Introduction

i aiming and determining

In the *Cleitophon*, a short and strange dialogue attributed to Plato, the char-
acter "Socrates" speaks only twice. He accuses the eponymous interlocutor
on the one hand of telling people that it is a waste of time to associate
with him, while on the other of lauding contact with Thrasymachus, the
infamous character from Book 1 of Plato's *Republic*. Cleitophon replies
that Socrates has not heard the whole story: he is in certain respects deeply
impressed by Socrates, but in other ways sharply critical. Always open to
correction and betterment, Socrates is happy to hear Cleitophon's com-
plaints and the last four Stephanus pages of the work consist solely of a
speech by Cleitophon in which he sharply distinguishes between two tasks:
(1) persuading a person that virtue[1] is more important than anything else;
and (2) saying precisely what virtue is. According to Cleitophon, Socrates
does an excellent job, better than any other person, at persuading and
exhorting people to pursue virtue and the care of their souls (407a7,
410b4–6), but he is utterly unhelpful when it comes to saying what virtue
actually is. Because Socrates is so useless with this substantive question,
Cleitophon is forced to conclude that either Socrates' ability to champion
virtue does not in any way imply that he knows what virtue is, or else
Socrates is simply unwilling to tell him. It is Socrates' failure on this sec-
ond issue that leads Cleitophon to turn to Thrasymachus (410c–d). The
dialogue ends with no response from Socrates.

Cleitophon's speech suggests a distinction between two sorts of ethical
principles: what I call "aiming principles" and "determining principles."
An aiming principle tells the agent what overall *aim* she ought to have in
acting, for example, to do the virtuous action; because this particular aiming

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[1] I translate ἀρετή as "virtue" or "excellence," varying only for stylistic reasons.

principle is so important to Socrates[2] and Plato, I shall give it a name: the "supremacy of virtue" (henceforth, SV). SV says that doing the virtuous action trumps any other aim one may have in acting. An aiming principle functions in two ways: as an "explicit aim" and as a "limiting condition" for action.[3] When SV functions as an explicit aim, an agent who adheres to SV will explicitly aim to do the virtuous action above all. In other situations, however, SV may operate as a "limiting condition." When acting for some end other than virtue (for example, pleasure or financial gain), SV requires that the agent nevertheless not act in a way that is contrary to virtue. The role of SV as a limiting condition is expressed in Socrates' well-known statement that "it is never right to do wrong."[4] We can now see how one can follow SV in all actions, without that implying the implausible view that in every action one ought explicitly to aim at acting virtuously. Many actions may be morally neutral, but what is crucial about the agent who adheres to SV is that she will never knowingly act in a way contrary to virtue.

Consider, by contrast, an agent who holds a different aiming principle than SV; let's call it the "supremacy of survival (SS)." According to SS a person should aim at surviving above all. SS too may function both as an explicit aim and as a limiting condition. Sometimes the adherent of SS will explicitly deliberate about which action will ensure his staying alive. In addition, SS may also function as a limiting condition insofar as the agent committed to SS will not (intentionally) perform any action that leads to his death when, for example, he is aiming at pleasure; "It is never right to act in a way that leads to one's death" would be the expression of SS as a limiting condition. If an action does not lead to death, then the adherent of SS is allowed to choose to do it or not on whatever grounds he likes (as far as SS is concerned). As we shall see later in the book, SS is a view that Socrates frequently disparages. In general, then, an aiming principle sets the supreme aim of an agent's action: for SV, the supreme aim is virtue; for SS, the supreme aim is survival.[5] Henceforth when I say that an agent who is committed to SV "aims to act virtuously above all," I mean that as shorthand for "makes acting virtuously the supreme aim of her actions

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[2] Unless explicitly noted otherwise, "Socrates" refers to the character in Plato's dialogues, not to the historical figure. I discuss my approach to the dialogues below.

[3] I borrow the term "limiting condition" from Herman (1981/1993), 14–17.

[4] "To do wrong" translates ἀδικεῖν, which is also sometimes translated "to do injustice." It is important to remember that the word carries with it the broader connotation of wrongdoing in general. This will be particularly important in the discussions of the *Crito*, *Gorgias*, and *Republic*. The just action, the right action, and the virtuous action are the same.

[5] For a hedonist, the supreme aim is pleasure.

so that virtue will sometimes be the explicit aim of her actions and will always at least function as a limiting condition on actions which aim at other ends."

