DOES SOCRATES VINDICATE THE COHERENCE THEORY OF TRUTH?

Within Plato's Socratic Dialogues we routinely observe the character of Socrates employing a formal, yet largely unexplained method of investigation into the beliefs that his interlocutors hold as true. Socrates even goes so far as to claim there will be discord within them their whole life should they not be able refute one of his controversial and counter-intuitive revealed truths. With the beliefs under investigation striking to the core of how one should live a good life, this paper seeks to investigate whether Socrates' formal method justifies him in making the claims he does. After exposing the methodology of his technique, we turn to investigate the theory of truth that the method represents, seeking to ascertain a greater understanding of what truth means to Socrates when he makes the claim that a belief is true.

In the earlier works of Plato, more specifically what are often referred to as the *Socratic dialogues*, we regularly see an unusual but specific formal method of enquiry being undertaken. Far from being mere backstory, this method is the pivotal process that the characters use to claim each other's beliefs are either true or false. Claims as bold as these merit justification, some form of explanation as to how they can assert such things, a cogent theory that makes explicit how the process works; but we are to find little if any such justification, explanations, or reference to a theory within the dialogues. If we wish to know more then, we must observe this method in use in an attempt to reveal its secrets. I shall restrict the scope of this present enquiry to a selection of three of Plato's works from within the Socratic dialogues: *Gorgias*, *Apology*, and *Crito*[1]; which I will refer to as the *examined dialogues*. Within these examined dialogues, the *character* Socrates[2] is the most experienced practitioner of the method, we seem therefore more likely to learn the most about it through his skilled application. The aim of this present work is then to investigate this method of enquiry further through Plato's character of Socrates as featured in the examined dialogues. What are the method's aims? What roles do we see being occupied? How is it supposed to work? Are the characters actually justified in making such claims regarding truth and falsity? Finally, can we determine if there is a specific theory of truth that is being represented by this method?

Background

As the predominant figure associated with the use of this enigmatic method, it has for sometime been known simply as the *Socratic method*. It is only recently, in fairly modern times[3], that the method was baptized as the *elenchus*. Plato does not directly name the activity himself, or provide any explicit instructions on what it is, or how it is supposed to work; he only describes it in the dialogues with terms meaning "to refute", "to critically examine", or "to censure". It is no surprise then that the language in the philosophical

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[1] For the readers benefit I will prefix the Stephanus pagination references in the following format: Gor. for *Gorgias*, Apo. for *Apology, and* Cri. for *Crito*.

[2] 'Socrates' will in the scope of this work always refer to the Platonic character Socrates, and not the historical figure.

[3] Vlastos (1994) comments we are unlikely to find uses prior to those of George Grote, 1865, and Lewis Campbell, 1867.

discourse concerning the elenchus often use the terms 'examine' and 'refute' interchangeably, but they obviously have quite different connotations. I believe the more neutral 'to examine critically by attempting refutation' best captures the general spirit of the elenchus, since it usually seems it is a process of investigation to discover truth, not prove it.

The elenchus is a method that stands in direct contrast to the *eristic* style of argument, a commonplace approach or technique of the period. The eristic technique has a simple credo: win the argument, that is *all* that matters. This gives enormous latitude as to how one might achieve that goal, e.g. logical slight-of-hand by using known fallacious argument forms, the rhetorical arts to sway opinion, calls to unfounded majority beliefs, and even lying should it serve your purpose. Whilst the eristic style is singular in its aim, it has multitude of ways of realizing that objective. One might sum up the general strategy of the eristic approach with the slogan: 'If it works, use it!'

In contrast to the jousting, victory inspired nature of the eristic approach, we are told that the elenchus seeks something quite different: truth. Socrates comments on this difference himself in *Gorgias*, "*... they start trying to win the argument rather than look into the issue they set out to discuss.*" (Plato 1994, Gor. 457d) Unlike the *ad hoc* nature of the eristic approach, the elenchus always follows a specific format. To say we have no instructions about the elenchus is not quite true, in locations across the examined dialogues we are informed by the characters of the single explicit instruction: you must represent your true position, your true beliefs. The purpose of the elenchus is not to win, but to reveal by way of examination the truth of disputed premises. Socrates tells us, "*I'm certainly not less happy if I'm proved wrong than if I've proven someone else wrong, because, as I see it, I've got the best of it*" (emphasis in original) (Plato 1994, Gor. 458a), making it quite clear that the greatest benefit is to be had by the 'loser', the person who has their incorrect beliefs highlighted. This approach is diametrically opposed to the outcomes of the eristic technique, since should you 'lose' an elenchus, you actually 'win' by having the inconsistencies in your beliefs brought to your attention[4].

