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Back to Ancient Questions?

Tornare alle domande degli Antichi?

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Socrates and the *Ti Esti* Question

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If there is one question with which Socrates is identified, it is *ti esti* (What is it?). Most of his interlocutors are fooled by the utter simplicity of it. As Meno says, after Socrates gives his usual confession of ignorance: «Is this true, Socrates, that you don't even know what *arête* is?». To this Socrates answers that not only does he not know what it is but that he never met anyone who did. Socrates' reply should give us pause. What does he mean by saying that he never met anyone who knew what *arête* is? Didn't the people he met speak Greek? Weren't they able to communicate with others?

Although the answer to both questions is yes, the fact is that using a term in ordinary speech does not insure that one has the kind of knowledge Socrates is seeking. Socrates' question is not analogous to a person asking about the meaning of a technical or unfamiliar term – as we might ask "What is a Higgs boson?" or a native speaker of English might ask "What is a umiak?". The problem is not that *arête* is a technical or unfamiliar term but that as Socrates' discussion with Meno soon reveals, it is a disputed one.

1. *Disputed Terms*

By a disputed term, I mean a term that implies approval or disapproval and whose application is open to question. To take some obvious examples, Euthyphro thinks that prosecuting his father for murder is an example of piety; his relatives do not. Meno thinks that the acquisition of political power is an example of male *arête*; Socrates does not. Laches thinks

that it is foolish to deny courage to animals like lions or wild boars; Nicias does not.

As a general rule, any society that experiences social change or disruption will run into disagreements about how disputed terms are to be understood. In describing civil war in Corcyra, Thucydides tells us (*Peloponnesian War* 3.82):

> To fit in with the change in events, words, too, had to change their usual meanings. What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect to expect to find in a party member; to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward; any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character; ability to understand a question from all sides meant one was totally unfitted for action. Fanatical enthusiasm was the mark of a real man, and to plot against an enemy behind his back was perfectly legitimate self-defense.

Granted that Thucydides is describing extreme circumstances. Even in relatively normal circumstances such as those depicted in the Platonic dialogues, disagreement on the application of moral terms is common. To continue the list, Crito thinks that Socrates is taking the coward's way out by remaining in jail and that a brave man would try to escape. Callicles thinks that the pursuit of philosophy is unbecoming in a grownup man. Thrasymachus thinks that justice is what serves the interest of the rulers in power.

To return to the case at point, *arête* is a noun corresponding to the adjective *agathos* (good), and in its widest application could be translated in English as excellence in the performance of a function. As Socrates asks Glaucon at *Republic* 353b: «Doesn't everything with a function have its own particular excellence (*arête*)?». In the *Meno*, then, the question "What is *arête*?" is a way of asking what is the proper function of a human being. Meno answers by distinguishing the functions of a man, a woman, a child, an elderly person, and so on. His primary example – the function of a man – is that *arête* is the ability to manage the affairs of the city in such a way that one helps his friends and harms his enemies (71e-72a).

It is here that generations of teachers have explained to students that a list is not the kind of thing Socrates wants because it does not give us a general criterion. What he wants is what the items on the list have in common. But the perceptive reader will notice that it is not just Meno's lack of generality that is at issue. He has his mind set on political power and the spoils that come with it. He is not concerned with how a person acquires them – as

shown by the fact that Socrates must keep reminding him that it is only the just acquisition of wealth and power that qualify as examples of *arête*. In view of this, we should not assume that Socrates and Meno have reached agreement on what counts as a legitimate example of *arête* at 72c, when Socrates asks Meno to say what character (*eidos*) all of his examples have in common. His disagreement with Meno is as much substantive as logical.

After a long session in which his various attempts at a definition are rejected, Meno throws up his hands in frustration and complains that he has been paralyzed. Here I want to sympathize with Meno on the grounds that given the way Socrates has posed his question, it is far from clear how one is to go about answering it. If, as Socrates asserts in other dialogues, we must know what something is before we can know what things are legitimate examples of it, how are we to conduct our inquiry[1]? How can we determine what *arête* is if we are unsure what kind of person has it? To be sure Socrates, allows that we can have true beliefs about virtue without having knowledge and that it is helpful to examine those beliefs. The problem is that most of the beliefs of his interlocutors are false. How, then, can we separate truth from falsity and proceed to something stronger than belief?

