My primary interest here is Socratic dialectic. I am going to talk about what Socrates calls the art of dialectic, and how reading the Socratic dialogues as dialogue gives us insight into the phenomenon of teaching and learning: what teaching and learning consist of, and how we can then, as teachers and learners, teach and learn better. The importance of this discussion is drawn from the place of the classroom within the larger scope of the University. For this reason, I am going to preface my discussion of Socratic dialectic with a brief, unfortunately reductive, comment on the purpose of the University, what it is we are doing, why we are doing it, why this is given the name "liberal arts," and why this is not at all limited to the arts as opposed to the sciences.

The "liberal" arts are defined by two things. First, they are a series of subjects, of disciplines, which change historically but which nonetheless share certain features: they are important (that is they are worth knowing) and they are rational (that is they are understandable, learnable, and knowable). Second, it is a way of learning, so that the content (knowledge) of the subject cannot be simply reduced to an assemblage of theories and facts. Rather, the knowledge itself requires the distinction between memorizing and repeating, and understanding. The knowledge itself does not exist autonomously from the way it is learne3d so that all subjects of the liberal arts involve some kind of philosophical reflection upon the knowledge they purport to hold. Which is to say that the subjects of the liberal arts contain not simply facts and theories but, more importantly, justifications for those facts and theories, justifications which themselves are independent of the facts and theories, and dependent on some kind of reflection, of questions asked and answers given.

We all know this, indeed we cannot proceed with the various elements of a University without agreeing in a more general way with what we are doing here, with what teaching and

learning consist of over and above the subject matter. Now saying what teaching and learning are (in their fullness) is quite difficult, so let us begin with what they are not. As a stat ement of principle teaching does not consist of telling and insisting nor learning in listening and repeating. The learner is not an empty vessel into which the teacher pours knowledge, rather teaching is the art of begetting and eliciting. This begetting and eliciting, which may sound needlessly poetic, is done through dialectic, through questions and answers, through which the teacher pulls out of the student what is already there so that all teaching is this process of discussion in which questioning, answering, refutation, and questioning take place. Which is to say that a liberal arts education is organized around the art of asking and answering questions. Discussion is not something that is done to "engage" students but it is inherent in teaching and learning, and it is inherent in teaching and learning because it is inherent in knowledge, both as a kind of content (things known), but also as form (the way in which things are known). And here we begin to see the great difficulty, for discussion can always be perverted, especially in a democratic context by a lack of direction, by the supremacy of opinion over knowledge, for it isn't mere discussion that characterizes a liberal arts education, mere talk in which everyone has an opinion and all opinions are equal, but discussion of a particular kind To clarify this distinction we need to do two things. First, we should acknowledge that asking and answering questions is what we are already doing at a University. What we are doing when we are teaching and learning is asking and answering questions. Second, to do this better we need to understand what is the situation such that asking and answering questions is necessary? Fortunately for us, this is precisely the question of the Socratic dialogues.

In discussing the Socratic dialogues it is necessary to begin with their dramatic character. The first, and immediately apparent, thing to observe is that the dramatic quality of the dialogues

demonstrate that we are always already confronted with an ambiguity of words such that irony is inescapable. This ironic ambiguity, the moving distance between what is said and what is meant, is not some mistake or accident which we should seek to avoid (or overcome) but rather emerges as a feature of language (though which, I would note, we learn and teach). In the Socratic dialogues, this ambiguity draws the interlocutors (and us) into the learning situation. The characters are forced to engage in dialogue, rather than their often preferred mode of competing speeches, only once they realize that they don't quite understand what it is they are trying to say. In these dialogues there are teachers, often more than one, and there are students, with the roles often changing, going back and forth through their discussions. Because they don't quite understand, either what they are saying or what they are learning, they are led to ask questions, to alternatively teach and to learn, and to do so in different ways. Jacob Klein, in his famous commentary on the Meno, notes that this irony has implications for how to read (that is to learn from) the dialogues, but these implications also hold for the phenomenon of teaching writ large. First, Socratic irony implies the hearing of what is not said, "for a statement or a behavior to *be* ironical there must be *someone* capable of *understanding* that it is ironical." Second, this means that not only must the dialogue have an audience but that "everything about Socrates' irony depends on the presence of other people who are capable of catching the irony, of hearing what is not said. A dialogue, then, presupposes people listening to the conversation not as casual and indifferent spectators but as silent participants."[1] Third, because the ideas of a dialogue are necessarily expressed in ironic speech, which contains elements that are not said but are nonetheless understood, this means that Plato's dialogues, while they contain something like a philosophical doctrine (but not a system), this can never be explained "'with complete clarity.' It