We typically see Socrates inviting others to join him in an examination, as he does to the character Gorgias in the work *Gorgias*, "*... if you were like me and saw the profit in being proved wrong, but that otherwise we should just forget it.*" (Plato 1994, Gor. 461a); a clear indication that this is viewed as a shared voluntary investigation into the truth, but, only should that be of interest to you. We also see Socrates allowing others to leave the examination should they wish to, as he does to Callicles, who faces 'defeat' a little later in the same work, "*But there's no point in me saying all this unless you think we should finish the argument; if you don't want to carry on, let's leave it there and go home.*" (Plato 1994, Gor. 506a), an insight that if the person who was being examined was not open to accepting the conclusion of the enquiry, then it served little purpose to continue. In the discourse on the dialogues, Socrates is often accused of being insincere with his 'examinations', that he always knew where they would end up before he began, but his own position of "*I certainly don't speak as an expert with knowledge: I look into things with your help.*" (Plato 1994, Gor. 506a)

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[4] Assuming that you, like Socrates, placed value on being made aware of your own inconsistencies.

seems to at least suggest that is not how Socrates sees things. Socrates is however renowned for having a complicated relationship surrounding claims to knowledge[5].

Elenchi[6] may vary as to how many people are involved: in *Crito* we find only the character of the same name and Socrates performing an examination alone together at Socrates' prison cell, no more than a day or two before his death penalty is to be carried out; in *Gorgias* we see a small intimate group of mainly close friends taking turns in the key roles whilst they discuss what it is to live a good life; and in *Apology* we find Socrates facing capital charges before the entire assembly of the Athenian court; because it really wouldn't be unfair to say that all present are involved in some capacity, since they are all equally privy to the process and outcome of the examination should they wish to engage with it. We find evidence to this passive involvement when Gorgias, who retired from an active role much earlier in an examination, gently scolds Callicles on behalf of this passive group for not answering Socrates' question, "*Don't do that, Callicles. Please answer him. We'd appreciate it too, because without your reply the discussion will be incomplete.*" (Plato 1994, Gor. 497b) We even see when Callicles notices the impending refutation of his own position approaching fast, and decides to withdraw, that again Gorgias on behalf of the passively involved 'spectators' implores Socrates to finish the examination, even if he has to do so on his own, "*I'd like you to complete the argument, and I get the impression everyone else wants you to as well. In fact, for my part, I'd like to hear you round off the argument by yourself.*" (Plato 1994, Gor. 506b)

Modus Operandi Exposed

In an elenchus, there are usually two clearly defined roles: the examiner, and the examined[7]. In more complicated elenchi, it is quite usual to see the intermittent exchange of these roles shifting back and forth, a dynamic game of 'cat and mouse' as both parties critically investigate the beliefs of the other. From reviewing the examined dialogues we discover that the template for the basic form (*BF*) of a successful elenchus is expected to be as follows:

BF1) Person *X* asserts proposition *P*

BF2) Person *Y* believes *P* is false and targets for examination

BF3) *Y* elicits further relevant propositions *Q*, *R*, *S*,... (as required) from within *X*'s own beliefs

BF4) *Y* argues that *Q*, *R*, *S* logically entail *~P*

BF5) *X* concedes *Q*, *R*, *S* do entail *~P*

BF6) *Y* declares *P* false and *~P* true,

BF7) It is now left up to *X* whether they attempt to resolve their inconsistent set of beliefs or not.

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[5] See e.g. Vlastos (1994) chapter 2: Socrates' disavowal of knowledge
[6] Elenchi: the plural form of elenchus
[7] The term examined within the scope of this work shall apply to both single and multiple examinees.

