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Abstract

While serving as a Visiting Fellow at Lancaster University, I was asked to lead an informal seminar on Classical Philosophy. It was to be a reading group of postgraduate students and staff, focusing on two foundational texts of Western civilization: Plato's Republic and Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics. I happily accepted. The resulting two-hour, weekly sessions over Michaelmas Term were lively times of philosophical effervescence, full of probative questions, interesting interpretations, diverse evaluations, vigorous debates, and shared insights. Postmodernists engaged in the holy act of Interpreting the Text, we nonetheless strained to grasp the "true meaning" of the texts, to extend our range of charitable understanding across twenty-four centuries of linguistic and cultural difference, and then to examine that meaning in light of our contemporary context and personal perspectives. However successful that collective exercise may have been, it was certainly provocative. [*excerpt*]

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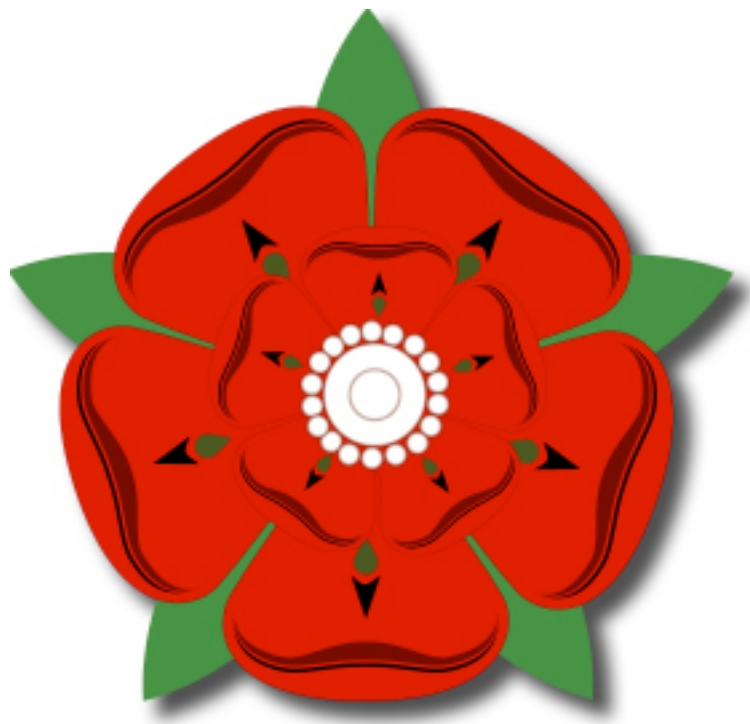
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Reflections on Reading Plato and Aristotle in Lancaster¹

Daniel R. DeNicola

I. Text and Context

While serving as a Visiting Fellow at Lancaster University, I was asked to lead an informal seminar on Classical Philosophy. It was to be a reading group of postgraduate students and staff, focusing on two foundational texts of Western civilization: Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. I happily accepted. The resulting two-hour, weekly sessions over Michaelmas Term were lively times of philosophical effervescence, full of probative questions, interesting interpretations, diverse evaluations, vigorous debates, and shared insights. Postmodernists engaged in the holy act of *Interpreting the Text*, we nonetheless strained to grasp the "true meaning" of the texts, to extend our range of charitable understanding across twenty-four centuries of linguistic and cultural difference, and then to examine that meaning in light of our contemporary context and personal perspectives. However successful that collective exercise may have been, it was certainly provocative.

The *Republic* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* are majestic and magisterial. Masterworks of two philosophical patriarchs, they come to us through the labors (and filters) of generations of scholars who unearthed, preserved, transliterated, translated, corrected, edited, annotated, and commented upon them. Their ideas are woven deeply into Western culture; they have each generated a vast and still-expanding scholarly literature, and they are surely among the most frequently taught texts in the contemporary world. They are, of course, very different texts: their authors, despite studious decades together, are famously different in philosophical outlook, creating a rivalry that established opposing polarities of thought. The two texts differ in genre and style, in purpose and topics, in methods and vision, in presuppositions and conclusions. Yet both are concerned with the elaboration of normativity, with how the governance of the good might be manifested in our lives. And both texts argue that some possible lives and some possible human arrangements are better than others. Indeed, both project ideally good lives.

