolay Milkov, "Karl Popper's Debt to Leonard Nelson", *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 86 [2012], 139).

10 Hacohen, *Karl Popper – The Formative Years*, 117-127; Milkov, "Karl Popper's Debt to Leonard Nelson", 137-156.

11 Milkov, "Karl Popper's Debt to Leonard Nelson", 143.

Hegelians of the era),[12] I believe that his thought and his approach to philosophy remain an important, untapped resource for philosophers today.[13] One such resource is how he integrates Kantian and Platonic thought into the concrete practice of Socratic method.

Although Nelsonian Socratic method centers dialogue as a catalyst for training students in independent, critical thought, this method is not meant to be an alternative or "more open" form of traditional education, and it is not meant to end at the classroom. In Nelson's 1922 essay "The Socratic Method", which documents his understanding of this technique and his ambitions for it, it is rather described as part of a larger social, political, and scientific paradigm – one that, at each level, resists dogmatism which Nelson argues is indifferent "to self-understanding", and "purchases its illusory success at the cost of more and more deeply rooted dishonesty."[14] This method is meant to train students to be philosophers, not to teach them about philosophy; it is furthermore meant to train them to be rationally autonomous, not to let their thinking depend on unexamined ideological presuppositions. After Nelson's death, Gustav Heckmann (1898-1996) would divest

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12 Tomasz Kubalica, "The polemic between Leonard Nelson and Ernst Cassirer on the critical method in the philosophy" *Folia Philosophica* Vol. 35 (2012), 53-69.

13 Only a handful of Nelson's books have been translated into English so far, the majority of which were completed under the direction of Nelson's student Julius Kraft in the three decades after Nelson's death in 1927. Some of Nelson's major works – including his works on legal theory, his *Critique of Practical Reason*, and *On the So-Called Problem of Knowledge*, his encyclopedic critique of virtually every *fin-de-siècle* theory of knowledge – remain to be translated, meaning his readership among English speakers is still very limited and is likely to remain so unless efforts are made to correct this trend. Indeed, as far as I can tell, Nelson's work remains a niche subject even among German-speaking scholars.

14 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*: *Selected Essays* trans. Thomas K. Brown III (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), 25.

Socratic method of the metaphysical and epistemic import Nelson that emphasized,

leaving it an unleavened variation of Montessori education:[15]

> After Nelson's early death at the age of 45, his students continued
> his work, and even facilitated and participated in dialogues as part
> of their resistance in the first years of the National Socialist regime
> . . . After the war, Gustav Heckmann especially developed the
> method of Socratic dialogue further. . . . With Heckmann the
> neo-Kantian background of the Socratic method becomes less
> prominent. This becomes clear when, for instance, considering
> the possible outcome of a Socratic dialogue. Few people nowadays
> assume, as Nelson did, that participants can find 'universal truths'. . .[16]

Such an outcome is predictable given the changing fortunes of Kantianism in the past

century, but Nelson's original treatment of Socratic method remains intimately bound up

with his prolific – and avowedly Kantian – philosophical output.

My preliminary research for this thesis has revealed that, while there is at least one

scholarly treatment of Nelson's practice of Socratic method in a classroom setting,[17] there

have been no such explorations of why Socratic method represents to Nelson the true

meeting-point of Kantian critical philosophy and Platonism. Lacking this philosophical

context, I believe we are in no position to appreciate Nelson's insistence on such a

method for pedagogy, since we cannot appreciate the philosophical force of his resistance

to more traditional lecture-based instruction in schools or the dangers he sees in these

more established methods. We can still less understand why a Kantian like Nelson can

describe himself, at one and the same time, as "a faithful disciple of Socrates and of his

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15   Malachi Haim Hacohen, *Karl Popper – The Formative Years, 1902-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge
     University Press, 2000), 117.
16   Altorf, "Dialogue and discussion", 63.
17   Hannah Marije Altorf (2019), discussed in this Thesis, Section 3.3.

great successor Plato."[18] I will argue that these problems become soluble when we understand the purpose Nelson sets for Socratic method, namely to train students in what Kant calls the *public use* of their reason: approaching problems – be they speculative, practical, political, etc. – dialectically, following the peirastic approach[19] of Plato's dialogues. Nelson believes that it is only in this way that we can find, at the bottom of our true judgments, the metaphysical principles which *make* them true.[20] To understand why Nelson takes this to be the shared project of Kant and Plato, we have to view each as sharing a common *method*, rather than a common doctrine.

My aim with this thesis is twofold: to explain how Nelson reaches such a conclusion, and using this explanation to analyze his 1922 essay "Socratic Method", which has received little if any direct scholarly attention of its own. My discussion takes the following form:

Chapter 1 sets Nelson's overall aim for Socratic method in the context of Kant's theory of enlightenment, in particular Kant's notion of the public use of reason. I sketch Nelson's own view of philosophy as taking up and continuing Kant's major insights and concerns. I explain that Nelson views Socratic pedagogy as the only one suited to the task of Kantian enlightenment and practical education because it trains students in the ability to detect and solve philosophical problems independently of external instruction. In turn, Kant's critical philosophy puts the dialectics of Socrates and Plato on a firm theoretical

18 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 1.
19 "Peirastic" is Aristotle's name for a form of dialectic which aims to test the internal consistency of hypotheses (*peirastikós*, "tentative"). See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Γ.2-3 in *The Complete Works of Aristotle* trans. W. D. Ross, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 1995, 3411-3416.
20 Nelson, *Socratic Method*, 10.

and systematic foundation. We thus see the philosophies of Socrates, Plato, and Kant as linked methodologically rather through a shared doctrine, and can appreciate how the efforts of all three thinkers overlap.

Chapter 2 turns to Plato. The first part of the chapter takes up recent scholarship on Plato as a socio-political critic to show that the public use of reason (exemplified by the character of Socrates) is no less important to Plato than it is to Kant, and is not accidental to Plato's or Kant's philosophical purposes – I argue that, for each thinker, the critique of institutions and dominant ideologies is part of a deeper inquiry into the true principles of thought and action. In the second part of the chapter I discuss Kant's own reception of and objections to Plato, among them what Kant views as Plato's dogmatic approach to metaphysics and (at least with regard to the *Letters*) his visionary mysticism. I then explore Nelson's attempt to synthesize the two philosophies in his theory of ethics. Using Catherine Rowett's (2018) recent work on Plato alongside Nelson's remarks, I have tried to outline a possible reading of Plato and Platonism which does not overstep Kant's restrictions on metaphysical knowledge: far from directing our inquiry to a transcendent realm of Ideas, Plato wants to strengthen our grasp of ordinary problems, concepts, etc. through rigorous dialectic. Like her, I argue that the solutions which lay at the bottom of the problems explored by Plato are not correct beliefs or propositions which resolve difficult "What is x?" questions (e.g., "What is beauty?" or "What is justice?"), but finding the conditions under which these questions can be reliably answered. I argue further that this is the main epistemological purpose Nelson sets for Socratic method in his own work.

Chapter 3 focuses on Nelson's 1922 essay, analyzing it using the context discussed in preceding chapters. Nelson views Socratic method not only as the correct means of teaching philosophy, but of philosophizing – not to produce knowledge, but to explain the knowledge already in our possession. Socratic method always takes us from correct judgments about the world to the metaphysical principles which justify them. Importantly, Socratic method allows us to explain *why* a given judgment is justified without mistaking this explanation for the justification itself. For Nelson, this approach is none of other than what Kant calls for with the critique of reason: not to prove, but to explain and delineate the validity of human knowledge. Drawing from Altorf's article, I end the chapter with an outline of how Nelson actually put Socratic method into practice – creating a disciplined space for exhaustive, cooperative dialogues on philosophical problems. I believe this thesis will show that Nelson not only persuasively connects Kant and Plato in terms of their methodological and epistemological commitments, but builds a pedagogy which successfully integrates the contributions of both.

CHAPTER 1. KANT AND NELSON ON ENLIGHTENMENT

This chapter anchors Nelson's discussion of Socratic method in Kant's Enlightenment concerns – in particular, Kant's notion of autonomy – as these aspects of Kant's thought motivate Nelson's pedagogy. After establishing Kant's own position, with special attention to themes from his essay *What is Enlightenment?*, I discuss the epistemological side of Nelson's engagement with Kant. Nelson situates Socratic method within Kant's theory of knowledge, and believes that the success of Socratic method corroborates Kant's claims about the nature of metaphysical principles and of human reason. In turn, Nelson argues Socratic method is able to solve philosophical problems because it leads us steadily from a particular judgment about the world (e.g., "Every change has a cause") to a secure warrant for our asserting such a judgment (e.g., Kant's Second Analogy of Experience). Nelson believes this technique has importance not only theoretical-scientific education, but also moral education. However, although Kant's theory of autonomy and enlightenment informs Nelson's theory of pedagogy, Nelson does not follow Kant's approach to education: he does not believe that Kant sufficiently describes a pedagogy which will preserve the autonomy of students. In explaining the social and political role of Nelson's pedagogy, I argue that Socratic method addresses this problem: Nelson describes a model of education structured in such a way that respects and reinforces the autonomy of students, and exercises them in what Kant terms the *public use* of their reason. From this, we will see that Socratic method answers a question

that Kant himself leaves rather vague: *how* enlightenment, in the Kantian sense, can be achieved concretely on a public scale.[21]

1.1. The Autonomy of Reason

Nelson is a Kantian, and his discussion Socratic instruction very much grows out of his vexed relationship with the post-Kantian philosophy of his time. As Kraft (1949) explains:

> Continental philosophy during at least the first decade of the [20th] century was almost exclusively[preoccupied] with *Erkenntnistheorie* [epistemology]. This *Erkenntnistheorie* is, of course an echo of Kant's critique of reason, though only a very remote one indeed. The neo-Kantians, the empiricists, and the phenomenologists had substituted for the basic problem of an analysis of knowledge the problem of finding a criterion for the validity of knowledge in general. This problem admits only of circular "solutions" and is therefore fictitious.[22]

Indeed, for Nelson, philosophy by the 20th century had "degenerated into total anarchy" regarding its purpose, methods, and its position among other disciplines: "to find our bearings in the chaos of present-day philosophy," Nelson argues we have to understand Kant's achievements correctly and judge which developments in philosophy will best allow us to build on Kant's achievements.[23] While Nelson's own loyalties were with Jakob Friedrich Fries' (1773-1843) development of critical philosophy – with Nelson proclaiming Fries "the one man who actually completed" what Kant had begun[24] – all of

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21 I examine Kant's remarks on education, and how he addresses this question, in section 1.3.

22 Julius Kraft, Introduction to Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, xiv. Nelson's arguments against "Erkenntnistheorie" are probably most succinctly set out in his refutation of Meinong in chapter 4 of Nelson's *On the So-Called Problem of Knowledge* ("Über das sogenannte Erkenntnisproblem") (1908).

23 Nelson, *Progress and Regress in Philosophy Vol. 1: Hume and Kant* trans. Humphrey Palmer (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970), 16.

24 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 33.

Nelson's philosophical activity was within the limits set by Kant and his critical works.

So what is critique, and why is it important?

1.1.1. Kant on Critique and Enlightenment

Kantian critique aims for a taxonomy of concepts whose employment in metaphysics will not trespass the limits of human cognition. In this respect, Kant intends his critical philosophy to be a corrective to metaphysical *dogmatism* in theoretical and practical questions. Dogmatism in metaphysics attempts to gain ground in philosophical problems purely intellectually (from concepts alone) and "without an antecedent critique of [reason's] capacity" to lay legitimate claim to its purported solutions[25] – it is precisely because Kant takes reason to guide us in scientific and practical matters that we have to determine the extent of its legitimate use. Because Kant's terminology on this topic is confusing (he uses virtually identical terms for something he is for and something he is against),[26] in this thesis I will restrict the term "dogmatism" and its cognates to the sense just discussed (metaphysics, philosophy, ethics, etc., without critique). Kant's critique is therefore a ground-clearing[27] for a future *critical metaphysics*, as Nelson terms it. While critique can only serve a negative function – i.e., "serving not for the amplification but

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25 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Bxxxv.

26 Kant makes it clear from the outset that he is not opposed to "dogma" in metaphysics as such; critique is only meant to correct *dogmatism*: "Critique is not opposed to the *dogmatic procedure* of reason in its pure cognition as science (for science must always be dogmatic, i.e., it must prove its conclusions strictly a priori from secure principles)" (Kant, *CPR* Bxxxv). In this respect Kant sees Christian Wolff's work as a paradigm for what metaphysical systems should look like, once these secure principles are discovered (*CPR* Bxxxvi).

27 "[A] system of pure (speculative) reason I hope myself to deliver under the title *Metaphysics of Nature*, which will not be half so extensive . . . as this critique, which had first to display the sources and conditions of its possibility, and needed to clear and level a ground that was completely overgrown" (*CPR* Axxi).

only for the purification of our reason"[28] – this negative function serves to keep reason free of errors that Kant views as endemic to dogmatism.

We might consider critique to be the solution to an "engineering problem": just as the engineer cannot expect to build a reliable bridge from bad blueprints, the metaphysician cannot in turn construct a system of scientific knowledge from illegitimate concepts. To Kant, these illegitimate concepts happened to include perennial objects of metaphysical inquiry – divinity, free will, and the immortality of the soul – none of which, he argues, can be objects of scientific knowledge at all.[29] Despite the effort expended by countless philosophers on these topics, Kant wants to show with his critique that it is profitless to enter into debates on these subjects assuming that ampliative knowledge lies at the other end. Certainly in an 18th century context this conclusion matters – not just for the ethical systems that posited these concepts' existence, but for the skeptical opponents of these systems as well. Kant's argument, in effect, is that rationalist and empiricist quarrels over supersensible matters cannot have any decisive conclusion *in principle*: neither theist nor atheist, foundationalist nor relativist can land the final punch if they each assume that human cognition is suited to these questions. What critical philosophy reveals instead is that *human reason* is the law-giver both in the natural and

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28 Kant, *CPR* A11/B25.
29 "The difference between religion and science from Kant's point of view is not that science concerns the truth and religion doesn't, but that science is a *project* of acquiring new theoretical knowledge and religion is not. Religion is a matter of *Glauben*, of *faith*, not because it doesn't concern the truth or isn't (so far as God's *existence* is concerned) adequately justified, but because while we can know that God exists we have no way of knowing what it is that exists. Moreover, there is nothing to do in the way of acquiring further knowledge concerning God; there are no further cognitions that it is possible for us to have [of God]" (Carol W. Voeller, *The Metaphysics of the Moral Law: Kant's Deduction of Freedom* [New York: Garland Publishing, 2001], 54-55).

ethical world, and if we want to understand either of these areas, we have to turn our inquiry to reason itself. As such, a right understanding, and use, of our reason takes on fresh urgency.

The same way metaphysical dogmatism prevents progress in philosophy, Kant believes dogmatic institutions hinder social and political progress. His remarks most explicitly concern the religious sphere,[30] but his concerns extend to the monarchy no less. Insofar as religious and political institutions restrict what Kant terms the "public use of reason", they impede the moral development of citizens: "[for] enlightenment . . . nothing is required but *freedom*, and indeed the least harmful of anything that could even be called freedom: namely, freedom to make *public* use of one's reason in all matters."[31] Royal (1999) notes that, in contrast to this public use of reason, "[what] Kant calls 'the private use of reason' amounts to no more than passive subservience to an authoritative Other": doing one's job as a clerk, priest, officer, etc., or duty as a citizen, without protest or disruption to the established social order.[32] The soldier is not free to question orders, no matter how wrong they appear to the soldier; the only choices are pulling the trigger or facing punishment. Because such social roles subordinate our own convictions to external requirements in this way, Royal explains that the private use of reason is little more than

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30 "I have put the main point of enlightenment, of people's emergence from their self-incurred minority, chiefly in *matters of religion* because our rulers have no interest in playing guardian over their subjects with respect to the arts and sciences and also because [immaturity in religious matters], being the most harmful, is also the most disgraceful of all" (Kant, *What is Enlightenment?* in *Practical Philosophy* trans. Mary J. Gregor [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], Ak. 8:41).

31 Kant, *WE*, Ak. 8:36.

32 Michael D. Royal, "Kant's Ostensible Anti-thesis of 'Public' and 'Private' and the Subversion of the Language of Authority in 'An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'" *Episteme* Vol. 10 (1999), 21.

"a surrendering of one's ability to properly reason at all."[33]

Without freedom to subject the claims of our institutions to critique and analysis in an open forum, we are as unlikely to make progress in social matters than the dogmatists would in metaphysics – the private use of reason would unduly dominate human life. This is, further, why Kant is concerned with autonomy: it is not that autonomy is something we achieve when political restrictions are relaxed; it is to be recognized as our original condition as rational beings. We cannot act morally unless we first understand that a given duty is *ours*. This is not only important for individual moral development but, by extension, for the preservation of the social fabric: neither an atomized society in which no one recognizes obligations to one another, nor an authoritarian society in which obligations are imputed from outside forces, honors human morality as Kant describes it. Such morality requires not only the ability, but the discipline, of thinking for ourselves.

In the Third *Critique* Kant argues that thinking for one's self is the first maxim of thought: "the maxim of the *unprejudiced* way of thinking," and also "the maxim of a reason that is never *passive*."[34] Prejudice is, for Kant, reason overtaken by passivity: "the greatest prejudice of all is that of representing reason as if it were not subject to the rules . . . on which the understanding grounds it by means of its own essential law."[35] Kant calls such prejudice *superstition*, and "[liberation] from superstition is called *enlightenment*."[36] In other words, we come to think independently and without prejudice by recognizing

33   Royal, "'Public' and 'Private'", 21.
34   Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* trans. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), §40, Ak. 5:294.
35   Kant, *CJ* §40, Ak. 5:294.
36   Kant, *CJ* §40, Ak. 5:294.

reason as active and *autonomous* – needing nothing external to itself to validate the

necessity of its laws, be they theoretical or practical. Kant footnotes this passage: "One

readily sees that while enlightenment is easy *in thesi*, *in hypothesi* it is a difficult matter

that can only be accomplished slowly."[37]

Difficult and hard-won as it may be, enlightenment is necessary. As Onora

O'Neill (1990) puts it,

> Reason, the discipline of all disciplines, can only be and must be
> *self*-disciplined: The subordination of thinking or practice to other
> supposed authorities (state, church, experts, personal preferences)
> is not reason, but the abrogation of reason. Reason's discipline
> cannot be alien; it must be autonomous.[38]

Reason's authority, in turn, "can only be vindicated by critique . . . critique itself [being]

at bottom no more than the practice of autonomy in thinking"[39] – indeed, for Kant,

"freedom and autonomy are at the heart not just of morality but of all reasoning."[40]

O'Neill argues that the critique of reason "leads us face to face with the conditional

character of all reason," but in doing so it reveals there are no transcendent principles

which subordinate reason to anything external to its own activity.[41] She argues further that

Kant replaces these transcendent sources of authority with "the authority of reason, whose

supreme principle is no more than the maxim or strategy of refraining from acting or

thinking on principles that cannot be adopted by all potential [rational] agents."[42]

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37 Kant, *CJ* §40, Ak. 5:294, n.
38 O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 55.
39 O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, 57.
40 O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, 52.
41 O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, 64.
42 O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, 64.