[1] Jacob Klein, *A Commentary on Plato's Meno*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 5-6.

is still up to us to try and clarify those foundations and consequences, using, if necessary, 'another, longer and more involved road,' and then accept, correct, or reject them—it is up to us, in other words, to engage in 'philosophy.'"[2]

These three elements, that irony implies the hearing of what is not said, that this requires auditors of the dialogue who actively participate in it, and that there is no such thing as a closed system or doctrine, raise important questions concerning what we are doing when we "engage in philosophy," draw the outline of the phenomenon of teaching and learning. In this way, by turning to the philosophic problem that prompts the necessity of dialogue I would like to clarify three things that are important for understanding the nature of teaching and learning. First, using Hans-georg Gadamer's reading of Plato as a guide, identify the philosophic problem that necessitates dialogue. Second, clarify what is meant by the art of dialectic and how it addresses both the philosophic and moral problems of the dialogues. Third, provide an account of the Meno, and Socrates answer to the question of whether virtue can be taught, so that we can understand what Plato means when he says that all learning is recollection.

According to Gadamer, Plato is motivated by two sets of related problems. Politically, he is attempting to respond to the sophistic claim that no one willingly does what is right, a kind of moral skepticism that was supposed to be supported by natural philosophy, a reasoned account of what is universal on the basis of sense experience. Both the problem of what I should do, in deed, and the problem of what I know, in argument, presuppose a larger problem concerning the appropriate starting point, or criterion, against which these questions might be measured. In both cases the problem that Plato confronts, and which requires the dialogue form to articulate and

[2] Klein, *A Commentary on Plato's Meno*, 9. The reference to "complete clarity" is from the *Sophist*, 254c6. The reference to "another, longer and more involved road," is to the *Republic*, BK IV, 435d3. See also, *Republic*, 504bd.

answer, is that we lack an identifiable criterion in advance. What the dialogues demonstrate time and again is the interlocutors do not know what to do, and the reason they don't know what to do, is they don't *know* what to do. The refutation of the arguments of the interlocutors lies not in their words but in their deeds, or rather they are led to a contradiction with their deeds by the inadequacy of their words.

On Gadamer's reading, for Plato knowing has little to do with empirical verification because knowing requires being able to distinguish between what is and what is not, something that is presupposed by empirical verification and hence cannot be established by empirical verification.[3] Plato's procedure of hypothesis is not simply different from the modern method of formulating a hypothesis and then testing it against empirical experience, but different in such a way that the controversy cannot be settled, because the criterion by which such disputes might be settled is precisely what is in dispute. For instance, Plato's hypothesis of the *eidos*, the Idea of the forms, is not meant to be tested against experience but rather experiences are expected to be tested against the hypothesis. The doctrine of ideas is rationally necessary in order to explain the act of explanation and hence cannot be tested against a scientifically rational account of experience, for the very possibility of science comes from the world of ideas. Knowledge cannot be produced directly by sense experience for all thinking, and this would include scientific thinking, is the act of going beyond sense experience. In other words, the test of the *eidos* can never be experience, rather experience is always tested by the coherence of the *eidos*.[4] And

[3] For a full articulation of this argument see Gadamer, "The Proofs of Immortality in Plato's Phaedo," in *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*.