By contrast, my purpose in this little essay is quite modest. I won't offer a grand vision, not even an exegesis of any portion of the texts; nor will I attempt to distill our conversations. Instead, I propose to reflect briefly on three broad, braided themes from these works: the hierarchies of the worthwhile, the place of the philosophic life, and "doing philosophy" as an activity. All of which will suggest reflexive observations about their inspirational source – our group reading of Plato and Aristotle in Lancaster – with which I will conclude.

II. Hierarchies of the Worthwhile

It is one thing to find an activity worthwhile, but quite another to claim it is more worthwhile than something else. We tolerate, sometimes are even buoyed by, the fact that our fellow human beings find so many different activities to be not just pleasurable, but worthwhile. From football to opera, from poetry to social media, from philately to philosophy – it is a dazzling array, a sustaining profusion of apparently good things. We might debate their extrinsic value, their utilitarian payoff; but we hesitate to dispute claims that they are also valuable in themselves, because we will soon be led into the mysteries of justifying intrinsic

¹ For this experience, I am grateful to Oliver Thorne, who instigated and organised the group, and to the other regular participants: Phil Chandler, Martha Ebbeson, Natalia Klaaser, Nicola Mathie, Dan Palmer, Tom Randall, Faye Tucker, and Tom Wolstenholme. My thanks also go to my home institution, Gettysburg College, and to Lancaster University for this opportunity.

value. In a way, the forceful claim that something has intrinsic worth, that it is valuable for its own sake, seems an attempt to end debate, to assert that further justification is otiose. Claiming that two very different activities both have intrinsic value sets up an uneasy truce; the question then is whether there are two different values or two manifestations of the same value in play. But claiming that one activity is better than the other, “higher” or more worthwhile, is an incitement; the more worthwhile gains a normative pull over the less so, hegemony of the better over the not-so-good. It is a comparative judgment, one that assumes some discernible difference in the amount or level of goodness of things. It is a judgment that seems, in the negative sense, judgmental.

For Plato, all value devolves from a transcendent unity, an ideal of the Good that is also the ideal of the True and of Beautiful.² This supreme and ineffable ideal subtends many hierarchies; hierarchies which, in reverse movement, serve as ladders of perfectibility. The *Republic* alone presents progressive levels that are ontological (entities from shadows to the highest Forms possessing increasing reality, permanence, and perfection); epistemological (increasingly reliable objects, forms of knowledge, and ranges of expertise); political (forms of social arrangements that range from tyranny to the just *kallipolis*); social (from artisans to the philosopher-king); psychological (from the body and its appetites to the mind in its rational splendor) – and more! Such hierarchies determine the comparative worth of pursuits: working with the hands is less noble than working with the mind; painting is lower than mathematics. While those activities that help a soul ascend these ladders (especially dialectic) are certainly worthwhile, nothing is better than the rare moment of knowing the Form of the Good (*noesis*).

Whereas Plato’s vision is structural, Aristotle’s is functional. Whereas Plato’s conception of goodness is a transcendental ideal, Aristotle’s is a dynamic sense of flourishing. And what determines and draws forth flourishing is a *telos*, an inherent goal or “final cause.” The entire cosmos and all within in it are understood teleologically. Within this system, those activities that conduce to the end have extrinsic value; the *telos* itself has intrinsic value. In addition, *teloi* are nested; they may become means to or components of other *teloi*, displaying a grand hierarchy we have come to call “the Great Chain of Being.” Aristotle delineates special periods of time in which we can realise our *telos* (pursue activities for their own sake): leisure. The optimal life will flourish in having the greatest scope for and experience of the most worthwhile activities of which it is capable. Aristotle argues that wise use of our reason is our generic human *telos*, and that theoretical reasoning (*theoria*), a knowing contemplation, is the pinnacle of human experience.

The confident presumptuousness of such judgments has not gone unnoticed. A particularly vociferous attack was authored by philosopher-turned-politician, Oliver Letwin.³ He briskly examines and rejects various bases on which to establish such a hierarchy. Though he acknowledges that there are grounds for judging one poem better than another, one football game better than another, Letwin asserts that there is no ground for judging poetry as more worthwhile than football or *vice versa*. Practices cannot be ranked. He declares, “the hierarchy of activities is [...] no more than myth.” And the myth is not harmless. Letwin claims, “the myth does [...] have a tendency to provoke shame and guilt, and thereby to undermine a person’s sense of the importance of standards in each of the activities he undertakes.” It has “a capacity not only to mislead intellectually but also harm morally.”