Certainly, Kant takes a critique of reason to be the process of "determining and judging what is lawful in reason in general," to deliver reason out of "the state of nature" where it remains under the illusion of heteronomous[43] dependence on the facts of experience.[44] Because reason is the true efficient cause of our "actions and their objects,"[45] heteronomy represents, at its core, an error about *where* the norms of our action come from. Kant believes it is a mistake to derive these norms from mere matters of fact: "Experience is (alas!) the mother of illusion [in moral-practical matters], and it is most reprehensible to derive laws concerning what I *ought to do* from what *is done*, or want to limit it to that."[46] To go about practical reasoning in such a way is self-imposed immaturity.[47] It is immaturity because in externalizing the sources of our moral agency we shirk a responsibility which is rightfully ours, and ours alone; it is self-imposed because, due to the autonomy and freedom of reason, it cannot in fact be imposed *on* us. To break through this self-imposed immaturity is to eliminate superstition and passivity from our rational conduct – only then are we enlightened.

This is the answer to the question, "What is enlightenment?", but this does not answer the equally pressing question of how to go about it. Kant believes that populations "gradually work their way out of barbarism of their own accord if only one does not

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43 "If the will seeks the law that is to determine it *anywhere else* than in the fitness of its maxims for its own giving of universal law – consequently if, in going beyond itself, it seeks this law in a property of any of its objects – *heteronomy* always results. The will in that case does not give itself the law; instead the object, by means of its relation to the will, gives the law to it" (Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* in *Practical Philosophy* (1996), II, Ak. 4:441).
44 Kant, *CPR* A751/B779.
45 Kant, *CPR* A317/B374.
46 Kant, *CPR* A318-319/B375.
47 Kant, *WE*, Ak. 8:35.

intentionally contrive to keep them in it".[48] Fair enough; but how is this work actually

done when the contrivances are removed? How do we accomplish this feat of using our

own understanding, and taking "*Sapere aude*" as our motto?[49]

Nelson argues that while the answer to such a question is important, and the

answer must lie in education, Kant himself "did not pursue the problem of instruction in

philosophy beyond some incidental pedagogic observations of a general character."[50] This

is not an objection to Kant; it is partly a limitation inherent to Kant's own purposes, and

partly due to the seeming oxymoron involved: we cannot depend on others to enlighten

us, since it is my emergence out of my own, *self*-imposed immaturity; however, if

enlightenment is a *public* rather than a merely individual goal – i.e., if the "spirit of

freedom" is meant to spread through civil society[51] – there clearly has to be some kind of

social dimension or interaction to the process. But what external conditions (irremovable

as they are) *would* best enable this process? Addressing this question, according to

Nelson, is the office of philosophy.

1.1.2. Nelson on the Task of Philosophy

For Nelson, philosophy's main aim "is always practical," and we practice it with

the intention of getting "clear on our final aims in life": he argues from a fact-value

dichotomy that "factual research" cannot "provide these [aims], for we need a standpoint

from which to view the facts, and which is not itself dependent on the facts."[52] This

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48 Kant, *WE*, Ak. 8:41.
49 Kant, *WE*, Ak. 8:35.
50 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 18.
51 Kant, *WE*, Ak. 8:41.
52 Nelson, *Progress and Regress*, 4.

standpoint is achieved through doing philosophy, which remains under the jurisdiction of reason alone. According to Nelson, reason "traces out" its "unwritten laws . . . independently of all external powers," so the truths discovered and systematized in philosophy will not be "matters of fact. [Philosophical truths] hold independently of all the facts that we may know."[53] Because of this, Nelson takes Kant's critical philosophy to be the model philosophers have to work within in order to achieve these goals.

Critical analysis – inquiring into the *reasons* for such and such a claim (e.g., "Serve your country") – marks the "first steps toward autonomous activity" for Nelson, even if only negatively.[54] He argues that, while

> people think their own standpoint philosophical . . . they are really slaves to facts [of experience], unconsciously allowing their maxims of judgment and action to be dictated to them by the facts. *Tradition*, *Convention*, *Authority* are collective names for such facts, which, in spite of our efforts to be philosophical, do tend to impose rules of judgment and action upon us. To achieve a really philosophical standpoint one must free oneself completely from such influences.[55]

The body of facts that Nelson names (emphasized above) I will term *ideology* for the purposes of my discussion. In Nelson's assessment no ideology, no moral code, furnishes me with the solutions to moral problems; such a solution can only be reached through my own rational assessment of the problem at hand. According to Kantian principles I can do nothing of moral value if I act in conformity to such external authority; I am moral only if I act in accordance with my freedom as a rational agent.[56] This standpoint of freedom is

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53 Nelson, *Progress and Regress*, 4.
54 Nelson, *System of Ethics* trans. Norbert Guterman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), 235.
55 Nelson, *Progress and Regress*, 4; emphasis added.
56 Nelson, *System of Ethics*, 93.

recognized only when we properly engage in philosophical inquiry and lay hold of the true principles by which we ought to think and act.

So Nelson has his own answer to the question, "What is enlightenment?": in short, enlightenment is "the attempt to let reason run one's life, and to free oneself from all external powers claiming to prescribe what one should think or do."[57] This point requires some clarification. Nelson, no less than Kant, is aware that human life is conditioned by sensible nature, and are therefore susceptible to all sorts of external influences: "in nature the human mind is always under external influences and, indeed . . . the mind cannot develop without external stimulus."[58] Nelson does not address the ascetic, after all, but moderns – who pay taxes, go to work, who vote, read the news, who are citizens of a certain country, etc. This empirical or "factual" dimension of our lives cannot be dismissed. The point is, rather, that this factual dimension cannot in the least determine what is normative in our judgments: "Morality," as a function of practical reason, "stands or falls with the *possibility of personal insight into duty*. Any command imposed by an outside will would be entirely beyond the range of our insight."[59] If I abstain from crime to avoid punishment, I am merely civil; I have done nothing morally valuable. But if I refuse certain actions (legal or not) because I recognize they are wrong, I have allowed reason to "run" my actions. In other words, I have not allowed the private use of reason to compromise my moral agency.

Therefore, for Nelson, "to free oneself from all external powers claiming to

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57 Nelson, *Progress and Regress*, 17.
58 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 19.
59 Nelson, *System of Ethics*, 199; emphasis added.

prescribe what one should think or do" is precisely to recognize reason – which is free from external or sensory influence – as the source of "the laws which govern the natural world and the laws according to which we ought to act."[60] Autonomy is the recognition of ourselves as subject to an *ought*.[61] Nelson moreover believes "[it] is for philosophy to point out the origins in human reason of necessary truths in all . . . areas"[62] – or as Kant words it in the *Groundwork*, to make reason "attentive to its own principle", as "did Socrates."[63]

1.2. Reason as Immediate Knowledge

Nelson divides our sources of epistemic certainty into two categories: immediate intuitive[64] knowledge (perception) and immediate non-intuitive knowledge (reason). For any true judgment we might have, the grounds for this truth are to be found in the judgment's agreement with some sense experience and the metaphysical laws that make that experience intelligible (i.e., Kant's analogies of experience, axioms of intuition, etc.). To render this approach to knowledge succinctly: neither the senses nor reason, in and of themselves, err; error only arises in judgments. Nelson identifies reason as "the faculty of knowing what is the law," and rationality as "an attribute of a being capable of action" according to that knowledge.[65] A law is either natural or moral: "knowledge of natural laws enables us to foresee the consequences of our conduct," and respect for moral law

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60 Nelson, *System of Ethics*, 110.
61 Nelson, *System of Ethics*, 46.
62 Nelson, *Progress and Regress*, 19.
63 Kant, *GMM* I, Ak. 4:404.
64 In the sense of *Anschauung*; related to sensory perception.
65 Nelson, *System of Ethics*, 145.

guides that conduct.[66] Reason and its principles are always "behind the scenes", and we cannot come to recognize our actions as self-determined unless we raise this fact to our awareness. This "raising to awareness" is doubly crucial because the principles flowing from reason are not present to consciousness at the time we use them, neither are they "self-evident truths. On the contrary, [these] principles are the focus of obscurity, uncertainty, and controversy. There is unanimity only with respect to the concrete application of these principles."[67]

For instance, during infancy we begin to develop an awareness of object permanence: the ball which rolls behind the curtain and the ball which rolls out from behind the curtain are one and the same object. But the truth of object permanence – i.e., that it is a fact about objects, not merely a belief we have about them – does not in any way depend on, or have its origin in, experience. Experience merely shows us that object permanence is the case. The truth of this principle, under Kant and Nelson's model, instead depends on *permanence through time* being the schema by which a given perception conforms with a pure categorical synthesis undertaken by reason (Kant's category of substance). The process just described is not a conscious one; we do not "decide" whether permanence through time is the schema of substance, or whether a given sensation conforms to a category or does not. It is just a fact that we experience the world this way, in Nelson's view, and just as with any fact about how the world operates, there is nothing we can do about it.[68]

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66 Nelson, *System of Ethics*, 145-146.
67 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 8.
68 Christian Bonnet, "The Transcendental Bias", *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 54 (July 2005), 262. "Kant's refutation of idealism actually boils down to showing that the certainty of the

The ubiquity and non-empirical nature of such a metaphysical principle means that while we are always perceiving it at work, we are not at the same time aware of it: we can only experience an object as an object, and judge that presentation A and presentation B have the same underlying substance, *after* all this work has already spontaneously taken place as an immediate pure cognition. This spontaneous activity is the condition on which any propositional attitudes we have about the object can arise. Because *a posteriori* and *a priori* knowledge is "mixed together" in this way, critique is necessary to separate the true, rational principles from derived, empirical ones – for Nelson as well as Kant, this is as true for reason's practical use as it is for the speculative.

1.2.1. The Self-Confidence of Reason

Like O'Neill, who takes reason's authority to be grounded on "the maxim or strategy of refraining from acting or thinking on principles that cannot be adopted by all potential [rational] agents",[69] Nelson believes any investigation into reason's powers must assume reason's "self-confidence": this self-confidence "deserves to be called a critical (or transcendental) principle only in so far as we understand under the term a proposition that, without itself being metaphysical, provides us with a criterion of the legitimacy of metaphysical propositions."[70] Nelson believes that any principle applying equally to speculative and practical reason cannot be "too narrow, in that it arbitrarily restricts our metaphysical capacities, or too broad, in that it improperly inflates the pretensions of

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existence of the external world could not be the outcome of a proof; external perception nonetheless directly relates to objects located outside us, thus making, through its own reality, any justification of its validity otiose and vain" (Bonnet, 263).

69 O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, 64.
70 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 125-126.

metaphysics."[71] It is moreover necessary that, in recognizing the authority of reason, we at the same time recognize reason as "the highest court of all truth . . . even though we do not yet know what the genuine statement of its truth is – even though, indeed, it is just this [genuine statement of truth] that we are seeking."[72]

Nelson distinguishes reason from the understanding, which can only decompose concepts (its analytic function) or employ rules of *a priori* synthesis (or categories) to sensory data through schemata (its synthetic function). The understanding is "empty" and therefore only a means of structuring experience; reason, on the other hand, *is* a source of knowledge for Nelson – reason is a faculty of knowledge which does not depend on perception and is unmediated by anything higher.[73] This is synonymous with Nelson's description of reason as the faculty of "knowing what is the law": a law is universally binding because it applies unconditionally, and the unconditioned can only have its source in reason.[74] Because the "spontaneity of reason . . . is immune to arbitrary thinking",[75] "it is through confidence in reason alone that we are able to think, therefore . . . to doubt," and also to act.[76]

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71 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 127.
72 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 128.
73 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 128.
74 "[Nature] in the most general sense is the existence of things under laws. The sensible nature of rational beings in general is their existence under empirically conditioned laws and is thus, for reason, heteronomy. The supersensible nature of the same beings, on the other hand, is their existence *in accordance with laws that are independent of any empirical condition and thus belong to the autonomy of pure reason*. And since the laws by which the existence of things depends on cognition are practical, supersensible nature, so far as we can make for ourselves a concept of it, is nothing other than a nature under the autonomy of pure practical reason. The law of this autonomy, however, is the moral law, which is therefore the fundamental law of a supersensible nature and of a pure world of the understanding, the counterpart of which is to exist in the sensible world but without infringing upon its laws" (Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* in *Practical Philosophy* (1996) I, Ak. 5:43; emphasis added).
75 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 127.
76 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 128.

In contrast to this rational self-confidence, we have to "mistrust every judgment" constructed by means of the understanding "until its verification has been carried to its deepest roots" – indeed, "we cannot be confident about even the most skillful proof or the most convincing conclusion in our scientific systems so long as we have not assured ourselves of their final principles and ultimate presuppositions."[77] Nelson moreover denies that an individual judgment as such can be "knowledge; if it were, no further justification would be required": because judgments are mediate, questions of whether a judgment expresses knowledge can only come down to "a subjective comparison of a judgment with its grounds."[78] A judgment is not the act of synthesis itself: it is a representation, in logical terms, of such an act.[79] Thus, for Nelson, the target of philosophical inquiry will not be proving or disproving particular judgments – as Kant points out, experience and observation shows whether our judgments are correct[80] – rather, the target is connecting a particular judgment with its grounds. The grounds for a judgment like "My shoes are too tight" will be different from one like "The rational alone is real," for example; explaining why this is, and whether grounds actually exist for these judgments, is what Nelson takes to be the real concern of epistemology.

1.2.1.1. The Scientific Revolution as a Recognition of Reason's Self-Confidence

Take Galileo's judgment, not only that bodies fall with a velocity proportionate to the duration of the fall, but that this can be formalized mathematically. Through a

77 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 127.
78 Nelson, *Progress and Regress*, 200.
79 Klaus Reich, *The Completeness of Kant's Table of Judgments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 44.
80 Kant, *CPR* A710-711/B738-739.

combination of observation of real-world cases and abstraction (idealization) from such

cases, we can obtain a natural law which can be expressed in an equation, which can in its

turn be checked by experiment (e.g., astronauts dropping a hammer and a feather on the

Moon). If we meditate on this fact for enough time the question arises: *why* does the

equation say something true about experience? It seems highly improbable that

mathematics – a product of mental activity – would stand in such intimate relation with

how the world operates. Indeed, such a thing *would* be improbable if there were no

metaphysical warrant for applying mathematical constructs to experience. Kant notes that

with Galileo and subsequent discoveries in physics,

> a light dawned on all those who study nature. They comprehended
> that reason has insight only into what it itself produces according
> to its own design . . . for otherwise accidental observations, made
> according to no previously designed plan, can never connect up to
> a necessary law, which is yet what reason seeks and requires.
> Reason, in order to be taught by nature, must approach nature with
> its [own] principles in one hand . . . and, in the other hand,
> experiments thought out in accordance with these
> principles.[81]

Our understanding of natural and moral facts is only possible through principles which

hold independently of particular cases. Indeed, according to Kant (in his 1764 *Inquiry*

Concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality),

> [the] true method of metaphysics is basically the same as that
> introduced by Newton into natural science and which has been
> of such benefit to it. Newton's method maintains that one ought,
> on the basis of certain experience . . . to seek out the rules in
> accordance with which certain phenomena of nature occur. Even

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81 Kant, *CPR* Bxiv.

> if one does not discover the fundamental principle of these occurrences in the bodies themselves, it is nonetheless certain that they operate in accordance with this law.[82]

Nelson takes this description as his model for the critical discovery of metaphysical principles: although these principles do not make themselves directly obvious in experience or in our judgments, such experience and such judgments are only possible in accordance with them.[83]

The original acts of synthesis which produce these metaphysical principles are what Nelson calls reason's pure and immediate knowledge (*unmittelbare Erkenntnis*). Such knowledge is neither derived from experience (i.e., it is pure), nor is it derivable from further, more basic elements (i.e., it is non-inferential). In this sense, "immediate" (*unmittelbar*) means both "instantaneous" in its employment and literally "not mediated" or "not mediate". Nelson claims this pure immediate knowledge is what lies behind a variety of explanations of metaphysics throughout philosophy's history, from "Plato's 'divine intuition of the ideas', Aristotle's 'νοῦς', [to] Kant's 'transcendental apperception'",[84] which were all attempts to articulate and describe reason's autonomous, spontaneous power of synthesis. It is this pure rational activity which makes our experiences actual, our judgments true, and our knowledge possible.

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82 Kant, *Inquiry Concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality* in *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770* trans. David Walford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), Ak. 2:286.
83 Bonnet, "The Transcendental Bias," 259.
84 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 143. "Transcendental apperception" is Kant's term for the principle that "*I think* must *be able* to accompany all my representations . . . otherwise something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all" (*CPR* B132). In other words, my experience must be represented to me as *mine*, at least to the extent necessary for me to put it into propositional form.

1.2.2. Quid Juris?

Knowledge is a *real* relationship between a subject and an object – whether interal or external – it is therefore a mistake to interpret such a relationship as logically necessary, since the law of contradiction provides no criterion of truth for natural facts.[85] If we want to explain the fact of our knowledge, it is not enough to show that it follows from any argument we may design, any more than we could deduce the fact of plate tectonics from an argument; it has to be explained scientifically. This does not mean, from Nelson's point of view, that we have to turn to neuroscience or cognitive psychology – these can only give us an account of the physical mechanisms involved, and never tell us why our modes of cognition apply to the world. Importantly Kantianism, though it does "subjectivize" knowledge – in that we have to take into account what kind of creature we are to find the limits of our knowledge – does not thereby *relativize* that knowledge. Nelson would agree with Frege that explaining human knowledge of logic, mathematics, and so on does not reduce the latter to mere conveniences for our peculiar form of life: to take this view would be "a hitherto unknown type of madness."[86] Moreover, such a view would strip these aspects of our knowledge of all necessity which they legitimately claim. So to investigate human knowledge "scientifically" does not mean this for Nelson; rather, it has to be what Kant terms a deduction (*Deduktion*).

Kant describes deduction as a procedure to pick out, from the "mixed fabric of

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85 Nelson, *Progress and Regress*, 158.
86 Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic* trans. Montgomery Furth (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 14. Nelson himself argues against such relativist readings in his analysis of Ernst Mach's conventionalism in *Is a Metaphysics-Free Science Possible?* ("Ist metaphyisikfreie Naturwissenschaft möglich?") (1908).

human cognition", those concepts "that are also destined for pure use *a priori* (completely independently of all experience)."[87] This "also" is the key feature: the concepts aimed for in a deduction are ones we make use of all the time in ordinary cognition, but they are also, Kant argues, the only legitimate concepts for building legitimate metaphysical systems. As Allison (2015) notes, Kant takes the "clue" for discovering these concepts to be "their correlation with the logical functions of judgment, the completeness of which [Kant believes is] ensured within general logic."[88] Nelson describes this discovery with analogy to Cartesian geometry, where the figures and equations are not derived from one another – "for that would be no great discovery" on Kant's part – but that they do, in fact, stand in correspondence, such that they are mutually translatable.[89]

Kant's metaphysical deduction of the categories (*CPR* A65/B90) is correct for Nelson, and therefore so is the way Kant addresses the *quid facti* of reason's *a priori* principles: by using the fixed set of possible forms of judgment, we can map a corresponding set of universal rules of synthesis.[90] Kant's transcendental deduction, however, shows "defects of substance" for Nelson.[91] Nelson argues that the question of objective validity Kant wants to answer with the transcendental deduction "is wrongly put. The relationship of knowledge to its object is not a topic for scientific investigation at all, for it is impossible to compare knowledge with its object" – that is, we cannot "know

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87   Kant, *CPR* B117/A85. The term *Deduktion* is adapted from Prussian legal terminology, originally meaning a document which certifies the rightful ownership of property.
88   Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Deduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 166. Klaus Reich (1992) makes a persuasive case for the completeness of the table of judgments – and therefore the completeness of the table of pure concepts – in *The Completeness of Kant's Table of Judgments*, specifically its concluding chapter (101-113).
89   Nelson, *Progress and Regress in Philosophy*, 187-188.
90   Nelson, *Progress and Regress in Philosophy*, 190.
91   Nelson, *Progress and Regress in Philosophy*, 190.

the object independently" of how that object is structured by our forms of cognition.[92] The

thrust of Nelson's argument here is that if we accept Kant's proposition that we can only

experience an object insofar as it conforms to the pure concepts of the understanding, the

fact of our experience of objects already validates the legitimacy of these pure concepts.