SV does not by itself rule in or out any non-evaluatively described action-type, and it says nothing about *how to determine* what the virtuous action actually is, which is precisely Cleitophon's complaint. I thus distinguish between establishing the supreme aim of an agent's action (which is the function of an aiming principle) and the distinct issue of *how to determine* what action is going to constitute the virtuous action in some circumstance.[6] Thus merely adhering to SV leaves open what sorts of considerations may be relevant in any particular deliberation about what to do, as well as what particular action such deliberation might yield; commitment to SV ensures only that, barring error about which action is virtuous, the agent's action will be the virtuous one or at least not contrary to virtue. The pleasure or pain the action causes oneself or others, the financial cost, the risk one runs of life or death, may all be relevant considerations in *determining* what the virtuous action actually is here and now. SV simply but importantly maintains that a person's *aim* must always be to act virtuously above all (understood as explained above), and not to save her life, or to cause pleasure, or to generate financial gain, or even to follow the law.

By contrast, a determining principle (e.g., a proposed moral rule such as "Never kill anyone") would be one that actually *determines* which action or action-type is forbidden or required; once you adopt "Never kill anyone" as a principle, then, at least as far as that principle is concerned, if an action involves killing someone, it is forbidden. The role of a determining principle may be played by a principle (a moral rule), but it may also be fulfilled by other means, reasonable or unreasonable, such as intuition, tarot cards, following a virtuous person, and so on. I shall refer to questions about which token actions or action-types are virtuous as *determining questions*, because they involve determining what the virtuous action actually is, whereas I shall call questions about what supreme aim one should have in acting *aiming questions*. According to Cleitophon, then, while Socrates has a clear answer to an aiming question (and he is apparently very persuasive about this), he utterly fails to offer answers to determining questions.

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[6] There are parallel, but less interesting, determining questions at issue with SS as well: "Here and now what token action will save my life?", or, when SS functions as a limiting condition, "Will this token action lead to my death?" These are less interesting than determining questions about virtue because they are not ordinarily difficult to answer nor the subject of dispute.

It is well known that the ethics of Plato and Aristotle do not offer us determining *principles*.[7] We look in vain in their writings for particular moral rules, containing only non-evaluative terms, that determine which actions are virtuous and which vicious. Indeed, for many contemporary scholars, it is an advantage of the ancients that they do not fall into what is seen as the trap of trying to supply determining principles, but instead focus on people's characters. By developing a virtuous character, the agent will act virtuously because of the distinctive outlook on the world that she has acquired. I have one comment about this here. We might agree that there are no determining principles in Plato and Aristotle, but nevertheless believe that they argue about moral principles of a different type, namely, aiming principles. Socrates' claim that one should look to virtue above all in action and that it is never right to do wrong is such a principle (SV).[8] SV, however, both because of its generality and because it contains an evaluative term, does not by itself resolve the problem of determining what the virtuous or right action is, either in general or in some concrete circumstance. Cleitophon is understandably frustrated. He has been successfully persuaded to commit himself to virtue, but then SV leaves him without any way of determining what virtue is. But if we distinguish between aiming and determining principles we can at least qualify the claim that Plato rejects moral rules or principles in general: while he may deny that one can supply *determining* principles, this does not imply that he rejects all universal moral principles, for he is concerned with and argues for an *aiming* principle, SV.[9]

This book argues that in the ethics of Socrates and Plato virtue is crucially conceived of as an aim, and that this is contrasted with determining questions about virtue, which seek to know what virtuous action is in general or in specific instances. I examine how the aiming/determining distinction structures Plato's conception of virtue in what are typically referred to as the "early" and "middle" dialogues. I concentrate in detail on how arguments in Plato about SV differ significantly from those about *what virtue is*, and show that the dialogues themselves distinguish between them.

2 VIRTUE, AIMS, AND EUDAIMONIA

Almost all contemporary discussions of ancient ethics importantly and usefully take eudaimonia or "happiness," as it is traditionally translated, as the supreme aim of action, and then explain how different ancient theories

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[7] An exception is the hedonic calculus proposed at the end of the *Protagoras*. See 4.4 for discussion. (References such as 4.4 refer to chapter four, section four.)
[8] See chapter one.   [9] I argue that this holds for Aristotle as well, see Vasiliou (2007).

fill in its content. The nature of eudaimonia is the central topic of most philosophical discussions about ancient ethics. It is a common principle of such studies that, beginning with Plato, what all ancient moral theories have in common despite their particular differences is a "eudaimonist framework."[10] Its fundamental question is: "What sort of life ought one to lead?" (i.e. "What is eudaimonia?"). The main components of philosophical conceptions of eudaimonia are virtue (both moral and intellectual), pleasure, and the "external goods," the last being Aristotle's expression for goods of the body, such as health and beauty, and material goods broadly speaking, such as wealth, good luck, noble birth, and good reputation. Different philosophers and philosophical schools then argue about which combination of these goods constitutes happiness. The *locus classicus* for the eudaimonist framework is, of course, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. He begins by offering a highly abstract and formal account of happiness, and then seeks to specify its content. The situation with Plato is somewhat less clear, although he is still understood as belonging within this framework.[11]