² Goodness (*agathou*), truth (*aletheia*), and beauty (*kalón*) are nowhere in Plato’s writings explicitly connected as a doctrine of ultimate value, yet both the transcendence and unity of these values underlies the entire body of his work. The *Republic*, of course, centers on the relationship between the first two.

³ O Letwin, *Ethics, Emotion and the Unity of the Self*, Croom Helm, London, 1987. This attack occupies Chapter 2, and the quoted passages in this paragraph are found on p. 28.

In Letwin's view, the moment at which such an evil is born is the dividing of the soul (*psychē*) or self into "higher" and "lower" parts.⁴ In fact, he sorts philosophers into two types: those that partition the self, he calls "Romantics"; those that retain an integrated self, he calls "Classicists." Plato is, in his account, "an archetypal philosophical Romantic": one who finds the human condition unsatisfactory; who seeks release from the "ultimate disjunctions" of human existence, the liberation of a true self from its degrading baggage; one who is nostalgic for our real home. Aristotle, by contrast, is a Classicist, who sees the material and the abstract merely as two perspectives; who maintains a unified self, in which body and mind, passion and reason, are integrated; who sources value within, not beyond, human experience.

Letwin is undeniably painting with a very broad brush – he also labels Kant and Freud as Romantics, and Hegel as a Classicist – but the image is telling. He portrays the divided self as the origin of hierarchies of activities; that partitioning does not, however, provide justification. He reviews and soundly rejects a list of purported bases for judging "higher" and "lower" activities. Though I cannot defend the point here, I find that Letwin argues dismissively and precipitously; and, were his arguments valid, they would undermine the claim that any activity is worthwhile, not just that one is objectively better than another. Moreover, I think Letwin may have misjudged the pivotal point. After all, Aristotle – Classicist though he may be – indulges in an extensive attempt to rank forms of life and the activities they involve; in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he sets our specific criteria for his judgments. Rather, I believe the key to such hierarchies, the place to start, is the phenomenon of intrinsic value, not the divided self. In fact, the latter may well derive from the former. That something is intrinsically worthwhile seems self-evident to those who experience it, and impossible to justify to those who do not.

III. The Philosophic Life

Nearly all Classical philosophers, including Plato and Aristotle, are keenly concerned to convey a conception of the good life. By implication if not explicitly, they tell us what is of value, what we should seek and praise, and how we should live. Their advice gains depth through their analyses of human nature, through their speculative visions of the cosmos in which we dwell, and through their projections of the ultimate grounds of the human prospect. For most of these thinkers, philosophy is a way of living – and the good life is a philosophical one.

If today we think of Socrates as the iconic philosopher, it is due to Plato. It is Socrates' trial and execution that spur Plato to his philosophical writing; all his works save one (the last work, *Laws*) honor Socrates through their use of dialogue in which Socrates himself is usually chief interlocutor. His writings present episodes of the philosopher in action, and for Plato philosophy is personal: the character of his interlocutors is revealed in their philosophising, and they are shaped by the philosophy they espouse. Philosophy is not a body of esoteric knowledge, but a fierce and consuming art that has urgency and moment, and is unsettling when engaged in with genuine conviction.

Plato's *Republic* is a philosophical disquisition on whether being a just or moral person is worthwhile; and, if it is, is it justified extrinsically, intrinsically, or both. It soon takes the form of an elaborate thought-experiment. It is serious play. As though placing figures in a dollhouse, Plato has his interlocutors envision the just person and arrange an optimal setting, the just state. In this, the first utopian tract, the optimal lives of all citizens depend on the wisdom of the philosopher. Plato elevates the philosopher as the one who is truly wise, and who therefore is in the best position to shape a life and a society. One doesn't stumble into enlightenment. The philosophical life is demanding. The long first phase entails

⁴ *Ibid.* The argument concerning the divided soul and Romanticism vs. Classicism occupies Chapter 1.

