Socratic Elenchus:

An Argument for the Elenchus’ Heuristic and Moral Significance

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Introduction

There seems to be some sense of ambiguity when understanding abstract concepts such as courage, temperance, justice, and piety. How exactly do we determine what constitutes such abstractions? The answer to this question is not as simple as it may seem. The more one delves into the concepts, the more complex it appears. In Plato’s *Laches*, the contentious dispute between Laches and Nicias offers evidence of its complexity. Plato presents two highly-ranked Athenian generals, Laches and Nicias, as men who are perceived to know what courage is. Nonetheless, when they are questioned by Socrates about its definition, they exhibit fundamental disagreements, and at the end of the dialogue, Socrates and his interlocutors consider themselves insufficient exponents to the nature of courage.

While the interlocutors in *Laches* fail to define courage, Plato uses their disagreement to make a fundamental point. That point is this: when a person commits to a certain occupation, he must understand or at least attempt to understand his reason for committing to it. This is especially the case if it happens to be that one cannot justify his/her duty to his/her occupation. The ignorance and unwillingness to acknowledge the necessity of personally justifying one’s duty has detrimental moral consequences, resulting in a disharmonious state. Disharmony, namely the lack of occupational competency, inevitably leads to the collapse of the state.

It is no coincidence that the *Laches* is the only one of the Socratic dialogues whose *dramatis personae* includes two leading Athenian statesmen as interlocutors. The *Laches* clarifies something fundamental about the Socratic moral teaching known as "Ethical Intellectualism," the fundamental tenet of which is that when people act in morally wrong ways, they act in ignorance. Fundamentally, ethical intellectualism warns how devastating the consequences of ignorance can be. In what follows, I discuss the *Laches* with the aim of this
constellation of ideas about Plato’s method, types of ignorance, societal use of elenchus, the utilization of elenchus in cognitive-behavioral therapy, and the devastating consequences ignorance causes the state.

**Laches and the Elenchus**

The use of the elenchus—refuting arguments through question and answer—is prominent throughout the Socratic dialogues. One of the key ways that Plato's Socrates uses the elenchus is to help his interlocutors attain a fundamental understanding of their main practices and occupations. In the *Laches*, such usage is first exemplified in Socrates' conversation with Melesias.¹ It is then exemplified in Socrates' conversations with Laches and Nicias. The latter conversations focus on whether hoplomachy is a worthwhile pursuit. In the course of it, Socrates discovers a reason for the discussion of the worthiness of the pursuit of hoplomachy itself. That reason is to help Lysimachus and Melesias ensure that their sons “turn out to be worthwhile persons” (185a).² Socrates himself specifies what they are seeking, saying “Lysimachus and Melesias called us in to give them advice about their two sons out of a desire that the boys’ souls should become as good as possible” (186b).³ He narrows his account of their objective even further when he asks “aren’t these two now asking our advice as to the manner in which virtue might be added to the souls of theirs to make them better?” (190b)⁴, and does so further still with his question, “isn’t it obvious that we ought to take the one to which the technique of fighting in armor appears to lead? I suppose everyone would think it leads to courage, wouldn’t they?” (190d).⁵ Socrates and his interlocutors have, thus, identified a specific reason for the pursuit of

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⁴Plato, *Laches*, 675.
⁵Ibid.
hoplomachy, which is to inculcate courage into the sons of Lysimachus and Melesias. The remainder of the dialogue consists of Laches’ and Nicias’ attempt to define precisely what courage is. Socrates’ initial questions about the worthiness of the pursuit of hoplomachy are, thus, the catalyst for the subsequent investigation of courage. Predictably, the investigation of what courage means is further dissected through Socratic elenchus.

Elenchus is the main driver in all the Socratic dialogues which include, in addition to *Laches*, dialogues such as *Euthyphro*. Gareth Matthews raises the point that the attempt in the *Euthyphro* to define precisely what piety means is an attempt to reveal the nature of what it is to be pious.⁶ Similarly, the attempt in the second part of the *Laches* to define precisely what courage means is an attempt to reveal the nature of what it means to be courageous. Laches is the first interlocutor to make that attempt, and he does so with Socrates' help.