[4] For instance, the interpretation that Plato is an idealist suggests the forms are both real and separate from appearances. Gadamer points out that this view presupposes that Plato's theory of the forms should be accepted as a proposition, thereby ignoring the context of the dialogues in which, for instance, the problem of participation, and Aristotle's criticism of the theory of the ideas, is explicitly presented by Plato. In contrast to this "two worlds" interpretation of Plato, Gadamer argues that the Platonic teaching is that *chorismos* (separation) and *methexis* (participation) "go together from the start"[4] He notes that in Plato's usage, *methexis* takes the place of the

indeed, how else could it be? Experience only emerges as an experience insofar as it is already coherent. As Gadamer points out, with respect to the "idea" of something, no instance, or experience, of that idea could refute the idea itself, for the test presupposes the validity of the idea. Thus the modern procedure of testing, or verifying, a hypothesis is absurd for "that which constitutes being a horse could never be proved or disproved by a particular horse," for this presupposes that we already know the particular horse is, indeed, a horse.[5]

If what counts as evidence depends upon a prior organizing of the evidence by our ideas, then how do we sort through mutually incompatible, yet coherent, rational arguments? What is the appropriate test for our ideas, if it is not the evidence? Plato places the arguments concerning propositions within the context of dramatic dialogues to demonstrate that truth cannot be understood propositionally because a propositional understanding of truth presupposes that we already have a secure starting point against which to measure propositions, and yet in any actual situation, it is the absence of a secured starting point that gives rise to the question in the first place. The hermeneutic approach to read the dialogues as dialogues in which the statements are not competing logical propositions but rather statements whose meaning is revealed only in the

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Pythagorean *mimesis* to signify the participation of the particular in the universal, something that is not possible with the concept of *mimesis*, for "mimesis refers to the existence of what is imitated or represented, while *methexis* refers to coexistence with something." See, Gadamer, "The Question at Issue," *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, 10. This shift in usage highlights that the part is a part only by virtue of *participating* in a whole. Not only is the part present in the whole, but the part is only itself by virtue of participating in the whole. Likewise, intellection (*noesis*) is distinct from perception (*aesthesis*), such that knowing can no longer be reduced to various kinds of perception, but is a different kind of thing, and hence requires a way of operating independent of sense observation. Here, Gadamer finds support for the Heideggerian claim that ontology is inseparable from language. We come to understanding Being through our way of saying things because intellection is distinct from perception. While it is true that Plato emphasizes the ideas, the ideas do not constitute a world that exist for themselves, for not only do all particular things participate in the ideas, but we can only know the ideas through the things themselves, and primarily what we say about them. This "turn to the logoi," is not simply a way of doing philosophy, or a prescription for how we ought to philosophize, but a philosophical claim in its own right, an account of what we are always doing when we are thinking, "the real experience that thinking is." Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* xxxvi.

[5] Gadamer, "The Proofs of Immortality in Plato's *Phaedo*," 33.

context of the dialogue, is not simply an artistic choice, but a philosophic necessity arising out of the specific argument Plato is making concerning a universal problem. If this is the case, then the arguments of the dialogues need to be interpreted in terms of the larger argument concerning the dialogue form, and the arguments read, not simply as competing propositions, but in the dramatic context of question and answer.

The implication here is that there can be no Cartesian starting point, no original position, no secure starting point of any kind, independent of the position we are in. We are always in-between; there is no absolute and certain starting point any more than there is a rigorous and certain conclusion.[6] Thus the product of intellection can never be certain, a proposition subject to verification, in the way that sense experience aspires to be. Moreover, it is precisely the ambiguous position of knowledge that gives knowledge a moral dimension in practical life. At the same time it is always practically and morally necessary to make choices, choices that require we make a distinction between good and bad, which we justify with reasons, so that while there is no secure starting point, nonetheless in practical life, "whenever we choose one thing in preference to another, we believe ourselves capable of justifying our choice, and hence knowledge of the good is always already involved."[7]