2. *The Priority of Definition*

In a controversial article in 1966, Peter Geach dubbed Socrates' belief in the priority of definition the "Socratic Fallacy" and objected that we know "heaps of things" without being able to definite the terms in which we express our knowledge. In fact, according to Geach, a set of examples may be more useful than a formal definition in trying to understand something. He also objected that if Socrates is right about the priority of definition, then it would be useless to try to arrive at a definition by citing examples[2].

[1] It is worth mentioning that Socrates was not the only thinker who believed that one cannot arrive at the definition of a moral term by citing examples. According to Kant (*Groundwork*, 409): «Nor could one give worth advice to morality than by wanting to derive it from examples. For every example of it represented to me must itself first be appraised in accordance with principles of morality, as to whether it is also worthy to serve as an original example, that is, as a model; it can by no means authoritatively provide the concept of morality. Even the Holy One of the Gospel must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before he is cognized as such…».

[2] P.T. Geach, *Plato's Euthyphro: An Analysis and Commentary*, in «The Monist», 50 (1966), pp. 371. For a forerunner to Geach, see R. Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1853, p. 53. Numerous responses to Geach have been forthcoming, some maintaining that he does not commit the Socratic Fallacy, others that there is nothing falla-

Socrates' commitment to the priority of definition is most clearly expressed at *Euthyphro* 6d-e, when he asks the title character for a standard (*paradeigma*), so that he can determine what things are pious and what things are not[3]. It is clear that Socrates' request is motivated by more than theoretical interest. In ancient Athens, impiety was a crime against the state which, as we know, could bring the death penalty. Socrates' position amounts to this: if you are going to execute someone for being impious, it stands to reason that you can say what piety and impiety consist of, for in the absence of such definitions, you would be sending someone to his death without a good reason for doing so[4]. This is especially true if that person is your father!

We can therefore understand why Socrates is eager to seek the advice of an expert. Although his relatives disapprove of what he is doing, Euthyphro replies that their attitude shows how little they know about piety and impiety. By his own admission, he is the one who can clear up any confusion. If he cannot, if he is prosecuting his father on a whim, he risks the anger of the gods. As it happens, Euthyphro and his relatives are not the only ones who disagree about piety and impiety; as we soon learn, so do Socrates and the majority of his jurors.

In a similar passage at the end of the *Hippias Major* (304d-e), Socrates castigates himself by asking how he can know whose speech – or for that matter any action at all – is noble (*kalon*) and whose is the opposite if he does not know what nobility is. Again, the context suggests that there are basic disagreements about the term in question. Hippias thinks that that

cious about it. See G. Santas, *The Socratic Fallacy*, in «Journal of the History of Philosophy», 10 (1972), pp. 127-141; M.F. Burnyeat, *Examples in Epistemology: Socrates, Theaetetus and G. E. Moore*, in «Philosophy», 52, 202 (1977), pp. 381-398; J. Beversluis, *Does Socrates Commit the Socratic Fallacy?*, in «American Philosophical Quarterly», 24 (1987), pp. 211-223; H. Benson, *The Priority of Definitions and the Socratic Elenchus*, in «Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy», 8 (1990), pp. 19-65; G. Vlastos, *Is the Socratic Fallacy Socratic*, in *Socratic Studies*, ed. by M. Burnyeat, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994, pp. 67-86; W.J. Prior, *Plato and the "Socratic Fallacy"*, in «Phronesis», 43, 2 (1998), pp. 97-113; D. Wolfsdorf, *The Socratic Fallacy and the Epistemological Priority of Definitional Knowledge*, in «Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science», 37, 1 (2004), pp. 35-67. As will become clear, my sympathies are with those who argue that there is no fallacy and that Socrates' belief is entirely reasonable, chiefly Burnyeat, Benson, Prior, and Wolfsdorf.

[3] Note that according to this passage, there would be a standard for piety and one for impiety.

[4] Here I am reminded of the American Supreme Court judge (Potter Stewart) who said that while he could not define pornography, he knew it when he saw it. The obvious response is that without an acceptable definition, a single judge's intuitions are arbitrary and thus any statute that prohibits pornography on this basis is intolerably vague.

the ability to produce a speech in a law court or public assembly that brings one benefit and protects one's property and friends is noble and of great value. But like Meno, he has neglected to say anything about truth or justice. I take this to mean that the difference between Socrates and Hippias is important enough that they have no choice but to ask what nobility (a notoriously ambiguous term) is. Finally there is Charmides (176ab), who says that he does not know whether he has wisdom or temperance because he cannot know whether he has the thing that Socrates and Critias have been unable to define.