He takes the question not to be whether *a priori* principles "really agree" with objects of

experience (since such a question is redundant); rather, it is a question of "showing that

we do *as a matter of fact* possess epistemological grounds for the judgments we are trying

to justify."[93] These epistemological grounds are none other than the metaphysical

principles exhaustively discovered by deduction.

Deduction verifies a principle as metaphysical if it shows it as a fundamental

synthetic law of the reason.[94] The rules for applying categories to sense perception is an

immediate conceptual synthesis which is "immediately known". Milkov (2012) explains:

> similar to judgment, immediate knowledge . . . takes two forms:
> perceptual and conceptual. . . . [Immediate conceptual knowledge]
> cannot be proven because they set up the first principles of human
> knowledge; nor can they be demonstrated by induction. They can
> only be abstracted; not through intuition, however, but through
> reflection [*reflexion*].[95]

Moreover, Nelson defines knowledge as

> an immediate quality of inner experience and not something
> compounded quantitatively, to be explained or constructed from
> simpler relations. All knowledge is as such already the knowledge
> of an object: the object is always in the cognition; it is not something

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92 Nelson, *Progress and Regress in Philosophy*, 191.
93 Nelson, *Progress and Regress in Philosophy*, 201.
94 Nelson, *Progress and Regress in Philosophy*, 155.
95 Milkov, "Karl Popper's Debt to Leonard Nelson", 141-142.

> that only later is added to it. The relation of knowledge to the object
> cannot be subjected to any mediate examination; it can only
> immediately experienced as it exists as a fact in our knowledge.[96]

As such, any "subjective" process of ascertaining metaphysical principles – going from

the convictions we actually have about the world, through to the grounds of these

convictions in reason – remains *objective* in the sense that we inquire into which objects

of cognition, experience, etc., we are subject to. In this sense knowledge, whether of an

external object like a cup, or of an inner object like the personal insight into duty, is

"subjective" only to the extent this knowledge stands in relation to some subject, i.e.,

ourselves. With this as our aim, Nelson argues that a "critique of reason asks simply:

What immediate knowledge does our reason possess?",[97] and we proceed to this answer

through a subjective (in the sense just clarified) deduction.

Nelson approaches this deduction through analogy with mathematical axiomatics,

which distinguishes an object language (propositions themselves) from a metalanguage

(analyses about those propositions). He uses the example of the parallel axiom:

> Here we have the proposition which we shall call *A*:
> A. *On a plane surface only one straight line can pass through a point
> outside another straight line without crossing it.*
> This is the parallel axiom, a proposition from the system of

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96 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 118-119. Such a description – knowledge as quality of inner experience – may not inspire confidence as to the truth of such knowledge, or whether it is knowledge at all. As Carol Voeller (2001) points out, however, in contemporary philosophical usage there is an "impulse to read 'objective' as 'subject-independent,' 'observer independent,' 'intersubjectively accessible,' or something else in this vein," while "'subjective' is correspondingly read as 'dependent on the subject or observer (considered as an individual of, to some extent, peculiar nature),' 'not intersubjectively accessible,' etc." But "[Kantian] usage of these terms should be considered primarily metaphysical with their force vis-à-vis the epistemic left an open question. As agents and cognizers, we stand in the relation of subjects to the objects of our cognition, experience, and agency" (Voeller, *The Metaphysics of the Moral Law: Kant's Deduction of Freedom* [New York: Garland] 2001, 42).

97 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 125.

> geometry. Now this proposition A becomes the object of a
> proposition of the critique of geometry, which we shall call
> proposition *A'*:
> A'. *A is unprovable.*[98]

A' is only concerned with the provability of *A* – the actual validity of A in no way depends

on *A'*. In a critique of reason, similarly, "[*a priori*] knowledge is . . . the object of

transcendental investigation, which forms the content of critique."[99] This distinction

between "content" and "object" reflects the "Newtonian" approach described in Kant's

1764 *Inquiry*: just as the *content* of a physical theory is observable phenomena (e.g.,

planets) while its *object* is a description of the underlying laws, so too the content of

critique is an experience or a particular judgment, while the object is describing its

underlying metaphysical principle. A deduction will go like this, then, according to

Nelson:

> B. *Every change has a cause.*
> This proposition is the principle of causality. In the critique of
> reason it becomes the object of proposition *B*:
> B'. *B is the rendering of an immediate cognition.*[100]

As with the example of the parallel postulate, the truth of "Every change has a cause" is

in no way dependent on the deduction; its truth depends on whether it is, in fact, an

immediate and pure cognition. A deduction can only show us whether such a dependence

is *there*.

For example, if I ask "Why is the door open?" I am, as it were, "subconsciously"

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98 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 165.
99 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 134.
100 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 166.

invoking the universal necessity of causality, though the words "cause" and "effect" do not appear anywhere in my question. My question implies that some agent or some chain of events caused the door to be open rather than closed, i.e., it did not, and *could not*, "happen for no reason". Moreover, the presupposition behind my question goes beyond what I merely observe: all I see is an open door. I do not see who or what opened it, and I did not observe the door being opened. But my certainty is such that if I were in my kitchen at a given point in the past, I would observe the cause at work – a certainty so strong that I do not even examine it. What warrants such certainty? Not perception, since I never observed the door being opened. Indeed, as we learn from Kant's engagement with Hume (cf. *CPR* B127), causes are never "observed" at all – causality itself is an *a priori* condition of how we experience the world and cannot thus be perceived. So my appeal to previous experience is eliminated. According to Nelson's model, I either have no warrant whatsoever to assume there was a cause for my door opening, or the validity of my assumption is secured by the validity of the *a priori* concept of causality listed in Kant's table of categories. If deduction shows that my assumption (i.e., "Every change has a cause") stands in such dependence to the *a priori* concept of causality, then Nelson's deduction will show that my assumption is metaphysically valid. This, in turn, excludes the possibility that the door is open "for no reason". Nelson's model of deduction thus narrows our field of possible explanations through a comparison of a judgment with its counterpart in Kant's table of categories.

The success of such a deduction is enough, in Nelson's mind, to demonstrate the independence of reason's validity from the empirical sphere – not just in theoretical

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matters, but in moral ones as well. For example, the imperative "Respect personal dignity", if it is valid, can only be so under the practical law of right, which in turn can only be an immediate moral cognition. Indeed, the validity of any "ought" can only be grounded in a free will, which cannot be empirically conditioned.[101] Thus the validity of speculative and ethical principles alike stand or fall with their dependence on pure cognitions of reason, which Nelson takes to be demonstrated scientifically through Kantian critique.

Critique is necessary because the pure activity of reason "originally obscure":

> There is no immediate obviousness in metaphysical truths; we
> cannot derive these cognitions from an "intellectual intuition";[102]
> they reach our consciousness only through thinking (reflection),
> through abstracting from the intuitively given content of
> empirical judgments.[103]

With the preceding, we see how the critique of reason accomplishes its task of raising these originally-obscure principles to awareness, setting them out systematically for legitimate use in the proper domains:

> the critique of reason is not concerned with the truth of the basic
> philosophical principles in question – they are, as basic principles,
> altogether unprovable – but simply the truth of the empirical
> proposition that we are actually in possession of an immediate

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101 "By *freedom* in the cosmological sense . . . I understand the faculty of beginning a state *from itself*, the causality of which does not in turn stand under another cause determining it in time in accordance with the law of nature. . . . [It] is this *transcendental* idea of *freedom* on which the practical concept of freedom is grounded . . . *Freedom in the practical sense* is the independence of the power of choice from *necessitation* by impulses of sensibility. . . . [Practical freedom] presupposes that although something has not happened, it nevertheless *ought* to have happened [and recognizing this,] it might produce something determined in the temporal order in accord with empirical laws, and hence begin a series of occurrences *entirely from itself*" (Kant, *CPR* A533-535/B561-563).

102 Or, in terms used in Kant's third *Critique*, "intuitive understanding".

103 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 200.

> rational knowledge that contains the ground of those philosophical propositions. Whoever demands more of the verification of philosophical principles, whoever thinks that philosophical knowledge can or should first be produced by way of dialectics, is simply deceived by the original obscurity of philosophical knowledge.[104]

With critique it becomes possible to undertake metaphysics, and with it, scientifically rigorous philosophy: we do not proceed progressively from stipulated definitions, but regressively from how we think and act to the conditions of that thought and action. Only when these conditions are laid out systematically does Nelson believe we are in a position to set out programs for the sciences, ethics, and their attendant curricula to follow.

1.3. Pedagogy

As noted above, Nelson argues that Kant "did not pursue the problem of instruction in philosophy beyond some incidental pedagogic observations of a general character."[105] It is not that Kant has *nothing* to say about pedagogy, and Nelson is under no illusions on this point; rather, Nelson does not believe Kant fully addresses the necessity of *non-dogmatic* instruction in the context of his theory of enlightenment. I argue that is precisely how to reconcile education with rational autonomy, and that Nelson's pedagogical use of Socratic method is meant to do just this. Just as it is not possible to act morally by following a set of commands issued from outside ourselves, it is not possible for teachers to force their students to become enlightened. Enlightenment is only possible when students are trained to resist "self-incurred immaturity" on their

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104 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 102.
105 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 18.

own; the question is how. For Nelson, the "how" is supplied by a new Socratic pedagogy which combines dialogue with Kant's model of human reason and the theory of deduction I describe above. To appreciate Nelson's solution, and how it fills a gap not sufficiently addressed by Kant, I want to first consider Kant's general view of education and the remarks he does make on the topic of pedagogy.

1.3.1. Kant on Pedagogy

Kant's remarks on pedagogy mostly pertain to moral education. Kant maintains in the *Doctrine of Virtue* that instruction is required in order for pure practical reason to inform our actions (over and against other inclinations); indeed, that "virtue can and must be taught already follows from its not being innate".[106] He divides the possible routes of this instruction into "the *dogmatic* way (in which only the teacher speaks) . . . the way of *dialogue* (in which both teacher and pupil question and answer each other)," and the "way of teaching by catechism," in which the teacher puts questions to the pupil but not vice versa.[107] Socratic dialogue and catechism represent two methods of "erotetic" or interrogative instruction for Kant, and the appropriateness of each method for teaching virtue depends "on whether the teacher addresses his questions to the pupil's reason or just to [the pupil's] memory."[108]

Kant describes Socratic method as follows:

> The teacher, by his questions, guides his young pupil's course of thought merely by presenting him with cases in which his predisposition for certain concepts will develop (the teacher is the

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106 Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals* in *Practical Philosophy* (1996), II §49, Ak. 6:477.
107 Kant, *MM* II §50, Ak. 6:478.
108 Kant, *MM* II §50, Ak. 6:478.

midwife of the pupil's thoughts). The pupil, who thus sees that he himself can think, responds with questions of his own about obscurities in the propositions admitted or about his doubts regarding them, and so provides occasions for the teacher himself to learn how to question skillfully, according to the saying *docendo discimus* ["we learn by teaching"].[109]

Kant here identifies the "midwife" role of the Socratic instructor, a metaphor Socrates himself employs to describe his pedagogical approach:

> my art . . . is just like [a midwife's] in most respects. The difference is that I attend men and not women, and that I watch over the labor of their souls, not of their bodies. And the most important thing about my art is the ability to apply all possible tests to the offspring, to determine whether the young mind is being delivered of a phantom, that is, an error, or a fertile truth.[110]

In his *Lectures on Pedagogy* Kant claims that this mode of instruction is mainly useful for assessing the pupil's powers of reasoning, as a kind of discipline; but discipline, however valuable, "leaves us only with a habit" – i.e., the ability to reason effectively through moral problems.[111] The pupil will be made more analytical, but not more duty-bound or virtuous.

To truly educate a pupil in moral-practical matters and instill virtue in them, Kant believes the method of catechism should be followed: "a pure moral catechism, as the basic teaching of duties of virtue . . . can be developed from ordinary human reason, and (as far as its form is concerned) . . . needs only to be adapted to rules of teaching suited

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109 Kant, *MM* II §50, Ak. 6:478.

110 Plato, *Theaeatetus* in *Plato: Complete Works* trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 150b-c.

111 Kant, *Lectures on Pedagogy* trans. Robert B. Louden in *Anthropology, History, and Education* ed. Günter Zöller and Robert B. Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Ak. 9:480.

for the earliest instruction."[112] Because this method is aimed at the pupil's retention of

moral principles, Kant argues it does not "permit Socratic dialogue . . . since the pupil

[would have] no idea what questions to ask."[113] The instructor using the method of

catechism simply asks the pupil guided questions, and records the correct answers for the

pupil to study and train her memory.[114] Unlike Socratic method, the teacher of a moral

catechism has a pre-established doctrine (consisting of principles validated by a critique

of practical reason) to check the pupil's answers by, and is therefore able to correct the

pupil or fill in answers where the pupil is unsure:

> 1. Teacher: What is your greatest, in fact your whole, desire in life?
> Pupil: (is silent)
> Teacher: That everything should always go the way you would like
> it to.
> 2. Teacher: What is such a condition called?
> Pupil: (is silent)
> Teacher: It is called *happiness* (continuous well-being, enjoyment of
> life, complete satisfaction with one's condition).[115]

By this method the pupil is taught, in no uncertain terms, values worth striving for and

principles which inform moral actions: the pupil is "brought to a clear insight into the

moral catechism, which should be presented with the utmost diligence and

thoroughness."[116]

1.3.2. Why Nelson Pursues the Socratic Method

Following Kant's lead, Nelson defines pedagogy as nothing less than "the

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112 Kant, *MM* II §51, Ak. 6:478.
113 Kant, *MM* II §51, Ak. 6:479.
114 Kant, *MM* II §51, Ak. 6:479.
115 Kant, Remark to *MM* II §52, Ak. 6:480.
116 Kant, Remark to *MM* II §52, Ak. 6:484.

systematic guidance of the individual toward virtue," whose "aim is to make him capable

of fulfilling his ethical tasks."[117] Further, it is a procedure for discovering "the conditions

under which virtue is realized in the life of the individual."[118] However, Nelson does not

accept any kind of catechistic instruction in moral matters, simply because he considers it

impossible to formulate a moral code of the kind Kant intends the pupil to learn through

catechism. According to Nelson, the moral law is purely formal, that is, devoid of any

content; it only demands that in situations A and B that we act in a manner we believe to

be universalizable to all other rational agents. But we cannot determine from this, *a*

priori, that the same action will be the right thing to do in situations A and B. Therefore,

Nelson argues, we can not use the moral law to construct "moral code, i.e., systematic

catalogue of duties, which would tell us how to behave in each given situation."[119] No

matter how much a teacher trains pupils by casuistic[120] questioning, Kant's method of

teaching virtue would ultimately require "compliance with instructions emanating from

another's will, i.e. . . . a heteronomous morality."[121] Nelson therefore opts for Socratic

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117 Nelson, *Politics and Education* trans. W. Lansdell (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1928), 25.
118 Nelson, *Politics and Education*, 25.
119 Nelson, *System of Ethics*, 92. In this sense Nelson would agree with Hegel that Kant's moral law is an "empty formalism" (see Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* §133), but for Nelson this is not an objection to the moral law's validity: "[The] action required by duty in a given case [is] 'the material content of duty,' and I maintain that the content of duty cannot be logically derived from the content of the moral law [i.e., the categorical imperative in its various formulations]. . . . Only depending on the nature of the circumstances can anything become the *material content* of our duty. [The] *criterion* that we apply to the given circumstances, and that is given to us directly by the moral law, is established independently of the circumstances" (*System of Ethics* 91).
120 I.e., hypotheticals used to test a pupil's practical reasoning and understanding of moral principles (e.g., "Is it murdering oneself to hurl oneself to certain death (like Curtius) in order to save one's country?" [Kant, *MM* II §6, Ak. 6:423).
121 Nelson, *System of Ethics*, 93. We see this no more clearly than in Kant's example cited above, wherein the teacher instructs the pupil as to the pupil's greatest desire in life, namely happiness. Even if is true, this truth has no value to the pupil unless the pupil has personal insight to it. Instruction, for it to aid enlightenment, must train the pupil to find their own answers, or none will be accepted.

dialogue as the relevant mode of education – not between a teacher and a student, however, but between students themselves, mediated by the teacher.

1.3.3. Politics and Education

As W. J. Roberts (1928) tells us, the "educational problem with which [Nelson] is . . . concerned is a limited one, namely, of training the intellect and will of selected persons for the task of political leadership";[122] however, the political and social background to this educational problem is far from limited. Nelson's writings on education and pedagogy come in the wake of the first World War. Nelson blames the war on the unprincipled opportunism among Europe's leadership, and because he considers this to be an intellectual failing, he believes "the formation of political character" should be the goal of any training for public service.[123] This is no small goal, since in the end "it is real, flesh-and-blood people who have to pay for the tragic consequences of the fallacies committed by their intellectual leaders."[124] Any education for this practical realm requires training students to be philosophically adept.

Because the population from the personal failings of its leaders, and these leaders require better training, Nelson believes the entire state of education itself has to change as a preventative measure. A new direction in education requires "a special plan of teaching, different from that of the ordinary school";[125] Nelson argues the traditional boarding-school education should be supplanted with "training in a community . . . [which] enables

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122 Roberts, Introduction to Nelson, *Politics and Education*, ii.
123 Nelson, *Politics and Education*, 94.
124 Nelson, *A Theory of Philosophical Fallacies* trans. Fernando Leal and David Carus (New York: Springer, 2016), 151.
125 Nelson, *Politics and Education*, 101.

the pupil to realise the possibility of a society of [individuals] based upon a clear purpose".[126] Rather than training pupils to follow their own private interests and develop their skills independently of the interests of others, Nelson wants schools to be cooperative environments for "thorough and all-round training in the *art of organisation.*"[127] The education of any student, insofar as it trains them for public office, cannot prepare them to meet the demands and responsibilities of this office unless it gives them "insight into what is politically worth striving for, and . . . an eye for what is politically attainable."[128]

What is worth striving for presupposes a goal; in politics these goals are to be "formulated in [a] theory right" such that would-be politicians and public servants will have clear ends to attain.[129] This is of course a teleological conception of politics and therefore of the function served by pedagogy. Indeed, Nelson's approach to pedagogy follows a self-consciously Platonic ideal (referencing the *Republic*'s discussion of education); an ideal which, while "thrust aside as an assumed Utopia," has only been neglected because "philosophic science [has been] unable to lay down for us the principles of the theory of the State . . . [or] a clearly defined aim" to direct political education towards.[130] But by undertaking Kant's critical philosophy and its applications to the fields of ethics, right, law, and so on, this Platonic ideal has, in Nelson's estimation, "become a practically soluble task."[131] I will return to this subject in Chapter 2. For now, I

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126 Nelson, *Politics and Education*, 101.
127 Nelson, *Politics and Education*, 102.
128 Nelson, *Politics and Education*, 80.
129 Nelson, *System of Ethics*, 25.
130 Nelson, *Politics and Education*, 138.
131 Nelson, *Politics and Education*, 138.

draw attention to these passages to highlight the seemingly (or really) paradoxical

political framework Nelson envisions for educational reform, described well by Hacohen

(2000):

> [Nelson] was a militant left-liberal and cosmopolite who preached
> a universal Kantian ethics and called for the establishment of an
> international legal system. He . . . opposed German imperialism,
> and advocated pacifism. In the midst of World War I, he published
> a critique of positivist jurisprudence that challenged the moral and
> legal claims of all combatants, Germany included. At the end of the
> war, he founded the *Internationaler Jugendbund* (*IJB*), a youth
> league promoting educational and political reform. Initially, the
> league included mainly his students, but it gradually extended its
> reach from Göttingen to most German universities. It established its
> own school, the *Walkmühle Schule*, near Kassel. Nelson introduced
> there . . . the "Socratic Method". It emphasized the dialogical nature
> of education. Nelson hoped that the school would serve as a model
> for socialist educational reform, cultivate enlightened citizens, and
> create leaders for the Weimar Republic. He doubted that parliamentary
> democracy was capable of producing responsible leaders, or of
> resisting fascism. He considered . . . majority rule incompatible with
> liberty and justice. Against democracy, he posed the Platonic "rule of
> the wise".[132]

This cross-section of Nelson's concerns and concrete actions reveals his social, political,

and philosophical views to be an eclectic mixture, to say the least.

