

Socrates on the Moral Mischief of Misology

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Abstract In Plato's dialogues, the *Phaedo*, *Laches*, and *Republic*, Socrates warns his interlocutors about the dangers of misology. Misology is explained by analogy with misanthropy, not as the hatred of other human beings, but as the hatred of the *logos* or reasonable discourse. According to Socrates, misology arises when a person alternates between believing an argument to be correct, and then refuting it as false. If Socrates is right, then misanthropy is sometimes instilled when a person goes from trusting people to learning that others sometimes betray our reliance and expectations, and finally not to placing any confidence whatsoever in other people, or, in the case of misology, in the correctness or trustworthiness of arguments. A cynical indifference to the soundness of arguments generally is sometimes associated with Socrates' polemical targets, the Sophists, at least as Plato represents Socrates' reaction to these itinerant teachers of rhetoric, public speaking and the fashioning of arguments suitable to any occasion. Socrates' injunctions against misology are largely moral, pronouncing it 'shameful' and 'very wicked', and something that without further justification we must 'guard against', maintaining that we will be less excellent persons if we come to despise argument as lacking the potential of leading to the truth. I examine Socrates' moral objections to misology which I show to be inconclusive. I consider instead the problem of logical coherence in the motivations supposedly underlying misology, and conclude that misology as Socrates intends the concept is an emotional reaction to argumentation on the part of persons who have not acquired the logical dialectical skills or will to sort out good from bad arguments. We cannot dismiss argument as directed toward the truth unless we have a strong reason for doing so, and any such argument must itself presuppose that at least some reasoning can be justified in discovering and justifying belief in interesting truths. The relevant passages from Socrates' discussion of the

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soul's immortality in the *Phaedo* are discussed in detail, and set in scholarly background against Socrates' philosophy more generally, as represented by Plato's dialogues. I conclude by offering a suggestive list of practical remedies to avoid the alienation from argument in dialectic with which Socrates is concerned.

Keywords Argument · Dialectic · Misology · Plato · Socrates · Sophists

1 Against Argument

Socrates in several of Plato's dialogues warns his interlocutors about the evils of *misology*. Misology, as Socrates explains, by analogy with misanthropy as the hatred of humanity, is the hatred of *logos*, of words, in one sense, but more relevantly of discussion, logical reasoning, and argument. Socrates seems to be concerned that individuals who could otherwise find wisdom through the exercise of dialectic will be prevented from making progress in the search for truth and care of their souls if they turn against argument by becoming misologists.¹

How do mentally competent thinkers come to develop a hatred of argument? Hatred of *arguing* or of *listening* to arguments that seem to go nowhere at the same time that they threaten to go on forever is not the same as a loathing or abhorrence of argument. We may consider argument itself along Platonic lines to be something more abstract than any of its particular instantiations. Argument is a form of conversation in which contrary positions of theoretical or practical interest are represented and brought into adversarial interaction, where the best justifications that can be marshaled in support of one position over another serves as a first point of rational encounter in a disputational method of inquiry that is indispensable in the cognitive search for truth and wise governance in the social order. If we are rational in our inquiry and serious about trying to discover the truth, then Socrates thinks we can only proceed dialectically, accepting at least provisionally whatever may turn out upon critical examination to be the best conclusions of the best arguments, however the arguments get started and wherever they may lead.²

2 Cultivating Critical Reasoning Abilities

To be successful in this task, we must master argumentation skills. We must be able to construct and criticize arguments effectively according to a standard set of norms for good arguments that are independent of any particular application, and thereby

¹ Plato (1981, 1991), *Phaedo* 89d–91c; *Republic* 411c4–e3; *Laches* 188c.

² For present purposes I assume a relatively conventional popular interpretation of Socrates' philosophical vocation. See Stokes (1992, 26–55). Seeskind (1987), Gonzalez (1998), Santas (1979), Irwin (1977, 1995). Scott (2004) challenges many of the standard readings of Plato's dialogues. Vlastos (1983). Socrates' 'mission' is usually historically or apocryphally related to the oracle at Delphi's positive reply to Socrates' friend Chaerophon's question as to whether Socrates was the wisest man in Athens. As generally with the Pythia's pronouncements, there is enormous latitude for exact interpretation, which did not necessitate Socrates' pursuit of the *elenchus* and *maieutic* among his fellow Athenians. Socrates recounts the episode as part of his defense at his trial in Plato, *Apologia* 20e3–21a.

to sort out in a principled way the good arguments from the less good by their distinctive inferential and other constructive and polemical characteristics.