In response to Socrates' request for a definition, Laches initially defines courage as a man’s willingness to defend his post without running away from the enemy (190e).⁷ Dissatisfied with that answer, Socrates apologizes for not having made his request more precise. He then rephrases his question, asking what constitutes courage in various situations such as warfare, danger at sea, illness, poverty, etc. (191d).⁸ Eventually, Laches comes up with a second definition, saying that "if it is necessary to say what its nature is in all these cases," then he thinks that courage must be “a sort of endurance of the soul” (192c).⁹ While this second definition offers a more specific account of the nature of courage, Socrates asks Laches for a still more precise definition saying, “I think that you don’t regard every kind of endurance as courage. The reason I think so is this: I am fairly sure, Laches, you regard courage as a very fine

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thing” (192c). Socrates here gets Laches to agree that, when endurance is conjoined to wisdom, it is a fine and noble thing. Socrates then says, “Suppose it is accompanied by folly? Isn’t it just the opposite, harmful and injurious?” (192d). This eventually leads to Socrates claiming that the endurance of the soul which is harmful and injurious is not fine, whereas courage is fine (192d).10

Note that Plato’s Socrates seems to claim in 192d that courage cannot be something that is harmful and injurious. Why does Plato assume that courage cannot be something harmful? Perhaps his answer is that courage is a virtue, and Plato holds by definition that virtues are fine and never harmful. If that is his response, it raises another question: Why assume that courage is a virtue in that sense? Terence Irwin suggests a reason: namely, that if we are to "hold fast to the assumption that [bravery] is a virtue, [then] we must reject any account of bravery that implies that it is not always fine."11 Irwin seems to suggest that Socrates simply presupposes that courage is a fine thing, and in so doing, excludes the possibility that courage may be viewed as harmful. However, there is the suggestion in Plato’s definition that performing a fine action bravely is what Plato would call courage, while a bad action performed boldly is not characterized as courage. This may be understood as a distinction in the definition of good boldness and harmful boldness, that by definition only fine and good boldness is what Plato merely terms “courage.”

Regardless, for the sake of continuing the Laches’ search for an adequate definition of courage, like Socrates, we will assume that courage is fine and virtuous.

Synthesizing Laches’ reasoning to this point, Socrates suggests that Laches’ own view is that courage means wise endurance and that foolish endurance is not courage. Socrates rebuts that claim by asking a question about a soldier who "endures in battle" and "his willingness to

10 Plato, Laches 677.
fight is based on wise calculation because he knows that others are coming to his aid and that he will be fighting men who are fewer than those on his side, and inferior to them, and in addition his position is stronger.”

With regard to the soldier who endures in that particular way, Socrates asks: “Would you say that this man, with his kind of wisdom and preparation, endures more courageously or a man in the opposite camp who is willing to remain and hold out?” (193a). Laches replies that the man in the other camp is the courageous one, to which Socrates rejoins, “but surely the endurance of this man is more foolish than that of the other” (193b). Ultimately, Laches gathers that foolish endurance appears to be braver than wise endurance (193d). Laches is, thus, left in a state of perplexity as to what courage is. Although Socrates’ examination of Laches does not yield an acceptable definition and indeed seems to leave Laches in a state of perplexity (aporia), his examination does yield other benefits. Instead of holding an indefensible opinion while being ignorant of its indefensibility, Laches now, in his perplexity, is aware that he does not know what courage is—he is aware of his ignorance. The perplexity of that kind, I submit, a very good thing as it opens a door to intellectual advance. As Darrell Dobbs states, the nature of courage "may come to light in the conduct of the interlocutors as they grapple with their own perplexity". Dobbs understands the importance of facing perplexity, noting Laches’ courage in the face of perplexity. When one confronts perplexity, he realizes his ignorance, and in so doing, becomes suited for genuine inquiry. This is in evidence of Laches’ response to Socrates in which he says “I am ready not to give up, Socrates, although I am not really accustomed to arguments of this kind. But an absolute desire for victory has seized me

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12 Plato, Laches, 678.
13 Ibid.
15 Dobbs, 828. See also Dobbs, 839.
with respect to our conversation” (194b).\footnote{Plato, \textit{Laches}, 679.} Laches acknowledges his ignorance and responds with a strong urge to further inquire into the nature of courage. Thus, its nature may come to light as Laches recognizes his ignorance of what courage is and also his knowledge, at least in part, of what courage is not. Recall Socrates’ ethical intellectualism, in which immorality is a product of ignorance. The result of elenchus allowed Laches to become aware of his ignorance, preventing him from instructing others of what he perceived courage to be.