If everyone could agree on what counts as a legitimate example of a moral term, one could propose that we lay out examples and try to generalize from them. But even though Socrates asks Meno to say what is common to the virtue of a man and the virtue of a woman, there has been no such agreement between them. This does not mean that the examples are of no help. Numerous people have objected to Geach on the grounds that Socrates uses examples on several occasions[5]. But we must be clear what his use of examples says about his commitment to the priority of definition.

At *Laches* 190e, the title character defines courage as staying at one's post and facing the enemy. In order to get Laches to broaden his definition, Socrates asks whether he accepts other examples such as fighting in retreat, confronting perils at sea, standing firm in the face of disease or poverty, or, more generally, standing firm when it comes to pleasure and pain. The strategy works because Laches agrees that these things too are courageous so that his first definition is too narrow.

Does this mean that Socrates and Laches have agreed on a set of examples or that only Laches has? I submit that it is the latter. There is no way that Socrates could accept these examples as legitimate instances of courage unless more information were given[6]. In particular, we would have to know why the soldiers are remaining at their post, the captains facing perils at sea, ordinary people standing up to disease and poverty or dealing with pleasure and pain. Is there a noble purpose behind their action or are we back to acquiring wealth and power? Until we have this information, the list of examples is provisional at best.

[5] See, for example, Burnyeat, Santas, and Beversluis.

[6] See Prior, 105, n. 16, who credits this insight to Roslyn Weiss. For a different view, see Vlastos, 74-5. While it is true that Socrates uses the example of quickness to show Laches how to define courage, quickness is not a disputed term and therefore the examples from which Socrates generalizes could be "the base of a model definition". But as the dialogue soon reveals, courage is quite different.

Myles Burnyeat is therefore right to say that rather than Socrates and the interlocutor reaching agreement on a set of examples, it is the interlocutor who must agree with himself[7].

Socrates does not claim to know what piety, courage, justice, or virtue are; the interlocutor does.

As a result, the interlocutor is given the freedom to do whatever he wants as long as he maintains consistency. He can reject an example and retain a definition, as Nicias does when Laches protests that his definition excludes wild animals (*Laches* 195a ff.). Or, he can retain an example and modify the definition to take account of it. This sort of move occurs at *Meno* 73d, when the title character defines *arête* as the power of governing people. Socrates then asks him whether this applies to children and old men – people that Meno has admitted can exemplify arête. Meno says that it does not, which means that the definition has to be given up.

Whatever direction the interlocutor takes, the fact remains that unless we have a suitable definition of the term in question, there is no principled way to know whether something is a legitimate example of it. This assumes, of course, that a person who has knowledge (*episteme*) of something ought to be able to give an account (*logos*) of what he knows. As Socrates says to Laches (190c): «Of that which we know, I presume, we can say what it is»[8]. To the best of my knowledge, no one in the Platonic corpus ever challenges this.

It goes without saying that in ordinary discourse, our use of know is not as rigorous as Socrates'. As we use the term knowledge, I can know that lemons taste sour, that high cholesterol is bad for your health, and that gravity causes unsupported object to fall even though I cannot give a satisfactory account of why or define the terms that such an account would have to contain. So in one sense Geach is right to say that we know heaps of things without being able to definite the terms in which we express our knowledge. But this has no tendency to show that Socrates' use of knowledge is unjustified when we are talking about disagreements on moral questions.

Aside from the priority of definition to the identification of examples, Socrates also believes that you cannot know what properties a thing has

[7] Burnyeat, 384.

[8] Also see *Meno* 98a, *Republic* 531e, 524b. Aristotle goes even further, saying (*Posterior Analytics* 71b10 ff.), that we have knowledge when we know the cause of something and why the thing in question cannot be other than what it is.

unless you know what it is. Thus: «If I do not know what a thing is (*ti esti*), how can I know what sort of thing (*hopoion ti*) it is?»[9]. If I do not know what *arête* is, how can I decide whether it is teachable?

This point is reiterated later in the dialogue (86e), when Meno becomes frustrated with the *elenchos* and asks to return to his original question about how *arête* is acquired. Socrates responds by saying that if they were to do things the right way, they would not take up the question *poion ti esti* (what sort of thing *arête* is) without first deciding what it is. With his usual deference to conversation partners, Socrates agrees to do things Meno's way and introduces a mathematical example to illustrate his point. Asked whether a certain area can be inscribed as a triangular space in a given circle, the mathematician replies that he cannot answer the question definitively but that he can state hypotheses (in effect boundary conditions) such that if the area is of one type, a certain conclusion follows and if it is not, a different conclusion follows.