If we become misologists in Socrates' sense by turning our backs on argument, refusing to appreciate its value, then we cut ourselves off from what Socrates believes is the only method of attaining the kind of philosophical truth that is vital to the soul's welfare. We will then be neglecting one of our highest moral imperatives to achieve moral excellence, *arête*, or virtue in the care of our souls. This is the goal of an enlightened mind, according to Socrates, who in Plato's dialogue *Protagoras* and elsewhere in the later middle period of his writings identifies virtue reductively with wisdom.³ It is by means of argument and dialectical exchange that we raise conceptual difficulties to challenge our understanding, consider alternative possibilities, and negotiate our points and positions in adversarial interactions with other thinkers. We thrash these things out with persons who may have a critical perspective that is not guaranteed to be sympathetic to our own, and from whom we should accordingly stand ready to learn. We advance theses, criticize conflicting views, and shift or sustain the burden of proof to support this or that proposition relevant to the inquiry, in the course of which we may be expected to apply an arsenal of logical distinctions and reasoning criteria in order to maintain a respected place in the conversation as we make progress toward a grasp of eternal truths.

When it functions properly, argument tries out the strengths and weaknesses of different often conflicting choices in theory or social practice. These are the conclusions of arguments, in the form of propositions that appear to follow logically from things we may already believe, and in whose outcome and applications we may have heavily vested interests. If we come to hate argument, and refuse obstinately to consider and follow only the best arguments in decision-making because we have grown cynical at the (sophistic) misuse of reasoning methods, or for any other reason, then we preclude ourselves from the only path toward wisdom, and, in Socrates' conviction, as such we are not taking proper care of our souls. Socrates, morally virtuous person that he strives to be, and hence by implication concerned about the care of his own soul and that of anyone his teachings can motivate, is exercised about the damage that might be done both to individual souls and the city-state, were misology to prevail especially in the hearts and minds of unseasoned more highly impressionable young people. There is consequently a Socratic responsibility, as Socrates views his role in the city-state, to nurture developing minds in the purpose and methods of good argument, and to steer them away from misology toward a more appreciative regard for the value of argument as instrumental in the search for truth.⁴

³ Plato, *Protagoras* 349d–351c. Vlastos (1972, 415–458), Freejohn (1982), Devereux (1992), Brickhouse and Smith (1997).

⁴ The responsibility to help young thinkers avoid misology is a corollary of Socrates' commitment to the care of the soul through the two-part method of *elenchus* and *maieutic*, the last step of the *elenchus* constituting the first step of the *maieutic*. The *maieutic* in turn is the philosophical midwifery whereby Socrates leads the *elenchus*-chastened soul to *arête*, virtue or moral excellence. Misologists will be excluded from Socrates' two-part program for the care of the soul because they have already renounced any interest in argument.

3 Concept of Misology in Plato's Dialogues

In Plato's dialogue *Phaedo*, Socrates is depicted in the final moments before he drinks the poisonous hemlock, discoursing on the soul's immortality and cautioning his friends about the dangers of misology. Plato describes Socrates and Phaedo as having the following exchange on the day of Socrates' execution by the jury's decision in Athens. Plato himself was not there, as he informs his readers. He may have been preoccupied preparing his flight to Megara, about 70 km away from Athens, where he sought refuge with Euclides after Socrates was put to death. As a result, Plato needed to reconstruct the incidents of Socrates' death and the discussion that preceded it from eyewitness reports of participants there who unlike Plato were either not under the same threat of guilt by close association with Socrates, or else may have had greater courage to defy the authorities and prevailing political sentiment.⁵

Socrates prepares his listeners gathered in his prison cell to follow the intricacies of what turns out to be a remarkably convoluted proof for the immortality of the soul.⁶ During the course of this discussion, the non-Athenians Cebes and Simmias argue to the contrary that the soul is not immortal if, as Cebes believes, the soul is a harmony and the parts of the lyre on which the harmony is played is destroyed, or, as Simmias contends, the soul is like a man who outwears many cloaks, one of which finally survives his death. Simmias' cloaks are supposed to be analogous to the succession of a soul's repeated incarnations in different bodies. The body at least for that reason is not immortal, as when a final relatively unworn cloak like the body eventually remains behind after its owner's death. Socrates' friends thus entertain his last moments with precisely the kind of intellectual dispute, a vigorous wrestling match of ideas, on which Socrates had always thrived.

As Cebes' and Simmias's arguments contradict one another concerning the possibility of the soul's reincarnation, they seem logically to undermine and negate or nullify one another. Socrates intervenes to gently admonish his friends:

[Socrates] ...there is a certain experience we must be careful to avoid.
What is that? I [Phaedo] asked.

[Socrates] That we should not become misologists, as people become misanthropes. There is no greater evil one can suffer than to hate reasonable discourse. Misology and misanthropy arise in the same way. Misanthropy comes when a man without knowledge or skill has placed great trust in someone and believes him to be altogether truthful, sound and trustworthy; then, a short time afterwards he finds him to be wicked and unreliable, and then this happens in

⁵ See Brickhouse and Smith (2002). An interesting and well-researched account of the political background to the events surrounding Socrates' trial and the aftermath for his followers is offered by Stone (1989).