**The Elusiveness of Nicias**

There is a form of ignorance that is comparatively worse than the ignorance exposed in the character Laches. This form of ignorance is what I will call 	extit{fortified ignorance}, which fellow interlocutor Nicias is seen to possess. After Socrates leads Laches to perplexity, he prompts Nicias into the discussion of courage. Nicias begins by accusing Socrates of not defining courage in the right way (194c).\footnote{Ibid.} Nicias states his reason by referring to the idea behind ethical intellectualism, claiming that he has heard him say “every one of us is good with respect to that in which he is wise and bad in respect to that in which he is ignorant” (194d). Nicias then makes the point that “if a man is really courageous, it is clear that he is wise” (194d). Socrates understands Nicias to be claiming that courage is a form of wisdom. Laches is befuddled by this definition, and Socrates asks Nicias to explain what sort of thing courage is. Nicias explains that courage “is the knowledge of the fearful and the hopeful in war and in every other situation” (195a).\footnote{Plato, \textit{Laches}, 680.} Laches is frustrated by that definition and accuses Nicias of speaking nonsense. Laches is certain that courage is a separate thing from wisdom, arguing that, while doctors, farmers, and craftsmen know what to fear in their fields, the fact that they know what to fear in their particular fields is not sufficient to make them courageous. Nicias responds to this objection by pointing to
the difference between knowledge in a field and the knowledge of life and death, which is what Nicias says courage involves. Noting Laches’ irritation, Socrates redirects the discussion to courage in animals. Socrates says that “anyone taking this position must necessarily deny courage to any wild beast or else admit that some wild beast, a lion or a leopard or some sort of wild boar, is wise enough to know what is so difficult that very few men understand it” (197a)\(^{19}\). Nicias defends against this objection by stating that he does not consider wild beasts to exhibit courage. He makes the distinction that rashness in animals does not mean they show courage, whereas sensible people with foresight exhibit courage (197c). With Laches’ increasing frustration, Socrates surmises that Nicias has likely procured his skill in drawing verbal distinctions from the sophist Damon, an associate of the sophist Prodicus who himself “has the reputation of being best among the sophists at making such verbal distinctions” (197d).

Furthermore, Socrates asks Nicias to recall that they are investigating courage as a part of virtue (198a)\(^{20}\). Despite Nicias’ claim to be defining courage as a part of virtue, he speaks of courage as pertaining to the past, present, and future (199c). Socrates contends that Nicias’ argument would be describing the whole of virtue, rather than the part (199e)\(^{21}\). At this point, Nicias concedes that he had not been defining courage in the right way and hopes to correct his definition with Damon. The dialogue ultimately concludes with everyone in the dialogue acknowledging their ignorance of courage and for that reason finding themselves unfit to tutor the sons of Lysimachus and Melesias about it. Lysimachus agrees that they are unfit, and Socrates agrees to help Lysimachus and Melesias find the proper tutor for their sons.

The ignorance exemplified by Nicias is more detrimental than the ignorance of Laches. Nicias’ ignorance is a sophisticated kind of ignorance, which had made it difficult for him to

\(^{19}\) Plato, *Laches*, 682.