If the condition of knowing is always prior to the condition of verification, then it is impossible to reason from outside our immediate conditions, from the perspective of the universe, because I am always already in a situation which requires me being able to reason, and this situation is bounded by a set of questions and concerns that are prior to the act of reasoning, within which I must think. This ambiguity makes our knowledge uncertain, opening the door to

[6] For the development of the idea of the "in-between," see Gadamer, *Truth and* Method, 291-300. There he says that "*The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between.*" (italics in the original)
[7] Gadamer, "Knowing and Not-knowing," *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, 57.

dissembling, and sophistic manipulation. The answer, then, is to turn to the language itself, and to "secure" the meaning of words behind (and through) the words.[8] Because I am always already in a moral context, what is needed is understanding better the good of that context. What is sought is the preservation of the good of a practical action, something that cannot be done through the mimetic repetition of traditional forms of behavior. For the moral philosophy of what Gadamer calls the tradition of *logos* philosophy, then, what is needed is understanding better what I am already doing. This explains the centrality of virtue, for if I am not already moral then there is nothing for me to understand.

It is here that the distinction between technical knowledge and the kind of knowledge that Socrates refers to must be made. Plato begins with technical knowledge as a paradigm of what knowledge is. Socrates is always making allusions to various craftsmen and their art or craft (*techne*) because we can be reasonably certain that such a person knows their craft, that with regard their craft at least, there is something to know. A *techne* is rational, teachable, and always good. It is rational in the sense that it makes an appeal to general knowledge that is applicable across cases, it is teachable in the sense that someone who has that knowledge can pass it on to others, and it is always good in the sense that a techne is always oriented towards the good of its object. What distinguishes an artisan from someone who is not an artisan with respect their craft is that their knowledge is secure. Once someone has learned their craft they cannot be dissuaded from doing what they think is right for their object by someone who does not know. Within the confines of their craft they will be steadfast. By contrast someone who does not know will

[8] Gadamer, "The *Polis* and Knowledge of the Good," *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, 90. See Socrates discussion of the four cardinal virtues in Book IV of the Republic for a good example of this. The four virtues of Book IV are not Platonic, but traditional. Here, Plato is working with the virtues that are already considered virtuous and trying to identify what they are and how they relate to each other. He interprets them in order to demonstrate what lies at their foundation. See "The *Polis* and Knowledge of the Good," 64-65.

always be uncertain what they should do. Socrates is always referring to handworkers, doctors, and mathematicians because "within their competencies they are not to be shaken by the sophistic arts of rhetoric and argumentation."[9]

The problem is that when we leave the domain of the specialist, as we do when we consider social and political questions, we are confronted with questions that concern all of us, and about which we all have an opinion, and for which we have no secure answers. Here "a debate about the good is always going on" and everyone is advancing their own opinions, even if it is to say there is no independent good other than self-interest.[10] This problem has no technical solution because a technical answer presupposes we have an end to which the techne is directed, but in this case that is precisely what is in question. We are forced to distinguish between good and bad, but we lack a technical criterion for doing so. The term Plato uses for distinction is *dihaeresis*. *Dihaeresis* is what distinguishes the good from the bad, which, he argues, can only be done in relation to the *idea of the good*, because it is only on the basis of the idea of the good that the distinction exists in the first place.[11] The idea of the good is what distinguishes between knowledge in the sense of a techne, and the art of dialectic, between technical knowledge and what he sometimes calls "practical reasonableness." The question of the good is not a techne because it involves no specialized knowledge, and it implicates everybody who, because they have only their own opinions concerning the Good and not knowledge of the good, are susceptible to sophism and manipulation. So, on the one hand, what is required is a kind of knowledge, because it is only on the basis of knowledge that we can resist sophistic rhetoric and argumentation, but on the other hand this knowledge cannot be technical knowledge because the

[9] Gadamer, "Socratic Knowing and Not-Knowing," 39.
[10] Gadamer, "Socratic Knowing and Not-Knowing," 41.
[11] See Gadamer, "Socratic Knowing and Not-Knowing," 45-46.

uncertainty here is not technical. The art of dialectic has to lay the groundwork for a new distinction between good and bad, for what is and what isn't, based on a new kind of education, that replaces emulation and memory, as well as the technical application of general rules, with something like conscious learning, with the recollection laid out in the Meno, with the act of putting words back together.