Although some have taken the reference to mathematics as a sign that Socrates is trying to introduce greater rigor into the conversation, I have argued that the opposite is the case[10]. The problem Socrates presents to illustrate his point was unsolvable when the dialogue was written. Later, in *Republic* VII (533b-c, cf. 510b ff.), Socrates criticizes mathematics on the very point he has tried to impress on Meno: your results will not be trustworthy if you bypass the *ti esti* question and put derivative questions first.

Not surprisingly, the *Meno* ends with an unsolvable problem of its own: there is a proof that *arête* is teachable together with a proof that it is not. Socrates' assessment of what has happened sounds a familiar theme (100b): «The certainty of this [how we acquire *arête*] we shall only know when, before asking in what way arête comes to mankind, we set about inquiring what *arête* is in and of itself (*auto kath' hauto*)».

Once again, this point is more than just a theoretical nicety. Suppose that Meno is right and that the virtue of a man is the ability to manage the affairs of the city to his own advantage and that of his friends. This quality might well be teachable. Nothing in the dialogue suggests that it is not. The problem starts when we realize that this quality is not what virtue is and that until we have a suitable definition, the question of its teachability remains open. Putting all this together, we do not have to say that Socrates

[9] The same point is made at Laches 190b-c.

[10] K. Seeskin, *Vlastos on Elenchus and Mathematics*, in «Ancient Philosophy», 13 (1993), pp. 37-53.

is committed to an egregious form of moral skepticism – as Geach suggests and as Socrates suggests (tongue in cheek) at the end of the *Hippias Major*, when he says that without a definition of nobility, he might as well be dead. All we have to say is that without a definition, all convictions or intuitions, including those in alignment with "common sense", are provisional, subject to revision or eventual rejection.

3. *How to Search for a Definition*

The problem should now be clear. If the *ti esti* question must be answered before we can identify examples or attendant properties of the thing in question, what method can we use to answer it?How does one reason to a definition if the definition is logically prior to everything else?

In Euclid, the definitions are stated right at the beginning. We are never told how they were arrived at or what the alternatives are. If we must agree on a definition of something before we can know what counts as a legitimate example of it, then simple induction will not work. To be sure, induction can have heuristic value by helping a person move from the particular to the general, and there is no denying that Socrates often employs it in this way[11]. But induction can never insure that we have hit on the right general description because it has no way of verifying that the particulars we start with are genuine. Similar doubts apply to deduction. If a definition is prior to everything else, from what could it possibly be deduced?

The problem is not confined to the early dialogues. To return to *Republic* VII (533b-d), Socrates tells us that dialectic is the only science which gives an account of what each thing is and therefore the only science worthy of the name knowledge. Nothing surprising here. Unfortunately, when Glaucon asks for a fuller description of its forms and methods, Socrates refuses to provide one. From what follows, we may surmise that instead of asking what its hypotheses imply, as geometry does, dialectic asks what would imply them. That is, it moves from lower hypotheses to higher ones. Each time a

[11] The kind of induction I am thinking about here is that in which a number of examples of a general term such as virtue or courage are cited and the interlocutor is asked to identify the common property (*eidos*) that they share, e.g. Laches 191c-d. There are, of course, other kinds of induction used in the dialogues, e.g. *Apology* 27b, *Euthyphro* 10a, *Protagoras* 332c. For the classic discussion of Socrates' use of induction or epagoge, see Robinson, 33-48. For a recent critique of Robinson, see M.L. McPherran, *Socratic Epag g and Socratic Induction*, in «Journal of the History of Philosophy», 45, 3 (2007), pp. 347-364.

new hypothesis is identified, the dialectician will examine its implications trying to find a contradiction. If she finds one, something has to be revised; if not, she can proceed to the next level and start the process over again.

This process will continue until full consistency is achieved and a starting point identified. If the starting point survives repeated attempts at refutation, then, and only then, can the dialectician say that she has found something that is no longer hypothetical but true. How do we demonstrate its truth? Richard Robinson wrote that in the end, dialectic cannot demonstrate anything except in the sense in which raising the curtain in a theater demonstrates the existence of the stage[12]. Thus the function of dialectic is to put us on the pathway to a perspective from which we can gain a clear view of the subject in question. This is not a demonstration in the sense of a valid deduction from true premises; but we have seen that Socrates' commitment to the priority of definition precludes a demonstration of that type.