\(^{21}\) Plato, *Laches*, 684.
recognize. It is a 'fortified' kind of ignorance in the sense that Nicias understands only a part of what courage is. Nicias’ distorted knowledge of courage fortifies his ignorance, as he is aware of the part of Socrates’ ethical intellectualism that holds that virtue is knowledge. Nicias’ misguided understanding of ethical intellectualism leads him to believe that he has sufficient knowledge to be an exponent of courage. Theodore De Laguna affirms the idea that Nicias had adopted a debased version of Socratic thought. Although Nicias understands the idea behind ethical intellectualism, he mistakenly equates courage as the whole of virtue. He had professed to understand courage on the basis of his limited knowledge of ethical intellectualism, while not possessing sufficient understanding. Falsely believing that one’s limited knowledge is sufficient knowledge constructs a difficult barrier to the recognition of one’s ignorance. This false belief fortifies ignorance, allowing one to operate in tasks they are unsuited for, without the recognition of one’s limited knowledge for the task. Had Socrates not been in the discussion, Lysimachus and Melesias may have likely taken Nicias as the tutor for their children. Recall, Nicias’ association with Damon, who spends much of his time with the sophist Prodicus, the expert of verbal distinctions. Aristide Tessitore states that Nicias had not realized the depth of his own ignorance. Tessitore says at “the end of the dialogue [Nicias] maintains that he has spoken suitably and that, if something is lacking in his account, he expects that it will be easily rectified after speaking with Damon”. The danger with Nicias is that he seemingly does not realize he is confronting his ignorance in the wrong way. Instead of facing his perplexity and using elenchus

An interesting thing to note is that De Laguna had also claimed Plato to be using Nicias as the mouthpiece for his Socratic contemporaries. He states that Plato believed to be the true inheritor of Socratic thought, incorporating “false” Socratic ideology espoused by his contemporaries into the dialogue and refuting them. Plato may have been using the dialogues to refute the ignorance of his Socratic contemporaries. See De Laguna, 172.
24 Tessitore, 128.
or philosophical inquiry to resolve it, he finds comfort in sophistic verbal distinctions and hopes to fix his inability to articulate courage with the sophist Damon.

**The Elenchus and Society**

As previously mentioned, ethical intellectualism asserts that acts that are harmful and immoral are committed by ignorance. Socrates makes this idea clear in 25d-e of the *Apology*, in his response to Meletus who accuses him of deliberately causing harm by corrupting the youth of Athens.25 Socrates makes the defense that if he were to corrupt the youth that would, in turn, risk harming himself. That would mean that Socrates would knowingly and deliberately harm himself, contradicting the idea in ethical intellectualism that holds one *unknowingly* harms oneself. Thus, Socrates argues that he is either not corrupting the youth or he does so unwittingly, in either case, refuting the charge that he knowingly and deliberately causes harm. Consequently, this idea supposes that one *only* performs something harmful and immoral because one is ignorant. There are objections to this, one that Daniel Devereux recognizes: namely, that it may be possible to know what one ought to do but fail through a weakness in will (*acrasia*).26 However, Devereux notes this objection and says that “Socrates believes that a virtuous person will consistently act in a virtuous manner”.27 If one *truly* knows what is good, they will always do it, therefore, eliminating any explanation of wrongdoing premised on *acrasia*.

The primary reason I bring up the *Apology* is to make a point about certain actions by the historical Nicias during the Sicilian expedition. In that military campaign, Nicias was in the process of departing from Sicily until an eclipse occurred in the battlefield. Nicias, frightened by

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27 Devereux, 145.
the eclipse, froze and delayed his departure, forfeiting his life and the lives of his men. Indeed, there is comic irony in the *Laches* alluding to the expedition of Sicily, which Tessitore notes.\(^{28}\) Recall, near the end of the *Laches*, Nicias had agreed that he was an insufficient exponent of courage and thus could not tutor the children on courage (200d).\(^{29}\) An Athenian general who is perceived to know the nature of courage by virtue of being an Athenian general ultimately fails to understand and exhibit courage, as seen in the *Laches* and the Sicilian expedition. Despite Nicias acknowledging his ignorance of courage in the *Laches* and agreeing to not impose his ignorance on the children, Nicias had harmed himself and Athens by being unfit to lead as a general because of his lack of courage. Yet, ironically, Nicias likely would not have maintained his position as general if he had been thought by Athenians to be a coward. Because of Nicias' lack of courage, he had committed harm to himself and his soldiers, and, therefore, acted immorally.