Certainly to postwar, liberal-democratic sensibilities, Nelson's anti-democratic

views – coupled with an insistence on training "rulers" and promoting a social model

adapted from Plato (probably the most infamous aspect of Plato's thought) – raises alarm.

In an earlier discussion of Nelson's political views – and likely the most exhaustive which

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132 Hacohen, *Karl Popper – The Formative Years*, 121-122.

exists in English – these factors lead Walter Struve (1973) to subject Nelson to scathing

charges of bourgeois elitism and authoritarianism:

> [Nelson's] elitism – his critique of democracy and his doctrine of
> the rule of the just – provided a coherent interpretation of the present
> and an optimistic vision of the future for small, but significant
> segments of the middle class. Yet his seemingly boundless optimism
> obscured a strong element of despair. Permanent dictatorship, however
> enlightened and benevolent, became the only way to reach and secure
> the liberal goals that he continued to cherish, even when he identified
> them with socialism after World War I.[133]

Determining just where Nelson stands vis-à-vis elitist authoritarianism ultimately

depends, I would argue, on where we place Kant and his theory of *Rechtstaat* regarding

this question, because this is the organizing principle behind Nelson's own state

socialism. But this does not have any pressing importance for the present discussion; it is

not necessary for now either to defend or condemn the political framework Nelson

envisioned for pedagogy, only to point out *that* he had such a framework in mind. And

further, because this position is the *outcome* of Nelson's cross-pollination of Kantian and

Platonic political thought, it poses no problem in our assessment of Nelson's Kantian-

Platonic philosophy more generally; if anything, it shows us the extent of the affinity

Nelson sees in Kant and Plato's philosophies.

This said, in Hacohen's description we find the broader social objective Nelson

intends for Socratic method. We also find Nelson's answer to the question we set

ourselves at the beginning of this chapter: the conditions and procedures he takes to be

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133 Struve, *Elites Against Democracy: Leadership Ideals in Bourgeois Political Thought in Germany,
1890-1933* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 214.

necessary for enlightenment on a public scale. In order train students to exercise Kant's

maxim of unprejudiced thinking, namely thinking for one's self, education needs to

employ a dialogue-based, dialectical method which forces students to become acute

problem-solvers and discerning judges both of their own conduct and of others'. This

cannot be done, Nelson believes, without a broader critique by philosophers of dominant

institutions and ideologies which shape the world where such an education can take place,

be these economic, political or otherwise. Hence there must always be an organized,

ground-up fight to secure Kant's "public use" of reason: educators, civil servants, etc.,

always have to critique, and indeed be allowed to critique, the conditions under which

citizen live their lives. If a state suppresses the autonomy of its population – if it

maintains its rule only through force and unimpeachable ideology – it can have no inner

stability to sustain it, and suffer an entropic collapse over time. The cornerstone of any

functional society will have to be the free and autonomous activity of its citizens, which

education reinforces by providing citizens the training necessary to ensure their free and

autonomous activity.

For Nelson, Socratic method is a "regressive method, the importance of which

does not lie in extending our knowledge, adding new truths to the fund of those already

known, elaborating their consequences, but rather in examining the known truths with

regard to their preassumptions".[134] It is "regressive" in the sense of "working backwards"

from what is known to the necessary condition of that knowledge. Nelson envisions this

technique as the only one suitable for philosophy, given the poverty of dogmatism and the

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134 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 188.

flaws he sees in logicist epistemology. By demonstrating the futility and impossibility of such a theory, Nelson intends to put in its place "a program of cooperative and fruitful scientific endeavor in philosophy", thereby showing the way out of "divisive and barren dogmatic quarrels" which plague the work of philosophers.[135] As a pedagogical tool, Nelson intends Socratic method to address the shortcomings in political – no less than philosophical – education, to produce the kind of enlightenment Kant showed to be most desirable for states and their peoples. By connecting such a project with what he considers a "Platonic ideal", Nelson nods to the deeper agreement he sees between Kant and Plato. I argue that Nelson's synthesis of Plato and Kant can be best clarified by looking at how and why each thinker engages with the public use of reason, i.e., how they inquire into the authoritative ground of moral precepts insofar as these influence the conduct of individuals. It is this line of inquiry that I pick up in my discussion of Plato in Chapter 2.

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135 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 205.

CHAPTER 2. PLATO'S PHILOSOPHY AS AN EXERCISE

IN THE PUBLIC USE OF REASON

In this chapter I consider how Plato approaches philosophy as a critical enterprise similar to that of Kant. For the most part my analysis of Plato will be based around two recent treatments of his philosophy: one is Jonny Thakkar's (2018) treatment of Plato as a critic of Athenian ideology, whereby Plato is understood as critiquing the state and its traditions so as to reach a true account of how human life ought to be organized (represented, e.g., in the *Republic*'s discussion of the ideal city). The other is Catherine Rowett's (2018) treatment of Plato's theory of knowledge, which I will argue bears similarities to Nelson's discussion of pure immediate knowledge and Nelson's re-working of *anamnesis*. This discussion makes up the first part of the chapter. The remainder will be used to analyze Kant's understanding of Plato and how it influenced later Kantian interpretations of Plato, Nelson's included. Here I raise an objection to Kant's reading of Plato as an ontological dualist and a "mystic", and suggest we can avoid this reading without abandoning Kant's restrictions on metaphysical knowledge. Finally, I return to Nelson's socio-political philosophy and how it acts as a framework for Socratic method. This time I examine the ways in which Nelson adapts Platonic idealism to his position, and how Nelson can be seen to follow a Platonic model of philosophy as ideological critique.

2.1. Plato's Problem

Plato's philosophy can be described as the attempt to solve what Chomsky (1986) aptly calls "Plato's problem": accounting for the breadth and depth of our knowledge of

the world given our limited experience of it.[136] A solution to such a problem can be

attempted in many ways; however, following Lloyd Gerson (2013), we can characterize

Plato's explanation more specifically as one which eschews materialism, mechanism,

nominalism, relativism, and skepticism – indeed, Gerson argues a Platonist has a minimal

commitment to showing the falsity of these positions.[137] Whatever positive doctrine can

be gleaned from Plato's dialogues (reconstructing such a famously elusive doctrine is not

my goal with this discussion), Gerson believes we can at least arrive at its minimal

conditions negatively, by identifying positions Plato consistently has Socrates refute, such

as Protagorean relativism.[138] Furthermore, the dialectical method employed in the

dialogues (not just by Socrates but, e.g., by Parmenides in the dialogue bearing his name)

is directed at objective truth, not a variety of equal narratives about the world:

"dialecticians use . . . hypotheses as real hypotheses, that is, as 'stepping stones' or a

'launching point' until they reach something 'unhypothetical'", namely the sources of

knowability.[139] Socratic exchange begins and ends with a conviction that there is an

objective state of affairs which analysis and speculation can reach.[140]

This is not to say such exchanges begin with *knowledge* of this objective state of

affairs: as Catherine Rowett (2018) notes, Plato's inquiries begin with a recognition that

"conceptual knowledge, or knowledge of *types* . . . underpins all . . . propositions and

practical engagement with the world is evident," but "what [this conceptual knowledge] is

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136 Chomsky, *Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origin, and Use* (New York: Praeger, 1986), xxv.
137 Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013), 14.
138 Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism*, 9.
139 Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism*, 85. Cf. Plato, *Republic* 511b.
140 Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism*, 18.

and what it is about, and what kind of truth it captures is not so evident."[141] Thus when the

character of Socrates undertakes examination of beliefs, he does not do so as a "teacher"

in the mold of the sophists, but as a seeker of knowledge in an cooperative

investigation.[142] Some commentators, such as Charles Kahn (1996), argue that on the

subject of knowledge Plato radically expands on the concerns of the historical Socrates,

who always professed to "know nothing":

> Platonic metaphysics and epistemology can be seen as Plato's answer
> to the question: what kind of knowledge is logically required for the
> success of the Socratic elenchus described in the *Apology*?[143] . . . The
> answer is not, of course, intended to imply that Socrates historically
> possessed such knowledge. Rather, Plato's own theory can be seen
> as his attempt to provide for the world, and for himself, a coherent
> account of what kind of knowledge would be required for full
> competence in the search for moral wisdom that Socrates had
> begun.[144]

If a philosopher is to achieve anything with dialectic, then a sense (if not a full

knowledge) of what distinguishes truth from falsity, and knowledge from mere opinion, is

needed. This brings us to the practical dimension to "Plato's problem": the conditions for

a good life – not only for the individual, but for a community – how we can come to

know these conditions, and how to act on them.

 As we have seen Rowett claim, knowledge of these conditions will be a

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141 Rowett, *Knowledge and Truth in Plato: Stepping Past the Shadow of Socrates* (Oxford: Oxford
 University Press, 2018), 5; emphasis added.
142 Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 89.
143 *Apology* 24b-28a portrays Socrates engaged in elenchic dialogue with Meletus on the topic of Socrates'
 impiety and corruption of the Athenian youth. Kahn argues the success of this exchange – namely,
 showing Meletus' accusations to be self-contradictory and inconsistent – is only explicable if this self-
 contradiction entails the falsehood of Meletus' claims and, in turn, such an entailment could only be
 recognized from the standpoint of true knowledge (Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 202).
144 Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 202-203.

knowledge of types (as opposed to particulars) for Plato.[145] This typic knowledge does not

necessarily begin with sense data: for example, "we need not suppose that, when Socrates

speaks of 'knowing the road' [to Larissa][146] he means knowing the concrete particular, the

road that we actually travel on"; we should instead suppose he means "knowing in the

abstract *what would count as a road to Larissa*, but not which road is the one."[147] An

analogy might be a description given to the public to identify a fugitive: without first

knowing what the fugitive looks like, the public has a set of criteria for what "counts" as

the fugitive, should he be identified (e.g., short reddish hair, tall, slight build). The public

knows what the fugitive looks like, but does not have an empirical correlate for this

knowledge yet (the specific person). Should someone walk into a corner store and judge a

customer to fit the description, Rowett argues this would be *doxa* – selecting a

corresponding token for the type (and this *doxa* will be correct if it is, in fact, the

fugitive).[148] Socratic dialogue is, then, aimed at identifying "what counts" given the type

under examination: does harming our enemies and helping our friends count as justice?

Does being loved by the gods count as pious?

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145 For Rowett, "knowledge of types" – or better yet, "grasp of types" to avoid association she finds are
usually connected with the word "knowledge" – is a term for that framework under which our
judgments, perceptions, and propositions are categorized and derive cognitive coherence. To even say
of an object that it is an object, or "that thing," Rowett argues we need to see the world in individuated
terms already, no matter how specific or general these terms are. Rowett uses the example of a church:
"you will always see it as *something*. It is no simpler or more complex to see it as a building than as a
church. You are aware of something under a certain description, and the description is supplied
(sometimes in linguistic form, sometimes not) from your repertoire of concepts (e.g. building, church,
landmark, thing, artefact). Some conceptual work is built into the very experience that brings it to your
attention. We hardly ever (maybe never?) encounter something that can't be categorized in any of our
existing terms" (Rowett 2018, 32).
146 Cf. Plato, *Meno* in *Complete Works* (1997), 97a.
147 Rowett, *Knowledge and Truth*, 90-91.
148 Rowett, *Knowledge and Truth*, 91.

Of course, the more pressing question is how we would know we achieved anything by this examination. For example, the Eleatic Stranger notes this problem right away in *Sophist*: "[we] need to begin the investigation from [what we know about] the sophist – by searching for him and giving a clear account of what he is. Now in this case you and I only have the name in common, and maybe we've each used it for a different thing."[149] There is always the possibility that we misidentify a particular or a set of characteristics as falling under an Idea. But Rowett argues that this is only a problem if we take knowledge and *doxa* to have the same content:

> they are two different kinds of grasp of two logically different kinds of objects: *doxa* is token-recognition or 'seeing as' (and the occasional use of *epistemai* in the plural also refers to token-recognition, when bound by *episteme*), while *episteme* is one's grasp of the type or concept in itself, which is a pre-requisite for recognition.[150]

Where there is insufficient *episteme*, *doxa* remains inadequate or at very least "untethered" to a good explanation.[151] We might illustrate what this means as follows: I have the perfectly reasonable belief that when I drop a pencil, it will fall – it will not fly into the ceiling. However, if I *examine* this belief and my reasons for holding it, I have to confess to my ignorance about why the pencil will not fly up. Absent any theoretical grasp on the physics involved, my only real grounding for this belief is previous experience: I have never seen such a thing happen before. My "explanation" would likely amount to a vague gesture to the concept of gravity – maybe appealing (without further

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149 Plato, *Sophist* in *Complete Works* (1997), 218c.
150 Rowett, *Knowledge and Truth*, 107.
151 Rowett repeatedly uses the image of Daedelus' wandering statues from *Meno* 97d to describe *doxa* which is not sufficiently secured or "tied down" with requisite theoretical or conceptual knowledge.

detail) to the mass of Earth in comparison to the pencil – without really understanding the physical processes at work. But my belief remains correct: gravity is the relevant explanation for the pencil's fall, however benighted I as an individual happen to be on the subject. It is not as though my explanation is devoid of content; rather, my understanding is deficient. If I were to learn more about the physics, say, my grasp on the concept of gravity would be vastly strengthened, and at a certain point I would even be able to communicate this knowledge to others. In view of this we may say that, under the Platonic model, philosophy is meant to strengthen our grasp on Ideas so we can make keener judgments of real-world cases and better communicate our reasoning to others.

This is why Jonny Thakkar (2018) argues against reading Plato's political philosophy (e.g., in the *Republic*) as advocating for rule by a caste of esoteric mystics. How we understand the philosopher *qua* political leader depends on what kind of knowledge we suppose the philosopher to possess. If we understand the philosopher-rulers Socrates describes as directing their contemplation exclusively to an otherworldly realm of Ideas at the expense of worldly affairs, it would make "the notion of philosopher-rulers almost unintelligible. Why would anyone in their right mind offer the keys of the kingdom to a Platonic philosopher?"[152] If we imagine Platonism generally as an ascetic rejection of the world of experience, then it is hard to imagine why philosophers would care how city-states are run, let alone make politics their business.[153]

Thakkar argues this picture of Platonism incorrectly reads Plato's epistemology as

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152 Thakkar, *Plato as Critical Theorist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018), 39.
153 Thakkar, *Plato as Critical Theorist*, 40.

entailing an ontological split between "'the world of sense' and 'the world of ideas.'"[154]

Thakkar instead argues that a "two-aspect" reading of Plato is equally, if not more, consistent with Plato's texts and renders the practical concerns of his philosophy more convincing. Thakkar holds that we can read Plato as positing "one world with two aspects. If that is the case, then philosophical rulers might be concerned with the same concrete objects as their nonphilosophical counter parts . . . only with the advantage of being able to see them under both their sensible and formal aspects."[155] In Rowett's words, a reading like this would commit a Platonist to "nothing more abstruse than the familiar logical distinction between concept and object, or signifier and signified, or descriptor and what is described."[156] So in Plato's hands, Socratic method "enables one to deduce why this or that token is worthy of the description 'virtue', and not just *that it is* a virtue."[157]

2.1.1. Plato's Critique of Athenian Ideology

It is precisely Plato's innovation in political philosophy, Kant argues, *not* to allow "concrete examples" set the standard for discussions of statecraft – objections of this kind are no more than fallacious attempts to derail any social or political critique:

> The *Platonic republic* has become proverbial as a supposedly striking example of a dream of perfection that can have its place only in the idle thinker's brain . . . But we would do better to pursue this thought further . . . rather than setting it aside as useless under the very wretched and harmful pretext of its impracticability. . . . For nothing

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154 Thakkar, *Plato as Critical Theorist*, 44.
155 Thakkar, *Plato as Critical Theorist*, 45. In the first *Critique*'s B Preface, Kant describes his distinction between phenomena and noumena in similar terms:
156 Rowett, *Knowledge and Truth*, 179.
157 Rowett, *Knowledge and Truth*, 68.

is more harmful or less worthy of a philosopher than the vulgar appeal to allegedly contrary experience . . . frustrating all good intentions by using crude concepts in place of [Ideas,] just because these concepts were drawn from experience.[158]

Moreover, according to Thakkar, whether

the *Republic* offers a critical theory in the post-Hegelian sense – one that criticizes the present from the standpoint of its un-actualized potential – is debatable, but it does seem fair to credit Plato with aiming to liberate his readers from the dominant ideology so that they come to see that . . . it is not Kallipolis[159] that is the dream-world, but Athens.[160]

Taking these passages together, we might say that Plato's insight is that existing polities, traditions, institutions, etc., exert an illusory necessity by sheer virtue of *existing*. To be sure, such institutions began as "ideas" in the colloquial sense – in that they always begin in thought – but not, from the Platonic or Kantian standpoint, as products of rational deliberation guided by a pure, i.e., non-empirical, ideal.

Thakkar points to two senses of "ideal" here: the first referring to "models – the ideal F or the ideal G – that exist in the imagination, whether as the product of deliberate reflection or as the product of acculturation," and a second referring "to transcendent goods, such as community or justice or beauty, that seem to organize a hierarchy of lower goods against which they cannot be traded," noting further that these "two kinds of ideal will inevitably shape each other."[161] Plato, knowing that human individuals and societies are by nature "mimetic" – in that we are largely guided to act by imitation of a model

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158 Kant, *CPR* A316-317/B372-373.
159 I.e., the ideal state discussed in the *Republic*.
160 Thakkar, *Plato as Critical Theorist*, 199.
161 Thakkar, *Plato as Critical Theorist*, 121.

(heroes of poetry or legend, great city-states, etc.) – also recognizes "this process of imitation and emulation leaves us thoroughly and permanently exposed to the possibility of a dysfunctional social world."[162] The right models have to be followed if we are to produce the most possible transcendent good, and in turn we have to value the right things to recognize the right models. If we only take our models from empirical reality, however, we are left with highly changeable values: a regime change, *coup*, invasion, economic crisis, etc., can violently interrupt our assumptions about what is valuable or "best". Today's liberal theorist can be tomorrow's authoritarian commissar with sufficient changes to the social order – our loyalties and our aims, *qua* agents in the material world, are highly contingent and nowhere near as autonomous as we might believe.

Plato is not ignorant of this; in fact, he views it as evidence that the material world and its institutions are a poor model for the best order. As Socrates states in *Republic* VI:

> No one whose thoughts are truly directed towards the things that are
> . . . has the leisure to look down at human affairs or to be filled with
> envy and hatred by competing with people. Instead, as he looks at
> and studies things that are organized and always the same, that neither
> do injustice to one another nor suffer it, being all in a rational order, he
> imitates them and tries to become as like them as he can.[163]

The project of political philosophy and ethics becomes one of knowing "the things that are", or the true and necessary principles of things. The Athenian state is of course guided by principles – democracy, patriotism, piety, courage – and it is not a matter of whether these principles are argued for (as they are, for example, in Pericles' funeral oration), or

162 Thakkar, *Plato as Critical Theorist*, 122.
163 Plato, *Republic* in *Complete Works* (1997), 500b-c.

whether these arguments are persuasive, but whether the arguments for them are *true*. It may be that piety or courage ought to be the building-blocks of a harmonious society; be that as it may, we cannot come by this belief accidentally or through heteronomous influence. If we make such things principles for ourselves and others, we have to show our claims to be true ones.

