The main aim of this paper is to explain why Plato’s Socrates devotes himself to philosophy. In so doing, I hope also to show that he does not sincerely believe that any of his decisions, about philosophy or anything, involve any kind of divine intervention. As my conclusions are contrary to a good bit of first-rate, recent scholarship on the subject, and also contrary to part of what Socrates himself says in Plato’s Apology of Socrates, I think it is especially important to clarify these issues, however repeated commentary (by, again, the best scholars in the field) on the same texts may seem to have exhausted the need for further clarification. Confusion about these issues entails grave misunderstandings of the Socratic philosophy that Plato meant to depict, at least in his "early" dialogues.

Section 1. Socratic Philosophy: Mere Method, or Pursuit of Wisdom and Happiness?

It is crucial first to understand what is the nature of philosophizing, according to Socrates, and the fact that, predominantly, his stated reasons for philosophizing do not invoke any god or any command. The prominent place of the oracle story in the Apology, and its connection there with Socrates’ account of his peculiar "practice (pragma)"’, has led some able commentators to conclude that Plato’s Socrates is not even a philosopher or that his “philosophizing” does not involve the pursuit of genuine wisdom. In fact, such conclusions clash with most
of what Socrates says about philosophy in Plato’s early dialogues generally and in the *Apology* in particular. I shall return to the matter of the oracle, but in order first to establish what is philosophizing for Socrates, consider a familiar passage from the *Apology*:

... This actually happens to be the greatest good for a human—to make accounts/statements/arguments (*logoi*) each day about virtue and about the other things concerning which you hear me discussing and examining myself and others—and... the unexamined life is not livable for a human. ... (*Apol.* 38a)5

It is fairly uncontroversial to infer that what Socrates here calls “making *logoi*” and “discussing and examining” (cf. 23b-c, 29e, 33c) are the main activities of what he elsewhere terms simply “philosophizing” (28e5, 29d5).6 Nor is it very controversial to infer that Socrates uses the term “philosophizing” to refer to the core activities involved in the attempt to acquire virtue. But as this latter inference has recently come under formidable criticism,7 and as the story of the oracle in the *Apology* (20c-23c) rather obscures it, it would not hurt to review the evidence.

First of all, when Socrates characterizes making *logoi*, discussing, and examining as “philosophizing”, nothing suggests that “philosophizing” simply means making *logoi*, discussing, and examining. Michael Forster considers the same passages just cited and concludes that philosophizing is being “virtually equated with cross-questioning oneself and others...” (2006, 17). But other evidence suggests that that goes too far. It is plain that such are the main activities of the philosopher, according to Socrates; but they are not what he thinks philosophy *is*, plain and simple; for, it is critical to note, the activities are goal-driven. Of course a philosopher discusses, cross-examines, makes *logoi* about virtue, lacks wisdom, and is aware of lacking it.8 But insofar as one is a

5 Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own, based on the Oxford Classical Text.
6 Cf. Weiss 2006, 247. Interestingly, the “discussing, asking and answering, affirming and denying” that occur in one’s own thoughts are treated, at least in later dialogues, as not fundamentally different from the *logoi* between two or more interlocutors (*Theaet.* 189e-190a, *Soph.* 263e-264a, *Phil.* 38b-c).
7 Weiss 2006; Forster 2006 and 2007.
8 Forster correctly says that Socrates’ characterizing himself as a “philosopher” “may well connote his lack of knowledge and his awareness of his own ignorance” (2007, 17-18). Certainly it does. This is made explicit at *Lys.* 218a-b: philosophers are neither wise nor unwise, but between wisdom and ignorance: they “have ignorance” but are not “ignorant” or “unlearned” as a result of it, since they regard themselves as not knowing what they do not know (cf. *Symp.* 204a). But there is no reason to suppose, as Forster seems to, that this represents the entire meaning of “philosopher” anywhere in the dialogues.
"philosopher", one wants wisdom and pursues wisdom. In ancient Greek, this is virtually a tautology, prompting Socrates in the *Lysis* to assert that "...the ones who are already wise no longer philosophize. . ." (218a; cf. *Symp.* 204a). A philosopher philosophizes—i.e., loves wisdom (even if wisdom does not love the philosopher back; *Lys.* 212d5-c1). *Euthydemus* 288d8 actually has: "...Philosophy is acquiring knowledge (Hê de ge philosophia kτēsis epistēmēs)."

That translation is rather too literal. Socrates must mean that philosophy is the process of acquiring knowledge, just as the "ascent to reality" in the *Republic* is called "philosophy" (521c).10

As such isolated passages could perhaps be explained away, we should consider more substantial evidence: Socrates thinks that if we want happiness (and we all do), it is "necessary" to love wisdom—i.e., to strive to acquire wisdom (*Euthyd.* 282a1-b6, c8-d1, c2-4, 288d6-7, 289c7-8)—genuine wisdom, genuine virtue, because to do well—to act correctly (at least consistently enough to be happy) requires wisdom.11 We find a related view attributed to Socrates in a

---

9 Weiss appears to acknowledge this: "... The more philosophical among us ... deeply desire to know, yearn to know, and strive to know" (2006, 251; her emphasis). But, concerning Socrates' philosophy, she seems to accept Forster's more narrow definition: "What makes what he does philosophy is that he attempts to [get his interlocutors to think as he does] by asking questions and presenting arguments" (252). I shall presently address the concerns that seem to have led Weiss to this conclusion.

10 Forster notes *Euthyd.* 288d (2007, 17 n. 40), but apparently does not think much of it. By the way, it is true that at *Euthyd.* 307, Socrates seems to suggest that Euthydemus and Dionysodorus are philosophers. But if so, he evidently believes they are bad at philosophy. It is not that 'philosopher' means something different when applied to them. Rather, what Socrates means is that there is a single practice (the pursuit of wisdom), and some do it well and others do it poorly. Presumably, there are different ways of doing it poorly: one could genuinely desire real wisdom but be bad at getting it, or one might not genuinely desire it and so practice philosophy disingenuously, etc. (So similarly there are bad politicians etc.) Of course, even if "philosopher" did really mean something other than "pursuer of wisdom" when applied to the likes of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, this does not supply us convincing reason for taking the term to have such a meaning in other contexts, particularly in those where it is applied to Socrates, whom Plato consistently contrasted with the sophists. Again, Forster evidently would not agree (2006, 17).

11 Cf. *Hipp. min.* 366d3-368b1 and *Gorg.* 466e, 509d-e. Although Socrates arrives at the same conclusion at *Meno* 88c, he later (97a, 97b-c, 98b-c) appears to withdraw this conclusion because having true opinion without knowledge seems to lead to success as well. Vlastos thinks (1991, 228 n. 91) this indicates a shift from genuine Socratic doctrine to Platonic. (Cf. his contention that the *Meno* is "a hybrid, firmly elenctic down to 80E, firmly non-elenctic after that" (115 n. 41). See also Kraut 1984, 301-304.) Penner has defended a plausible interpretation according to which Socrates genuinely recants neither the success-requires-wisdom doctrine nor the virtue-is-wisdom doctrine (1987, 310-320; 1992, 165 n. 63). Forster, who accepts *Meno* 96e ff. pretty much at face value (2007, 10ff.), recognizes (11) that *Meno* 100a implies that divinely inspired true belief is only a "shade (skia)" compared with "real (alēthes)" virtue; Forster nonetheless maintains that Socrates held that humans were incapable of such "real virtue". Forster believes that for Socrates true belief without understanding is "in many cases...beneficial for action" (2007, 31). If this is meant to suggest that true belief by itself is consistently beneficial in practice, it seems