

The Unity of Virtue: Toward a Middle Ground Between Identity and Inseparability in Socratic Virtue

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At the center of much of the discussion about the virtues in the earlier Socratic dialogues lies an issue concerning the relationship among those virtues—specifically about whether or not they are necessarily linked in some way. In the *Protagoras* and the *Laches*¹ (the dialogues to which I will confine most of my discussion here for reasons mentioned below) it is clear that Socrates² subscribes to a view in which the virtues are somehow *united*. It is far from clear, however, what specific form that unification is supposed to take. Although he does at times appear to be arguing for his own stance on whether the virtues are unified, the dialogues are generally structured in such a way that it is not Socrates, but his interlocutors, who are in the position to defend a given point of view. For this reason, much of what Socrates says about the exact relationship among the virtues is left unexplained.

In most of the scholarship concerning Socrates' doctrine of the unity of Virtue, there has been a tendency to endorse one of two interpretive stances, neither of which, unfortunately, seems sufficiently able to make sense of seemingly contradictory parts of the dialogues. Daniel Devereux assesses the situation quite well in his article "The Unity of the Virtues,"³ but I will argue that the conclusion he draws there is not entirely satisfactory. In the first two sections of this paper, I will discuss the two alternative interpretations of the doctrine of the unity of Virtue, the Inseparability View and the Identity View, in order to bring to light the problems of each. But whereas Devereux is content with referencing external accounts (e.g. those of Xenophon and Aristotle) of the historical Socrates and attributing the problematic areas to an inconsistency in Plato's representation of that historical figure⁴, I will suggest an interpretation that makes Socrates' claims self-consistent. Central to this effort will be a general redefining of what Socrates is arguing about, and on that front I will share an important starting point with Terry Penner's "Identity View." I will argue, however,

that Penner's strict Identity View gives rise to its own complications, and that there is a better way to understand Socrates' doctrine of the unity of Virtue. My larger aim is to suggest a way of thinking about inseparability and identity which will avoid the pitfalls of the Inseparability View as they are outlined in Section I, as well as the puzzling ontological implications I find in the Identity View.

I. THE INSEPARABILITY VIEW

The two most thoroughly argued interpretations of the doctrine of the unity of Virtue differ primarily in the strength of the respective claims that they understand Socrates to be making. The weaker Inseparability View takes Socrates to be asserting an equivalence of all the virtues—what Gregory Vlastos calls a “Biconditionality Thesis.”⁵ According to this view, the separate virtues remain distinct parts of a whole (Virtue), but they are necessarily coinstantiated. That is, having one of the virtues is a necessary and sufficient condition for having all the others, which is to say that X is courageous if and only if X is also just, temperate, pious, etc. It is important for this view, though, that the individual virtues remain distinct: courage is not *identical* to justice, justice is not *identical* to piety, etc. Whatever these virtues turn out to be, they are all distinct parts of a whole. The central claim is just that an agent cannot be courageous unless she is also just, temperate, pious, etc. Any argument for the Inseparability View relies heavily on Socrates' remarks at the end of the *Laches* (esp. 198d-200) where he seems to equate the whole of Virtue with knowledge of all goods and evils. At 199e5-6, for example, Socrates tells Nicias that “the thing you are now talking about [knowledge of all goods and evils, from 199d1], Nicias, would not be a part of virtue *but rather virtue entire* [emphasis added].” The salient idea there is that knowledge of all goods and evils just is Virtue, and it is necessary that anyone who has *any one* of the individual virtues necessarily has that knowledge which guarantees possession of all the other virtues.

The textual evidence for the Inseparability View comes from two premises drawn from the early dialogues. The first,

- (1) X is virtuous if and only if X is characterized in some way by moral knowledge or wisdom,

is a generalized inference from the many instances where Socrates and his interlocutors take it for granted that virtue is a “fine and noble thing,” and that something cannot be fine and noble without being in some way attentive to or characterized by wisdom (see in particular *Laches* 192c6 and *Protagoras* 349e4-350c5). This can apply to either an action or an agent. A reckless or shortsighted action performed in dangerous circumstances, for example, would not really be virtuous (and thus not courageous), because it may also have been foolish. A foolish action is hardly commendable, and so, the argument goes, it is not virtuous. So there must be wisdom or knowledge

at play somewhere in the picture, and if we are talking about some individual virtue, the relevant kind of wisdom is of course going to be moral wisdom, wisdom in some way pertaining in some way to action.⁶ The second premise, established in the argument at the end of the *Laches* (199b7-8), is

(2) The same knowledge is of the same things whether future, present, or past,

which, together with (1), establishes a strong case for the Inseparability View. To speak of agents, if X has any one of the virtues, then she must have moral wisdom or knowledge (from (1)), and if X has moral wisdom or knowledge, then she must have knowledge of *all things pertaining to moral action*, (from (2)). And of course knowledge of all things pertaining to moral action will ensure that the agent is virtuous in all possible ways—that is, that she is courageous, just, temperate, pious, etc.