This quest underlies all Socratic inquiry to some degree: if piety, for example, is what is loved by the gods, and the gods are given to arbitrary impulses and to conflict (e.g., as depicted in Homeric and Hesiodic literature), then determining what is and is not pious will depend not only on which god loves what action, but whether a particular god loves an action *at any given time*. To be pious, we would in turn have to possess knowledge of such things. So if Euthyphro wants to use piety to justify having his father arrested, this justification lies on shaky grounds (or at least, from the Socratic-Platonic standpoint, the Athenian authorities ought not to accept his actions as justified by his understanding of piety). To take the concept of piety or whatever else as a justification for our actions and moral judgments, we need to know what these concepts are. In other words, if we want to be courageous, we have to understand courage. To act justly, we have to understand justice. Rowett argues:

> [From the Platonic standpoint, our] grasp of the concept (our idea
> of what justice is) provides a more accurate and authoritative basis
> for judgement than common practices that are considered just. The
> latter will always fall short for various reasons, and our ability to
> pass judgement on those practices reveals that we have a more

authoritative grasp of the notion in ourselves.[164]

In virtue of this, "we can criticize ourselves and others for not doing in practice what we know in theory; and we can criticize ourselves and others for being unable to explain or define something that we know and can correctly deploy in practice."[165] The normative motivation behind this kind of critique is that we should always have sufficient *reasons* for our actions, at least insofar as these actions can affect others. That such critique can be undertaken – as it were, "outside of" our particular circumstances – shows that we can deliberate on and analyze such reasons in the abstract, independently of what empirically happens to be the case, and without allowing our final court of appeal to be concrete cases or the dictates of external authority.

Of course Plato is not against authority *per se* – neither, for that matter, are Kant or Nelson – but is concerned with asking on what authority a supposed authority rests. This is why poets are a frequent target of Plato's dialogues, example: poets, and artists generally, exercise a (quite literally) unreasonable influence over Athenian opinion, as the power of their words and images are only buoyed along by the rhapsodic and idiosyncratic inspiration the artists themselves possess. According to Thakkar, this influence "allows Socrates [in the *Republic*] to suggest that poets are the hidden rulers of democratic Athens: wittingly or not, they shape the social imaginary, using ideals in the sense of models to shape ideals in the sense of values", which demands critique because this "hidden rule" does not operate according to any intrinsic rightness.[166] On the Platonic

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164 Rowett, *Knowledge and Truth*, vii.
165 Rowett, *Knowledge and Truth*, vii.
166 Thakkar, *Plato as Critical Theorist*, 261.

view we cannot let our paradigms of thought or action depend on the erratic and fortuitous inspiration of poets, nor can we look to the words of rhetoricians, whose artificial meanings depend only on an oration's intended effect. Such influences cannot be trusted because they cannot be interrogated or subjected to rational analysis. How we lay hold of the proper models – that is, *purely intelligible* ones – can only be through dialectic and dialogue.

2.1.2. Dialogue as Method

That Plato is engaged in a kind of ideological or social critique is not only evidenced by the kinds of topic Socrates concerns himself and his interlocutors with – e.g., virtue, courage, piety, rhetoric, political leadership – but also the form Plato's works take. It is, as Vlastos (1991) tells us, modelled on that of the historical Socrates, who employed a "method by which [he would examine] himself and others . . . [involving] a form of argument which Aristotle was to call 'peirastic': a thesis is refuted when, and only when, its negation is derived 'from the answerer's own beliefs.'"[167] In order to ascertain some conceptual truth with the help of his interlocutors, while still "professing to know nothing," Socrates would attempt to derive such truth "from true premises, accepted as such by his interlocutors" – this is, moreover, why interlocutors were always be required to "say what they believe."[168]

This peirastic procedure is a winnowing of hypotheses: if Socrates and company set out to answer "What is *x*?", they have to start somewhere; usually with provisional

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[167] Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 111. Cf. Aristotle, *Sophistical Refutations* 165b1-5.
[168] Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 113.

statements about *x* in order to work out its precise features. Usually these statements are drawn from common attitudes and cultural assumptions, the argument of a popular sophist, etc., which are subjected to *reductio*-style arguments in order to test their mettle. Since Socrates expects to get somewhere with dialogue, since he expects "to discover truth by this method, he must be making an exceedingly bold assumption which he never states . . . that side by side with all their false beliefs, his interlocutors always carry truth somewhere or other in their belief system," such that, by his elenchic procedure, Socrates expects "to turn up *true beliefs entailing the negation of each of their false ones*."[169]

Socratic elenchus, as represented in Plato's early period dialogues and to a lesser extent Xenophon's Socratic works,[170] places a high premium on definitions. It seems that if we want to build the polis around an ideal like courage or equality, we should know precisely what one another means by these terms when we discuss them in court or elections, when leaders use them to drum up support for a military campaign, or when dramatists make them themes of City Dionysia tragedies, so we can judge accordingly. To

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169 Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 113-114.

170 "To a lesser extent" in terms of representation, not importance: while Xenophon indicates at various points the importance of definition for Socrates' philosophical purposes, we see it *dramatized* to a far lesser extent than we see in Plato. For example, in the *Memorabilia*, Xenophon lists a variety of subjects Socrates concerned himself and interlocutors with, among them "what is pious, what is impious, what is noble, what is shameful, what is just, what is unjust, what is moderation, what is madness, what is courage, what is cowardice, what is a city, what is a statesman," etc. (*Mem*. 1.1.16); in terms of Xenophon's actual depiction of Socrates, however, we find comparatively few instances of definitional inquiry – such as defining "economy" at the outset of *Economist* and a discussion of the meaning of "wisdom" in *Memorabilia* 4.6.7. Cf. Pangle (2020): "While Xenophon stresses that the *outcome* of Socrates's 'turn,' or the heart of Socrates's mature philosophizing, was his dialogical pursuit of the 'What is . . . ?' questions, Xenophon rarely depicts that pursuit explicitly; and he only allusively reveals that 'coming together to deliberate in common so as to separate the affairs of concern according to their species [*eidos*]' was a very large aspect of Socrates's 'never ceasing to investigate, with (or among) his companions, what each of the beings might be' ([*Mem*.] 1.1.16, 4.5.12-4.6.1)" (Thomas L. Pangle, *Socrates Founding Political Philosophy in Xenophon's* Economist*, Symposium*, *and* Apology [Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2020], 178).

be sure, we find a preoccupation with semantic matters in these early dialogues, like in

the *Protagoras*:

> [Socrates:] "Then tell me [Hipparchus,] what you think a sophist is."
> "I think . . . that, as the name suggests, he is someone who has
> an understanding of wise things."
> "Well, you could say the same thing about painters and carpenters, that
> they understand wise things. But if someone asked us 'wise in what
> respect?' we would probably answer, for painters, 'wise as far as
> making images is concerned,' and so on for the other cases. And if
> someone asked, 'What about sophists? What wise things do they
> understand?' – what would we answer? What are they expert at
> making?" "What else, Socrates, should we say a sophist is expert at
> than making people clever speakers?"[171]

Hipparchus' definition of a sophist is too wide; the predicate "understands wise things"

applies, as Socrates shows, to a variety of occupations – indeed it is a potential quality of

any human being regardless of occupation. This provisional definition is then narrowed to

expertise in making people clever speakers, and so on until theoretically the correct

predicate is found for sophists taken as a class. The question that naturally arises with this

kind of inquiry is the one Meno puts to Socrates:

> How will you look for [the correct definition], Socrates, when you do
> not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something
> you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know
> that this is the thing that you did not know?[172]

This is a genuine objection to the historical Socrates' procedure, as far as the ancient

record preserves it: how can we arrive at genuine knowledge (*episteme*) of the ideals or

171 Plato, *Protagoras* in *Complete Works* (1997), 312c-d.
172 Plato, *Meno* in *Complete Works* (1997), 80d.

principles to live by, if we only investigate our beliefs (*doxa*)? Are these latter not the very obstacles to the knowledge we pursue?

Rowett argues that Plato's breakthrough with the *Meno*, and his innovation in Socratic inquiry generally, is moving beyond the historical Socrates' style of argumentation, which we can characterize as conflating the answer to "What is *x*?" with a definition or precise clarification of a given concept. When investigating ideals which are, to use Kantian language, "pure", construing knowledge of them as a definition cannot have anything other than an aporetic ending, according to Rowett: "we [can only] devise a definition on the basis of what we know . . . reaching a sound definition must come as a mature expression of the conceptual knowledge, if it comes at all. But it need not be possible at all" for us to nevertheless possess this conceptual knowledge.[173] Rowett argues not only that the concepts or principles investigated by Socratic-Platonic inquiry are "vague", but that what is desired in clarifying such concepts – true *doxa* or *episteme*, or if we wish, *techne* – are not propositional attitudes at all. They are a "grasp" of what, e.g., virtue, justice, etc., are; a knowledge of the "what-it-is."[174] I will return to this "grasp" metaphor shortly (section 2.2.2., below), but for now only Rowett's conclusion concerns us: "we should not imagine that Socrates means that reflective enquiry adds something new – such as justification or evidence – to an existing true opinion, and thereby turns the opinion into knowledge," rather, this "enquiry [only] brings to light the conceptual underpinning, which was there already."[175]

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173 Rowett, *Knowledge and Truth*, 82.
174 Rowett, *Knowledge and Truth*, 107.
175 Rowett, *Knowledge and Truth*, 106.

Plato nods to this non-propositional model of knowledge with Socrates' story about recollection or *anamnesis* in the *Meno*:

> As the soul is immortal, has been born often, and has seen all things here and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both about virtue and other things. As the whole of nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, nothing prevents a man, after recalling one thing only – a process men call learning – discovering everything else for himself, if he is brave and does not tire of the search, for searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection.[176]

Further, Kahn (1996) points out that *anamnesis* should be "understood not as a Pythagorean recall of previous incarnations but as a mode of a priori knowledge" whose existence can be recognized most clearly through mathematics.[177]

Thus when Meno's slave is led through a lengthy geometry lesson by Socrates – possessing no prior instruction in the subject – he manages to solve the problem Socrates sets for him. Socrates infers from this that "the man who does not [consciously] know" something nevertheless "has within himself true opinions about the [thing] that he does not know."[178] These latent "true opinions" are, Rowett argues, items of "inarticulate knowledge [we use] to recognize examples and know that they are sound," and Socratic questioning, in its turn, "helps [us] to reach clarity by articulating the inarticulate knowledge from which [we] began – the hidden knowledge that enabled you to pick out examples."[179]

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176 Plato, *Meno* in *Complete Works* (1997), 81c-d.
177 Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 67.
178 Plato, *Meno* in *Complete Works* (1997), 85c.
179 Rowett, *Knowledge and Truth*, 73.

2.1.3. Envoi

The notion of *anamnesis* that Socrates introduces in the *Meno* would prove influential; in revised form, it would lend support to later rationalist theories of innate ideas. Leibniz, for example, only found Plato's theme of spiritual pre-existence in need of correction, while affirming the thesis of latent knowledge.[180] Moreover, Leibniz took the *Meno*'s geometry experiment to faithfully reflect our condition: "the soul virtually knows those things [i.e., truths of geometry, in this case], and needs only to be reminded . . . to recognize the truths. Consequently, it possesses at least the idea upon which these truths depend."[181] We find a similar stance earlier, in Cudworth: "the only true and allowable sense of that old assertion, that knowledge is reminiscence . . . is the mind's comprehending of things by some inward anticipations of its own, something native and domestic to it, or something actively exerted from within itself."[182] Socrates could not teach Meno's slave the first thing about geometry if he was not already "built" for such instruction, nor for that reason could virtue be taught. As Cudworth reminds us: "A thing which is merely passive from without, and [which] doth only receive . . . cannot possibly know, understand, or judge of that which it receives."[183]

Nelson sees the thesis of innate ideas – and the empiricist theory of knowledge which developed in reaction to it – as the outcome of taking *a priori* knowledge to be the

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180 Chomsky, *Knowledge of Language*, 263.
181 Leibniz cited Chomsky, *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 100.
182 Ralph Cudworth, *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 74.
183 Cudworth, *Treatise*, 74.

same as "knowledge from reason alone", i.e., without any experiential input.[184] If this were the case, Nelson argues, there would truly be an "exhaustive disjunction" between rational and experiential knowledge;[185] one which, furthermore, results from an incomplete disjunction between thinking and intuition (in the Kantian sense of *Anchauung*) as the only possible sources of knowledge.[186] From a Kantian standpoint, of course, if we have knowledge of non-empirical matters at all, such aspects of our knowledge can only be explained as *a priori* cognitions, which require the categories and pure principles Kant describes. But this raises the question: are these categories, principles, etc., innate? Or rather, we might put it, how could they *not* be innate, seeing as they are necessary for the structure of experience? Kant severs this knot by calling the categories, as well as the pure intuitions of space and time, an "original acquisition" of our cognition (*acquisitio originaria*).[187] Béatrice Longuenesse (1998) explains:

> in the case of the categories what is "original" is the discursive (intellectual, spontaneous) capacity, with its logical forms as forms of the objective unity of apperception. What is "acquired" are the categories as "concepts of an object, insofar as its intuition is considered as determined with respect to the logical functions of judgment." In other words, what is acquired are categories as concepts of the unity of synthesis achieved with a view to analysis according to the logical functions of judgment. I would claim that according to Kant, categories so considered are acquired in exactly the same sense as [formal intuitions] are acquired: "Impressions are always required in order first to enable the cognitive power to

184 Nelson, *Progress and Regress*, 27.
185 Nelson, *Progress and Regress*, 27.
186 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 142-143.
187 Kant, *On a discovery whereby any new critique of pure reason is to be made superfluous by an older one* in *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781* (2002), Ak. 8:221.

represent an object."[188]

Similarly, while Nelson assents to the empiricist thesis that "the mind is as a matter of psychological fact empty" upon birth – and therefore possesses no innate concepts – we nevertheless possess an innate ability to "acquire" concepts which are not borrowed from experience (i.e., pure), and this ability "precedes all experience;" in this sense Liebniz is essentially correct in saying *a priori* knowledge is "virtual".[189] The innate ability for reaching such knowledge is the "faculty of abstraction", which enables us to "[separate] the various sorts of knowledge which are mixed together in our minds, so that we can think of them one by one."[190] It is this ability that is exercised by Socratic method; it enables us to recognize, abstractly, "the truth of . . . laws [apart from] particular applications of them."[191] This faculty, in combination with Kant's transcendental idealism, allow us to determine what items of our knowledge are *a posteriori* and *a priori* with respect to their source, i.e., which come from experience and which cannot; through critique, moreover, we can lay out the fundamental principles by which reason structures the world around us. In light of this, I argue Nelson's conception of Socratic method is far more in line with Rowett's interpretation than those preceding him, in that he considers Socratic method as a process of raising "originally obscure" *a priori* principles to our awareness, to "articulate the inarticulate" underpinnings of our thought and actions.

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188 Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 252-253.
189 Nelson, *Progress and Regress*, 25.
190 Nelson, *Progress and Regress*, 25-26.
191 Nelson, *Progress and Regress*, 26.

2.2. Platonism and the Kantian Tradition

Nelson's discussion of Socratic-Platonic philosophy is a lesser-known chapter in what Alan Kim (2010) calls the "strange controversy . . . over the meaning of Plato's dialogues" unfolding in Germany philosophy during the "first decades of the twentieth century."[192] This controversy did not generate itself spontaneously. Kant's self-conscious, career-long engagement with Platonic themes (evidenced, e.g., in his 1770 *Dissertation*) – culminating with his critical works and the remarks therein about Plato and the doctrine of Ideas – make comparisons and cross-reference of the two thinkers inevitable: in the work of "German thinkers after Kant . . . from the German Idealists, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, to neo-Kantians, Phenomenologists and Hermeneuticians" there is a common preoccupation with debating "Kant and Plato, Plato through Kant, and Kant through Plato."[193] For many Neo-Kantians, notably Paul Natorp, an understanding of Kant's overall project depends on clarifying how his philosophy relates to Plato.[194] In turn, Kant's theory of reason and his transcendental idealism represented a potential answer to how Plato is to be interpreted by modern philosophers.[195] It is certainly fair to place Nelson's remarks on Socratic and Platonic philosophy in such a context, but he diverges from his contemporaries in a few respects.

For example, whereas Nelson sees Platonic Ideas as successfully adapted by Kant

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192 Kim, *Plato in Germany*, 13. "Little-known" is not an exaggeration: we find no mention of Nelson either in Kim's own work on 20th century German Platonism in *Plato in Germany*, nor in the otherwise comprehensive and detailed *Companion to German Platonism* (2019), of which Kim was an editor and contributor. I make this point to show that Nelson's work is a blindspot even in the best and most recent scholarship on this topic.