Whilst a formal method, an elenchus might actually come about quite organically in an informal scenario, such as a dinner party between friends. Let us then observe the elenchus in action in a hypothetical modern setting such as this, dealing with a contemporary issue as an introduction to the method. John, the owner of a small business, (*BF1*) makes the claim (*P*) 'I believe woman deserve equal pay'. Ex-employee Jane, who is sitting across the table from him, (*BF2*) believes *P* to be false; that whilst John may think he believes it, that in reality he does not, and seeks to refute it; not for her benefit, but for his. At this point she takes on the role of the examiner, and in doing so, John becomes the examined assuming he agrees to the process, explicitly or tacitly. Knowing John well, Jane (*BF3*) extracts the further relevant propositions from him:

Q) A person who truly believes something operates in accordance with that belief

R) A person who believes in something does not seek to engineer its contrary outcome

S) John employs more women because he believes they work harder and he can hire them for less

John agrees that these are truly his beliefs. Jane, (*BF4*) argues that *P* is inconsistent with *Q*, *R*, *S* since a person who truly believed *P,* women deserved equal pay, would: (*Q*) pay them equally, (*R*) not hire women because they are cheaper, and (*S*) would actually pay them more since they are believed to work harder. John, somewhat embarrassed, admits that whilst he was not overtly aware of his position, (*BF5*) concedes that *Q*, *R*, *S* do indeed entail ~*P*, that it now seems apparent it is not true that, 'He believes that women deserve equal pay'. (*BF6*) Jane reiterates ~*P* is true, so those present have the opportunity to see how the examined set *P*, *Q*, *R*, *S* are logically inconsistent, giving them another opportunity to identify the same potential inconsistencies within themselves. As a forgiving group of genuine friends, they talk further with John about the matter. (*BF7*) John decides that he actually wants 'I believe women deserve equal pay' as part of his logically consistent position. As is his choice, he decides he would rather reject *S* than accept ~*P* as part of his consistent set, and resolves to begin moving towards parity in pay between his male and female workers.

Some of the key elenctic points that we see in this hypothetical example are, *KP1*) that *P* is refuted from within the belief system of the examined person, *KP2)* once propositions *Q*, *R*, *S* have been elicited by the examiner and accepted by the examined, there is no further attempt to establish them as true, *KP3)* We only seem to find *P* guilty of belonging to an inconsistent premise set, yet, as a result it is claimed that P is false, and ~P is true.

We can see that the key move in the elenchus being is made at *BF3* by the examiner as they strive to extract a relevant proposition set of beliefs *Q*, *R*, *S* from the examined; it is this set that will seek to add their cumulative force to identify and expose the *refutand*[8] as not consistent with that set. We seem therefore to be seeing a method that originates from a theory that truth can be determined *solely* from within a set of beliefs, and that true beliefs will be non-exclusionary to other true beliefs, i.e. a true belief will not be excluded by the logical entailment of other true beliefs.

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[8] Refutand: The proposition that is undergoing refutation, in this case *P*.

Consistent Beliefs

Former commentators[9] on the methodology of the elenchus have all identified that its functionality is related to the concept of consistency within a set of beliefs, but I think there might be something more here. I think what we are actually seeing in *BF3* is more than merely a consistent set being extracted, or an even logically consistent set; we are seeing calls being made to a *relevant* set. We have another more precise term for describing sets of things that are logically consistent, but, it also requires all members of the set to have a relationship to each other so that they fit well together; we describe sets meeting this additional criterion as *coherent*.

The word 'consistent' comes directly from the Latin[10] *consistent-* 'standing firm or still, existing'; whereas the word 'coherent' comes from the Latin *cohaerere* from *co-* 'together' + *haerere* 'to stick', which culminates in 'to stick together'. Whilst we commonly use coherent and logically consistent as interchangeable terms, it seems that these etymological definitions reveal their differing natures. Coherence seems to be the stronger of the two terms, since a coherent system is logically consistent, but it also has the extra property of its members belonging to an integrated or interrelated system that fit together. Consistency means only that group members do not logically contradict each other, there does not need to be any relationship between them.

Set1)   "Tasmania is an Island" - "Grass is green" - "Birds lay eggs"

Set2)   "Socrates is a man" - "All men are mortal" - "To be mortal is to die"

If we are asked are the members *Set1* logically consistent, we will correctly answer yes, since none of the members logically exclude each other. If asked is this a coherent group, we would say no; they are totally unrelated. So whilst none of the members logically exclude one another, they also have no relevance or interrelationship with one another either, so don't obviously cohere as a set of just three beliefs; we would need to add more members to allow them to eventually cohere. *Set2* is both consistent, and coherent, since the members all integrate into one single interrelated form with no remainder, i.e. all the members of the set form a *coherent comprehensible class*.

