

Chapter 5

Socrates' Method of Definition

5.1 Readings and Homework

- Required Readings: Plato, *Euthyphro*
- Recommended Readings: Please read the course notes by Marc Cohen on Socratic Definitions:
<http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/socdef.htm>, on which the following course notes are based, in agreement with the author.
- Study Questions:
 1. What are the characteristics of a good definition according to Socrates?
 2. What are the three definitions of piety that Euthyphro proposes?
 3. What is the structure of the refutation of Euthyphro's definition in 9e (the pious is what all the gods love)?
 4. What is Socrates' view on piety (12d)? Does he fully articulate this view?

5.2 Reading the *Euthyphro*

This is on the basis of Cynthia Freeland's outline.

Introduction: 2a-5c

- Setting: King-Archon's Court
- Characters: Socrates (S.), Euthyphro (E.) (prophet)
- S.'s Case 2b
 - S. is accused by Meletus to invent new gods, deny the old ones and corrupt the youth in teaching these theses.
 - Note the constant irony Socrates's talk : against Meletus in 2c-d for example.
 - Note Plato's irony in 3e against E.: the prophet predicts that Socrates will be fine!
- E.'s Case 3e
 - E. is prosecuting his father for murder (by negligence) of a murderer.
 - S. is very surprised that E. can decide what is to be done in such case.
 - E. is claiming an "exact knowledge" about the pious and the impious.
- Agreement on the rules of the discussion:
 - The topic of the discussion is then decided: Socrates' question is: "What is piety?" 5d
 - The type of answer is also decided:
 - the idea of the pious is one single thing, whatever it is applied to.
 - the pious and the impious are contradictories.
 - piety and impiety possess each "one single characteristic"

This is one of the usual assumptions of Socrates' elenchus: he believes that there is a single answer to the question he asks about the different virtue. There is something like "the" pious.

Definition 1: Piety is doing what I am doing now - 5d

- argument from the mythology (Zeus against his father Cronus)
- S.'s suspicion concerning the validity of the myths
- But main objection is: *giving an instance of something is not giving its definition* 6d-e.

WHY? What is a good definition?

- it seems that we learn what are things in encountering various instances of that thing. (you learn what is a bird in being shown some canaries, sparrow etc.).

- but we learn what are things only when we come to understand what is in common to the different instances: we grasp what are the characteristics that make a bird a bird.

- Moreover, without a clear definition, reasoning by instances can be misleading: whales look like fish, but are mammals.

- However, can't we imagine some definition by enumeration of *all* instances? This is called the *extension* of a notion, and the corresponding definition is an *extensional* definition? See for example in mathematics: definition of a set in enumerating its member.

- But it is sometimes impossible: how do you enumerate the even numbers??

- SO: extensional or intentional definition ?

Socrates refuses the extensional definition: even a complete list is neither necessary nor sufficient. Definitions have to be intensional.

– It is not necessary to know all the birds to know what a bird is.

– It is not sufficient to know all the birds to know what a bird is: you might pick up another common trait of the instances (and confuse, say, the notion of bird with the notion of wiggled, or the notion of fish with swimming in water)

- Socrates seeks "the form itself by virtue of which all the pieties are pious" 6d
- again one single characteristics

- which function as a model 6e
- "by virtue of which" ? We'll have an explanation later on in the dialog.

Definition 2: Piety is what is dear to (loved by) the gods - 7a

- Elenchus (Refutation):
 - P1: gods quarrel
 - P2: there is no quarrels about measurable things, but about moral values
 - CC: gods quarrel about what is pious and what is not. That is to say: The same things are both god-loved and god-hated. 8a
- What is the point of this refutation?
 - do you think Socrates believes in P1?
 - or isn't the point rather this:

According to Socrates, a definition is OBJECTIVE: it is not a matter of what people, or god, think. Indeed, Socrates says, you'll have difficulties to find any agreements on moral values, ironically even among the gods. Again, Socrates assumes that there is something that makes the pieties pious, beyond mere opinion and common sentiment.
- What would be the opposite view?

One possibility is to say the moral values are mere conventions. This is called moral relativism. Relativism was defended by the Sophists.

Think about the human rights for example: are they conventions invented in the western world or is there something inherent to them that make them universal, because beyond mere opinion?
- Objection of Euthyphro and Socrates' answer:
 - E: all gods agree that injustice should be punished. It is uncontroversial that who is acting unjustly deserves punishment.
 - S: all men also agree on that as well! This is not the point.
 - The problem is to sort what is unjust from what is just. This is matter of controversy among both gods and men.

More irony from Socrates to lead Euthyphro to go back to the relevant point...