A reader might reasonably think that there is a kind of aiming/determining distinction that operates at the level of eudaimonia. We take as our starting point that all people aim to do well and live well, that is, to live happily, and then we seek to determine what happiness is. One might say, then, that the aiming principle is "the supremacy of happiness" and that determining principles tell us what happiness consists in. I refrain, however, from using "aiming" and "determining" this way in the context of eudaimonia and its determination. Of course I do not deny that our ordinary language (and ancient Greek as well) speaks of aiming at happiness and of determining what it is. But it is significant that the posited "aiming principle," "the supremacy of happiness," is practically speaking a tautology, as Plato and Aristotle themselves admit. Aristotle says that there is general

[10] See, e.g., Annas (1993). This claim does not include the Cyrenaics, who Annas argues constitute the exception that proves the rule.

[11] Vlastos (1991), 203, refers to "the Eudaemonist Axiom" and claims that "once staked out by Socrates, [it] becomes foundational for virtually all subsequent moralists of classical antiquity." Some of those who bring to bear the eudaimonist framework most strongly recognize that Plato does not raise the same explicit questions about happiness as Aristotle, although they still interpret the dialogues, both "early" and "middle," as eudaimonist. For example, Irwin (1995), 248, writes: "At the beginning of the [*Nicomachean*] *Ethics*, Aristotle sees that it is important to form some conception of happiness before trying to decide whether different claims about how to acquire happiness are justified. We noticed that the Socratic dialogues do not take up Aristotle's question. In the *Republic* Plato does not take it up either, but we must try to identify assumptions about happiness that convince him that the just person is happier than the unjust." Brickhouse and Smith (1994), 103, claim that the "Principle of Eudaimonism," the view that "a thing is good only insofar as it is conducive to happiness," is "at the heart of Socratic ethics." They cite no texts to justify this.

verbal agreement on this question (*NE* 1.4, 1095a17–20).[12] *Everyone* wishes
to do well; no one would say that he wishes to do badly, no matter how
warped or flawed his conception of doing well may be. Contrast this with
the genuine aiming principle, SV. To say that one should act virtuously
above all is a substantive and controversial claim, and I shall restrict the
concept of an aiming principle to such claims. Thus the *question* "What
is eudaimonia?" is an "aiming *question*" insofar as it asks what a person's
supreme aim should be. But for it to count as an aiming *principle*, one
would have to state in a contentful way what one's supreme aim is, for
example, virtue or pleasure. Saying that one's supreme end is living well
or doing well is not yet to make a substantive claim about *what* one is
aiming at. For this reason, I do not regard "the supremacy of happiness" as
an aiming principle. Given that SV is the aiming principle, the question
"What is virtue?," either in general or in some concrete circumstance, then
counts as a *determining* question.

I restrict the terms in this way because the focus of this study is virtue,
not eudaimonia. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle believe that eudaimonia is
essentially bound up with virtue, even if each differs about the relationship
of virtue to eudaimonia.[13] They all maintain SV, and so they believe that
one ought to aim at virtue above all; none of these philosophers holds that
one should ever act contrary to virtue. In contrast to most contemporary
work, this study *begins* from the idea that virtue is supreme (as I shall
argue Socrates himself does), considers how this claim is defended, and
then asks how we determine what *it* is. I hope to show that the focus on
virtue as an aim yields new interpretations of central Platonic dialogues and
leads us to lesser-known passages within these texts that have not attracted
notice in part because of the almost universal focus on eudaimonia and the
eudaimonist framework.