We can clearly see that consistency and coherence have different scopes from one another; the terms can serve more specific purposes than simply acting as synonyms if we will let them. There is a reason that not just any belief is extracted at *BF3*, an extracted set that was logically consistent such as *Set1*, offers nothing of real value to the examiner or examined since they are unrelated. It is specifically beliefs that are relevant and that will form a coherent foundation of entailment that are extracted; it is their coherence as a set that allows them to apply force to *P*. I think what we are actually seeing in *BF3* is the extraction of a set beliefs that are already taken to be true, but are a set of coherent beliefs.

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[9] See e.g. Vlastos (1982;1994), and Waterfield from Plato (1994)

[10] Latin definitions have been taken from Apple Inc., (2010) Snow Leopard (10.6.2) Dictionary v 2.1.1

Extracting Beliefs

The most important role for the examiner is obviously the extraction of the relevant beliefs, so let us observe how Socrates himself approaches the core step of *BF3*. We typically see Socrates steering a question and answer phase, with his interlocutor's responses being teased out and worked on from multiple angles as Socrates seeks to clearly expose their true position, their actual beliefs. There is no real attempt in this phase to pin someone down; at any point his interlocutors are reasonably free to clarify, refine, and even redefine their position should they wish; as long as it is with the intention of more accurately expressing the beliefs they truly hold. I wish to label the specific subsection of the *BF3* process that begins with Socrates introducing a new theme, where it is refined, and ends when his interlocutor is offering their most refined representation of their belief relating to that theme, as its *distillation*: the interlocutor's opening position is refined down to its final belief form. We often find in the dialogues that a main elenctic enquiry breaks off into a series of other 'child' elenchi that seek to affirm the truth of the beliefs that support their 'parent' elenchi, which can result in quite complex hierarchical systems of examinations.

Looking to an example in *Apology* (24c-25c within the encompassing section 24b-28b), we find ourselves in one of these child elenchi, so let us swiftly get to *BF3* to see the beginning of the extraction. As part of the charges he has brought against Socrates, (*BF1*) Meletus claims he holds the belief (*P*) 'Socrates corrupts the young.' (*BF2*) Socrates obviously denies this and seeks to refute *P*. Whilst there are, as is typical of Socrates' masterly use of the elenchus, multiple additional events happening here[11], for clarity and brevity we will restrict our focus to how Socrates extracts just the first two members: *Q* and *R;* of the *BF3* set in this scenario whilst overlooking all of his other sophisticated manoeuvres.

The *BF3* phase begins with Socrates enquiring, "If I corrupt, who makes them better?" Socrates quickly distills Meletus' initial answer from "the laws", to an expanded cumulative position. We follow the move from just the laws, outwards to include the judges, out wider to include all those present in court, and out further still to include every single Athenian. This distillation process results in Meletus' final position that, 'everyone makes them better, but Socrates alone corrupts them'.

Socrates asks is the same true of horses; do the many make them better, and the one corrupt them? Here we see Socrates apparently drawing an analogy between the making better of horses and the making better of young men. This is a reference to Homer's *Odyssey*[12]*,* which is evidenced by the earlier[13] reference in *Gorgias* where Socrates asks of Callicles, "*Now, to be moral is to be tame, isn't it? That's what Homer says. What do* you *think?*" (emphasis in original) (Plato 1994, Gor. 516c) Socrates obviously agrees with Homer, as does Callicles

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[11] Socrates is actually simultaneously developing multiple cases to show e.g. a) *P* is false b) Meletus does not even hold this belief c) Meletus is not the concerned citizen he is masquerading as and therefore offends the law since he has no interest in the matter d) Meletus was wrong to bring him to court in the first place; even if he was corrupting the young, Socrates claims it would have been necessarily unintentional (26a) and therefore he should have received admonishment or instruction neither of which Meletus afforded him.

[12] Homer's *Odyssey* see e.g. book 6, line 120; book 9, line 175; book 13, line 201; and the usage of the phrase 'wild and immoral'.

[13] Earlier from a narrative perspective, no claim about the author's chronological ordering of the written works is being made.

with his agreement, that to be wild is immoral, and to be tame is moral. At *Gorgias* 516a/b, we see Socrates and Callicles establishing humans as creatures, and in this specific case, Socrates has been using horses as representations of creatures, developing further an analogous connection between humans and horses. This reveals Socrates' move in *Apology* might not be just an *ad hoc* analogy, but is perhaps a deeper and directly relevant metaphor about the moral development of young men. Socrates takes it as self-evidently true, and seems to assume that the assembly will agree with him that the opposite is actually the case; that it is the one, or the few (equestrians/moral trainers) that make the (horses/young men) better, and that the many who make them corrupt. This seems a bold claim since it seems unlikely that every person or every horse would be corrupted by every person who was not a moral trainer or equestrian, but may be speaking more figuratively that if you are not helping someone to become more moral, then you are hindering them in their achievements. Regardless, Socrates appears to take this point of 'the few and the many' as *so* evidently true, that even his 'hostile' examinee, Meletus, will be unable to reject it. So again we see what appears to be a call being made to a general truth, in this case, due the size of the assembly, a belief that the entire society would seem to have held as true.