There is an underlying assumption fueling this interpretation, and that is that the “What is X” questions Socrates asks (what is courage, justice, piety, temperance, etc.) are questions after something like the “meaning” or “essence” of X.⁷ A proper response to these questions, then, would be some sort of logical analysis about what we have in our conceptual understanding of X. The question we’re asking is, “What do we mean when we say that F is X?” A satisfactory answer to these conceptual questions will consist in a definition of, say, courage, that uncovers the essential features at play when we say something like “F is courageous.” To do this, we might begin with a definition that seems in some respects inadequate—at 192c1 in the *Laches*, for example, courage is “endurance of the soul”—and then work toward a more refined definition. This requires some logical analysis to yield what is really essential to courage; that is, what we *mean* when we say that F is courageous. A somewhat hackneyed example will be helpful here: take the sentence

(3) F is a bachelor.

If the term “bachelor” were in question in the Socratic dialogues, proponents of the Inseparability View would find the solution in an analysis that yields from (3) both

(3a) F is male, and

(3b) F is unmarried.

This is to say that it is contained within what one means when she says “F is a bachelor” both that “F is male” and “F is unmarried.” So to answer the *conceptual* question of what a bachelor is, we merely have to give a definition that uncovers these underlying, defining features of “bachelor” in a way that makes one better understand the term.

Socrates’ argumentative moves, on this view, are seen as a way of showing why it must be the case that the meaning of the term “courage” is such that it carries with it

other claims (about wisdom, necessary coinstantiation, etc.). The analysis would run something like this:

(4) F is courageous.

From this, Socrates' various arguments are taken to yield

(4a) F is wise. (See the discussion of (1) above for why this is so.)

and as a result he concludes

(4b) F is just, temperate, pious, etc.

This is what constitutes the Biconditionality Thesis, and it can be schematically represented as follows:

$$\forall f (Cf \leftrightarrow Wf \leftrightarrow Jf \leftrightarrow Tf \leftrightarrow Pf)$$

Within this construction, any of the virtues can be freely substituted for any of the others without producing a false statement. This amounts to the coinstantiation of the virtues which the Inseparability View takes as Socrates' main point. If Socrates' arguments succeed, then, he will have shown that the coinstantiation represented above is always operative in any talk of courage, justice, piety, etc.

This interpretation works quite well for reading the *Laches*, but it encounters some serious difficulties when confronted with certain parts of the *Protagoras*. Indeed, by 333b in that dialogue, Socrates thinks he has shown that the pair of propositions

(i) For one thing there is only one opposite; and

(ii) Wisdom is different from temperance yet both are parts of Virtue,

are mutually untenable. If *folly* is the opposite of both wisdom and temperance (332-332e14), then (i) and (ii) cannot be held simultaneously. If (i) is right, then wisdom and temperance cannot be different from each other, because they have the same opposite. Wisdom and temperance, then, are either *one thing*, or there was some misunderstanding in the talk about opposites. It seems clear, though, that both Socrates and Protagoras are less willing to abandon (i) than (ii), since the conversation after that point moves toward a reluctant agreement on Protagoras' part that "wisdom and temperance are one thing" (333b6).⁸

The real problem here is that Socrates seems to begin to abandon altogether the view that there are "parts of Virtue" at all. We can see this if we consider that the *Protagoras* is structured in general as a debate over two possible ways in which Virtue might be "one." Either "virtue is a single thing, with justice and temperance and piety

its parts” or these things are “all names for a single entity” (329d1-3). And when Protagoras endorses the former (329d4-5), much of the proceeding dialogue is largely an attempt on Socrates’ part to refute that claim. This is made even clearer in 349b, where Socrates summarizes the main point of contention:

Wisdom temperance, courage, justice, and piety—are these five names for the same thing, *or is there underlying each of these names a unique thing, a thing with its own power or function, each one unlike any of the others?* “[emphasis added]”

At this point, it seems clear that the primary issue at stake is not one of similarity, or even of inseparability, but rather one of identity or non-identity. The dilemma as Socrates formulates it above concerns whether or not the so-called “separate virtues” are actually just *one thing* which admits of different names. And, since most of Socrates’ arguments in this dialogue (concerning piety and justice in 330c-331b7; wisdom and temperance in 332-333b8; wisdom and courage in 349e-350c5) are aimed at refuting the claim that the virtues are non-identical, it would seem that he is ready to endorse the other horn of the dilemma—namely, that all the “parts of Virtue” are just five names for the same thing.