193 Kim, *Plato in Germany*, 17.

194 Kim, *Plato in Germany*, 17.

195 Kim, *Plato in Germany*, 19.

into his discussion of the Ideal of reason or transcendental ideal,[196] Cohen and Natorp respectively interpret comprehension of Platonic Ideas as a "foundational intuition" (*Grundanschauung*) and scientific understanding.[197] Lembeck (2019) tells us that for Cohen, the connection between Kant and Plato lies in the transcendental concept of formal purposiveness in nature (what Kant calls aesthetic Ideas):[198] what Plato is trying to describe with the *ideai*, and their contemplation by the philosopher, is essentially the power of imagination, and its content assists the understanding in the construction of an intelligible natural whole.[199] Kim (2010) tells us that Natorp, for his part, "promotes the thesis that the *ideai* signify not noetic substances . . . but 'hypotheses', or, equivalently, 'laws of thought', 'methods of science.'"[200] In this sense, Natorp identifies Plato's connection to Kant to be a common concern with *a priori* concepts which allow for the necessity and universality of scientific explanations.[201] Kim takes these Marburg Neo-Kantians generally to "fuse" the "separate functions given by Kant to ideals and categories"; therefore, "the Marburgers do not conceive Plato's *ideai* as Kantian ideals or perfect exemplars, for, as we have heard repeatedly, the *ideai* are merely functions" of cognitive synthesis.[202]

But Nelson argues that any such Neo-Kantian construals of Platonism – whatever their differences or nuances – suffer, in the end, from viewing reflection (thinking about

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196 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 90.
197 Karl-Heinz Lembeck, "Plato-Reception in the Marburg School" in Alan Kim (ed.), *Brill's Companion to German Platonism* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), 225 (Cohen's interpretation); Kim, *Plato in Germany*, 99 (Natorp's interpretation).
198 Lembeck, "Plato-Reception in the Marburg School", 224.
199 Lembeck, "Plato-Reception in the Marburg School", 224.
200 Kim, *Plato in Germany*, 99.
201 Kim, *Plato in Germany*, 147.
202 Kim, *Plato in Germany*, 115.

thinking) as itself a source of metaphysical knowledge. While Nelson does take Plato and

Kant to have a common goal, both fall short of success because both are captive to "the

dilemma between intuition and reflection as [the only] possible sources" of metaphysical

knowledge.[203] Nelson argues that this dilemma leads Plato to posit intellectual intuition,

and leads Kant to rely on reflection in order to secure the validity of *a priori* principles.[204]

The "intellectual intuition" Nelson attributes to Plato (and others, such as Spinoza and

Hegel[205]) is his term for the belief that the human mind or soul stands in unmediated

contact with metaphysical truths in the same way the senses stand in unmediated contact

with physical objects. Such a model would violate Kant's division between the discursive

intellect and sensible intuition – a division that Nelson upholds. But on the other hand,

because the faculty of reflection is empty and the intellect cannot add to its own content

by means of mere thinking, Nelson disagrees with Kant's approach to verifying

metaphysical principles as well.[206] In Nelson's view, if we are to find the common ground

between Plato and Kant – which he argues does exist – it is to be found by making

immediate non-perceptual knowledge (reason itself) the object of our investigation, since

it is only there that metaphysical principles can have unmediated validity. Acknowledging

reason's immediate knowledge dissolves the contradictions of metaphysics for Nelson,

and allows Socratic dialectic and Kantian critique alike to exhibit "the metaphysical

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203 Nelson, *Theory of Philosophical Fallacies*, 197.
204 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 127.
205 Nelson, *Theory of Philosophical Fallacies*, 193.
206 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 127.

criteria of all knowledge, [i.e.,] those criteria that are essentially only guiding lines for experience and all rational induction."[207]

2.2.1. Plato, *Verstand* and *Anschauung*

Kant's own stance on Plato underwent a complex evolution through the course of his philosophical development. From the First *Critique* onwards, Kant seems to have reached a decisive verdict on Plato, though this verdict is not as straightforward as it appears on a casual reading. According to Allison (2002), "Kant's long-standing and deep-seated ambivalence toward Plato" is reflected in how his discussions "divide" Plato as a thinker, namely Plato the Academic and Plato the Mystic:

> On the one hand, there is the Plato to whom Kant pays homage in the first *Critique* as the first to recognize the true nature of ideas as archetypes and who emphasized their indispensability for morality . . . On the other hand, there is the mystical Plato, whom, also in the *Critique*, Kant accuses of having "abandoned the world of the senses because it posed so many hindrances for the understanding, and dared to go beyond it on the wings of the ideas, in the empty space of the pure understanding."[208]

Allison explains further that it is "this latter [mystical] Plato whose name is attached to the dogmatic intellectualism of the theses of the four antinomies".[209] Indeed, Kant regards the Plato of the Letters as "raving" and a "mystagogue" whose doctrine of a soul which intuits the true essence of would be a "fifth wheel" to the concerns of the academic Plato.[210] Moreover, the esotericism Kant finds in the Letters is "antithetical to the very

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207 Nelson, *Theory of Philosophical Fallacies*, 200.
208 Allison, Introduction to Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781* (2002), 23.
209 Allison, Introduction to Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781* (2002), 23-24.
210 Kant, *On a recently prominent tone of superiority in philosophy* in *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781* (2002), , Ak. 8:398.

idea of a critique of pure reason" and the positive contributions made by the exoteric

Plato of the Academy[211] – here Kant's objections reflect the "two-worlds" view we have

seen Thakkar describe, whose esoteric consequences have always cast doubt on Plato's

political thought.

Kant's only real objection to Plato the Academic is that the latter moves from a

correct proposition – that we must be in possession of pure *a priori* intuitions in order to

explain our non-empirical knowledge – to an incorrect conclusion, namely that this pure

intuition is intellectual rather than sensible.[212] But even in this, Kant claims, "through no

fault of his own" Plato "used his intellectual intuitions only backwards, [i.e.,] to explain

the possibility of a synthetic knowledge *a priori*, not forwards, to extend it through those

Ideas that were legible in the divine understanding".[213] For Kant, Plato the Academic is

engaged in a perfectly reasonable line of metaphysical inquiry, but does not reach

satisfying results. In Kant's view, Plato had not appreciated – and, due to his historical

situation, could not be expected to appreciate – that human cognition can only intuit by

means of the senses, and that the understanding can achieve no conceptual knowledge

without the aid of sense data.[214] Therefore, according to Kant, Plato attributes to human

beings an unmediated knowledge of essences attained purely intellectually, i.e., through

concepts.[215] Such a cognition – which Kant argues could only belong to God – would

always possess knowledge analytically.[216] Kim (2010) reminds us that

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211 Allison, Introduction to Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781* (2002), 23.
212 Kant, *Tone*, Ak. 8:391-392.
213 Kant, *Tone*, Ak. 8:398.
214 Kant, *CPR* B75/A51.
215 Kant, *CJ* §77, Ak. 5:406.
216 Cf. Kant's discussion of Plato in Transcendental Dialectic Part 1, *CPR* A313/B370.

> Kant always takes plains to point out how reasonable and natural, and hence how excusable, Plato's errors are. Kant respects and forgives these errors because they [are] errors that every mind naturally and inevitably will commit if it embarks upon self-reflection without having undergone the purgatory of critique.[217]

Because Kant takes Plato to advocate for intellectual intuition, Platonism *simpliciter* represents a kind of mysticism for him.

Although Nelson considers Plato as well as Socrates to be engaged in critical philosophy – no less than Kant is – he nevertheless shares Kant's conclusion: while Plato saw through "basic fallacy of all previous dogmatic logic [i.e.,] the prejudice that all judgments are either demonstrable or provable" – indeed, recognizing that the principles of knowledge were logically unprovable – Nelson argues he sought such principles through "intellectual intuition (though it is lost at birth)."[218] Nelson denies we can have an "intuition of the essence of the good but we only bring the good (the law of the good) into our awareness *by thinking*."[219] Nelson argues it is only in this latter sense that Plato's doctrine of recollection and its connection to dialectic is right: the *a priori* principles we seek are already "in us" – i.e., they are ubiquitous presuppositions in all cognition – but it is only through examination of our judgments and their necessary conditions that we become (mediately) aware of them. Neither are what we seek Ideas (however we may interpret this term), but pure principles of reason, e.g., the Analogies of Experience, the Axioms of Intuition, etc. These principles have to be painstakingly uncovered and reconstructed in propositional form for us to make any metaphysical use of them; they are

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217 Kim, *Plato in Germany*, 44.
218 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 145.
219 Nelson, *Theory of Philosophical Fallacies*, 198.

in no way "intuitive" in the sense Nelson attributes to Plato. Thus for Nelson, as for Kant, Plato makes an illegitimate (but understandable) move in assigning intellectual power to intuition where it cannot possibly be.

2.2.2. Intellectual Intuition?

But is this inference a correct one – does Platonism require "intellectual intuition"? Kim argues, in the first place, "in their philosophical employment in the dialogues, the *ideai* do not appear as objects of intellectual intuition. . . . [Nowhere] do Plato or Socrates say what *ideai* 'look like' nor does the actual operation of the *ideai* as an anchor-point of dialectic in the dialogues themselves presuppose that Socrates or his interlocutors have gazed upon them."[220] Kim denies that, despite the poetic language often employed in Plato's texts, the dialogues do not contain firsthand descriptions or reports of what the Ideas *are* or whether they in fact exist, only theoretical discussions of them, i.e., only hypotheses are offered.[221] They are posits, in other words, not something that has been experienced (or intuited) either by Socrates or the other interlocutors. Indeed, "non-propositional knowledge of the *idea* is not an intellectual intuition of a transcendent substance, for the *idea* is nothing that one could have an intuition *of*" – namely, some kind of object.[222] Whatever the Ideas are, they have to be grasped by the understanding, and therefore no such intellectual intuition is required.

I believe the "intuitionist" reading of Plato is an error on Kant and Nelson's part for the simple fact that it oversteps the textual evidence. However, I do not think Nelson's

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220 Kim, *Plato in Germany*, 292.
221 Kim, *Plato in Germany*, 292.
222 Kim, *Plato in Germany*, 292.

essential insight about Socratic method is thereby lost. Rather, if we supplement Nelson's

view with Rowett's "conceptual grasping" we can strengthen his position without

violence to his writings: instead of grasping concepts in the way Rowett describes,

though, we grasp the originally-obscure principles of reason by raising them to

awareness. In Nelson's case, as well as in Rowett's, Socratic method is directed towards

the articulation of "buried", non-propositional[223] knowledge. I raise this objection to

Nelson's reading purely as a point of clarification for studies of his work going forward; it

is meant to illustrate how much Kant informs Nelson's reading of Plato, no less so than

other Neo-Kantian commentators.

2.3. Nelson's Theory of Ideals

Nelson credits Socrates with the insight that "ethics is a science," however, "[he]

did not develop this science because the initial question, *How* do I gain knowledge about

virtue? continued to absorb him."[224] Nelson argues that if ethics is in fact a science (a

thesis which he defends), the validity of ethical laws discovered by this science will not

be derived from experience: "Ethical laws, if they are valid at all, continue to be so even

if [we] cannot validate them scientifically – this much is as true here as it is in natural

science. . . . [Indeed], the law would remain valid even if it were not observed by anyone

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223 Unlike Kant, Nelson does not take all cognitions to be propositional – only mediate ones are
    propositional. The immediate cognitions of intuition and of reason, which able to be put into
    propositional *form* (e.g., "There is a cup in front of me"), are not themselves propositional attitudes
    because they are not judgments at all. In consequence, the principles of metaphysics for Nelson are not
    synthetic *a priori* propositions, but are *represented* by (or if we like, reconstructed through) synthetic *a
    priori* propositions.
224 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 5.

anywhere."[225] Here Nelson favorably contrasts Plato and his understanding of Socratic

method to that of Aristotle, who interprets it as a procedure of inductive inference:

> Though Aristotle praised him for it,[226] Socrates was not the inventor of the inductive method. Rather, he pursued the path of abstraction, which employs reflection to lift the knowledge we already possess into consciousness. Had Aristotle been correct in his interpretation, we should not be surprised at the failure of Socrates' endeavors. For ethical principles cannot be derived from observed facts.[227]

It is this latter observation which points us again to the autonomy of reason: the

independence of its validity from the realm of facts or phenomena. A science of ethics

cannot proceed from principles which are self-evident, since they are not objects of

perception; rather, it has to abstract all that is incidental from our ethical judgments until

the remainder is what is necessary in – and rationally prior to – all possible ethical

judgments. It is only then that we uncover the true normative content of ethics.

The Socratic-Platonic procedure, as a process of abstraction, sees in the *a

posteriori* facts of human conduct only a "moving image" (we might say) of an ideal

which, Nelson claims, is valid independently of that human conduct. Light shines outside

the cave whether or not we ever lay eyes on it. Nelson maintains that this "ideal stands for

a demand, which defines what ought to happen, independently of whether it actually does

happen" – and moreover, the ethical ideal "defines an aim, to approach which is worthy,

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225 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 7.
226 "Two things may be fairly ascribed by Socrates – inductive arguments [*epagōgē*] and universal definition, both of which are concerned with the starting-point of science" (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* M.4, 1078b25-30 in *The Complete Works of Aristotle* trans. W. D. Ross, ed. Jonathan Barnes [Princeton: Princeton University Press] 1995, 3665).
227 Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy*, 16.

to depart from which is unworthy."[228] Even if the world really *is* as Thrasymachus or

Callicles describe it from a factual standpoint, this is not at all evidence that the world

should be this way, or by that same token that it cannot be otherwise. As Nelson puts it,

"Does the destruction of Carthage really prove that Carthage deserved to perish?"[229]

Nelson takes the normative component of ethics not from duty – what should be

done in a given case – but from "the ideal", which he defines as "all that is worth doing

[or] which deserves to be done, even if we are not duty-bound to do it":[230]

> An ideal action is preferable only because it is valuable, whereas a
> moral action is preferable not because it realizes a positive value, but
> is valued only because it is moral, i.e., because it is enjoined by duty.[231]

To the extent that ethical action is the fulfilment of an ideal (versus a sensible) motive, the

idealist is also an ethical realist; in fact, ethical realism is only justified with reference to

an ideal motive: "it is only [by] interest in the successful attainment of the ideal," not in

attaining a desired outcome, that actions are objectively ethical.[232] Nelson does not take

the term "ethics" to be synonymous with morality; morality is a component of ethics. He

terms *morality* the narrower field of activities done from a respect for duty, and *culture*[233]

the broader field of activities done with respect for the ideals of goodness, truth, and

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228 Nelson, *Politics and Education*, 157.
229 Nelson, *Politics and Education*, 154.
230 Nelson, *System of Ethics*, 34.
231 Nelson, *System of Ethics*,166.
232 Nelson, *Politics and Education*, 161.
233 In the Kantian sense of *Kultur* and *Bildung*, i.e., activities which promote the spiritual and/or
      intellectual improvement of individuals and their community, including fine art, public games, civics,
      education, etc. Cf. M. M. Ardebili, "The Meaning of Culture in Kant's Critical Philosophy," *Journal of
      Existence and Knowledge* 6, No. 2 (2019-2020), 1-18. Nelson also describes culture more generally as
      "the shaping of minds . . . according to discernible patterns" informed by ideals (Nelson, *System of
      Ethics*, 183).

beauty. Morality and culture both fall under the umbrella of "the ethical". Nelson argues further that the "concept of the ideal implies a . . . positive valuation," and what consitutes "value" in this case is "a goal for our *action*, as something to be realized through our own contribution."[234] Goodness, truth, and beauty form the ideals towards which our evaluations, and therefore our actions, are directed. When our actions are guided by what should be done (duty) and what is worth doing (the conjunction of ideals), Nelson calls this *wisdom*.[235] Aiding our attainment of this wisdom is, naturally, the purpose of philosophy.

In order for ideals to contribute to social harmony, we must value goodness, truth, and beauty equally – a society valuing one above the others will negatively affect the social order, indeed how people conceive of their lives.[236] For example, Nelson argues that a society which values the love of goodness (morality) above or at the expense of truth or beauty could not direct life consistently: "For the moral law provides us only with a restrictive criterion of values, and cannot itself determine any positive value of life."[237] The moral law as such "prescribes a mold of life which can be realized only if it shapes life's richness," but a one-sided emphasis on morality sacrifices the richness of life "to the mere mold."[238] We can conclude that, in such a society, attaining the mere appearance of morality – without regard for the truth of such an appearance – would be enough to confer status to citizens. Censorship of art and other forms of expression, justified by a

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234 Nelson, *System of Ethics*, 166.
235 Nelson, *System of Ethics*, 34.
236 Nelson, *System of Ethics*, 195.
237 Nelson, *System of Ethics*, 195.
238 Nelson, *System of Ethics*, 195.

puritanical righteousness at the core of the social order, would strip life of its aesthetic dimension and subordinate the love of beauty for its own sake to "moral" art, if not propaganda. Such a society, Nelson believes, would defeat "its own purpose."[239]

As Plato recognizes, in an ideal society "stability and legitimacy come together"[240] – a legitimacy, moreover, "which reason itself grasps by the power of dialectic."[241] In order for citizens to endorse the values on which their society is built, they have to be "able to justify its basic structure to one another so that each person can endorse it from their own point of view," in Thakkar's words.[242] And ultimately, for Nelson, we come to value justice, truth, and beauty – the fundamental conditions of a harmonious society – to the extent that we value the cultivation of our own reason. If we do not care about the rigor or accuracy of how we think and act, we may still appreciate these ideals in some vague form, but we will not be letting them guide the way we live. In turn, the "cultivation of reason is possibly only if [understanding] is developed sufficiently to raise to clear consciousness what has lain obscurely in reason all the time," and it is only through this development "can reason determine the will and attain to control of life."[243] As the technique for this development, Socratic education serves what Nelson takes to be the goal of enlightenment – allowing reason to be the final arbiter of our thought and action. To the extent that we value action in accordance with duty, and conduct in accordance with ideals, we value wisdom.

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239 Nelson, *System of Ethics*, 195.
240 Thakkar, *Plato as Critical Theorist*, 259.
241 Plato, *Republic* in *Complete Works* (1997), 513b.
242 Thakkar, *Plato as Critical Theorist*, 259.
243 Nelson, *System of Ethics*,

We can now appreciate how Nelson understands Plato's thought, how he as a Kantian views Plato, and how he integrates Plato's thought into his own social, political, and pedagogical philosophy. Without trying to argue for the same connections between Kant and Plato that Nelson does, I have nonetheless tried to show that Nelson's reading of Kant and Plato has something to recommend it – Nelson's interpretation of these two thinkers, while one among many Neo-Kantian interpretations during this period, deserves consideration alongside those which have dominated scholarship on the topic thus far. By setting Nelson's reading of Plato beside Catherine Rowett's, I have tried to show how Nelson's reading can retain the thesis that Socratic method raises metaphysical principles to awareness without committing Plato to the kind of mystical errors Kant and Nelson attribute to him. Rowett's is, of course, *a* reading – and by no means a traditional or widely-accepted one – however, I believe the credibility of her account can contribute to Nelson's, especially if we follow Alan Kim's remarks on intellectual intuition. This is one way of proceeding, and one I believe can be fruitful; what is important is that we are now in a position to understand the interaction of Kantian and Platonic thought which motivates Nelson to adopt Socratic method. With this context in hand, we are prepared to look at Nelson's discussion of Socratic method on its own terms.

CHAPTER 3. THE ROLE OF SOCRATIC METHOD
IN NELSON'S ENLIGHTENMENT PEDAGOGY

With the philosophical context of Nelson's Socratic method now established, I turn to his 1922 essay on the subject. The majority of this chapter is devoted to analyzing Nelson's essay and its description of the pedagogical and philosophical problems Nelson intends Socratic method to solve. With this analysis we will better appreciate why Nelson views Socratic method not only as the correct means of teaching philosophy, but of philosophizing – Nelson takes the aim of critical philosophy not to be the production of new knowledge – after all, new knowledge is produced all the time quite independently of philosophical reflection – but explaining the validity of the knowledge already in our possession. Following the Socratic model as Nelson describes it, students are trained to be philosophers insofar as they are trained to properly identify the metaphysical conditions of true judgments, as well as identify the errors which stand in the way of recognizing true judgments as true. Although noting Nelson's criticism of Plato's preoccupation with definitions, I show that he nevertheless takes Plato to be an ancestor to Kant's critical philosophy, and further that Socrates and Plato deserve to be ranked with Kant as criticists. As a concrete pedagogical practice, Nelson's Socratic method is meant as a synthesis of Kant's conception of metaphysics and a re-interpretation of Plato's doctrine of recollection or, as we have seen Rowett describe it, "articulating inarticulate knowledge". I close the chapter with a look at Hannah Altorf's (2019) of Nelson's pedagogy in actual practice, in order to show how the theoretical remarks of Nelson's essay are reflected in practice.

3.1. Nelson's Understanding and Use of Socratic Method

3.1.1. Context

Nelson's essay "The Socratic Method" is a transcript of a lecture delivered on December 11, 1922 to the Pedagogic Society of Göttingen, published posthumously in 1929 in *Abhandlungen der Fries'schen Schule* ("Annals of the Friesian School").[244] The ostensible concern of this lecture is to explain the advantages of Socratic-style education to fellow specialists, and, in fact, this is why Nelson was invited to speak. However, he quickly abandons the pretense of being able to paraphrase or adequately describe in abstract what Socratic method consists of, instead pursuing a lengthy consideration of philosophy as a "science" (a productive, systematic discipline) and why Socratic method is key to bringing this ideal to fruition. To this end, Nelson crucially does not divorce Socratic method from its Platonic heritage or insist on an "un-metaphysical" treatment of it; its success as a method depends precisely on our acceptance of the fact of metaphysical knowledge, and the latter's source in pure reason. Because of this we cannot, according to Nelson, turn away from the Socratic-Platonic tradition in philosophy, since it is only in recognizing the kernel of truth in Plato's doctrine of anamnesis – coupled with Socrates' dialectical approach – that the course of philosophy can be righted and a proper systematization of metaphysics can be undertaken.