Plato is making a moral point, that inquiry via elenchus is necessary to prevent one’s self from committing harmful and immoral outcomes. This elenctic inquiry may, thus, be used as a heuristic device to determine whether or not one is suited for one’s particular role. Had Nicias undergone some form of an elenctic process when becoming a general, with the conditions of determining whether one possesses courage, there would likely have been a general that would have made the departure to flee where Nicias had froze. Furthermore, Nicias would not have served as a general as he would have been discovered to have been an incompetent general. I find Plato affirming this idea in his tripartite hierarchical class structure, consisting of guardians, auxiliaries, and laborers.\(^{30}\) These class structures are respectively philosopher-kings, soldiers, general because of his lack of courage. Yet, ironically, Nicias likely would not have maintained his position as general if he had been thought by Athenians to be a coward. Because of Nicias’ lack of courage, he had committed harm to himself and his soldiers, and, therefore, acted immorally.

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\(^{28}\) See Tessitore, 124-125.

\(^{29}\) Plato, *Laches*, 685.

and workers. The hierarchical class structure has philosophers on top as the governing class, soldiers a step below enforcing civic order, and the bottom class consisting of workers performing the general labor. Plato believes in the division of labor, and that a just and harmonious society is that in which each person is in the role they are suited for.\(^{31}\) In order to find out which roles ought to be divided for whom, elenctic inquiry is necessary. This appears to be the case, as Plato believed that philosophers ought to structure society, and are thus able to discern who performs which role. This discernment is through the use of an entire social educational system, where a formal philosophical education is reserved for those who are most suited for it, at the appropriate age.\(^{32}\) For Plato, it is clear that Socratic elenchus is a fundamental component for determining societal roles, as it was certainly the case for the interlocutors in the *Laches*—through the use of elenchus—that they were insufficient tutors. Indeed, this appears to be the reason why Plato chose Laches and Nicias, but particularly Nicias, in the discussion of courage. Again, his reason being that Nicias had failed to articulate courage, as well as failed to exhibit courage in the Sicilian expedition.

There are some likely concerns, however, when imagining the implementation of Plato’s tripartite class structure. It appears totalitarian in nature, as the philosophers are the sole discriminants in determining societal roles. Surely, it resembles tyrannical governments such as that in Soviet Russia, where the communist government “understands” which role is best for whom. However, the fundamental use of elenchus may be divorced from Plato’s governmental structure when determining societal roles. Indeed, this is the case when students attend schools and universities. Universities have purported experts in their respective fields to educate students and have exams to determine a student’s competency in their particular subject. In a sense, tests

\(^{31}\) Stevenson, 95.  
\(^{32}\) Stevenson, 93.
contain questions which are used to refute or affirm a student’s answer. Thus, without the certificate, diploma, or degree, typically one cannot take jobs and perform roles in which they are unlearned and are, therefore, unfit for. Certainly, the one who is a mechanical engineer is suited for his role as he has passed the exams required to earn his degree, thus proving his competence. Plato is correct, fundamentally, in the use of elenchus to determine who ought to fulfill which role for a functioning society.

**Socratic Elenchus in Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy**

To further prove the effectiveness of elenchus, one should look at its use in cognitive behavioral therapy. For clinical psychologists, the primary aim of the Socratic Method in cognitive-behavioral therapy, or CBT for short, is “to help patients become aware of and modify processes involved in the maintenance of their difficulties; experience a shift in perspective and/or affect; and learn a method of re-evaluating thoughts and information”. There are nine common forms of cognitive distortions which CBT helps recognize. These cognitive distortions are emotional reasoning, catastrophizing, overgeneralizing, dichotomous thinking, mind reading, labeling, negative filtering, discounting positives, and blaming. An example describing the cognitive distortion of emotional reasoning states that it lets “your feelings guide your interpretation of reality. ‘I feel depressed; therefore, my marriage is not working out’. This cognitive distortion of emotional reasoning is predicated on feelings rather than rational thought. Absent from the use of CBT, an individual suffering from emotional reasoning or any other cognitive distortion may make their own self-assessment of their distress, likely leading to