The problem the Inseparability View faces here is that it must ignore or distort the instances in the *Protagoras* where Socrates seems to be situating himself against the view that there are actually parts of Virtue. There are two ways to deal with this troubling inconsistency. The first option is to take Socrates’ argument in the *Protagoras* as merely an attempt to undermine Protagoras’ claims. But to read the *Protagoras* in this way is likely to preclude any possibility of understanding Socrates’ stance on the issue, since it reduces many of his claims to mere argumentative tools. This reading would discredit not only the Inseparability View, but all of Socrates’ interpretations.⁹ Furthermore, there are passages which provide definite obstacles to the reading that Socrates is not arguing for anything in particular, such as the one at the end of the *Protagoras* (361b1-361b4): “but now you [Socrates] are arguing the very opposite *and have attempted to show that everything is knowledge—justice, temperance, courage*” (emphasis added). The speaker here is Socrates, and he is giving voice to what he thinks the discussion would say “if it had a voice of its own” (361a5-6). This passage, among others,¹⁰ shows that it is likely that Socrates is arguing for a particular stance; what is not immediately clear is exactly what his stance is.

The second option, then, is to take Socrates’ skirmishes with Protagoras as arguments in which Socrates himself does have something to establish. Once we agree to do this, we can examine in more detail what his position that the virtues are in fact “one” implies. This line of thought leads to the development of the Identity View, a very convincing account of which can be found in Terry Penner’s “The Unity of Virtue.”¹¹ I think that Penner succeeds there in revealing how the Inseparability View not only faces textual contradictions, but also reduces many of Socrates’ argumentative moves to sheer nonsense. In the next section I will briefly discuss how Penner’s ac-

count paved the way for the necessity of an interpretation that asserts something stronger than inseparability among the virtues. I will then take issue with and alter some aspects of Penner's Identity View in an attempt to avoid the problems that arise from that view.

II. THE IDENTITY VIEW

The Identity View meets the above complications by attributing to Socrates a stronger claim than inseparability. The thought here is that when Socrates makes his claims about Virtue being "one," he is not simply saying that there are many virtues which are linked in such a way that they cannot be separated. He is saying, rather, that there is only Virtue, and that Virtue admits of a number of different names, depending on the circumstances in which it is active. To quote Penner, this is a stronger claim than the one attributed to Socrates in the Inseparability View, "since it carries ontological implications not carried by [inseparability]."¹² The ontological implications Penner identifies are:

(1) 'Bravery,' 'wisdom,' 'temperance,' 'justice,' and 'piety' are five different names of the same thing, and

(2) In addition to brave men there is such a thing as bravery.¹³

This stronger claim does indeed seem more consistent with the areas in the *Protagoras* mentioned above, where Socrates seems to argue against Protagoras' formulation of Virtue as a whole comprised of distinct parts. Furthermore, when speaking of justice at 330c1-3, Socrates poses the following question: "Is justice a thing or is it not a thing? I think it is. What about you?" There are other instances where he speaks similarly about piety as a "thing" (330d1), and in the whole argument from opposites (332d-333b10), he is speaking of temperance, wisdom, justice and piety as *things*. The ontological implication of (2) sits well with these areas of the dialogue, and so the claim which gives rise to this implication naturally seems more likely to be what Socrates meant.

But Penner also identifies a more fundamental problem with the Inseparability View. As I formulated it above, the Inseparability View understands Socrates' questions as *conceptual* questions about what is carried in our concept of a virtue. Penner argues¹⁴ that what Socrates is after is in fact *not* some sort of logical analysis, but something altogether different—some sort of substantive theory saying *what courage is*—and that the Inseparability View is misguided from the start. The key difference here is that in conceptual questions the reference of "courage" is the *meaning* of courage, while in substantial questions the reference of courage is, to quote Penner, "*that psychological state which explains the fact that certain men do brave acts.*"¹⁵ The reasons given above for preferring a claim which implies (2) are also strong reasons for reading Socrates'

“What is X” questions as substantial rather than conceptual. And there are still further reasons: it is clear as early as 330a in the *Protagoras* that Socrates is speaking of the virtues as having “powers” or “functions” analogous to the powers of the eyes or the ears.¹⁶ In the following discussion on 332a-c, he argues that it is “by temperance” that people “act temperately” (332a11), just as it is “with quickness” that an action is “done quickly” (332b13). A similar discussion can be found in the *Laches* at 192b-c, where Socrates is trying to explain to Laches in what way he wants to discuss courage. Again, the example he gives is a *power*: “[...]what I call swiftness is the power of accomplishing a great deal in a short time” (192b2-3), and he then asks Laches

...to speak in the same way about courage. What power is it which, because it is the same in pleasure and in pain and in all the other cases in which we were just saying it occurred, is therefore called courage? (192b5-8)