3.1.2. Dogmatic and Socratic Instruction

The question Nelson wants to answer is this: what method is suitable for the aims

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244 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 1, note 1.

of philosophy? "As a faithful disciple of Socrates and of his great successor Plato,"[245]

Nelson is committed to restoring the prominence of Socratic method, which he calls the

"slighted and rejected" stepchild of philosophy.[246] He describes Socratic method as "the

art of teaching not philosophy but philosophizing, the art not of teaching about

philosophers but of making philosophers of the students."[247] This description of

philosophical education issues directly from Kant: "Among all rational sciences (*a priori*)

. . . only mathematics can be learned, never philosophy (except historically); rather, as far

as reason is concerned, we can at best only learn how to *philosophize*."[248] And in keeping

with the Platonic tradition, Nelson cites Plato's *Seventh Letter*: this capacity to

philosophize is "brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as light that is kindled by a

leaping spark, and thereafter it nourishes itself."[249] Here we see that Nelson understands

his approach to education to be a faithful cross-pollination of Kantian and Platonic

principles.

Nelson distinguishes Socratic method from dogmatic method which, according to

him, is *status quo* in modern philosophy – both in scholarly practice and how it is taught.

Dogmatic instruction in the academies, like dogmatic philosophizing, is "[indifferent] to

self-understanding"; it arrogates itself to the summit of philosophical rigour and

"purchases its illusory success at the cost of more and more deeply rooted dishonesty,"

namely its neglect of critique.[250] This neglect is attractive; especially, as Kant puts it, to

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245 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 1.
246 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 2.
247 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 1.
248 Kant, *CPR* A837/B865.
249 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 1.
250 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 25.

young people: "dogmatism . . . gives so early and so much encouragement to [youths']

complacent quibbling about about things they do not understand, and things into which

neither they nor anyone else in the world will ever have any insight," yet all the same

emboldens them "to launch on the invention of new thoughts and opinions" on such

topics.[251] Nelson likewise believes dogmatic instruction can only erode the qualities in its

students which are required to make them actual philosophers:

> to present philosophy in [the dogmatist] manner is to treat it as a
> science of facts that are to be accepted as such. The result is at best
> a mere history of philosophy. For what the instructor communicates
> is not philosophical truth itself but merely the fact that he or somebody
> else considers this or that to be a philosophical truth. In claiming that
> he is teaching philosophy, he deceives both himself and his students.[252]

Such instruction gives truth the appearance of a "checkerboard" laid out over history,[253]

with philosophers stabbing in the dark and hitting their discoveries by sheer luck – or

virtually so, since the intellectual process which leads to genuine discovery is obscured.

Even philosophical positions of the past which are rigorously argued for – successfully or

not – can take on a dogmatic cast if mishandled by educators:

> [critical philosophy] requires a continuous succession of trained
> philosophers, at once independent and well schooled, to avert the
> danger that critical philosophy may either fall a victim of
> incomprehension or, though continuing in name, it yet may become
> petrified into dogmatism.[254]

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251 Kant *CPR* Bxxxi.
252 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 11.
253 Nelson, *Progress and Regress*, 10.
254 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 18.

Breaking this spell is not a matter of telling students which philosophical works are worth studying; it is a matter of leading them through the very intellectual process which makes philosophical work possible at all, as would be done in training engineers or carpenters.[255]

In this respect, Socratic method is the critical counterpart to dogmatism: "Socratic method is compelled to fight a desperate battle for integrity of thought and speech before it can turn to larger tasks. It must also suffer the additional reproach of being unphilosophical enough to orient itself by means of examples and facts."[256] Socratic method trains philosophers to eschew "technical language" whereby the dogmatist[257] can "denote his artificial concept [with] the same word the critical philosopher uses to denote his real concept".[258] The mark of dogmatism for Nelson is its reliance on these "artificial meanings": the dogmatic philosopher "says 'I' and means 'cosmic reason.' He says 'God'

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255 We have to bear in mind here that Nelson does not advocate for an "ahistorical" approach to philosophical education; it is not as though the history of philosophy has *no* place in his pedagogy. A keen historical consciousness runs through all of Nelson's work. But the historical side of the discipline would presumably play the same role in training philosophers as the history of science would in training scientists: discoveries and advances are obviously made in *some* historical context or another, but the *validity* of these discoveries is not confined to that historical context. Nelson views the insights of Plato and Kant in much the same light as a scientist views the insights of Newton or Einstein: certainly these thinkers were necessary for the discipline to advance as it did, but insofar as what they discover and formulate is *true*, Newton and Einstein's discoveries stand independently of the times and places in which they originate. Likewise, insofar as Plato and Kant provide philosophy with real gains to be learned from, these gains are not "tied" to either thinker. They are the common property of anyone sensitive to their contributions. The history of philosophy, then, has at least a negative use for students in Nelson's view, like the history of science would for science students: to prevent them from repeating old mistakes or lapsing back into erroneous approaches to the problems facing them.

256 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 25.

257 The meaning of "dogmatist" and "dogmatism" in Nelson's and my own discussion is always Kantian in origin, i.e., philosophy which espouses a system of knowledge without first undertaking a critique of reason's legitimate claim on knowledge. For further clarification on this point, see my discussion in 1.1 of this thesis.

258 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 30. Nelson distinguishes "artificial" from "real" concepts (*Begriffe*) to the extent that an object of possible experience can fall under the concept. For example, in Nelson's Kantian model, God would not be a concept at all but an idea of reason, since no object in possible experience can be subsumed under our notion of God. Nelson's criticism here is that the dogmatist furnishes his or her system with "concepts" which lack the relation to possible experience which would qualify them as concepts in the Kantian sense (cf. Nelson, *Theory of Fallacies*, 52).

and means 'peace of mind.' He says 'state' and means 'power subject to no law.'"[259]

In Nelson's view, the culprits of this dogmatism range from Hegel and Schelling – whom Nelson regards as building entire systems of out of amphibolies of the kind Kant has already refuted[260] – to the physicists of Nelson's own day, such as Henri Poincaré and Ernst Mach.[261] Nelson extends this charge of dogmatism no less to the Marburg and Baden Neo-Kantians, among them Ernst Cassirer and Kuno Fischer (or "so-called Neo-Kantians" as Nelson renders it, so as to remove any ambiguity about his view of these schools).[262] Regardless of their approach or whether they label themselves inheritors of Kant's legacy, what binds these disparate thinkers for Nelson is an underlying disregard for *critique* as Kant outlines it: the Neo-Kantians and empiricists, no less than Hegelians and other German idealists, proceed illegitimately to their conclusions from arbitrarily-selected principles rather than reaching such principles by a rigorous examination of human psychology and the world humans experience. So it is not so much individual thinkers that Nelson is concerned with when he attacks dogmatism, but a tendency which exerts a degenerative influence when dogmatic thinkers teach students themselves or students are made to study dogmatic thinkers' works. Moreover, Nelson takes this tendency to stand in direct opposition to the tradition begun by Socrates and Plato, whose *dialectical* pedagogy leaves no room for unexamined dogmatic maneuvers. So, according

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259 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 31.

260 Nelson, *Theory of Fallacies*, 197. The Amphibolies of the Concepts of Reflection section of the first *Critique* examines and refutes confusions which arise when philosophers mistake an object of the senses for an *a priori* or purely intellectual concept, and vice versa.

261 Nelson's most detailed comments on these thinkers and their dogmatic "anti-metaphysics" is found in *Is a Metaphysics-Free Science Possible?* (1908).

262 Nelson, *Socratic* Method, 155ff. *Jakob Fries and His Latest Critics*, *On the So-Called Problem of Knowledge* contain more detailed discussions of the Neo-Kantian schools and Nelson's views of them.

to Nelson, "there must be an honest choice" for philosophy going forward, both in how it is practised and how it is taught, if it is to contribute to human understanding: "either dogmatism or following Socrates."[263]

Since Nelson maintains that critical philosophy "finds its origins solely in Socrates and Kant," this choice is obvious for any philosopher who wants to continue Kant's work.[264] Indeed, Nelson takes Kant's critical method to represent "the resumption of Socratic-Platonic philosophizing," and considers its value for our self-knowledge to be no less than what the two Athenians had originally envisioned.[265] Still, despite the immense historical significance of Kant, Plato, and Socrates, their most essential insights have "remained sterile and ineffectual" wastes of opportunity for philosophical progress.[266] Inevitably, philosophers shrink from the demands of critical method and veer off into dogmatism and system-building without enough scrutiny of their own principles. On this point, Nelson argues that Athens' resistance to Socratic enlightenment was repeated in modern philosophy with Kant:

> Twice in its history there was some prospect of getting philosophy
> out of its groping stage and onto the certain path of science. The
> ancient world punished the first courageous attempt with death:
> Socrates was condemned as a corrupter of youth. The modern world
> disdains to execute the heretic. It has passed sentence by "going
> beyond" Kant.[267]

263 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 18.
264 Nelson, "The Critical Method" in *Socratic Method*, 153, n14.
265 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 6.
266 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 4.
267 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 4.

If philosophy is to "follow Socrates", then, it must also follow Kant – in spirit, if not in letter.[268] In both cases, philosophy can only achieve its goals by making critique "the very foundation of philosophy."[269]

But what makes Socrates the model critical philosopher, such that his example can correct the excesses of dogmatism? Perhaps the most important characteristic is that Socrates insists on the primacy of dialectics for philosophical inquiry. Nelson believes we "may designate as *dialectics* the process of verifying a philosophical doctrine," and that by applying a dialectical method to our questions and problems we have at our disposal "all the means necessary for achieving with scientific certainty a general conception of life and nature."[270] When Meno asks Socrates whether virtue can be taught (perhaps expecting a lecture in the style of the sophists), Socrates turns the question around: "Meno, by the gods, *what do you yourself* say that virtue is?"[271] Socrates does not want Meno to believe knowledge of virtue – if such a thing is possible – can be attained through the passive reception of external doctrines. Socrates understands that if he is to be of any help on the topic, he needs as much direction from Meno as vice versa – in a real sense, neither is in a position to teach the other about virtue. Although at first he offers stock definitions of virtue to get the inquiry underway, Meno is open-minded enough to stay with Socrates through the winding path of dialogue. This open-mindedness is all that is required if Socratic method is to be successful: not only is it the "art of forcing minds to

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268 "The study of Fries convinced [Nelson] . . . that the cultivation of critical philosophy excludes the blind acceptance of the Kantian letter. . . . Kantian letter and the Kantian spirit are not alike" (Kraft, Introduction to Nelson, *Socratic Method*, xi; xvi).
269 Nelson, "The Critical Method" in *Socratic Method*, 108.
270 Nelson, "The Art of Philosophizing" in *Socratic Method*, 87.
271 Plato, *Meno* in *Complete Works* (1997), 71d; emphasis added.

freedom," it is to get the interlocutor to "the realization of his not-knowing, [which is the] negative determinant of all genuine and certain knowledge."[272] Socrates provides the model for philosophical instruction because

> after this higher level of ignorance is reached, far from directing the discussion toward the metaphysical problems, [Socrates] blocks every attempt of his pupils to push straight on to them with the injunction that they had better first learn about the life of the weavers, the blacksmiths, the carters. In this pattern of the discussion we recognize the philosophical instinct for the only correct method: first to derive the general premises from the observed facts of everyday life, and thus to proceed from judgments of which we are sure to those that are less sure.[273]

Nelson views Socrates "blocking" his interlocutors' shortcuts as crucial. He notes a "teacher who follows the Socratic model does not answer. Neither does he question. More precisely, he puts no philosophical questions, and when such questions are addressed to him, he under no circumstances gives the answer sought."[274]

The teacher's role is to promote and mediate discussion among the students. Because, if "a student approaches philosophy without having a single question to put to it, what can we expect in the way of his capacity to persevere in exploring its complex and profound problems?"[275] Socrates' greatness as a pedagogue is simply this: "he made his pupils do their own thinking and introduced the interchange of ideas as a safeguard

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272 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 15.
273 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 15.
274 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 20. Cf. Socrates' remark in *Theaetetus*: " The common reproach against me is that I am always asking questions of other people but never express my own views about anything, because there is no wisdom in me; and that is true enough. And the reason of it is this, that God compels me to attend the travail of others, but has forbidden me to procreate" (Plato, *Theae*. 150c-d).
275 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 21-22.

against self-deception."[276] Nelson acknowledges the difficulty in this – the difficulty of "getting the students to the point of spontaneous activity, and with it . . . the temptation for the teacher to pay out a clue like Ariadne's thread."[277]

However, the goal of what could be called a "reserved" approach on Nelson's part – i.e., "putting no philosophical questions", "never giving the answer sought" – is to awaken in pupils a "philosophical impatience" which is so important to the process.[278] This "impatience" is nothing other than the individual's natural desire for truth and knowledge – to know what justice is, or what beauty is, or what truth and knowledge themselves are. Without this desire – or the nurture of it where it exists – philosophical inquiry quickly runs out of steam and, with it, the possibility of attaining any answers. Socratic instruction, in addition to promoting discussion, is meant to promote "the Socratic spirit, the stout spirit of reason's self-confidence . . . This strength gives Socrates the composure that permits him to let the seekers after truth go astray and stumble. More than that it gives him the courage to send them astray in order to test their convictions."[279]

We see here the context Nelson intends for his principle of reason's self-confidence: it is not that Socrates or Plato were such optimists about human reason's ability to know transcendent truth (we have good textual grounds for denying such a reading); rather, it is their insistence that *something is to be achieved* through dialogue, through the analysis and cross-examination of everyday beliefs and assumptions. We do not need to grant reason unlimited power in order to recognize it as our highest court of

276 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 17.
277 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 21.
278 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 22.
279 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 24.

appeal: Kant's critiques show us the precise opposite is the case. Rather, we have no choice but to rely on reason to gain ground in the questions that vex us; it is reason itself which makes such questions possible. Likewise, if answers to these questions are possible, they are possible – and can be recognized *as answers* – only through reason and the principles it provides to our faculty of understanding. One who truly desires knowledge and values philosophy as the means to pursue it will not be deterred, but instead emboldened, by the frustrating reticence of their instructor.

The difficulty of proceeding in the Socratic manner is compounded by the nature of philosophy as a discipline:

> We are not so fortunate in the problems of philosophy as we are in the problems of mathematics, which, as Hilbert says fairly, call to us: 'Here I am, find the solution!' The philosophical problem is wrapped in obscurity. To be able to come to grips with it by framing clear-cut, searching questions demands many trials and much effort.[280]

Nelson does not take, in this connection, the clarification of terms to be productive of knowledge – such an analytic procedure, while necessary for the correct use of concepts, can only produce tautologies. It cannot amplify our knowledge in the way philosophical inquiry should.[281] If we want to build a system of ethics or metaphysics of nature, we have to build it out of synthetic propositions *a priori*.

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280 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 22.

281 "Definitions, according to Nelson, are merely analytical judgments of what exists . . . and as a criterion of the validity of a [metaphysical] principle . . . they are absolutely futile" (Levi D. Gresh , "The Legal and Political Philosophy of Leonard Nelson," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 35, No. 3 [June 1941], 445).

3.1.3. Nelson's Objection to the "Socratic Circle"

To illustrate why philosophy cannot gain ground through merely analysis of concepts, Nelson recounts a class he taught when, "[despite] my warning, the group stuck to the opening question: 'What is a concept?'":[282]

> It was not long before a casual reference to the concept 'lamp' as an example was followed by the appearance of the 'lamp in general' provided with all the essential characteristics fall particular lamps. . . . My diffident question, whether the lamp-in-general was fed with gas, electricity, or kerosene, went unanswered as unworthy of philosophical debate until, hours later, the resumption of this very question of the source of energy forced the negation of the existence of the lamp-in-general. That is to say, the disputants discovered that different illuminants for one and the same lamp, be it ever so general, were mutually exclusive.[283]

Nelson's question about the energy source of the "lamp-in-general" is a *reductio* maneuver of the kind we see Socrates employ in Plato's dialogues, and is meant to show the students the futility of making definitions the starting-point of systematic knowledge. This is also part of Nelson's criticism of Socratic method in its ancient form:

> in his search for the more universal truths, Socrates concentrates his attention wholly on the general characteristics of concepts as we grasp them and devotes himself to the task of making these concepts explicit by definition. Without concepts, of course, there is no definite comprehension of general rational truths; but the elucidation of concepts and the discussion of their interrelations do not suffice to gain the content of the synthetic truths that are the true object of his quest.[284]

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282 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 27.
283 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 27-28.
284 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 16.

There is, of course, a reason for this. Nelson claims that Socrates is concerned with definitions because, in Plato's view, human concepts "are images of the ideas that constitute ultimate reality," making the elucidation of such concepts "the summit of scientific knowledge."[285]

Nelson terms this approach and its resulting problems "the Socratic circle" – occupying ourselves with finding metaphysical knowledge in analytic propositions, no matter how correct or exact these propositions are. Plato saw correctly that, without setting dialectic inside some metaphysical framework, Socratic inquiry cannot get us further than correcting the meanings of our words. Socratic method would be a kind of "philosophy-as-therapy". But while he assents to this insight, Nelson believes Plato's own solution results in logicism, or metaphysics "only from logic [and] pure reasoning", which Kant had shown to be fruitless.[286] So if we are to practice Socratic method, we cannot have the same goals as those Nelson attributes to Plato. This is not a problem, however: Nelson maintains that a critical mode of philosophy should be understood "not in terms of results but in terms of method," and further that "[whoever] adheres to this method is a criticist, no matter what conclusions he may reach with it."[287] It is perfectly consistent, then, to consider Socrates and Plato critical philosophers – the only ones prior to Kant, Nelson argues – without making revisionist claims that they were proto-Kantians or the like. If we seek continuity between Plato and Kant in their systems, as was attempted so often by post-Kantian commentators, we will encounter far more difficulties

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285 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 16.
286 Nelson, *Theory of Philosophical Fallacies*, 44.
287 Nelson, "The Critical Method" in *Socratic Method*, 130.

than if we seek this continuity in their *method*. Whatever the results Socrates and his

interlocutors reach (or rather, do not reach), they are looking in the right place: not in

experience, but in reason itself.

3.1.4. How Is Education Possible?

When we take such Socratic questions as "What is virtue?" or "What is beauty?",

Nelson shows that the difficulties only multiply after we have given a definition of these

concepts. So the Socratic program seems to be at an impasse: if we are not looking for

definitions, what are we looking for? What is there to learn from philosophy? Or, more

immediately: "How is any instruction and therefore any teaching possible when every

instructive judgment is forbidden?"[288] This new difficulty is endemic to any style of

education which pits itself against dogmatism:

> If the end of education is rational self-determination, i.e., a condition in
> which the individual does not allow his behavior to be determined by
> outside influences but judges and acts according to his own insight, the
> question arises: How can we affect a person by outside influences so
> that he will not permit himself to be affected by outside influences? We
> must resolve this paradox or abandon the task of education.[289]

Here, Nelson hits on the most important point of clarification: no matter how much self-

determination we want to preserve in the student, it is a simple fact that they are always

under "external influences and, indeed . . . the mind cannot develop without external

stimulus".[290] Any ideal of autonomy has to acknowledge that we are surrounded with and

absorb enormous quantities of data, often conflicting data. One moment we are pulled

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288 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 19.
289 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 19.
290 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 19.

toward one opinion, the next we can find ourselves pulled toward its opposite. But more than this, it is by this very exposure to outside stimuli that we are able to know or understand at all. If we accept Kant's model of cognition, cannot know what we cannot experience: our understanding cannot grow without external input any more than the body can. If, then, we view individual self-determination and the fact of external influences as disjunctive, education would seem to fall into the category of external influence. Nelson does not view it this way, however: he points instead to a real difference between "*external stimulation* of the mind [and] molding the mind to the acceptance of outside judgments."[291] Nelson identifies the former with Socratic instruction and the latter with dogmatic or didactic instruction.