⁶ Socrates' abstruse argument for the soul's immortality appears in Plato's *Phaedo* 84d2–107a1, with warnings about misology sandwiched in between. The underlying idea is that the soul as essentially living is deathless in the sense that as an entity (*eidos*) the living considered in itself does not admit but is incompatible with death. Socrates supports the conclusion on the general conceptual grounds that no principle accepts its opposite, and that whatever is deathless is indestructible. See, among other insightful expositions in an expansive secondary literature, Frede (1978).

another case; when one has frequently had that experience, especially with those whom one believed to be one's closest friends, then, in the end, after many such blows, one comes to hate all men and to believe that no one is sound in any way at all. Have you not seen this happen?

I surely have, [Phaedo] said.

This is a shameful state of affairs, [Socrates] said, and obviously due to an attempt to have human relations without any skill in human affairs, for such skill would lead one to believe, what is in fact true, that the very good and the very wicked are both quite rare, and that most men are between those extremes. (*Phaedo* 89c6–90a2)

Socrates does not enter the fray to defend again his own previous conclusions in support of the soul's immortality. Despite the urgent relevance of the question to his present personal situation as he prepares for death, Socrates turns instead to a matter of greater scope and generality, one of more sweeping philosophical interest and urgency, he thinks. It is a topic with implications for the moral development of other souls, including those of the friends he is about to leave behind, and for his philosophical legacy of encouraging others to seek wisdom through the proper theoretical understanding and practical application of argument in dialectical exchange, which is to say the *logos*.

Socrates is confident in his own prior argument for the soul's immortality. He declares, in a passage partially quoted below, 'I shall not be eager to get the agreement of those present that what I say is true, except incidentally, but I shall be very eager that I should myself be thoroughly convinced that things are so' (*Phaedo* 91a5–8). Socrates seizes the opportunity instead to speak out and advise his friends not to lose faith in the value of argument, even when it seems to point equally in opposite incompatible directions, ending only in stalemate and indecision. It is likely part of the unspoken subtext of Plato's many-layered dialogue that Socrates chooses to address the threat of misology shortly before his death, since it would be not unreasonable to imagine his followers easily becoming misologues through resentment of the kind of argument that seems to have brought Socrates to his final tragic lethal punishment. If you love Socrates, and if his engaging in argument has deprived you of his precious companionship, then you might find it natural if not entirely rational to develop a hate for argument as the agent or at least the occasion of his demise. Socrates prefers that his friends continue to love argument for its own sake, as a tool for perfecting their souls through the pursuit of truth, and not become estranged from it even when it appears fruitless or personally hazardous. It is not argument itself that is to blame, in such instances, he believes, but only its misuse in the hands of the opinionated many in the less-than-ideal democratic city-state, as Socrates' defense recounted in Plato's dialogue *Apologia* brilliantly but ineffectually illustrates.

Socrates next explains the direction by which some people lose their trust in arguments. He attributes misology to individuals not having mastered the skills of argument sufficiently to understand how the game is played. He begins by making the following comparison:

[Socrates] ...arguments are not like men in [every] particular...The similarity lies rather in this: it is as when one who lacks skill in arguments puts his trust in an argument as being true, then shortly afterwards believes it to be false—as sometimes it is and sometimes it is not—and so with another argument and then another. You know how those in particular who spend their time studying contradiction in the end believe themselves to have become very wise and that they alone have understood that there is no soundness or reliability in any object or in any argument, but that all that exists simply fluctuates up and down as if it were in the Euripus [straits between Euboea and Boetia beset by violent and variable currents] and does not remain in the same place for any time at all.

[Phaedo] What you say, I said, is certainly true. (*Phaedo* 90b4–c6)

If we do not have the necessary skills for critically evaluating arguments at our command, then we may be subject to being cognitively tossed about on the tide of arguments. We are subject in that case to the whims of opinion and the manipulation of belief through non-rational forces because we cannot distinguish good from bad reasoning, between inferences that are actually as advertised and those that may appear persuasive to the undiscerning, but are actually fallacious. Being at sea argumentatively, Socrates now proposes, is never the fault of argument itself, and is never a just cause for misology. It is rather the inadequately prepared thinker whose critical reasoning defects manifest themselves when contradictory arguments are fallaciously made to seem equally correct:

It would be pitiable, Phaedo, [Socrates] said, when there is a true and reliable argument and one that can be understood, if a man who has dealt with such arguments as appear at one time true, at another time untrue, should not blame himself or his own lack of skill but, because of his distress, in the end gladly shift the blame away from himself to the arguments, and spend the rest of his life hating and reviling reasonable discussion and so be deprived of truth and knowledge of reality.