It is also important to note here that the whole discussion with Nicias and Laches is an attempt to find out “the manner in which virtue might be added to the souls of [Lysimachus’ and Melesias’] sons to make them better” (190b5-6). It seems clear by this point—without even delving into the contextual confusion that arises from taking Socrates’ “What is X” questions as conceptual ones¹⁷—that what Socrates is after is certainly something more like the identification of a motivational state of soul which gives rise to a specific kind of action. “What is courage,” then, can translate roughly into “What is that state of soul, the power of which is to produce courageous actions,” and *mutatis mutandis* for justice, temperance, piety, and all the rest. And it seems clear that the Inseparability View doesn’t quite address these questions in a satisfactory (or at least in a consistent) way.¹⁸

If we agree to take Socrates’ questions as substantial and not conceptual, then the central issue is this: does the same state of soul give rise to each of the different virtuous actions, or are there actually different states of soul, each of which has its own distinct power to produce a certain type of virtuous action? Is courage the state of soul whose power it is to produce courageous actions, justice the state of soul whose power it is to produce just action, and so on? Or is it, rather, one state of soul—Virtue—which has the power to produce courageous actions as well as just, temperate, and pious ones? Penner answers the latter question in the affirmative, and it follows that all the virtue words collapse into names for that single state of soul which is the explanatory entity for all virtuous actions. Penner is content with identifying Virtue with the knowledge of goods and evils¹⁹ and positing that as the single entity to which each virtue-term refers; he does not carry his conception of the unity of Virtue any further. There remains room for distinction, then, only among virtuous actions; the loss of distinction occurs at the deeper level of the “virtues themselves”—that is, in the soul. The difference between a courageous action and a pious one, on this view, is determined entirely by the circumstances in which the action occurs. A virtuous action performed in conditions of danger or affliction, for example, can be

characterized as courageous, while a virtuous action performed in conditions which demand attention to the gods' demands is a pious one, and so forth for all the other virtue-adjectives. The real difference between this view and the Inseparability View is the lack of distinction among the virtues. It is a central feature of the latter view that there is some way to distinguish among the virtues *in themselves* (and not only in the light of external circumstances: see note 18). On Penner's Identity View, there need not be any such distinction at this level. While we are willing to label certain actions as instances of this or that virtue, these actions will all have as their explanation *the same state of soul*.

There is a common-sense objection here that, though worth mentioning, will not by itself refute Penner's strict Identity View. The problem, in brief, is that it just goes against everyday talk about virtues to say that all the virtues are simply names for the same thing. It hardly seems plausible that when we call a person *courageous*, we are making the same claim as when we call her *just*. If this concern is not entirely eliminated by the end of Penner's article, he at least defeats it implicitly by posing Socrates' argument as substantial rather than conceptual. Socrates is simply not talking about virtue in the same way as we do in our everyday conversations. His specific idea of Virtue is not of something that can be separated into distinct parts. Our confused intuition, if Penner's interpretation is right, arises from thinking misguidedly about distinctive virtuous actions as being caused by different states of soul, instead of thinking about them as products of the *same* state of soul occurring under different external circumstances. But there is a more pressing problem here which is at least tangentially related to the previous one, and which is enough to warrant some hesitation toward the strict Identity View outlined above.

III. PROBLEMS WITH THE IDENTITY VIEW AND A MIDDLE GROUND BETWEEN INSEPARABILITY AND IDENTITY

It will be helpful here to assess some of the ontological implications of Penner's Identity View. His interpretation allows us to claim that there exists such a thing as virtue which is by definition identical to both:

(5a) Knowledge of all goods and evils,²⁰ and

(5b) The state of soul which gives rise to all virtuous actions.

It is also central to the Identity View that

(6) 'Courage,' 'justice,' 'temperance,' and 'piety' are all names for the same thing—namely, the thing whose existence is claimed in (5).

About a virtuous action—I will use courage as an example—we can say

(7a) A courageous action is produced by Virtue, and

(7b) A courageous action occurs in circumstances of danger or affliction.²¹

For any action G rightly to be called *courageous*, it is necessary both that it

(a) be produced by Virtue, and

(b) occur under circumstances of danger or affliction.

If (a) is not the case, then G cannot be courageous, just, temperate, or pious; if (b) is not the case, the action might be just, temperate, or pious, but it cannot be courageous. The trouble here is that, given (a), what can be an eligible candidate for a virtuous action is *extremely* limited. We can make this complication clearer if we substitute “knowledge of all goods and evils” for “Virtue” and then rephrase (a). What we get is

(a’) An action is courageous if and only if it is produced by (or with) knowledge of all goods and evils.