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35 Ibid.
misinterpretation and the exacerbation of their cognitive distortion.\textsuperscript{36} However, through the use of CBT, in which its fundamental function—guided discovery through question and answer—corresponds with elenchus, detrimental cognitive distortions may be alleviated. Indeed, CBT has been widely noted by therapists to be the most effective psychological treatment for moderate and severe depression.\textsuperscript{37} Additionally, the Socratic Method within CBT and employed by the therapist, assists patients in reaching subjective conclusions on their own.\textsuperscript{38} This self-discovery likely leads patients to “recognize and resolve logical inconsistencies and discrepancies in [their] reasoning”\textsuperscript{39}. This is analogous to 193d in the \textit{Laches}, in which Socrates assists Laches in discovering that his definition of courage had not made logical sense.\textsuperscript{40} Although this discovery had not necessarily led Laches to develop courage, at the very least, it helped Laches recognize the logical falsity of his preconceived notion of courage.

The reflective questioning of CBT in the discovery of cognitive distortions presupposes that cognitive distortions are unknown to the individual. So individuals experiencing anxiety or depression because of their particular cognitive distortion are harming themselves without knowing the cause of their anxiety or depression. This parallels the tenet in ethical intellectualism which asserts that if one commits harm to oneself or others, it is committed unknowingly. For Plato’s Socrates, in order to overcome ignorance one must “know thyself”, as instructed by the Delphic inscription. Indeed, in 194b of the \textit{Laches}, Socrates urges Laches to

\textsuperscript{36} Clark, 867.
\textsuperscript{38} Clark, 867.
\textsuperscript{40} Plato, \textit{Laches}, 678.
overcome his ignorance through philosophical inquiry.\textsuperscript{41} In order to “know thyself”, it is done through philosophical inquiry, which consists of Socratic elenchnus. And like ethical intellectualism, the elenctic process within CBT allows one to discover his own self-harm. The fundamental use of CBT assists persons from committing harm to themselves and others, further proving the effectiveness of elenchnus.

**Fortified Ignorance and Its Consequences to the State**

As shown earlier, Nicias had exemplified the neologism called ‘fortified ignorance’. To briefly clarify the definition of fortified ignorance, it is that in which one falsely believes they have sufficient understanding of a particular field or subject predicated on their distorted and limited knowledge of that particular field or subject. Therefore, this false belief blinds and fortifies one’s ignorance of the particular subject. I maintain that Plato warns of the devastating consequences this ignorance can do to the state, which is the reason why Nicias was portrayed in the *Laches*. Recall, Nicias is a leading Athenian statesman who not only failed to articulate courage but failed to exhibit courage in the Sicilian expedition. The *Laches* is also the only Socratic dialogue whose *dramatis personae* involved eminent Athenian statesmen. Furthermore, the Sicilian expedition was known to be a devastating blow to Athens, from which Athens never recovered.\textsuperscript{42} Plato’s use of Nicias in the dialogue of the *Laches* alludes to the demise of Nicias, which foreshadows the demise of Athens.\textsuperscript{43} Recall 194d, in which Nicias states the tenet in Socrates’ ethical intellectualism, where “every one of us is good with respect to that in which he is wise and bad in respect to that in which he is ignorant”.\textsuperscript{44} While Nicias is correct that the aforementioned tenet is asserted by Socrates, he had distorted the tenet by believing that courage

\textsuperscript{41} See Plato, *Laches*, 679.

\textsuperscript{42} Tessitore, 124.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{44} Plato, *Laches*, 679.
is virtue, rather than part. Therefore, Nicias’ distorted ethical intellectualism resulted in his fortified ignorance. The dialogue of the *Laches* is, thus, Plato’s warning that fortified ignorance can cause severe consequences to the state, hence the ironic use of Nicias in the discussion of courage.

To further show the severe consequences of ignorance—fortified ignorance, in particular—one should look at Adolf Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem. Adolf Eichmann was one of the major Nazi organizers of the Holocaust and was subsequently charged for war crimes in a publicized trial in Jerusalem. Hannah Arendt had reported on Eichmann’s trial, assessing that Eichmann expressed a “banality of evil”. Eichmann’s banality of evil was not from the will to do evil, but through his lack of thinking. This is in evidence of Eichmann’s understanding of Kantian ethics, in which he had distorted the first formulation of the categorical imperative.