One element distinguishing Nelson from Kant is that Nelson does not want to depend on existing political leaders (e.g., Frederick the Great for Kant) or other external authorities to remove the barriers to enlightenment. His faith does not rest on the *noblesse oblige* of state powers but in philosophy. Philosophy is an inside job; it only fulfils "its task when it systematically weakens the influences that obstruct the growth of philosophical comprehension and reinforces those that promote it."[292] Nelson's Socratic instructor – who never answers, and does not question – instructs this way because the instructor's potential influence can undermine the project of truly educating the students. Recall that philosophy is not for students who do not have "a single question to put to it":[293] the instructor is there for students desire to exercise the autonomy of their reason,

291 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 19; emphasis added.
292 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 19.
293 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 21.

not for students who are content with heteronomy and doctrinal education. It would be self-defeating, to Nelson, for the instructor to try making philosophers out of students by exerting authority over them.

This is the teacher's negative requirement; what is the positive requirement? Nelson believes

> [it] cannot be that of a guide keeping his party from wrong paths and accidents. Nor yet is he a guide going in the lead while his party simply follow in the expectation that this will prepare them to find the same path later on by themselves. On the contrary, the essential thing is the skill with which the teacher puts the pupils on their own responsibility . . . by teaching them to go by themselves – although they would not on that account go alone – and by so developing this independence that one day they may be able to venture forth alone, self-guidance having replaced the teacher's supervision.[294]

As for the subject matter of Socratic instruction, Nelson finds a model in Kant's antinomies of pure reason, whose apparently intractable conflict gives us "incentive to investigate the cause of the illusion [involved] and to reconcile reason to itself. This [process] is applicable to every instance of . . . dialectical conflict."[295] The instructor, without lecturing or leading the students, can simply present two theses on the chalkboard and ask students to discuss if and why they exclude one another. During the course of discussion the students will, simply through the presentation and analysis of various solutions, work out the problem: "This method will succeed if the student, struck with

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294 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 20.
295 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 32.

suspicion at [the] sophism, attends closely to the meaning of the words, for these words, when used in an artificial sense, put him on the track of the error."[296]

Nelson is quick to avoid misunderstanding here: "I do not advocate the point of view that so-called common sense and its language can satisfy the demands of scientific philosophizing. Nor is it my purpose, in dwelling on simple elementary conditions seemingly easy to fulfill, to veil the fact that the pursuit of philosophizing requires rigorous training in the art of abstraction, one difficult to master."[297] Rather, the point of using everyday problems, assertions, and so on, is to give the process of abstraction "something to abstract *from*,"[298] rather than steer inquiry towards Oxfordian ordinary language philosophy, which would land the discussion back into the Socratic circle Nelson criticizes.

3.2. Philosophy and Method

In Nelson's estimation, the problem philosophy faces is not paving the way for knowledge. We already have knowledge. We know that our raincoat is still our raincoat whether it is wet or dry; we know that our phone's fall was preceded by our releasing it and not vice versa; we know that the book on our table did not open itself. Philosophy will get nowhere, Nelson argues, if it starts from the assumption that such everyday convictions of ours are problematic. Once we put ourselves on the skeptic's level we cannot win, because we will never be able to produce a logical justification for such convictions. Rather, Nelson summarizes the problem with a quotation from Carl Friedrich

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296 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 32.
297 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 32-33.
298 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 33.

Gauss: "I have had my results for a long time, but I do not yet know how I am to arrive at them."[299] We are already in possession of knowledge, even synthetic *a priori* knowledge; the problem is finding a method by which we can "know how we arrive at" such knowledge. That is a significant task in itself, and no less difficult than the task of the sciences which always start with some phenomenon (falling bodies, species development, etc.) and try to discover why and how these phenomena occur.

Nelson claims "[if] there is such a thing as a research method for philosophy, its essential element must consist of practical directives for the step-by-step solution of problems. It is therefore simply a question of letting the student himself follow the path of the regressive method."[300] It is by this path that Socratic method can be productive, and indeed Nelson reports it has been productive in his experience: "I have seen [students in] a Socratic seminar not only deal successfully with such an abstract subject as the philosophy of law but even proceed to the construction of its system."[301] On other occasions, "a semester's work in a seminar in ethics yielded nothing except agreement on the fact that the initial question was incongruous. The question was, 'Is it not stupid to act morally?'"[302] Just as in Plato's dialogues, "the investigations run a far from even course," with questions and hypotheses tumbling "over one another. Some of the students understand the development [and] some do not" (23). In the end, however, the success of this approach depends

299 Nelson, "The Art of Philosophizing" in *Socratic Method*, 89.
300 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 26.
301 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 36.
302 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 22-23.

on the appearance of teachers who will [utilize] the 'maieutic'
services of the Socratic method, instituting the laborious and
protracted exercises that must not frighten away those who
plan to dedicate themselves to philosophy.[303]

Whatever failures or obstacles may present themselves in the course of executing this

pedagogical design, Nelson is firm in his conviction "that this art has no limitations."[304]

According to Nelson it is only by following the Socratic model that philosophical

instruction can be freed from dogmatism:[305] there is no other model which can properly

train philosophers, since it is the only one in which students' autonomy is protected,

nurtured, and recognized. Socratic instruction not only trains them in dialectic and logical

reasoning, but is intended to strengthen their ethical character: "For of what use is insight

into the laws governing the mechanism of nature if we do not also have free insight into

the moral law, which sets the standard for our personal conduct?"[306] If we neglect the

moral dimension of human beings in education, we cannot expect justice to be the norm

in the social and political sphere. And if we are not trained to develop our rational agency

and resist institutional indoctrination, it is Nelson's opinion that while we could gain

insight "into the secrets of nature," we "would still remain, in [our] highest practical

decisions, dependent everywhere upon the tutelage of higher powers."[307]

3.3. General Characteristics of Nelson's Socratic Pedagogy in Practice

To bring my analysis to a close, I want to outline some general features of Socratic

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303 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 35.
304 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 36.
305 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 18.
306 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 63.
307 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 63.

method as Nelson actually practiced it. Hannah Altorf (2019) gives us one of the few contemporary scholarly treatments[308] – brief though it is – of Nelson's Socratic pedagogy in practice, being a report of sessions she organized according to Nelson's essay and the theoretical framework he provides. Her article discusses other topics and describes a number of additions she brings to the procedure and discusses other topics, so I focus only on the features of which are directly informed by Nelson's precepts so as to give a general outline of what a session looks like.

Altorf notes first that "participating once, or reading about Socratic dialogue, cannot replace [the] 'continued application'" of rigorous reasoning Nelson demands – in order to achieve this level, it must be made the main tool of instruction for a course.[309] She clarifies further that "Socratic dialogue is . . . different from 'discussion.' It moves away from an emphasis on winning and losing, and from practical concerns to the importance of the conversation itself as a shared undertaking."[310] In other words, students are not arbitrarily assigned sides of a debate with the intent to persuade one another, the instructor, or a jury in order to win against the other side – this would be, after all, an exercise in rhetoric, not cooperative reasoning of the kind Nelson wants Socratic instructors to mediate.[311] Altorf argues that Socratic method is not, then, adversarial in nature. But is not, by the same token, an environment of passive acceptance, guided by "commonplaces like 'Everyone is entitled to their own opinion'" where students do not

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308 To the best of my knowledge, Altorf's article is the only treatment in English scholarship focused purely on Nelson's practical pedagogy.

309 Hannah Marije Altorf, "Dialogue and discussion: Reflections on a Socratic method" *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education* 2019, Vol. 18 (1), 61.

310 Altorf, "Dialogue and discussion", 61.

311 Altorf, "Dialogue and discussion", 62.

challenge one another's arguments or claims.[312] Rather, Altorf explains that Nelsonian

Socratic method aims for *reconciliation* – a path which is not available in debate settings,

and is not sufficiently encouraged by passive class discussion. Socratic dialogue "aims

for mutual understanding and agreement, and does not concern itself immediately with

practical outcomes," only with the practice of cooperative problem-solving.[313]

Another feature of organizing a Socratic dialogue is that the "philosophical

question that is central to the dialogue has often been decided in advance, in order to save

time," and that the "question should be answerable by experience and reason alone," i.e.,

by reference to the immediate intuitive knowledge of perception and the immediate non-

intuitive knowledge of reason.[314] Once the question has been put to the group,

"participants act as each other's midwives, questioning and probing positions."[315]

Following Nelson's strictures on instruction, the "facilitator does not contribute to the

content of the dialogue, and in this respect differs from Socrates in Plato's dialogues,"

only intervening when the discussion threatens to derail itself.[316] In making experience

and concrete examples a central point of reference for these discussions, Altorf believes

"Nelson . . . directs the conversation away from hypotheticals," which "allows for

different argumentation" than participants are used to.[317]

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312 Altorf, "Dialogue and discussion", 62.
313 Altorf, "Dialogue and discussion", 63.
314 Altorf, "Dialogue and discussion", 64.
315 Altorf, "Dialogue and discussion", 64.
316 Altorf, "Dialogue and discussion", 64. We have seen Nelson give a glimpse of such intervention when
    he describes himself warning his class not to pursue a discussion "lamps-in-general".
317 Altorf, "Dialogue and discussion", 64.

Altorf reports that once a sufficiently clear example or argument is chosen in connection with the original question, it becomes the focus of discussion. Pursuing one example or argument helps ground the discussion, and "disagreement can be confirmation that the example is relevant, when it leads to further investigation of the [original] question."[318] If the question under discussion is "What is the meaning of substance?", say, the class may use the example of an overcoat to keep the session grounded in everday facts. Altorf cites Nelson here:

> If we were here to discuss the meaning of the philosophical concept of substance, we should most probably become involved in a hopeless dispute, in which the sceptics would very likely soon get the best of it. But if, on the conclusion of our debate, one of the sceptics failed to find his overcoat beside the door where he had hung it, he would hardly reconcile himself to the unfortunate loss of his coat on the ground that it simply confirmed [against] his philosophical doubt . . . the permanence of substance.[319]

In the next stage of dialogue, the "example-giver and sometimes every participant are asked to provide a judgement that relates the question to the example" under discussion.[320] Such judgments may be "An overcoat is not a substance" and so forth; in providing judgments about the example's relation to the question, philosophical positions arise organically. A student who judges the overcoat not to be a good example of substance will be questioned on the reasoning behind their judgment. This development follows Nelson's dictum: "first to derive the general premises from the observed facts of

318 Altorf, "Dialogue and discussion", 66.
319 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 9.
320 Altorf, "Dialogue and discussion", 66.

everyday life, and thus to proceed from judgments of which we are sure to those that are less sure."[321]

Altorf notes that this stage of dialogue proceeds, as Nelson describes, from "opinions we actually hold (*quid facti*)" to examining "the reasons for holding this opinion (*quid juris*)."[322] Thus, quite naturally and without once opening a textbook, a potentially rich philosophical dialogue can get underway: for example, a "sceptic [about the permanence of substance] may argue that he or she has never observed any coat disappearing spontaneously (a form of empiricism), or that without the assumption that a coat does not move spontaneously the world does not make much sense (a form of transcendental philosophy)."[323] In this way, "Socratic dialogue thus provides an entrance into philosophical debate, through an investigation of our own experiences."[324] But once this inroads has been made, Altorf argues "the dialogue has only started, and depending on the agreed time the participants will continue to investigate their positions and arguments, and the underlying suppositions for hours, the rest of the day, or even for a week."[325] Without dogmatic instruction students are able to self-organize discussions which test their reasoning on philosophical questions, and are nevertheless able to yield positions which reflect a rich intellectual heritage. The point is that the participants do this of their own accord and by their own powers of reason – shifting the priorities of the

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321 Nelson, "Socratic Method" in *Socratic Method*, 15.
322 Altorf, "Dialogue and discussion", 70.
323 Altorf, "Dialogue and discussion", 70.
324 Altorf, "Dialogue and discussion", 70.
325 Altorf, "Dialogue and discussion", 71.

philosophy classroom from a dependence on catechistic memorization of theories and books to, as Nelson puts it, "things that cannot be learnt from books."[326]

It is by neglecting Socratic method that Western philosophy after Plato lost sight of critique and, in Nelson's view, did not regain it until Kant. The importance of this method is supplying philosophy with a secure, systematic procedure by which we "arrive at our results" – to investigate and clarify the metaphysical principles which underlie our everyday judgments, so as to eliminate errors and fallacies from rational discourse. If philosophy is to meet the demands Nelson sets for it – i.e., allowing us to realize the ends most worth striving for in life – it requires a corresponding technique to achieve this, which only Socratic dialectics can provide. According to Nelson, Socratic-Platonic philosophy is the true ancestor of Kant's critical philosophy, because all of these philosophers understood the poverty of dogmatism both in society and in metaphysics: attempting to start from principles which ought be ascertained at the *end* of philosophical inquiry. Nelson believes that, unless philosophers recognize this fact, they are helpless to solve any of the problems they lay out for themselves: accounting for truth and our knowledge of the world outside us, determining right actions from wrong actions, or identifying the best way to organize human life. What Nelson has called the "originally obscure" principles which are the key to answering these questions will remain out of reach unless philosophy employs the correct method.[327] Training school students in this method is, for Nelson, the best way to ensure future societies have responsible leadership,

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326 Nelson, *Theory of Philosophical Fallacies*, 162.
327 See this thesis, Chapter 1, pg. 35, for an account of this terminology of Nelson's.

and a mindful and cooperative citizenry. A society which is enlightened in the way Kant

envisions depends entirely on the use of Socratic pedagogy in Nelson's view – this was

not only his theory, but also his practice.

CONCLUSION

My aim with this thesis is exploring possible continuities between Kant and

Plato's thought by way of Leonard Nelson's theory of Socratic method: how Nelson

intended it to facilitate Kantian enlightenment on a public scale, how it is able to instruct

students without heteronomous influence over their thought, and how it continues the

purpose of dialogical inquiry originally set out by Socrates and Plato.[328] In Nelson's view,

the problem addressed through Socratic method – i.e., finding the correct method for

philosophy to assess the validity of our judgments – is only soluble if the autonomy of

pure reason can be shown. Nelson believes Kant's critical philosophy, in particular the

process of deduction Kant introduces, demonstrates the latter. This autonomy is the basis

of our freedom as rational agents, which obliges us to critique any social or political

forces which would compromise our personal insight into our moral duty. Education, for

Nelson, has the task of exercising this ability so that we have a concrete measure to

realize Kant's ideal of enlightenment. Nelson views this process as always having been

the purpose of philosophy, starting with Socrates and Plato. I believe our understanding of

what Kant and Plato have in common can benefit from Nelson's insights; on Nelson's

model, their commonality will be found less in a shared doctrine, as other post-Kantian

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328 A parallel aim in this thesis is contributing in some way to an interest in Leonard Nelson's work, and to
    scholarship about him as a philosopher in his own right. I believe the neglect of Nelson's work is a
    serious lacuna not only in scholarship on Neo-Kantianism, but scholarship on 20th century philosophy
    more generally. Bringing more attention to Nelson's thought – whether in translating or in building
    secondary literature around his works – is a worthy task, as I believe there is still much to learn from
    him. I have confined my own discussion to his remarks on Kant, Plato, and Socratic method, but even
    what I have presented here is far from saying all there is to say when it comes to these topics. There is a
    lot to discover in Nelson's thought if we are prepared to do the work.

commentators had asserted,[329] and much more about their foundational pedagogical goals and methods for reflection, insight, and judgment.

One important advantage of Nelson's synthesis is that it aims for an agreement between Plato and Kant along the practical axis as well as the epistemic axis: answers to ethical and political problems, no less than the truths of natural science, are only possible through a clarification of the laws and principles "lying obscurely" in the faculty of reason itself. Nelson moreover views Socratic method as the only recourse philosophers have for such problems: foundationalist and coherentist epistemologies alike, according to Nelson, misconstrue the question of knowledge as a logical matter – i.e., a problem of propositional analysis – rather than a real relationship between subject and object in the world. We cannot justify our knowledge by thinking about thinking (what Kant calls reflection): knowledge, if it is knowledge at all, is already "justified". The task facing philosophy is to investigate the conditions of this knowledge. Nelson believes this can only be done by a process of abstraction which he formalizes in Socratic method. As a pedagogical technique, Nelson takes Socratic method to be the only avenue for philosophy to be taught – by employing this technique, instructors no longer lecture students on completed historical works, systems, or schools of thought, but train them in the art of philosophy itself.

Nelson sees Socrates and Plato both as precursors to Kant's critical philosophy and, through their reliance on dialectic, as providing us the necessary technique for achieving philosophy's purpose: allowing rational beings to clarify the worthiest ends to

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329 Paul Natorp and Hermann Cohen in particular.

attain for themselves, their community, and the polity at large. Socratic method also

clarifies the *origin* of these worthiest ends – an origin which is not empirical, but rational.

The normative force of judgments and actions are not validated by inference from clear

and distinct principles, but have their validity only in relation to non-discursive principles

ascertained by reason itself. Nelson credits Plato with discovering this fact, but differs

from a more "traditional" reading of Plato which takes this non-empirical origin to be a

transcendent realm of Ideas recollected by the soul.[330] I have shown that while this

metaphysical disagreement of Nelson's with Plato is shared by Kant himself and Nelson's

Neo-Kantian contemporaries, there are readings of Plato which can mitigate such

disagreements.[331] On such a re-interpretation of Plato, Nelson's discussion opens a

feasible route for reading the projects of Kant and Plato as having real philosophical and

pedagogical continuity. With this model, we recognize philosophy as a kind *techne*, the

mastery of which is necessary if we are to honor the autonomy which is ours by virtue of

reason alone.

Thus we have a way out of the difficulties arising when we try to discern the

relationship of Kant and Plato's thought – a way which does not commit us to Whig-

historical explanations of this relationship, or reducing the insights of one thinker to the

system of the other. It is not that Plato only dimly perceived what Kant describes with

precision, or that Kant's philosophy is Platonism with a new coat of paint. We might

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330 I argue this "traditional" reading of Plato can be found in commentators as different as Khan, Vlastos, Gerson, and Kant himself, from whom Nelson adopts his concerns about Plato's "mysticism".
331 See Chapter 2 of this thesis, especially sections 2.1., 2.1.1., and 2.2.2., where I discuss Rowett and Thakkar's readings of Plato, which I take to contrast with the "traditional view" commentators cited above (Gerson, Khan, et al.). Following Thakkar's terminology, we may call this a "one-world" interpretation of Plato's ontological commitments; a similar reading can be found in Julia Annas (1981).

succumb to such readings if we try to understand them as sharing a doctrine; following Nelson's reading, however, we are able to view Kant and Plato as reaching quite independent results, but following shared underlying commitments to what constitutes learning. What we have, then, is not an treatment of Kant or Plato which pays strict fidelity to the letter of each thinker or how they are traditionally understood; rather, Nelson is attempting to bring the best of both philosophies under a common technique which can fulfill their shared purpose.

We can describe this shared purpose as a call to responsibility. We are all born into a given time and place, into a kind of ecosystem of pre-existing customs, histories, legal and social codes; but this does not discharge us from inquiring into the basis of what we should think or how we should act. When we ask ourselves questions like "How should I live?" or "What should I do?" – even in prosaic matters – these are not questions others can answer for us. They can only be answered through what Nelson calls a "personal insight": no evaluation or course of action can be considered justified until we *see for ourselves* why it is so. A law that is observed only to the extent that it is enforced is little more than a superstition, and a life lived according to laws, values, etc., which are never examined is hardly a human life at all, as Socrates points out in the *Apology*. In contrast, to live well is to live in accordance with principles whose validity we have established by and for ourselves – not only as individuals, but as communities, engaged in ongoing dialogue. We can find no stronger unity between Kant and Plato than their motive to engage us in such a way, to live by the motto of enlightenment.

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