We can see, then, that even to speculate about G being a courageous act is to presuppose either that the speaker herself has knowledge of all goods and evils, or that someone else (namely the person who committed G) has knowledge of all goods and evils. Certainly Socrates does not seem very inclined toward the idea that *anyone* has knowledge of all goods and evils, committed as he is to the idea that acknowledgment of his ignorance is what makes him the wisest man in Athens.²² The problem here is not *per se* that there are no virtuous individuals, but, rather, that there is no room in the Identity View for a virtuous action to come into being *at all* if no one has knowledge of all goods and evils. This is because Penner’s Identity View, by reducing courage to just another name for Virtue, has eliminated the possibility of separating *courage* from *Virtue itself* in order to identify courageous actions on some other grounds which do not presuppose knowledge of all goods and evils. Our labeling an action as *courageous* is in some sense mere happenstance. Besides the fact that it was produced by Virtue, there is nothing special—nothing *outside* or *independent* of Virtue itself—about a particular action which makes it courageous; we just happen to talk that way about actions which *seem* “right” or “good” and which occur in circumstances of danger or affliction. We can of course still speak of “right” actions, but the point is that without Virtue, there is no way of saying that an action is exemplary of Virtue (that it is virtuous). Since there is no virtue in the way Vlastos understood it—as a standard by which to judge whether an action is just or pious or courageous, etc.²³—we have noth-

ing outside of Virtue itself by which to make such judgments.

This is especially problematic because Socrates does not hesitate to discuss examples of virtuous actions. Indeed, many of his arguments take for granted that certain actions *are* examples of virtuous behavior.²⁴ If we accept that one cannot speak meaningfully of individual actions as virtuous (which I take to be a consequence of the Identity View), then many of Socrates' arguments would be begging the question, and much of what he claims would be outright contradictory to this formulation of his doctrine of the unity of Virtue. My suggestion here is to establish some sort of textual basis for distinguishing the virtues themselves at the level of the soul—without construing Socrates' arguments as merely conceptual—in a way that allows us to talk sensibly about virtuous actions. Such an account will, I think, be able to avoid the complications mentioned above, and it will also address our intuitional worry about collapsing all the virtue-terms into one entity. This requires a conception of the virtues such that they remain *quantitatively* undifferentiated—Virtue is still knowledge of all good and evils, and the individual virtue-terms still collectively refer to that state of soul—but also such that the virtues are somehow *qualitatively* distinct—there is some unique quality about each of the virtues by which it has the power to produce a specific type of virtuous action.

My suggestion is to begin by keeping separate our conception of a virtue itself, on the one hand, and a virtue's power or function on the other. Socrates hints at such a distinction at 330b1-2 in the *Protagoras*, where he asks whether the virtues “are unlike each other, both in themselves and in their powers or functions,”²⁵ and this distinction allows us to begin to question the idea that virtue is just the power to act virtuously. I think that if there is a qualitative distinction to be made at all (and it seems there must be), it should be located somewhere in the area of the distinction hinted at above. In what follows I will elaborate on the thought in 330b1-2 in hope that such an elaboration will lead naturally to a genuine distinction among the individual virtues.

Both the Inseparability View and the Identity View agree that Virtue itself is understood as knowledge of all goods and evils, and I think this account is consistent with the claims Socrates makes at the end of the *Laches* (199b-199e6). There is a problem, however, in speaking of Virtue as just the power to produce virtuous actions. Penner airs some hesitation at the end of his article²⁶ about how “knowledge, by itself, could be a motive-force in any way,” but unfortunately he doesn't proceed to address the issue. I think the key to the problem lies in Penner's own conflation of Virtue and a virtue's power. By reducing Virtue itself simply to the state of soul characterized by knowledge of all goods and evils, he has left out an important aspect necessary to call that knowledge a “state of soul” at all. What I am suggesting is this: we should not think of knowledge *itself* as the *only* thing relevant to Virtue. The fact that Socrates is talking about this knowledge as already relevant somehow to behavior is putting it in a certain context: the context of an agent whose possession of that knowledge is bound up in some way with her actions. We are talking about two separate things when we speak of knowledge in the abstract—as a collection of facts or truths which might exist independently of its possessors—and when we speak of knowledge as something

which “might be added to the souls” of young men “to make them better” (*Laches* 190b5). And if we are going to talk about Virtue as knowledge of all goods and evils, we must get clear about what it means for that knowledge to exist *in the soul* in such a way that it influences action.