[Phaedo] Yes, by Zeus, I said, that would be pitiable indeed. (*Phaedo* 90c7–d8)

The solution to misology, Socrates believes, the cure for the ailment, is to strengthen reason's resolve. We must not permit ourselves to believe that argument is irrelevant to the search for truth. If we lose sight of truth as the goal of argument, then the complexities of some reasoning, the twists and turns a chain of argument sometimes takes, and the unexpected assumptions and implications with which it sometimes proceeds, can easily seem overwhelmingly discouraging. Skill in handling arguments can then be expected to take care of itself, occurring naturally through participation in the activity of dialectic, as a thinker fixed on the vital purpose of argument matures and gains broad experience reflecting on the merits or otherwise of a variety of reasoning strategies.

The only requisite is not to back away from argument under the impression that it is useless, but to stay the course with the belief that only arguments leading to the

truth can ultimately prevail. Socrates accordingly proposes a practical if strangely volitional remedy to exclude from thought the idea that argument is pointless in arriving at knowledge:

This then is the first thing we should guard against, [Socrates] said. We should not allow into our minds the conviction that argumentation has nothing sound about it; much rather we should believe that it is we who are not yet sound and that we must take courage and be eager to attain soundness, you and the others for the sake of your whole life still to come, and I for the sake of death itself. I am in danger at this moment of not having a philosophical attitude about this, but like those who are quite uneducated, I am eager to get the better of you in argument, for the uneducated, when they engage in argument about anything, give no thought to the truth about the subject of discussion but are only eager that those present will accept the position they have set forth. (*Phaedo* 90d9–91a4)

It is a puzzling exception. If argument undertakes to examine reasons for any proposition in an open-ended, open-minded way, then why should not the question as to whether argument leads to the truth be equally subject to dispute? Is there no argument to show that all arguments are irrelevant to the truth? If there were, then, presumably, the conclusion of such an inference in all consistency would also need to be irrelevant to the truth. If we have already dissociated argument from truth, however, why should we care whether or not it would be consistent to consider an argument to show that arguments generally are irrelevant to the discovery of truth? Socrates might regard any argument against the knowledge amplifying power of inference as self-defeating, if it is supposed to result in a truth about the nature and limits of argument. Such a stance would at once make misology entirely a matter of emotion or the passions, rather than reason.

The problem of misology arises again in Plato's later middle period dialogue, the *Republic*, not as a reaction to incompetent, interminable, or mutually defeating arguments, but simply as a matter of neglect and oversight in a person's education. Here Socrates asks:

[Socrates] Now what about the man who labors a great deal at gymnastic and feasts himself really well but never touches music and philosophy? At first, with his body in good condition, isn't he filled with high thought and spirit, and doesn't he become braver than himself?

[Glaucou] Very much.

[Socrates] But what about when he does nothing else and never communes with a Muse? Even if there was some love of learning in his soul, because it never tastes of any kind of learning or investigation nor partakes in speech or the rest of music, doesn't it become weak, deaf, and blind because it isn't awakened or trained and its perceptions aren't purified?

That's so, [Glaucou] said.

[Socrates] Then, I suppose, such a man becomes a misologist and unmusical. He no longer makes any use of persuasion by means of speech but goes about

everything with force and savageness, like a wild beast; and he lives ignorantly and awkwardly without rhythm or grace.

Exactly, [Glaucon] said, that's the way it is. (*Republic* 411c4–e3)

We can now abstract from and collect together the essential points of Socrates' disquisitions on the nature and perils of misology:

- The pursuit of wisdom is demanded by the proper care of the soul.
- Our souls are the most precious things we have, the proper care of which is our highest moral imperative.
- Satisfying the soul's highest moral imperative is something that any rational thinker with proper will and guidance can accomplish (Socratic *maieutic*).
- The only path to (Socratic) wisdom is by way of dialectical reasoning (Socratic *elenchus*) concerning the nature of the eternal Forms or Ideas.
- Dialectical reasoning is a matter of engaging in an open-ended conversational exchange of arguments.
- The exchange of arguments has no fixed terminus, but rational judgment that is also fair in its evaluation of an argument can sometimes be seen by protagonist and interlocutor alike as strongly favoring one position over the contrary, and of someone in the exchange as having had the better side of the argument.
- Other dialectical scenarios can include exact standoffs or discussions that could continue unlimitedly with new worthwhile arguments appearing from time to time on both sides of an interesting and perpetually unresolved but not obviously irresolvable conflict.
- The dialectical process in pursuit of the truth about a matter of inquiry is the application of reason in the form of argument.
- It is this sense of reason in the form of argument that according to Socrates the misologist comes to hate.
- The misologist's general hatred or distrust of argument, or its neglect resulting from an inadequate education, must also include the specific refined techniques of dialectical reasoning that Socrates refined as the *elenchus*.
- By hating reason in the form of argument (especially the Socratic *elenchus*), the misologist is precluded from the only path toward (Socratic) wisdom.
- By hating reason in the form of argument, the misologist is thereby also precluded from any possibility of achieving proper care of the soul.
- By hating reason in the form of argument, the misologist is thereby precluded from any possibility of satisfying the soul's highest moral imperative to properly care for itself as the most precious of possessions.