The first formulation of the categorical imperative states that one should act upon a maxim in which they could at the same time will as a universal law, without contradiction. Eichmann had distorted and confused the categorical imperative, conflating the universal moral law to the *Führer’s* will. He had distorted the first formulation of the categorical imperative to “act as if the principle of your actions were the same as that of the legislator or of the law of the land”. This also translates into Hans Frank’s formulation of the ‘categorical imperative in the Third Reich,’ which had stated: “Act in such a way that the *Führer,* if he knew your action, would

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47 Ibid.
49 Lausten and Ugilt, 167.
50 Arendt, 136.
approve it”. Additionally, Eichmann’s distortion of Kantian philosophy converts the Kantian notion of goodwill that demands the disregard of all selfish considerations, into “the Führer demanded that everybody unselfishly work for the Fatherland”.

Eichmann’s distorted understanding of Kantian ethics is eerily similar to Nicias’ distorted understanding of Socratic ethics. Eichmann held a distorted version of Kantian philosophy which helped justify the belief in his duty. Likewise, Nicias held a distorted version of Socratic philosophy which justified his perceived knowledge of courage. Both figures exemplified fortified ignorance, as a result of their distortions to the respective philosophical systems. Thus, because of Eichmann’s distortion of Kantian philosophy and Nicias’ distortion of Socratic philosophy, they were ignorant of their faulty understanding of the respective philosophical systems. Consequently, their fortified ignorance had devastating effects on their respective nations. This is in evidence of Eichmann’s lack of thinking following Hitler’s orders and Nicias’ cowardice in the Sicilian expedition. Additionally, Eichmann’s unthoughtfulness, or rather his “banality of evil” lends credence to ethical intellectualism.

There is another moral point Plato is making, which is seen in Plato’s portrayal of Nicias’ fortified ignorance, and subsequently corroborated by the actions of Adolf Eichmann. The point is that it is morally important to understand your reasons for committing to the duty of your occupation. This can be done through elenctic inquiry, such as when Socrates had discovered in 190b-d the initial reasons for the pursuit of hoplomachy. Through elenctic inquiry, it follows that one is led to justify their duty to their occupation, as seen in the Laches’ justification for hopolomachy. The failure or lack of the attempt to justify one’s duty to their occupation leads to devastating consequences, as seen in evidence of the Sicilian expedition and Eichmann’s

51 Ibid. See also, Lausten and Ugilt, 168.
52 Lausten and Ugilt, 169.
53 Plato, Laches, 675-76.
“banality of evil”. Nicias had not attempted to justify his duty and occupation as a general, because of his fortified ignorance. Likewise, Eichmann had not correctly justified his duty ethically, because of his fortified ignorance. In essence, Plato’s point is that it is morally important to philosophically inquire, as the consequences of ignorance may result to devastating effects on the state.

**Conclusion**

The Socratic elenchus and its use in the refutation of question and answer has proven to be of significant utility. Not only is it the fundamental function of ethical intellectualism, but it leads persons to the recognition of their ignorance. During Socrates’ examination of Laches, his use of elenchus had exposed Laches’ ignorance of what courage is not. The use of elenchus also serves as an excellent heuristic device in determining societal roles. It is the reason why exams collectively determine whether one earns their degree, as it is fundamentally operated through the process of elenchus. Indeed, Plato believed that a just and harmonious society was one in which each person fulfillingly performs the role in which they are fit for. Plato was correct, to the extent that a functioning society is where each person fulfills their roles based on their competency. Furthermore, elenchus is shown to be effective in cognitive-behavioral therapy. In the same way the elenchus operates in ethical intellectualism, the same way it operates in cognitive-behavioral therapy. Thus, through the fundamental use of CBT, it prevents persons from committing harm to themselves. Finally, the elenchus is especially important in exposing fortified ignorance. As seen in Nicias and Eichmann, they had both held distorted versions of philosophical systems. As a result, they had contributed devastating consequences to their nations. Since the lack of attempting to acknowledge one’s ignorance is so devastating, it appears
morally necessary to philosophically inquire, which consists in the process of elenchus. By philosophically inquiring, one is sufficiently equipped with the right tools to overcome one’s ignorance.

**Bibliography**