Once we realize that there is some necessary and presupposed context here (namely the soul), it becomes natural to make the distinction I urged above about keeping Virtue itself separate from a virtue’s power or function. We have to keep these separate because we are talking both about Virtue as a kind of knowledge *and* about the kinds of *actions* that the virtuous *state of soul* produces. Without going into the epistemological questions concerning Socrates’ conception of knowledge, there will always already be some distinction here between that knowledge and the power which acts in tandem it. Naively we might say, for example, “Surely X’s knowledge won’t produce virtuous actions if her muscles have turned into jelly!” This is of course a bit ridiculous, but it shows that there must be more to the picture. There must be, in addition to knowledge, some power which acts together with that knowledge to produce a virtuous action. To dwell at length on the particulars of what that “power” is or what it must be would take me too far astray from the Socratic dialogues. I will say briefly that the distinction I am urging must be effected in some way “in the soul,” if we are talking about “states of soul” as the surrounding context for Virtue. We do speak intelligibly of dispositions and tendencies, and it seems dangerous to identify either as something purely and outwardly physical.²⁷ With this in mind, I think it is plausible not to equate “knowledge of all goods and evils” with “the power to produce virtuous action,” which means that we must understand Virtue in a different way.

Here, I am proposing that Socrates holds something like a bi-leveled conception of the soul.²⁸ Suppose, for example, that an agent is truly virtuous in Socrates’ sense. At the first level of this person’s soul lies knowledge of all goods and evils. This knowledge can be seen as informing and influencing what I will call the second level of the soul—the level at which I posit the powers to produce certain virtuous actions under certain circumstances. All of these powers or functions are equally influenced by the knowledge which exists at the first level of the soul; in the truly virtuous soul, this is knowledge of all goods and evils. For this reason, all of the *powers* which give rise to specific actions are always *virtuous* in the truly virtuous agent—that is, they will always produce an action which is informed by knowledge of all goods and evils. But they will sometimes be active and sometimes not. In a situation which demands that a person endure affliction or danger, for example, her power to act in an enduring way, *influenced by her knowledge of all goods and evils*, will produce what we might call a courageous action. The “courage” which gives rise to that action, then, is not identical *only* to her knowledge of all goods and evils; it was rather a combination of that knowledge and its influence on the part of her soul which is the power to produce courageous actions. And the state of soul in operation here is not the same as the one that would be in operation if she were to act temperately in a situation whose circumstances demanded that she resist temptation. In that case, her temperate action is a result of her knowledge of all goods and evils and the influence of that knowledge on

her power to act virtuously under conditions which demand self-control. Her temperance, then, is distinct from her courage, and we could make the same case for her justice, her piety, and so on.

One obvious implication of this view is that, so long as a person has knowledge of all goods and evils, there cannot be instances where one virtue conflicts with another. A person's courage, for example, cannot conflict with her justice (as Protagoras suggests at 349d4-8), because both of these virtues are anchored by knowledge of *all* goods and evils. This knowledge, presumably, will inform and influence the right power for acting virtuously under whatever circumstances. It is only in the event that a person does *not* have knowledge of all goods and evils that the "second level" of her soul could possibly produce an action that conflicts with the demands of Virtue. In that case she might act in a way that seems virtuous but is really shortsighted or unconsciously self-advancing, or something else not wholly commendable. Her lack of knowledge, for example, might act in tandem with a power in the second level of her soul and produce a "courageous" action where it was in fact foolish to endure in the given circumstances. But the fact that she has something operating which "recognizes" the circumstances as *the kind in which to endure* (even if that "recognition" is misled because it is not fully informed) shows that the situation was such that a virtuous action might have been possible. What I mean here is this: the "powers" I am positing at the second level of the soul recognize or pick out certain circumstances as the kind in which to act a certain way. It is of course *knowledge* which, for Socrates, will have the final say in the overall process, but that knowledge will have to "fuel" the correct *power* to act in accordance with what is right or wrong, good or evil. And since we all, as agents, have the same "powers" (to act courageously or justly or temperately, etc.) we are able to recognize "virtuous-like" behavior on some grounds independently of Virtue itself. We all have the ability to recognize that such-and-such behavior in such-and-such circumstances seems virtuous *because it was produced by a virtuous power*.

If we are allowed to talk in this way about Virtue, then we can also talk about specific examples of virtuous action. In the Identity View, we were unable to distinguish among individual virtues because all we had to work with was knowledge of all goods and evils, the products of which were impossible to speculate about without presupposing that very knowledge (either in the speaker or in the one who is acting). My distinction between knowledge and power allows for the existence of the individual virtues in a way that is at least partly intuitive, not only to Socrates but to his interlocutors as well. On my account, there is more to Socrates' conception of virtuous action than knowledge of all goods and evils, and this is what we needed to allow for virtuous actions to occur which are not *necessarily* the product of that knowledge. In this conception, it is possible for a "virtuous output" to result from a person who is not virtuous in the sense that she has knowledge of *all* goods and evils. What this would amount to, briefly, is one's power to produce virtuous actions under such-and-such circumstances (the "second level" of her soul) being influenced by what knowledge of goods and evils she *does* have (the "first level" of her soul) in such a way that she performs what is commonly recognized as a "virtuous" action. The reason such