intense training and the devoted search for truth; for the rare one who apprehends truth and its goodness and beauty, the second phase requires living out the impact of that apprehension, structuring one's life and even one's community in light of that vision. For Plato, an encounter with the Form of the Good, True, and Beautiful is not merely a startling flash of understanding; it is a transformative experience, and we are different as a result. Seeing the truth ennobles us and improves us; we acquire a small spark of its goodness and beauty.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle articulates a rich conception of virtues and vices. He identifies two types: moral and intellectual. Together these form an ecology of character that is conducive to a good life – more precisely, to a flourishing life of happiness and self-actualisation (*eudaimonia*) in which we actively employ our highest capacities with excellence. But although Aristotle celebrates the interpretation of the good life as a life of practical wisdom, he ultimately argues that the purpose of practical wisdom is to facilitate theoretical wisdom. In short, philosophising is the most worthwhile human pursuit of all.⁵

This claim that the philosophic life is the optimal life, or that only a philosophical life is a good life, is one source of the charge of elitism often made against these thinkers. After all, the capacity for and interest in abstract philosophical thought are not distributed equally; the consequence is that access to a good life is not equitably available. Moreover, the fact that accomplished philosophers pronounce this claim suggests bias and arrogance: leisured, male aristocrats opining that the best life is the life of the leisured, male aristocrat. There is surely a weighty portion of truth in that charge. Of course, philosophical engagement requires security and peace and time for reflection – as both philosophers acknowledge; one cannot philosophise when mere survival is the concern. But it is not so much the account of what is required for a philosophical life that is objectionable; nor is it the claim that a philosophical life is good; it is the claim that such a life is the optimal life, the one truly good life.

There may, however, be something going on besides the arrogation of values. When we take seriously the question, “What is the good life?” we may find ourselves in a predicament parallel to the one who asks: “Why should I be rational?” To ask the latter question seriously is to search for reasons, and therefore to be already “playing the game” of rationality; it begs the question in the sort of transcendental way exploited by Immanuel Kant. Rationality seems to be a necessary presumption of the question. Similarly, when we consider “What is the good life?” we are thereby engaged in philosophical inquiry and beg the question as to whether its pursuit is worthwhile. Taking an activity to be worthwhile is, of course, not the same as claiming it is the most worthwhile of activities (the *summum bonum*); far less is it the claim that, as such, the activity should define a life.

Neither Plato nor Aristotle imagines that we could compartmentalise our philosophising as one worthwhile activity among many – a component of the good life, but not necessarily the *summum bonum*. Both men believe that the highest good will in fact become the defining focus of a good life, so pervasive as to characterise a life and to give life to character. We cannot dabble in the highest good; it claims us when we pursue it seriously. Both men believe that the good ramifies in our lives. Their versions of this ramification of the good differ, however. Plato's notion is that the Form of the Good attracts us (through our *eros*) and inspires our imitation of it (*mimesis*); it alters our soul, which alters our life, which in turn may alter our community. The truly good “governs,” giving a life both integrity and liberation. For Aristotle, it is the *telos*, our natural fulfillment that orders our efforts, summons our virtues, and shapes our life and our community. The activity of reason is our self-

⁵ These judgments are especially interesting when one considers that both intellectual men were clearly committed to practical projects: they each founded and led a school, and their efforts were strong enough to create institutions that survived them. Philosophical activity was at the heart of these institutions, but there were surely practical matters that frequently required attention. I especially marvel at Aristotle, who – given his brilliant and polymathic output, given the diverse collections and activities of the Lyceum, and given his own researches – must also have mastered time management.

actualisation, and its exercise requires much of our moral and intellectual character. In both versions, the ramification of the good pulls us to a philosophic life.

IV. Philosophy as an Activity

The hegemonic advocacy for the philosophical life as the good life might well be seen as self-deceptive. Aristotle explicitly argues for self-sufficiency as a criterion in determining worthwhile activities; the contemplative life, the life of theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) is crowned the optimal life, in part, because it is the most self-sufficient. Yet the time, space, and opportunity for philosophy are, he acknowledges incidentally, dependent upon practical reasoning and the efforts of others. Philosophising depends on, among other factors, education, leisure, sustenance, shelter, relative peace and security – all of which depend on excellences in the practical and productive activities of others. It takes a *polis*.

Both philosophers argue that the good life for individuals requires a good community. Plato affirms this mutual dependence in the *Republic*, an insight that problematises the path to the establishment of his *kallipolis*: the just state requires optimised citizens, who are quite improbable unless they were reared in a just state. But in the *Republic*, he clearly ranks the thriving of the state of greater importance than the happiness (*eudaimonia*) of any individual or class.⁶ Aristotle eschews such totalitarianism, yet the good community remains essential for the good life. It serves as the nurturing and formative context for individual character and the theater in which virtues and vices are displayed. Especially when combined with the *Politics*, the *Nicomachean Ethics* portrays the good life not only as contributing to the sustaining of a good community, but also as formed and expressed in communal engagement.