With this single distillation of Meletus' belief about who makes the people better, augmented by the appropriate selection of a relevant more general belief: it is the few, the specialists, that improve things, and it is the many who corrupt; we find that Socrates has begun to establish his extracted set from Meletus' beliefs.

BF3-Q)   [In the moral domain] Socrates is the few, all other Athenians are the many.

BF3-R)   [In the moral domain] It is the few make things better and the many who make them worse.

Already we see a nascent cogency emerge in the interrelationship between *Q* and *R*. This simple 2 member set is already exerting a logical force that, should they both be true, describes by logical entailment the *beginning* of a solid belief structure to refute *P* from; that Socrates in fact makes them better, or ~*P*.

We seem to be observing that beliefs are not considered as able to be true within a vacuum, but only as true in a belief-to-belief justification as part of an interconnected network of beliefs. The elenchus relies on what is logically entailed from the extracted premises, each additional relevant premise creates a more explicit coherent network of beliefs from which to more obviously show that *P* does not belong to such a set. Since *Q, R, S,* are '*logically unsecured*' (Vlastos 1994), there is perhaps as we have seen from Socrates, a benefit to extract where possible, uncontentious generic beliefs that seem to be self-evidently true.

Theories of Truth

Having seen the form of the elenchus, and its use, we turn now to see if we can recognize any of its already identified properties within a wider theory of truth. Since a theory is the set of principles on which the practice of an activity is based, and we are trying to discover the theory behind the elenchus, it makes sense to see if we can find any correlation with any of the contemporary theories of truth to further develop our understanding. Theories of truth exist at a fundamental level within our ontologies; different theories logically entail and

describe very different metaphysical landscapes. Such far reaching implications though, fortunately benefit us in our enquiry, since they are more likely to leave noticeable markers for us to recognize. Putnam (1981) describes two contrasting philosophical points of view, or "*philosophical temperaments*" (p. 49), that he categorizes as the *externalist* perspective, what he calls the "*God's eye view*" (Putnam 1981); and the *internalist* perspective, the "*no eye view*" (Putnam 1981); so let us first consider a theory of truth representative of an externalist perspective, the perspective of metaphysical realism.

The predominant theory of truth has been the correspondence theory of truth, Putnam (1981) suggests the origin of this theory is attributed by ancient and medieval philosophers to Plato's student, Aristotle; but Schmitt (2004) suggests otherwise, that the correspondence theory's origins come from Plato's discussion of false beliefs within *Sophist*. Putnam also comments, "*Before Kant it is perhaps impossible to find* any *philosopher who did* not *have a correspondence theory of truth.*" (emphasis in original) (1981) The general position of the correspondence theory can be expressed in a simple slogan: *a belief is true if it corresponds to a fact*. According to this theory, the simple proposition 'Caesar is the fat cat that is siting on the mat', would be true *iff* there existed in the actual world at the time it was spoken a referenced mat, which was currently being sat upon by any such cat, which was indeed fat, that had been named Caesar. Putnam (1981) tells us that the correspondence theory of truth is representative of the *externalist* perspective, the 'God's eye view', since it is reliant on the view that there is a real existent world of some sort that is independent of our minds, and it this existent world that propositions correspond to that makes them true. What makes a proposition true is that the configuration of a belief successfully refers by way of correspondence to a mirrored configuration that exists independent of mind, in the *actual* world; therefore, there is "*exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'.*" (Putnam 1981) In this theory it is our metaphysics that explains the nature of truth, by providing the appropriately structured entities needed to enter into correspondence relations. This theory is then in essence "*an ontological thesis: a belief is true if there exists an appropriate entity - a fact - to which it corresponds. If there is no such entity, the belief is false.*" (Glanzberg 2009, section 1.1.2) There seems little obvious correlation between the elenchus and this theory, even at this most general of levels; we haven't noticed any obvious or repeated calls to facts or appropriately structured entities as justifiers of truth or true beliefs.