4 Diagnosis, Treatment and Cure of Misology

Misology is bad for the soul, something to avoid if we care for what is most precious. We must love arguments if we are to achieve wisdom, for there is no other path. How, then is misology to be avoided or overcome?

Unfortunately, Socrates does not offer definite positive suggestions as to how misology is supposed to be avoided, other than the recommendation to fortify ourselves against the thought that argument is irrelevant to truth. Since misology is nothing other than a hatred of argument resulting from the conviction, however it comes about, that argument is irrelevant to truth, Socrates' counsel amounts to nothing more than telling us that to avoid falling into misology we should try to avoid accepting misology's pessimism concerning argument as a conduit to knowledge. The difficult question remains how we can achieve this resolute denial if misology is not itself a result of conscious choice but something that might come over us like a virus, against our will, when a triggering event of some kind finally makes us completely disillusioned about the value of argument. What, if anything, can responsible Socratic philosophers, vocationally committed to promoting the pursuit of wisdom as the sum of all virtues, hope to do about it?

There is no salve or pill, shock therapy or vaccination to save the susceptible from misology. The only armor against it, Socrates seems to believe, is to know that there are situations in argumentation when it may be tempting to succumb to misology, and to guard against such moral mischief to the soul's progress toward enlightenment by resisting the siren call to turn away from argumentation, even when it seems tedious, excessively complex, superficially apparently pointless, or interminable. Socrates might imagine that forewarned is forearmed, so that if we know about the possibility of becoming misologues under certain circumstances, we can be on our guard to overcome the encroaching distaste for argument with a greater effort of will. Although he is not explicit on the matter, it appears that Socrates regards misology as a special case of *akrasia*, or weakness of will, against which reasoning + reinforced willpower can often conquer the contrary urgings of the emotions or appetites, in this case to shun dialectical argument. Having been warned about the risks of becoming a misologue, and understanding the obstacle it poses for attaining wisdom as part of the proper care of the soul, we may come to recognize that the only alternative to argument in dialectic, constructive and critical, is the use of brute force. Socrates makes this explicit in Plato's *Republic*, in the previously quoted passage, when he states: '[The misologue] no longer makes any use of persuasion by means of speech but goes about everything with force and savageness, like a wild beast'.⁷

If we believe that the use of force rather than argument in all adversarial interactions is unavoidable because argument inherently gets us nowhere closer to the truth of the matter, if we have become cynical and skeptical about the use of

⁷ The threat of violence as a substitute for rational persuasion by means of dialectic among musical thinkers is a pervasive theme in Plato's *Republic*. Plato sets the stage for an ongoing discussion about the conflict of reason and force in the individual soul and the ideal city-state in the dialogue's opening dramatic margin, when Socrates and Polemarchus, son of the wealthy Cephalus have the following exchange as Socrates and Glaucon, Plato's brother, are walking back to Athens from the Piraeus, *Republic* 327c2–8: 'Polemarchus said, "Socrates, I guess you two [Socrates and Glaucon, Plato's brother] are hurrying to get away to town." "That's not a bad guess," [Socrates] said. "Well," he said, "do you see how many of us there are?" "Of course." "Well, then," he said, "either prove stronger than these men or stay here." "Isn't there still one other possibility..." [Socrates] said, "our persuading you that you must let us go?" "Could you really persuade," [Polemarchus] said, "if we don't listen?" "There's no way," said Glaucon.'

dialectic, reasoning and argument in the search for truth, then by definition there is no recourse except to violence when disputes over anything of value arise. If we acknowledge that justice requires truth among other things, if truth is essential to the pursuit of justice in the proper sense of the word, and if only dialectic, reasoning and argument can discover the truth, then justice itself requires that which the misologue repudiates as an ineffective potentially endless back and forth of inferences that, with no independent basis for proper judgment, are indiscriminately alike equally good and equally bad.

5 Understanding the Origins and Conditions of Misology

What appears for a time to be the very best of such arguments, ones you would vigorously defend and whose conclusions you would fearlessly and unhesitatingly apply, the misologist complains, those same arguments, are invariably refuted from yet another perspective, with a different set of assumptions or interpretations of the meanings of key terms in an assumption if not the assumption in its entirety.