To what extent, then, is philosophy an individual or a group activity? Is the philosophical life one of solitary contemplation or is it one of dynamic social interaction? There is a deep tension in these ancient philosophers between the individual and the communal aspects of philosophy. At its core, the conflict arises from the pairing of a subjective and individualistic epistemology with a communitarian arena for the good life.

The dominant epistemological metaphor in Classical philosophy is that knowing is a form of seeing. The apprehension of truth (*noesis*) is an occasion in the mental life an individual, a private epiphany of insight – though a potentially transformative event with a range of manifestations. Even when a truth is unfolded in a series of steps – as, for example, in a Euclidean geometrical proof – there is the presumption of an individual consciousness that assents to each deduction, silently affirming the logic of each step and the validity of the conclusion. Enlightenment dawns within one soul at a time. Philosophising is an activity of and within individual minds – a lonely and, in a Socratic mode, heroic activity.

For Plato and Aristotle, we are individualised by our souls. From Socrates onward, the soul (*psychē*) is the moral and intellectual center of personhood, and the health of the soul is a major, if not the primary, concern of philosophy. The normative project – whether seen as character formation, flourishing, transcendence, or escape from earthly strictures (salvation) – is a project for individual souls. The *Republic* presents the soul's career as one of epistemological and moral development that extends even beyond a single lifespan.⁷ For Plato, the soul seems to bear an individuality that is deeper than gender or relationships or even memory; yet it is more than a purely ontological individuality, because it retains a cumulative normativity. For Aristotle, the human soul defines a type of being. The good life – a flourishing of the soul supported by a healthy body – may be profiled generically; it derives from a perfection of human nature. The Aristotelian soul is the gendered structure of the human body that enables all its vital capacities. Yet the soul also facilitates a character that is

⁶ Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, IN, 1992, IV, 420b.

⁷ See the Myth of Er, *Republic*, X, 614-21.

individual; its development, excellences, and happiness are individual. For both men it is the mind with its ability to cognise and to reason, the most wonderful aspect of the person, that gives us our stature in the cosmos.

These reflections suggest that philosophising is a private activity of individual souls or minds. Philosophy arises wondrously within individuals, is carried on by individuals, and aims to improve the lives of individuals. Yet this is not the whole story, for there are strong elements in Classical philosophy that suggest it is a collective pursuit with communitarian aims.

One might immediately point to Plato's use of dialogue. He began his work in thrall of Socrates for whom philosophical dialogue with others was a deep need, a mission, and a life's work. Philosophy consisted in purposeful conversation with others. Plato, *pace* Socrates, also pursued philosophical thinking through writing, though in dialogue form to capture the give-and-take of multiple thinkers' viewpoints. Admittedly, this style faded over his career: the dialogues became more a discourse of his own dialectical thinking, less a vivid record of different people's viewpoints. But taken as a whole, the Platonic corpus celebrates philosophy as dialogue, as an activity that requires a community, or at least an attentive group of responsive thinkers.

None of Aristotle's early dialogues is extant, and judging from what has survived, they may not be representative of his mature views. Yet even Aristotle's analytic tracts usually situate his thought within the larger community of philosophers, those thinkers who addressed the same issues in the past. He routinely makes astute use of the testimony of other philosophic researchers. He elevates a sense of a philosophical conversation that transcends time and space. Aristotle, more than any other ancient thinker, envisions philosophy as a richly diverse yet continuous, critical tradition.

Both Plato and Aristotle institutionalised philosophy by founding their respective schools. Though Plato's Academy emphasised education and Aristotle's Lyceum emphasized research, both provided venues for philosophising. Plato's intellectual progenitor, Pythagoras, established the pattern of gathering an adult group to pursue philosophy; but, although his "brotherhood" conducted significant research, it also seems like a charismatic cult of like-minded believers. The "schools of thought" in Classical philosophy often coalesced in real institutions or communities: the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the Neo-Platonists all organised philosophical communes. Epicurus' Garden and Plotinus' school were not simply designed to propagate their philosophical doctrines; they were also embodiments of a philosophical way of living, the good life in community.