Putnam (1981) then describes theories such as the coherence theories of truth as *internalist* perspectives, and representative of the 'no eye view': "*There is no God's eye view that we can know or usefully imagine; there are only the various points of view of actual persons reflecting various interests and purposes that their descriptions and theories subserve.*" (Putnam 1981) Some of the coherence theories of truth can similarly be captured in a slogan: *a belief is true if part of a coherent system of beliefs*. These theories state "*that a proposition is true if it is the content of a belief in the system, or entailed by a belief in the system.*" (Glanzberg 2009, section 1.3) Coherence theories differ from correspondence in that instead of truth being a matter of whether there exists suitably configured objects in the world to mirror their respective propositions, truth is a matter of how beliefs are related to each other. Whilst the correspondence theory seeks to represent the common intuition that truth is a belief-to-world relationship, coherence theorists argue that truth is a belief-to-belief

relationship; that truth is "*some sort of ideal coherence of our beliefs with each other and with our experiences* as those experiences are themselves represented in our belief system" (emphasis in original) (Putnam 1981)   Putnam also suggests that in contrast to the correspondence theories 'one true way' the world is, that, "*Many 'internalist' philosophers, though not all, hold ... that there is more than one 'true' theory or description of the world.*" (Putnam 1981) For clarity in later discussion, and since the ideas presented so far have been a very generic overview of many different approaches to coherence theories, I will refer to these ideas as a *common coherence theory* (*CCT*), since they do not represent any one theory, just the common ground between many approaches.

Immediately we can see that these types of coherence theory bear a striking resemblance to what we are observing within the elenchus; we see an attempt to judge the refutand solely on its ability to cohere with the set of beliefs extracted from the belief system of the examined. We also observe in the elenchus that the refutand would be claimed to be proven true if the examiner was unable to extract a set to exclude it, and certainly found false should the logical entailment of the extracted set exclude it as incoherent. If we are indeed looking at the elenchus as having some form of relationship to the coherence theories, then it looks as if Putnam might be mistaken, and we might be seeing some form of coherence theory, or application of it, in Plato's character Socrates some two millennia prior to Kant. Let us look closer at coherence theories then, to see if we are in the right kind of area for a theory that might explain or represent what is going on in an elenchus, and whether we have actually made such a discovery.

Let us consider an alternative coherence theory of truth to the CCT, still an *internalist* perspective, but one that represents idealism's approach to truth. *Materialism* argues that the body and mind are composed of just one substance, matter; that all mental phenomena can be accounted for just in terms of physical matter, and therefore dualism is false. *Dualism* argues that this is not the case, that there must be something more than just matter because we are *unable* to account for all of our mental mental nature in purely material terms, and therefore argue that materialism is false. *Idealism* is also a monist position like materialism, and agrees with it that material and mental nature should be understood in the same terms; but, instead of seeking to understand mental nature in terms of material nature, they seek to understand material nature in terms of mental nature. They agree with materialism in rejecting dualism, but, "*differ about where to find the ultimate ingredients*." (Braddon-Mitchell and Jackson 2007) Joachim (1906) offers a representation of British Idealism's approach to a coherence theory of truth: '*Truth in its essential nature is that systematic coherence which is the character of a significant whole*.' (Joachim 1906) For Joachim truth is singular, *only* the 'significant whole' is true; no individual belief, or subset of beliefs are true, it is only the totality of all accurate beliefs that constitute the 'significant whole'; anything less than the complete system can only ever be true by degree, never more than a partial truth. We do not see any obvious language referring to 'the Truth' as the significant whole in the examined dialogues: things are either successfully refuted and claimed to be false, unable to be refuted and taken to be true[14], or an impasse is reached which results in an unsuccessful examination.

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[14] For the time being at least, there is no double jeopardy defense in the elenchus, any belief might be examined repeatedly

We would hope to see more obvious language referring to partial truths or truth by degree manifested by its adherents; however, we do see truth being refined, attempts to make truth 'more true' by revisiting it to test it further, so we should not discount this approach just yet.