actions can be “commonly recognized” is that they are recognizably produced by the second-level powers of the soul, which are always producing eligible candidates for “virtuous” actions. To be sure, there is much more that would need to be said about this process and about what I have termed a bi-leveled soul. It should be sufficient, however, that I have created room for a separation between our talk of an action being virtuous (e.g. courageous) and a person being virtuous, and have thereby eliminated the necessary condition that a courageous action be produced by knowledge of *all* goods and evils. This conception succeeds in understanding Socrates’ questions as substantial and not conceptual (we are still talking about explanatory states of soul), and it also creates the possibility for talking about virtue as something manifested not only in a virtuous agent (who has knowledge of all goods and evils), but in a virtuous action as well (an action recognizably produced by the powers of the second-level of the soul). The problem with the Inseparability View was mainly that it provided a conceptual link among the virtues instead of a substantial one. The substantial link I have provided here is perhaps more akin to inseparability, but it meets the demands of Penner’s Identity View without all the puzzling ontological implications. This expands the ontological situation in order to allow for the existence of individual virtuous actions, whether or not there exist persons who are virtuous in the sense that they have knowledge of all goods and evils. Thus, it is possible to understand Socrates and his interlocutors as speaking intelligibly about examples of virtuous actions in a way that is consistent with Socrates’ own doctrine of the unity of Virtue.

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ENDNOTES

- 1: All citations to Plato herein come from the versions of the dialogues printed in: John M. Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*. (Hackett, 1997) The translations are by Rosamond Kent Sprague (*Laches*) and Stanley Lombardo/Karen Bell (*Protagoras*).
- 2: I am referring here (and will be throughout) to the Socrates as he is represented by Plato in the early Socratic dialogues. In an attempt to get a better understanding of the claims being argued there, I will confine myself in this paper to a discussion of the earlier dialogues (primarily the *Protagoras* and the *Laches*) where the influence of Platonic innovation is not yet very evident. For discussion of how Plato’s own views might have developed and departed from those of the actual historical Socrates (or what is known of them), see: Daniel Devereux, “The Unity of the Virtues” *A Companion to Plato* (Grand Rapids, 2006), 325-339 (esp. 336-338), and John M. Cooper, “The Unity of Virtue” in *Reason and Emotion—Essays on Ancient Moral Psychology and Ethical Theory* (New York, 1999), 76-117 (esp. 107-117).
- 3: Devereux, 325-339.
- 4: It should be noted here that Devereux advances this view as only one possible way of making sense of the contradictions. In other areas, he does mention that it might in fact be worthwhile to reconcile

the differences in a way that is more judicious to Plato's representation of Socrates, and I am, to some extent, just following him up on that suggestion here.

- 5: Gregory Vlastos, "The Unity of the Virtues in the Protagoras," in *Platonic Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University 1973), 221-269. Vlastos' Biconditionality Thesis is, for all intents and purposes, terminologically interchangeable with what I am calling the Inseparability View: I have simply adopted the latter term throughout this paper because I will be speaking more widely about the general method of interpretation and not just the thesis Socrates is understood to be asserting.
- 6: It is not clear in these dialogues whether Socrates himself actually distinguishes among different types of knowledge or wisdom in a way that would allow us to speak in detail about what might make "moral wisdom" different from, say, "theoretical wisdom." The important point here, though, is that for a person to perform *good* or *morally commendable* actions, she must have wisdom of some sort (this is the general thought behind the discussion in the *Protagoras* 349E4-351B), and that wisdom is concerned with action. It is this wisdom—the wisdom which guides an agent to perform morally commendable actions—that I am referring to as *moral wisdom*.
- 7: Indeed, Vlastos finds the strict Identity View preposterous mainly because he is worried about the "essence" of some individual virtue being the same as the "essence" of a different virtue. He seems especially committed to understanding Socrates' questions as a request for meanings on pp.227-228, where he expresses concern over whether or not piety, "as a 'standard' by looking to which we can tell whether a given act is or is not pious," could ever be the same thing as Courage. That is, if the virtues are *identical*, we could use Courage as a standard by which to judge whether an action is pious. Just after establishing his Biconditionality Thesis, he claims that he has established a "conceptual" or "definitional connection [...] between virtues" (233). And again in his section on Pauline predications (252-259, esp. 258): "he [Socrates] did not mean to assert that Justice is a just *eidōs* and Piety a pious one, but the analytic truth that the *eidōs*, Justice, is such that all of its instances are just, and the *eidōs*, Piety, is such that all of its instances are pious." These remarks make it clear that the Inseparability View as Vlastos would have it (and as I have outlined it in sec. I) is committed to understanding Socrates' questions as conceptual—that is, as requests for meaning or analytic truths, and not as substantial questions, as Penner understands them (see section II below).
- 8: It might be objected here that what I am taking to be Socrates' claims are in fact just rhetorical questions meant to further the discussion. There might be something to this objection, but I think there is reason to believe that Socrates does hold at least some of the claims he makes in these dialogues. I elaborate more on the problems of reading Socrates' questions as wholly non-committal below.
- 9: Thus Vlastos accounts for certain seemingly contradictory parts of the dialogues through an assessment of the goals of the *elenchus* (Vlastos, 268-270). I will not argue here for or against the merits of his interpretation—whatever results such an interpretation might yield, it seems beneficial to develop an account of the doctrine of the unity of virtue that can stand for the most part independent of normative claims about the *elenchus*.
- 10: There are similar instances in the *Laches* (194b1-4, 198b2-3, 198c10-21, to name a few) where Socrates seems clearly to see himself as having some personal footing in the arguments.
- 11: Terry Penner, "The Unity of Virtue," *The Philosophical Review* 82 (1973): 35-68.
- 12: *Ibid.*, 36.
- 13: *Ibid.*
- 14: *Ibid.*, 38-42.