Grounds for the occurrence of involuntary misology are found, for example, in Oliver Wendell Holmes' more recent description of one kind of disgust produced by what Holmes takes to be a particularly obnoxious category of discursive reasoning in his (1883) compendium of observations to a then-fashionable mutual admiration society, *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table: Every Man His Own Boswell*:

What are the great faults of conversation? Want of ideas, want of words, want of manners, are the principal ones, I suppose you think. I don't doubt it, but I will tell you what I have found spoils more good talks than anything else;—long arguments on special points between people who differ on the fundamental principles upon which these points depend.⁸

The process of dialectic appears to such a misologist to be a complete waste of time. Arguments themselves and the consideration of arguments are blamed for the novice misologist's frustration in this unstable process of one-upping a dialectical opponent through what have come to be perceived as tricks of argumentation that transform what might have otherwise been a love for dialectic into hate.

Although Socrates in Plato's dialogues makes no such exact proposal, it is also possible to outline preventative extra-Socratic measures for avoiding the moral mischief of misology. As often in such ailments, the diagnosis of misology leads to the cure. When and where does misology begin? Under what circumstances does it take root? The arguments Holmes mentions might, after all, interest Socrates greatly as revealing invaluable and sometimes internally irreconcilable differences in philosophical starting-places. It is only a question, then, of not making obtuse use of them in interpretation and criticism.

We distinguish, first, between *genetic* and *acquired* misology. If there is such a thing as genetic misology it will not have an environmental cause, although its expression in a misological individual might have an environmental trigger. A really

⁸ Holmes (1961 [1883]), 24.

stupid argument, for example, ingenuously delivered and widely approvingly received, might set the misologue off in some sort of expression of disgust, to refuse to listen any further, or simply walk away. The most common scenario for acquired misology if it is not part of a subject's nature, built into the DNA, is arguably one in which the novice misologist is genuinely taken in by a sparkling argument that is subsequently dashed to the ground. If this happens often enough or in especially impressive ways, then the promising dialectician may come to believe that argument generally is incapable of revealing the truth of any matter, but at most constitutes only an exchange of rhetorical tricks that cannot possibly lead us closer to the truth. The process of dialectic as a result can come to seem never-ending, futile and stultifying.

What is supposed to be true according to argument A is roundly refuted by argument B, which can only be maintained if in turn argument C is successfully refuted. An attempt at refutation there may be, but as to whether it is successful opens another gate for arguments to pour through on multiple sides of each new issue. Dialectic, so characterized, does indeed seem a rather dull affair, if it has no final or settled outcome, but goes on and on in endless rounds. If we love the truth and recognize its importance in understanding the world and guiding our actions, if we share Socrates' idea that the care of our souls requires that we aspire to wisdom, then why should we follow argument, when exactly opposed arguments can always be equally well-defended on any side of any interesting proposition? If argument does not really lead to the truth, then why should we love rather than despise, distrust and avoid rational argument? Why should we follow Socrates' advice to deny misology a place in our thoughts, if argument finally seems to us to be genuinely hopeless?

Socrates is undoubtedly right to observe, as a matter of pedagogical experience, that the best method to contain the spread of misology is to properly mentor persons when they are first encountering the practice of dialectic. We can adopt a specific program of discussion prepared to help them come to terms psychologically, cognitively and emotionally, with the seemingly endless clash of arguments in dialectical exchange, as nevertheless not only compatible with but essential in the search for truth. We can reinforce the anti-misology message by describing examples of extended argument in support of conclusions that are regarded as true, worthwhile, and otherwise unattainable outside of proper dialectic, but that do finally reach a settled stable state of something like reflective equilibrium.⁹

Perhaps we can seek the truth in other ways, without benefit of dialectic. We can appeal to an a priori extra-propositional grasp of essences, eidetic intuitions, divine revelation, or letting circumstances decide by seeing which sides prevail when argument gives way to force, as ineluctably from the misologue's wild beast perspective it ultimately must. If we have reached the point where we no longer care about the truth, then certainly by exercise of brute force we can chop through a number of Gordian knots occurring in dialectically opposed arguments. *Ad baculum*

⁹ The concept of reflective equilibrium originated with Goodman in his (Goodman (1983 [1955])). The term 'reflective equilibrium' and its applications specifically to moral theory and intuition was popularized by Harvard colleague Rawls, in his [1999 (1971)]. See Daniels (1979); reprinted in Daniels (1996). See also van der Burg and van Willigenburg (1998), Schroeter (2004).

might well be a logical fallacy, but, if you are a confirmed misologue picking up the club, then you are already beyond concern as to whether you are observing the niceties of deductively valid practical inference. It is rather we logophiles who have something at stake in minimizing the menace of misology on the part of others who may stumble and fall into its grip without our good will and positive efforts, unless we like having our best arguments and ourselves personally as their authors literally battered into submission *ad baculum*.¹⁰

6 Practical Measures Available to Oppose Misology

What, then, is to be done? The best method to contain the spread of misology is presumably to ‘properly’ mentor persons from the start when they are first encountering dialectic, reinforcing the message from time to time when high profile arguments threaten to become dangerously sticky.