We see in Joachim's representation of British Idealism's coherence theory, reference to a 'significant whole', a singular *significant set* of beliefs that is considered to be The Truth. Similarly, we find references being made to *significant sets* in CCT, but, as we saw earlier, they are a little more 'moderate' in that they allow for individual beliefs from within the significant set to be true, '*if it is the content of a belief in the system, or entailed by a belief in the system'*. For some coherence theorists, such as Young[15], this significant set is the largest consistent set of propositions that is currently believed by actual people; others like Davidson[16] suggest it is the set which would be recognized as true by an omniscient observer; whilst others such as Putnam (1981) hold that the significant set is the set that will be held to be true by people like us with finite cognitive capacities when we have reached some limit of enquiry.

Young tells us, "*According to some early versions of the coherence theory, the coherence relation is simply consistency.*" (2008, see section 1) However, since it is possible for two inconsistent propositions to both be consistent with a specified set, yet inconsistent together, consistency alone cannot accurately capture the coherence relation. Young then goes on to comment, "*A more plausible version of the coherence theory states that the coherence relation is some form of entailment.*" (2008, see section 1) We certainly see evidence of entailment being featured within the elenchus. The refutand is considered proven false if the content and relationship between the extracted set *entails ~P*. Bradley[17] has also suggested that coherence is the mutual explanatory support between premises, but this does not seem to be such an obvious correlation with what we see in the elenchus as does the relation of entailment. It seems that the theory behind the elenchus may be a coherence theory of truth that considers entailment to be the coherence relation.

A Tool for Truth?

Knowing what little we have learnt so far, let's see if Socrates has any sort of justification for even making claims of revealing truth and falsity in beliefs. Even when Socrates claims to have revealed the truth, he still invites people to prove him wrong[18], and this generally seems to be a genuine invitation. Here we appear to see a inconsistent position, because it seems that Socrates' 'truth' is always open to review and amendment in light of new information. He appears therefore to not be stating that this is an *absolute* truth; but, that this is a *correctable* truth. One might also infer from the lack of instructions Plato provided for the elenchus, that he thought its use could be picked up just through observation, that it was self-apparent how it worked. If intended to be a tool for widespread adoption by the populace, it highlights the

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[15] See e.g. Young, J.O., (2001). A Defence of the Coherence Theory of Truth. *The Journal of Philosophical Research*, 26: 89-101.

[16] In his earlier works at least. (Malpas, 2009, see section 4.2) See e.g. Davidson, D., (1986). A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge, In E. LePore (Ed.), *Truth And Interpretation, Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

[17] See e.g. Bradley, F., (1914). *Essays on Truth and Reality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.; or, Thagard. P., (1989) Explanatory coherence. *Behavioural and Brain Sciences*. 12, 435-467.

[18] e.g. Callicles (Gor. 482b) who rejects Socrates claim to have proven his thesis, is invited to prove him wrong.

issue that a skilled examiner such as Socrates with his ability to extract beliefs and create logical entailments might put a novice in the elenctic method at a distinct disadvantage in 'defending' the truth, even if the novice's belief was actually true. Alternatively, should an examiner have an eristic bent, they might easily find ways to obscure the truth, intentionally undermining the value and integrity of the tool. Also, should you have a seriously flawed belief system to start out with, inexperienced use may end up having the inverse effect and actually further corrupt your own currently minimally coherent set. It is therefore a fallible system, and part of that comes from its dependence on the skill level and intentionality of the operators. Socrates himself points out that the operators need to possess three qualities: knowledge, affection, and candour; that you need these to have the "*complete set*" (Plato 1994, Gor. 487a). Socrates tell us that, "*... for anyone to be able to test whether or not a person's life is as it should be ...*" (Plato 1994, Gor. 486e) they have to have the complete set. This confirms the method is not expected to yield the same results for all its users, which instantly disqualifies it from being a tool for absolute truth, but places it more in the category of an operator dependent truth *indicator*.

I feel though that when Socrates makes reference to having the qualities to, "*... to be able to test whether or not a person's life is as it should be ...*" (Plato 1994, Gor. 486e), we are not seeing an abstract reference to some ultimate test of a life, it seems clear he is talking directly about the method of testing they are currently engaged in, the elenchus. This would indicate that the elenchus is not a tool for absolute truth, as its practitioners seem to be claiming through their language use, but in fact a tool for examining a life through the coherence of their belief system; seeking to make corrections where it finds discrepancies through bringing them into conscious awareness for review.