- 15: *Ibid.*, 41.
- 16: It should be kept in mind, however, that Socrates does distinguish here between the virtues “in themselves” and “their powers and functions” (330b1-2). This will be important in the account of virtue I will develop in the next section.
- 17: Such an understanding, as Penner points out (91-92), reduces Socrates’ argument in 332a3-333b6 (on wisdom and temperance) to a rhetorical move that makes little sense and is blatantly fallacious. He does not mention the skirmish at 330c-331b7 (on piety and justice), but I think the same could be said of that argument as well.
- 18: Vlastos does talk of “recognizably different moral dispositions” as a way to distinguish among virtues at least some of the time (231). But the whole discussion on dispositions there seems somewhat confused, and he slides in and out of talk about virtuous actions and talk about virtuous agents in a way that makes it hard to understand what he means by moral dispositions. There is, at any rate, a host of problems inherent in thinking of virtue as an “essence” which manifests itself in things we call virtuous, on the one hand, and a moral disposition on the other. Penner’s discussion (pp.44-49) is quite helpful in revealing some of the complications of thinking about virtue as a disposition or “tendency,” but in the end I think that bringing something akin to Vlastos’ dispositions back into the picture is essential to keeping Socrates’ doctrine from being self-refuting (see section III below).
- 19: By page 60 Penner has made it quite clear that he’s talking about a “single entity which makes men brave, wise, temperate, just, pious, virtuous, knowledgeable.”
- 20: From the *Laches* 199d-199e6, and from Penner pp. 61-62.
- 21: I feel obliged to note here, again, that it is not of primary importance what we decide to posit as the circumstances in which a courageous action can be labeled as such. I am following Vlastos here in using “affliction or danger,” but the circumstances could just as well be something quite different. The important point is just that there do exist some special circumstances under which it is right to say of an action that it is a courageous action.
- 22: This view is made evident in many Socratic dialogues, but particularly in the *Apology*.
- 23: Vlastos, 227.
- 24: In the *Laches*, Socrates agrees with Laches that a man who fights the enemy while remaining at his post is acting courageously (191a1-5), and he then proceeds to give additional examples of courageous behavior in 191a5-191e3. In the *Protagoras*, the whole argument for the identity of wisdom and courage (349e-350c5) proceeds from the assumption that men who dive into wells and men who fight on horseback are engaging (at least sometimes) in acts that are courageous.
- 25: It is admittedly not clear whether Socrates is engaged at this point in a mere argumentative (that is, a non-committal) maneuver. I do think, though, that Socrates must be taking for granted some distinction like this in order for his doctrine to be intelligible. This will become clearer when I elaborate on my interpretation of that doctrine.
- 26: Penner, 67.
- 27: That is, physical in the sense of “muscles” or “bones” or something along those lines. Even if we take dispositions as being identical to some physical make-up of the brain, we are shifting from the outer and blatantly physical to something inner, something “in the soul” as it were. It seems at any rate unreasonable to speak of neurons or brain construction in an attempt to understand Socrates’ conception of the soul.
- 28: I think it is worth mentioning here that my calling the soul “bi-leveled” is metaphorical; the imagery

invoked by this term should not be taken too literally. I am not suggesting here that Socrates had an elaborate theory of the soul and that part of this theory was something analogous to Plato's idea of the "parts" of the soul. I have simply found the imagery to be helpful in understanding what I take to be a coherent way of making sense of Socrates' claims about the unity of virtue and the soul.