Definition 3: Piety is what all the gods love - 9e

- Elenchus:
 - Socrates' main point is:
 - (a) Is it loved because it is pious?, or
 - (b) Is it pious because it is loved? 10a
 Socrates objects that Euthyphro's definition is of the form (b) not (a).
- Argument
 - Socrates establishes a premise, which is: something is said "to be loved" because "it is loved" and not because it is a "loved thing".
 - What does this mean? The main point is: "to be loved" is a qualification, an accident, an affection. A qualification is to be contrasted to what is ESSENTIAL. If love was not a qualification, it would be an essential part of the "loved thing", that is, one could not take it out of the thing without denaturing the thing altogether. For example, arguably, an essential part of you being human is that you are rational. Were we to take off your brain, or mind, or whatever part of you is responsible for you being rational, you would not be you completely. By contrast, if you dye your hair tomorrow, it is just an accident, a change of one of your qualifications.
 - Socrates processes in giving a lot of examples: to be loved is like to be carried etc.
- The problem is that this amounts to circularity!
 - P1: pious = loved by the gods
 - P2: love is an affection: the pious is loved because "it is loved" and not because it is a "loved thing"
 - P3: Gods love the pious things because they are pious.
 - Then: Gods love the pious things because they are loved by the gods!!!

- What is at stake?

To give a qualification of something is not defining it. Here, to be loved describes an effect, or piety as having something happen accidentally to it.

Other typical example: answer to what is justice? justice is the most beautiful of the human deeds. Socrates would say: it is beautiful because it is just, not the opposite.

Remember also from the *Symposium*: the proposition: “true love is the most elevating feeling” cannot be a definition because it gives only a qualification of love, which is truly an effect of its true nature. Again, Socrates would say: love is elevating because it is love, not the opposite.

Thus, a good definition for Socrates is to give A CHARACTERISTIC WHICH IS ESSENTIAL, and not accidental, to what is defined. Such essential characteristic should *EXPLAIN* (11b) any further qualification and accident.

- Note that this applies *EVEN IF there is a complete overlap*, that is to say, even if
 - all what gods love is pious
 - and
 - all what is pious is loved by gods
- BUT: the pieties have something else that make them pious, and, *consequently* loved by the gods. See the Zsa Zsa Gabor paradox in Marc Cohen's notes.

Interlude: Socrates is like Daedalus, who made statues that ran away - 11c

Socrates' Hint: Piety is a part of justice - 12d

Definition 4: Piety is the part of justice concerned with care of the gods - 12e

- Elenchus: How can we construe "care of" in this definition?
 - (a)"care of" = tending as in tending horses or sheep; aims at benefit.
 - 13a It is absurd to say that we are pious in order to benefit the gods.

(b) "care of" = service as in a slave's service toward a master. 13d
 Service enables the thing served to achieve a fine end; but this is absurd to say about our service to the gods.

(c) "care of" = how to sacrifice and pray (= a kind of trading with the gods) 14c This amounts to saying that if we are pious, we give the gods what pleases them. So we are back to Definition 2 or 3. Conclusion: Socrates persists, Euthyphro runs off. 15d

5.3 Summing up and further thinking

5.3.1 Socratic definitions

To define something is to give a *one single characteristic* which:

- is *intensional*, not extensional, i.e. does not consist in simple instances.
- is *objective*: is not mere opinion or feeling.
- is *essential*, not accidental to the thing considered.
- is *explanatory*: it is necessary to pick up the exact class of instances, but it is not sufficient to have a good definition. All instances of X have to be X *because* it has the given characteristic.

5.3.2 Why bother with definitions?

Do we need to possess a definition of something to understand or know it? According to Socrates, the answer is positive.

- Definitions are essential to knowledge.

Socrates claims that you can't say anything about X before you know what defines it. Remember the *Symposium*: Agathon praises the beauty of Love, and Socrates shows very soon that a little reflection on what *is* love proves that love is nothing but beautiful. So, before you know the exact definition of something, *you do not know anything about it*. If you accept such definition of knowledge, then you have to admit that there is not much that you *know*. This helps to make sense of Socrates'

maxim: the only thing I know is that I know nothing. Such maxim indeed stems from a highly demanding definition of knowledge.

In general, knowledge involving a concept X depends on knowledge of the definition of X.

- Definitions are essential to morality
 - We have seen that, according to Socrates, it is necessary and sufficient to possess knowledge of what is right to do it. This implies that if you don't have knowledge of the good, you can't do it. *Virtue IS knowledge.*
 - Given now that all knowledge depends on knowledge of definitions
 - We have then that virtue depends also on knowledge of definitions

The claim is thus: Knowing what is virtue is necessary and sufficient to be virtuous.

Now you can imagine what was said above about knowledge can be said in turn about virtue: no one is truly virtuous before he truly knows what is virtue. Does this mean that no one on earth, including Socrates, is truly virtuous? This explains again the claim that the philosopher is not wise.

- Discussion questions: about knowledge and virtue:
 - Knowledge sufficient for virtue: no weakness of will – we have already discussed that point.
 - Knowledge necessary for virtue: cannot an ignorant be doing good?
- Discussion questions: about the definition of knowledge.

Is it really impossible to know anything about X without knowing exactly what is X?

Contrast:

- ignorance
- true opinion
- knowledge