The tension between philosophy as individual and communal reveals a lack or dissonance between treatments of the moral and the intellectual. What is missing is a communal epistemology. Aristotle may come closer than Plato to this idea, or at least his views are more compatible with the possibility. He distinguishes a category of intellectual virtues distinct from moral virtues. His consideration of moral virtues and vices – their nature and varieties, how they may be acquired, how they may be practiced and modeled – is extensive and elaborate. Though these are settled qualities of individual characters, the family and the political community are, as I noted, essential as the incubator of these virtues and the arena in which they are displayed. The intellectual virtues, by contrast, though crucially important for the optimal life, are given a truncated treatment. These virtues and vices of the rational soul are likewise qualities of individuals' minds. But the family and the political community comprise a moral, not an intellectual arena. At best, society is seen as a venue for the application of practical reasoning, not an interactive intellectual community.

We might say the Greeks had an epistemic community in practice, but not in theory. Perhaps we are simply left with the notion that philosophical activity must display a rhythm,

an oscillation between the private and the communal, between ruminating and apprehending at one time, and collegial interaction – listening, sharing, responding, and debating – at others.

V. Reading Plato and Aristotle in Lancaster

Any voluntary, faithful reading group presumably has judged the activity worthwhile. The group may include scholars for whom familiarity with the focal text may have utilitarian benefits for their later career's work. But there is a phenomenological difference, I believe, when we engage in something in which we find intrinsic value. Our sense of time alters: we don't feel the need to "get through" the experience, because we are already at the goal. We experience a flow in which we are immersed in the activity, our energies are focused, and time passes without our notice, except as interruption or boundary – when we feel the pressures of the obligatory. Plato once compared this state to being a free man, rather than a slave.⁸ This phenomenology is especially vivid when it is a shared engagement, when a group is valuing the experience intrinsically. That gives the group its effervescence. But what exactly is shared?

A shared valuation of the reading experience does not imply shared perspectives and evaluations of the text. But in our case, the group was reading texts that celebrate the philosophic life, that claim the good life is philosophical. Were not we, then, while busily engaging in philosophical discussions about Plato and Aristotle, tacitly endorsing their claim? No. Valuing philosophy as an activity does not entail valuing particular philosophical conclusions – even about philosophy, since the nature of philosophy is itself a philosophical issue. In fact, many participants dissented vigorously from the visions of the good life dilated by Plato and Aristotle, and others proposed qualifications or amendments to these visions. There are at least three possible points of divergence: (1) One may argue that these philosophical patriarchs go wrong in assuming a monistic or unified theory of value; that worthwhile activities do not form a single hierarchy capped by a *summum bonum*. (2) One may argue that both men falter when they make the extrapolation from worthwhile activity to good life; that a good life is not defined by the sustaining of the highest human state or activity. (3) Or one may argue that the good and true simply do not ramify in the ways and patterns envisioned by these thinkers. And here the critiques widen: perhaps they are mistaken about the most worthwhile activity; maybe their constructions of the social order, of education, of human nature are misguided; or perhaps these specific errors devolve from other metaphysical or epistemological defects. Though we well might dissent in these ways – and all were represented in our group – we need not deny that engaging with these texts philosophically was worthwhile. Such an experience might surely be embraced as part of the "good" in a good life.

The texts are, in the end, provocations to philosophise. "Doing philosophy" or philosophising is a complex activity. To speak of it as a single activity (identified with *dialectic*, *theoria*, or whatever) may be misleading. Contemplating, reasoning, apprehending, analysing, clarifying, proposing, refuting, and offering counterexamples, and so on, are all distinct activities. Each and all can be aspects of philosophising. To "do" these is effectively to be a citizen of an epistemic community, a particular kind of regulative, epistemic community that is philosophical. It is in such a community that the intellectual virtues are formed and employed. Curiosity, attention to detail and nuance, the ability to grasp other's perspectives, a sense of salience, respect for evidence, intellectual humility, expressive courage – these and others are virtues that underpin the doing of philosophy with excellence. To comprehend the activity of a philosophical seminar we not only need a conception of worthwhile activities, an understanding of textual explication, and knowledge of the various

⁸ *Theaetetus*, 172d-e.

activities of philosophy; we not only need to understand the epistemology of individual insight. We also need to understand the group as a regulative epistemic community and the intellectual virtues (and vices) that may be displayed therein. In short, we need an epistemology adequate for philosophy itself.