We can adopt a specific program of discussion prepared to help them come to terms psychologically, cognitively and emotionally, with the seemingly endless clash of arguments in dialectical exchange as nevertheless compatible with the search for truth. We can reinforce the anti-misology message by describing examples of extended argument in support of conclusions that are regarded as true, worthwhile, and otherwise unattainable outside of proper dialectic. Plato’s dialogues are supposed to be full of these, but it is not clear that all misologues would be impressed even if Socrates’ arguments were irrefutable by any more powerful counterarguments. First, a true misologue does not take interest in the conduct or outcome of argument as such. If counterarguments are not actually forthcoming to conclusions of inferences widely and authoritatively accepted as correct, then the stubborn unmusical misologue has no solid basis from which to reject any of Socrates’ arguments as revealing significant truths. But nor has the misologue in Plato’s portrait any rational motivation for acting, no considered guidance in the course of free-ranging dialectic.

The misologue might not care whether or not Socrates’ arguments lead to the truth, having given up altogether on dialectic, reasoning and argument out of disgust for their mutually nullifying consequences. We can help those new to dialectic to appreciate the fact that there is often a back and forth of good arguments both for and against a given proposition. The movement and opposition of arguments does not make reasoning worthless, but is rather the lifeblood of dialectic in the search for truth. Some propositions are such that there can be equally good reasons both for

¹⁰ There are lively controversies surrounding the exact interpretation of the *ad baculum*, whether it ought to be considered a genuine fallacy, what effect including such arguments as fallacies can have on our concept of what means to be a fallacy. The question, as a recurrent theme in Plato’s *Republic*, is whether to let our reasoning be affected by the threat of violence, whether it is sound argumentation to accept the conclusion of an argument that depends primarily on the assumption that we will suffer harm if we do not accept the conclusion. See among other useful references, these recent sources: Jason (1987), Walton (1987, 2000), Brinton (1992), Woods (1995, 2004). Levi (1999) criticizes Wreen’s ‘neo-traditionalist’ classification of the *ad baculum* as a logical fallacy. Wreen (1988a, b, 1989, 1995). Plato, despite his opposition to the Sophists, is considered as making use of fallacies in certain of the dialogues. See Sprague (1962).

and against them, but this does not invalidate the methods of argument. When we know through the process of dialectic that there are equally good arguments on both sides of an issue, if that should happen in some instances actually to be the case, it is nevertheless important for us to know that this is so. Such knowledge does not derive from conjecture. It is attained only as a result of allowing the adversarial exchange of arguments and criticisms to run its course, and then to see where the strengths if any belong, letting the chips fall where they may, and what propositions if any ought to be accepted as a result of the collision of arguments, even when they seem to result only in stalemate. We have no other practical way than the consideration of arguments in making and verifying these judgments, which it is the business of wisdom-seeking to understand and prudently apply.

If persons new to dialectic are not to become misologists, then it may also be useful to prepare them psychologically for the back and forth collision of arguments and criticisms that inevitably takes place in the course of a dialectical search for truth. A useful exercise in the course of this training to avoid misology is not to invest any personal commitment in the outcome of an argument unless or until efforts to refute it seem to have been exhausted. It is the naive expectation that any argument leads at once to the truth that encourages misology on the part of persons who through lack of patience in the method are then significantly disappointed when an argument that may have first seemed promising or even indefeasible is later refuted. If we are taught from the outset to expect truth to emerge only after a lengthy progression of argument, a dialectical exchange of criticism and counter-argument, and the like, then cynicism should not set in when an argument is presented first in a very positive light and later rejected after severe criticism.

The neophyte need only be gently reminded from time to time that patience also in the consideration of arguments is a virtue. Individual cases can be more directly managed. If an argument is truly sound, then it cannot contradict the results of another truly sound argument. Where arguments collide, it is the philosopher's responsibility to discover which of them is incorrect. The fact that some fallacious arguments can sometimes mistakenly appear to be correct should never be enough to sustain the kind of cynicism to which misologists are subject. The Socratic friend of potential misologists in this noble effort should then be able to adopt specific Socrates-inspired items from the following suggestive rather than exhaustive compilation of practical recommendations as a general response to a variety of distinct causes of misology:

1. Disabuse persons new to dialectic of the expectation that the first good-sounding arguments they encounter are likely to settle the matter finally as to a proposition's truth.
2. Expose the fallacious reasoning in some arguments that appear to be as good as their opposites when engaging in dialectic for the sake of discovering truth, proving to the potential misologist cynic that not all arguments are created equal.
3. Invite persons new to dialectic to consider that the chief virtue required in using argument as a tool for discovering truth is patience while allowing the arguments on opposed sides to unfold.