3 disputes about virtue and its supremacy

According to the above distinction I separate two types of deliberation. In
one sort, let's call it "aiming deliberation," we assume that a person has
determined, somehow, that one action is the virtuous one and a different
action is, for example, financially profitable, but contrary to virtue. A person
might then wonder which she ought to do, the virtuous action or the

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[12] Plato does as well: for example, *Euthyd*. 278e.
[13] I say "essentially bound up" as a way of remaining neutral about the precise nature of the relationship
between them – whether virtue is necessary and/or sufficient for happiness, whether it is virtuous
activity rather than virtue, and so on.

profitable one. The familiar question of the moral skeptic arises at this point: why should I do the virtuous action, she asks, rather than the non-virtuous but financially profitable one? Socrates believes that virtue as an aim ought always to trump whatever other aim we may have in acting; one should never act contrary to virtue (SV). The principle SV, however, in no way *answers* the skeptic. By providing the supreme aim of choice it simply *tells* the skeptic and everyone else which of the two actions to choose. Now Socrates' claim that virtue is more important than anything else has been interpreted, loosely, as saying that he thinks that one should not care *at all* about money, physical health, death, and so on, which is taken to mean that he would never take such things *into consideration* in a deliberation whose aim is to do the virtuous thing. But we shall see that this is incorrect. What we might call, by contrast, "determining deliberation" is quite different from aiming deliberation. Once we have *accepted* that virtue is the supreme aim (and thus excluded at least one kind of moral skeptic from the conversation), virtue is not then *also* a consideration in the deliberation about what constitutes acting virtuously in this or that circumstance. External goods, however, will be.[14]

While no one disputes that she wants to be happy nor does any one need to be persuaded to be happy, that we ought to do the virtuous action above all is another matter. This leads to the question of *why* doing the virtuous thing should be our supreme aim, and not, for example, financial gain or survival. We, like Socrates and his contemporaries, have beliefs about what is right and wrong and we can act on them without having answers to questions about their origin or their justification. In the context of an aiming deliberation Socrates assumes that a person has, somehow, determined that action A is the virtuous action but not financially profitable, while action B is financially profitable but not virtuous. Given this, he asks, "Do you think you should choose A or B?" And in fact for most of us, I think, the answer is "A." The moral skeptic, of course, says "B"; so the simple asking of this question fails to move him.[15] But for almost everyone else, this

[14] I show in chapter two the damage that this confusion has done to our understanding of the *Apology* and *Crito*. Since it appears that Socrates *is* taking into consideration his life, his children, his friends, money, and so on in deciding what to do, commentators must ignore prominent parts of the *Apology* and *Crito* (or else dismiss them as rhetoric, sophistry, irony or merely *ad hominem* argument). But if we appreciate that he is not taking the good condition of these things as his *aim*, but only taking them into consideration as factors in determining what the virtuous action *is*, we shall see that there is no conflict, and we can make sense of all of his remarks as consistent.

[15] An ancient skeptic would of course say "no more A than B." But in this discussion by "skeptic" I mean someone who in some way challenges or repudiates ordinary claims of morality. Thus Thrasymachus and Callicles will count as skeptics, even though they clearly do not meet the ancient definition of a skeptic as someone who suspends judgement.

point has some teeth. Without a clear method for answering determining questions, the call by itself to commit to SV will rely on people's untutored beliefs about which actions *are* virtuous. But even so, being consciously committed to SV can have a substantial effect on action, and a potentially good effect, if people paused in many situations for one additional thought and asked themselves whether they were doing what they took to be the virtuous action.

We should recognize that the agent committed to SV does not necessarily have *to think the thought* "I ought to do what is virtuous" each time she acts, even in cases where there is a virtuous action that must be done. The worry here is related to a criticism by Bernard Williams. Williams maintains that in a variety of cases the thought that one ought to do the virtuous action would be "one thought too many."[16] If a loved one falls into a river, and an agent begins her deliberation about what to do with the thought that she ought to do what is virtuous above all, it does seem reasonable to think that there is something amiss. A virtuous agent would not have such a thought, regardless of its truth, before acting. And if she did, it would detract from her virtue.

We can agree with the "one thought too many" point, but still quite reasonably acknowledge that Socrates' fellow Athenians frequently have what we might call "one thought too few." Ignoring entirely any question of whether they are acting virtuously, they focus simply on the aims of survival, wealth, reputation, and so on. It seems to me that the same holds for us as well. Many of us might act better if we paused to ask whether we were aiming at the excellent action, or simply aiming at what secured our professional reputation, financial gain, pleasure, and so on.[17] We can grant the correctness of Williams' point – particularly in cases where a quick and relatively straightforward decision must be made – while still recognizing that sometimes, indeed perhaps fairly often, an agent *ought* explicitly to remind herself of her commitment to SV. I believe that this is a significant part of the force of Socrates' role as "gadfly" of Athens (*Ap*. 30e): he accuses his fellow citizens of typically having one thought too few. As we shall see in chapter two, when Socrates must decide whether or not to escape from prison in the *Crito*, he does think that it ought to be explicit that the aim of his action is to do what is virtuous. For these reasons I shall retain the expression "aiming at virtue," with the understanding that it ought not to

[16] Williams (1976), 214–15.
[17] There is a related (and quite complex) political question about the deliberations of nations. Is the military supremacy, economic health, or even the survival of a nation more important than its acting virtuously?

imply that the agent will necessarily have a particular thought in her head, although sometimes she will and she ought to.