Although its authenticity is sometimes challenged, the *Seventh Letter* takes up much the same question[13]. After questioning the effectiveness of philosophic writing, the author goes on to recommend a long period of instruction in the subject under discussion as well as close companionship between teacher and pupil after which (341c-d) «suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is lit, it [the subject in question] is born in the soul and nourishes it». Inspiring as this is, it is hardly enough to satisfy most contemporary philosophers. Again we are inclined to ask how we know that the flashing light is not just a personal conviction rather than a universal truth? Is consistency enough to guarantee the kind of revelation that Plato is talking about? What would we say if a person were to define *arête* as the power to get whatever you desire and then argued that this definition covers all those and only those examples of *arête* that he is willing to accept?

4. *What About Immoralism?*

Faced with this scenario, Socrates would no doubt ask the person what he would say if he desired something that unbeknownst to him was detrimental to his welfare. Does he really believe that it would be virtuous to ac-

[12] Robinson, 174.

[13] For a recent attempt to argue that the letter is not genuine, see M. Burnyeat, M. Frede, *The Pseudo-Platonic Seventh Letter*, ed. by Dominic Scott, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015, pp. 122-192. But see Charles Kahn's critical review of this attempt at: http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/the-pseudo-platonic-seventh-letter/.

quire something that makes him worse off? Meno answered that no one wants to be miserable or wretched (78a, *athlios*). But suppose that this person, the coherent immoralist, says yes. For him *arête* just is the power to satisfy your desires whatever they might be. While this answer might contradict most people's understanding of *arête*, let us not forget Socrates' advice: «Don't worry about what other people say. Tell me what you think». Recall that the interlocutor need only maintain consistency to avoid refutation.

I suggest that Plato has only one reply available to him: that it is impossible to maintain a consistent immoralism. In the words of Gregory Vlastos: «Whoever has a false moral belief will always have at the same time true beliefs entailing the negation of that false belief»[14] .

This means that at some point, even the most brazen immoralist will find himself ensnared in a contradiction as Callicles does when he admits that some pleasures are bad, e.g. the pleasures felt by fools or cowards (499a-c). As long as he sticks to this, Callicles cannot also maintain that *arête* is the power to satisfy your desires whatever they might be. As his conversation with Socrates reveals, even he has standards, and those standards do not include fulfilling the desire to run away from the enemy. But what if a person has more gumption than Callicles and sticks to the claim that *arête* is the power to satisfy any desire you have? On what grounds can Socrates hold that no one can really believe this?

Vlastos is right to say that the only justification for such confidence is that each of us carries around enough moral knowledge to be able to see that no matter how appealing they might seem at first, certain beliefs are false; in other words, Socrates' confidence is based on the Theory of Recollection[15]. This is what enables him to assume that immoralism will eventually falter because the price for maintaining it is higher than anyone is willing to pay. Once this is granted, which is to say once we assume that a minimal form of moral awareness has been given to everyone, then the search for coherence makes perfect sense. Once we accept coherence as the touch stone of truth, there is value in examining provisional examples

[14] Vlastos, *Socratic Studies*, 25.

[15] Vlastos, *Socratic Studies*, 29. But I think Vlastos oversteps his case when he says that Socrates would have regarded this theory as "fantastic". Granted that he does not assert it in dialogues prior to the *Meno*. But if it justified his entire procedure, why would he not take it seriously? Vlastos sharp separation between the *Meno* and the early dialogues is part of his claim that the "socrates" of these two periods could not have inhabited the same brain unless it was schizophrenic. See G. Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, p. 46.

or attendant properties of a moral term for the simple reason that they can help call to mind knowledge we have but have not yet fully recovered. When the knowledge is recovered, then, in a way, Robinson will be right: it will be as if a curtain has been raised.

It bears repeating that the process of gaining access to this knowledge is not a simple case of moving from examples to general descriptions or from premises to conclusions. We can see this in Socrates' examination of the slave. When the questioning stops (85c), Socrates invokes the distinction between true opinion and knowledge to explain what has happened. Although the slave has hit on the right answer, he has achieved the former, not the latter. We are told that his opinions have been stirred up as if in a dream. Nonetheless, Socrates insists, if he were asked the same questions repeatedly, he would have a knowledge as accurate as anyone's.

These comments are important because they indicate that the overall path of Socratic inquiry is to move from provisional acceptance of beliefs to full acceptance or knowledge. As with the slave, so with Euthyphro (15c-d), beliefs that may seem secure at first are always open to reexamination. The goal, then, is to "tether" (97d-98a) such beliefs, and the only way to do that is to provide a *logos*, which in Euthyphro's case means a satisfactory answer to the *ti esti* question.