4. Inform such persons that the best arguments can take a long time to appear in the actually experienced course of dialectic, and we must follow the thread and see where things finally lead.
5. Remind them that there is no predetermined time limit on how long a good argument can extend, and we must always caution against judging too quickly on the outcome when discussion is ongoing.
6. Remind them that the point of dialectic is to air all the strengths and all the weaknesses of opposing positions in arguments that effectively try to justify alternatively a considered proposition or its negation.
7. Invite them again to take part themselves in unresolved dialectical interactions concerning as yet unresolved issues.
8. Show them by example and in analysis of specific methods of argumentation they are encountering in the marketplace that only some of these methods deserve to be taken seriously in the search for truth, and are otherwise irrelevant to wisdom and the proper care of the soul.
9. Persuade them also by a series of graduated and well-considered examples, that not all arguments are created equal, and when they are sometimes opposed the mere fact that there are strong arguments on both sides of an issue is not always the end of the matter.
10. The resources of argument are not exhausted whenever strong arguments encounter strong counterarguments with no immediately obvious basis for choosing between them.
11. If this is what turns promising dialecticians into cynical misologists, then we may help students to be on guard against such eventualities by teaching them to recognize the signs of argument-cynicism. Each argument and counterargument must be carefully considered and sifted on its own merits for the truth or indications of where truth might be found. Good convincing examples are needed for such misology-busting pedagogy.
12. Suggest and illustrate by good examples that the apparent dead ends in argument where force is completely nullified by counterforce of equally good arguments are rare in the first place. There is a difference between appearance and reality in every human endeavor, and that includes good argument. The fact that there is sham argument nevertheless does not imply that there is no good argument. On the contrary, it can be emphasized that the concept of sham argument makes sense only against a background of fundamentally good worthwhile argumentation. The successes of argument rightly practiced are best advertised when they can be plainly seen to lead to the discovery of interesting and potentially important truths.

Misology of the sort Socrates describes can be opposed as a practical matter in a variety of ways. We can work harder to improve the local climate and standards for argument for the sake of what we hope to gain from participating in dialectic. We must love dialectic enough to promote good argument, in which the causes of misological disgust, rejection and avoidance of arguments are minimized and ideally eliminated through exemplary practice of correct reasoning skills. If not, then the fault is ours, says Socrates, reasonably enough, and not argument's.

If we ask now to whom these remarks are addressed, we would be straining to answer: the misologues. We cannot expect to convince misologues by means of argument, because they hate argument. Although you never know. It is certainly possible for a confirmed misologue to begin to see the value of argument as a result of being exposed to good non-sophistic argument. Any misologue is a living thinking subject, and might in principle experience a reversal in their attitudes toward arguments. They might undergo something like a Saul → Paul conversion in which they come to appreciate the value of argument as a result of attending to good argument.

Any rational thinker, we may suppose, as in one sense also seems true by definition, can be reached at a rational level by the right chain of reasoning. In the meantime, no one says that misologues are irrational, just disillusioned and wrongly misguided away from both the pleasures and utility of good argument. More fundamentally, the point of discussing Socrates' interest in misology is for those who want historical-philosophical insight into what Plato is writing about in the passages where misology is discussed, especially in the *Phaedo*. As well to those who in teaching or using argumentation may encounter misologic tendencies on the part of others and may want to proceed on the strength of philosophical criticism to lead by example in the use of and discussion about good argument as something valuable, to which the search for truth and good practical decision-making is profoundly indebted.

There is both a cognitive and social philosophical dimension to Socrates' discussion of misology in Plato's dialogues, and we have focused on the cognitive at the expense of the social. To whatever extent Socrates or Plato might have wanted to invoke or rely on such a distinction, or include judgments about the social in knowledge more generally, it appears that for these rationalists at the beginnings of Western philosophy, knowledge in general would need to take explanatory precedence over the implications and applications of social knowledge in particular. It is knowledge prioritized over action for the Platonists, just as in the just soul and ideal city-state it is reason over spiritedness and desire in Plato's *Republic*. Action needs knowledge for guidance, or it cannot be action in the first place, but with reason's restraint we do not always act on every item of knowledge in every proposition we may come to know. Anyone who understands the continuation of standards of good argument as culturally important, as Socrates urges his followers even on his deathbed, should make it their business to do whatever can be done within reason and sound judgment to help especially young people avoid the sophistic snares and pitfalls of cynicism toward the value of argument and whatever Socrates may mean to include in his general consideration of misology as *anti-logos*.¹¹

¹¹ A version of this essay was presented at the Seventh International Conference on Argumentation, International Society for the Study of Argumentation (ISSA), University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 29 June–2 July, 2010. And at *Socratica III: A Conference on Socrates, the Socratic, and the Ancient Socratic Literature*, Università degli Studi di Trento, International Plato Society, Trento, Italy, 23–25 February 2012.

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