In *Gorgias*, as Polus retires from the examined role, there is a contentious belief that Socrates has 'proven' via the elenchus which Callicles is unwilling to accept. Socrates has been asking those assembled to disprove his thesis that "*wrongdoing - particularly unpunished wrongdoing - is not the absolutely worst thing that can happen*"[19] (Plato 1997, Gor. 482b). Callicles is told that if he can not refute Socrates' contentious claim, and not integrate this 'truth' into his belief system, that "*Callicles: there'll be discord within you your whole life.*" (Plato 1994, Gor. 482b) due to the now known inconsistency in his belief set. This is a very personal focus, which Socrates then expands on, with the explanation that it is better for a person to be a choir leader with a cacophonous choir, than it is for just one person - me - to contradict and clash with myself. (Gor. 482b/c) This seems to read that your primary concern should be coherency on a personal level, that your own internal belief set need not necessarily conform to any other belief set, just as long as it is internally coherent. We have also seen no obvious references to significant sets. The theory behind the elenchus is then potentially a 'primitive' form of personal coherence theory, perhaps even a relativistic form of coherence theory. Socrates may well have expected the commonality of self-evident truths to generally move people towards a general set of truth, an external significant set, but he appears to intentionally restrict his focus to an individual's internal coherence first.

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[19] i.e. Plato is claiming our own unpunished wrongdoing is the worst thing that can happen for us personally.

We see this personal focus again from Socrates too in the closing lines of *Gorgias*, which also confirms the real purpose of the elenchus. *"Argument after argument can be proved wrong, but just one holds its ground - that we have to take greater care to avoid doing wrong than we do to avoid suffering wrong, and that above all else we must concentrate not on making people believe that we're good, but on being good, in our private lives as well as our public."* (Plato, 1994, Gor. 527b). Socrates invites us to join him, on his journey for personal moral improvement, his unrelenting desire, to help us to be better versions of ourselves. Socrates tells us that it is only when we have completed our training, through the examination of our lives and bringing them into a coherent position, that we are we truly fit to act as contributors to society (Gor. 527d). We have a series of works from Plato, all featuring the common theme, what is it to live a good life. We are shown a tool in the elenchus that is at its core, and explicitly referenced as such by Socrates himself, a tool for self-improvement. Something to be shared ideally between those with compassion for one another, a reasonable amount of knowledge, and with the candour to speak their mind about their real beliefs, and point out the errors in their friend's positions.

Conclusions

The elenchus is not then as I have shown, the tool for finding truth that we might have thought it was *prima facie*. It primarily seems to be a coherence maintenance and improvement tool, a device to build a robust belief platform from which to apply leverage to extract false beliefs and their root systems. It is a tool of self improvement, intended to make us who we should be, before we seriously entertain the idea of entering public life and affecting change. The elenchus is perhaps then the embodiment of the famous Socratean slogan 'The unexamined life is not worth living'; intended to be a simple tool to allow gatherings of people[20] to engage in meaningful discussion and perform an examination of their lives. It provides a formal process of a rational dialogue between contrasting positions, a method to bridge the divide between entrenched opposing views, and find and explore the commonalities between them. As seen in the dinner party example, it can bring about positive change, it can reveal inconsistencies in our belief systems, so it has a practical purpose; it just needs to be understood that this is only an indicator of truth, that it only provides correctable truths.

I think the elenchus still has incredible value though, we just need to be careful about how we phrase and regard the outcomes of examinations. Correctable truths, or more accurate truths still have a value to us. It is hard to find any fault with an aim to move from a less coherent to a more coherent set of beliefs. I do believe that we are looking at a method originating from a nascent coherence theory of truth. The elenchus has features that represent some of the core strands we see in contemporary coherence theories of truth: entailment, belief-to-belief relationships, truth being judged from within a network of beliefs; this method bears all the hallmarks of a coherence theory. It may not completely capture the nature of truth, but that is perhaps not its intended goal. The elenchus does not seem to offer a perfect coherence theory that answers all our questions about truth and its nature, it is therefore not the theory to vindicate coherence theorists of claims of being fundamentally mistaken in their position; but,

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[20] Possibly ideally smaller groups, but not necessarily so as we have seen in *Apology*, so that each person present can take part in the examination to the full extent of their interest level.

I think it definitely offers us the ability to recognize just *enough* of the nature of truth, to provide us with some real value in our lives. Via the character of Socrates, Plato is claiming that we need to focus on our moral development, but he seems to understand that it will be an incremental process, and is content for us to move forward one truth at a time. In the elenchus then, he has provided us with a tool, that should we choose to use it, will move us gently and manageably towards a more moral, consistent, coherent, rational set of beliefs. He has given us a tool to help tame ourselves, and those we care most about.

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