5. *Conclusion*

To return to the *ti esti* question, there is something peculiar, if not sneaky, in the way Socrates asks it because it appears to his interlocutors, if not to some of his commentators, that he would be satisfied with a simple formula as an answer[16]. The fact is that no sooner do people propose such formulas that Socrates takes the discussion into issues relating to moral psychology, epistemology, even ontology in certain cases. In the *Republic*, it takes Plato the greater part of ten books to answer the question "What is justice?" In that time, he introduces a theory of the origin of the state, a theory of the perfect state, a moral psychology, an epistemology, and a theory of forms.

[16] At *Laches* 192a-b, Socrates offers an example of a satisfactory definition: quickness is the ability to get a lot done in a short period of time. The purpose of the example to get Laches to see what a general criterion is like. Note, however, that unlike courage, quickness is not a disputed term.

It is absurd to think that Meno, Euthyphro, Laches, or even someone as refined and articulate as Protagoras could go into this kind of detail on the spur of the moment. So when Socrates asks "What is *arête*?", "What is piety?" or "What is courage?" there is a sense in which he is misleading both his respondent and his readers. Since none of the interlocutors in the early dialogues is a theoretician, the chances of their being able to maintain consistency in the face of Socratic questioning is virtually nil. Even Nicias, who repeats the Socratic thesis that courage is knowledge, runs into trouble.

If there is no real chance of the interlocutors being able to reach a satisfactory account of virtue, piety, or courage, then we can understand why they often claim that Socrates has taken advantage of them. We saw that Meno protests that he has been numbed. Callicles complains that Polus has been bound and gagged (482d-e). Nietzsche refers to Socrates as a despotic logician (*Birth of Tragedy* 13-14). The irony of these protests is that so many people think Socrates has constrained them when in fact all he has done is to ask them to say what they think and be willing to accept the consequences of their opinions[17]. Strictly speaking, it is they who have constrained themselves. As we saw, they can abandon an example to save a definition or abandon a definition to save an example. The choice is theirs.

From another perspective, though, it could be said that Socrates did constrain them by asking them to play a game they could not win: the game of systematizing their moral intuitions. Indeed, it is a game Socrates himself was never able to win – unless, of course, one redefines "winning" to include a confession of ignorance. This may be one reason why philosophy as described in the *Republic* is very different from the sort of thing Socrates practiced in the marketplace. Socrates, it will be recalled, was willing to speak to anyone (*Apology* 30e) – young or old, citizen or stranger – he happened to meet. In the *Republic*, the study of philosophy is only offered to a highly select group of people who have completed a rigorous training program and reached the age of 30. The final assent to the Form of the Good does not begin until the age of 50. As we saw, the dialectician will continue the search for an unhypothetical beginning until she finds something that resists refutation and, in the words of the *Seventh Letter*, the truth bursts forth like a flash of light when a fire is lit.

One of the problems a commentator has in trying to locate Socrates'

[17] For example, *Crito* 49c-d, *Gorgias* 500b. For the "Say what you believe" rule in Socratic inquiry, see Vlastos, 7-10.

view with precision is that they change from one dialogue to the next. The *eidos* that Socrates asks Meno to identify will eventually designate a Platonic form. The theory of forms is based on a bifurcation between the sensible and intelligible realms. Once these commitments are in place, we can understand why what once seemed like the simplest of questions ("What is it?") may take a lifetime to answer. If there is a lesson to be learned here, it is that the job of systematizing our moral intuitions is no easy matter. No one can do it while walking through the market place and talking to Socrates. In the end, the people who can do it are the rarest of human beings. As Socrates says at the end of the *Meno* (100a), such a person would be a real thing among shadows. The rest of us are left with intuitions that are unjustified and, in all likelihood, inconsistent.

Abstract

Socrates is frequently identified with the well-known question is ti esti*? (What is it?). Most of his interlocutors are deceived by the extreme simplicity of this question and his detractors believe he does not know what an* arête *is. To this Socrates replies that he not only does not know what it is* arête*, but he has never met anyone who has done it. Using a term in ordinary speech does not insure that one has the kind of knowledge Socrates is seeking. The problem is not that* arête *is a technical or unfamiliar term but that as Socrates' discussion with Meno soon reveals, it is a disputed one.*

Keywords: Socrates; virtue; *ti esti*; immoralism; knowledge.

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