The art of dialectic, then, is a form of rational knowledge that is both akin to technical knowledge without being reduced to technical knowledge. Specifically, while its object is always the good, it produces neither general rules nor can it be simply learned by going through the process of learning in the way that the technical arts can. So, while dialectic is certainly a way of knowing, Gadamer finds it necessary to distinguish between knowing as a kind of skill, and knowing as a way of being, and this way of being is what distinguishes the philosopher from the sophist.[12]

It is in this context that we should understand the claim that the art of dialectic produces self-knowledge. Plato is confronted with two, related, problems. On the level of argument (*logos*), if what counts as evidence depends upon a prior organizing of the evidence by your ideas, what is the appropriate test of our ideas if it is not the evidence? Likewise, on the level of action, or deeds (*ergon*), if we lack a rational criterion for distinguishing between ideas, how do we give rational response to the claim that "no one willingly does what is right," so that what is held to be just is merely "the advantage of the stronger." The answer is that the test of the *logos*, the word or argument, is whether it can be expressed in *ergon,* deed, in the practical

[12] Gadamer, "Socratic Knowing and Not-Knowing," 38-39.

circumstance one is confronted with, which requires what Plato means by self-understanding.[13] We have seen that someone who does not know can be easily swayed precisely because they do not know. Conversely, someone who knows the good cannot be swayed. But what is it that they know, if the good is not technical knowledge that is expressed in general rules? It cannot simply be that they know the words, that is the argument for what they propose to do, because, as the dialogues show, for any argument there are always contrary arguments, which are coherent and plausible. What is necessary is not simply knowledge of the words, but how those words are expressed in deeds, such that the *logos* and *ergon* are in harmony, and knowing this they cannot fail to follow through on their words. To know the good in this sense is to do the good, but only if you have self-knowledge, the harmony of your words and your deeds. This requires practice in the art of justification, justification that aims to bring our words and deeds into harmony. Instead of applying the standards of the universe, which in any case we cannot know let alone apply, we work out the meaning of the *logoi*, of the things said, in order to understand what they really mean.

By contrast someone who does not have self-knowledge of this kind, who practices self-justification, necessarily fails, not out of a failure of will, or of hypocrisy (to say one thing and do another), but because no matter which course of action they choose it will result in a contradiction with their words. And this is what the dialogues show time and again, the refutation of the arguments of the interlocutors lies not in their words but in their deeds, or rather they are led to a contradiction in their deeds by a contradiction in their words. Importantly, while they are surely led there by Socrates, they are not led by tricks or falsehoods, but out of the

[13] The harmony of word and deed is a theme that runs throughout Gadamer's essays on Plato. For the fullest account see Gadamer, "*Logos* and *Ergon* in Plato's Lysis," in *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith, (Yale University Press, 1980).

nature of the words themselves, which has only been revealed by Socrates. Here we return to the importance of the disposition, and why this has to be a kind of self-knowledge, because there are no general rules of the Good (even if there were they would have to be applied and there are no general rules for how to apply the general rules), moral situations are always open and there are no final answers, this means there is no such thing as a permanent harmony of word and deed, it is always possible for the harmony to be disrupted, which is why what the person really needs is to know how to pull themselves back, and what pulls them back is the necessity to give justification, and the ability to recognize when the justification is lacking. This is the art of dialectic.

This brings us to the Meno, where these questions are explicitly dramatized in response to the questions that animate the dialogue: what is virtue? Can virtue be taught? Is learning possible?