

Papers

Cristina Ionescu
Elenchus, Recollection,
and the Method of
Hypothesis in the *Meno*

Lucas Soares
La relectura positiva de la
tradición poética griega en
el Banquete de Platón

Etienne Helmer
Le commerce de la vérité:
économie et commerce
dans les *Lois* de Platon

Alan Pichanick
Socratic Silence
in the *Cleitophon*

Thanassis Gkatzaras
The Form of the Good
in Plato's *Timaeus*

James M. Ambury
Dialectical Epimeleia:
Platonic Care of the Soul and
Philosophical Cognition

Book Reviews

Nicholas Zucchetti
Essays on Plato's Epistemology
by Franco Trabattoni

Alan Pichanick
Socrates and Self-Knowledge
by Christopher Moore

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Dialectical Epimeleia: Platonic Care of the Soul and Philosophical Cognition

James M. Ambury

King's College

jamesmambury@kings.edu

ABSTRACT

In this paper I argue that Plato's notion of the care of the self is his remedy to the psychological malady he refers to as 'wandering'. The wandering self requires care, and a close reading of the Platonic corpus indicates self-cultivation means stabilizing the soul in accordance with its intelligent nature. I then argue that Plato appropriates the ethical injunction to care for the soul and draws from it an important epistemological consequence. Specifically, his view is that a wandering soul's instability renders it incapable of philosophical cognition. To engender a healthy soul, one must participate in dialectic.

Keywords: dialectic, elenchus, care, affect, soul, wander.

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In this paper I argue for a set of distinct but interrelated theses; first, I argue that Plato's notion of the care of the self is his remedy to the psychological malady he refers to as 'wandering'. The wandering self requires care, and a close reading of the Platonic corpus indicates that self-cultivation means stabilizing the soul in accordance with its intelligent nature. I then argue that Plato appropriates the ethical injunction to care for the soul and draws from it an important epistemological consequence. Specifically, his view is that a wandering soul's instability renders it incapable of philosophical cognition. The Platonic insight is that grasping formal reality is only possible for a soul that is in a condition similar to its object. To engender this condition, one must participate in dialectic.

In the first section, I articulate Plato's conception of psychic wandering, and in the second section I demonstrate how understanding the soul's convalescence follows from an analysis of its nature. In the third section, I take up the epistemic consequences of maintaining a healthy soul. In section four, I argue that dialectic cares for the soul. I conclude with some speculative remarks about the role of collection and division in caring for the soul. It is my hope that the paper articulates the intimate connection between Platonic psychology and epistemology.

I. PSYCHIC WANDERING

Just before referring to himself as a gadfly in the *Apology*, Socrates claims that his task is to chide those who care for anything other than their souls. He asks his fellow citizens:

Are you not ashamed of [how you care] [ἐπιμελούμενος ὅπως] to possess as much