A different problem arises insofar as someone could easily, of course, be too cavalier about his assumption that the action he is about to engage in *is* in fact the truly virtuous one. This is just the sort of danger a figure like Euthyphro poses. While Euthyphro's commitment to SV is secure, he shows no interest in deliberating about determining what the virtuous action *is*; indeed, I shall argue that Plato depicts him as even failing to understand the importance of the question (see 4.3). Moral and religious fundamentalists claim to devote themselves to what is right, and not to what is pleasurable or financially profitable, but they then appear to think that determining what is right is an entirely straightforward matter. They share Socrates' commitment to SV, while by contrast with him they are unquestioningly confident that they know what virtue *is*; this can be a dangerous and repellent combination. In examining the difference between aiming and determining questions, we, unlike Euthyphro, must be careful not to "moralize." A person "moralizes" if she, like a fundamentalist, takes determining questions about virtue to be prematurely settled without adequate justification. Thus a person moralizes if she assumes, without argument, that, for example, telling a falsehood is always wrong or doing someone physical harm is always wrong. One might agree with Socrates that one must never do wrong, but then be unjustifiably confident that one knows which actions or action-types *are* wrong. This would be "to moralize" in the sense I intend.

When Socrates claims that it is never right to do wrong, the question that ought to follow is, "What *is* right and wrong?" That is, SV leaves us with a puzzle about how to *determine* what virtue is, while accepting that virtue ought to be our supreme aim. There are two questions here: one might ask what the virtuous action is in the here and now, and one might ask what virtuous actions are in general. The dialogues, as we shall see, address both of these questions. In chapter two, we shall examine how Socrates deals with determining what the virtuous action is in the here and now. He offers an example of how to put SV to work in action. In the so-called dialogues of definition, considered in chapter four, we see Socrates and his interlocutors try to determine what virtuous actions are in general by trying to answer the Socratic "What is F?" question.

I have just discussed the force of SV on figures other than the moral skeptic. The distinction between SV and questions about what virtue is, however, also results in a proliferation of skeptics. One could hold an ordinary conception of virtue, but deny SV, that is, deny that one ought to

do the virtuous action above all; in chapter three we will see that Polus
in the *Gorgias* is such a figure. Then again one might agree that virtue is
most important, but hold a radical and unconventional conception of what
virtue is, disagreeing both about particular token actions and more general
categorizations; Callicles is such a figure. Finally one might be willing to
shift positions both on whether virtue is supreme and on what virtue is. I
shall argue in chapter five that this fits Thrasymachus. So although I shall
begin in the opening chapters, following Socrates' lead, by ignoring the
challenges of the moral skeptic, the conceptual structure that I see at work
in the dialogues actually generates not simply one skeptic, but a range of
skeptics. The dialogues work through these possibilities to reveal the partic-
ular requirements that arise in dealing with particular types. In chapters six
through eight I turn to *Republic* 2–10. I argue that the aiming/determining
distinction is crucial to understanding the central argument of that work
and its unity. We shall see that *Republic* 4's notorious answer to the question
"What is justice?"– that it consists in the harmony of the tripartite soul –
is part of the justification for SV; it tells us *why* we should be just. By
contrast the metaphysics of the middle books, which introduce the tran-
scendent Forms as the objects of knowledge for philosophers, explains how
the outstanding determining questions may be answered.

4 SOCRATES AND PLATO ON VIRTUOUS ACTIONS AND VIRTUOUS CHARACTERS: A STANDARD ACCOUNT

It may be useful here in the Introduction to sketch briefly what I take
to be a common understanding of Plato's ethics and then by contrast to
explain how this book's focus on virtue and on the aiming/determining
distinction affects it. In the dialogues typically called "early" or "Socratic,"[18]
the character Socrates believes that virtue is the most important thing, but
he also disavows knowledge of what it is. This is one of the "paradoxical"
features of Socrates. At the same time, a familiar account proceeds, Socrates
believes that virtue is knowledge. This consists of two claims: (1) that
knowledge is necessary for virtue; and (2) that knowledge is sufficient for
virtue. While the first is plausible enough, the second is far-fetched, for
it denies the possibility of incontinence. The more mature Plato corrects
for this. In the *Republic*, for example, Plato introduces a tripartite division
within the soul, which allows for the possibility of intra-psychic conflict. He

[18] See Vlastos (1991) and Irwin (1995).