All human beings, by their nature, desire understanding.

— Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (Book 1)

The safest general characterisation of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.

— Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*

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### The Big Ideas to Master

- Theory
- Socratic humility
- The elenctic method
- Platonic realism
- Platonic Forms
- Socratic definitions
- Essences
- Natural kinds vs. artefacts
- Abstract vs. concrete entities
- Essential vs. accidental properties
- Counterexample
- *Reductio ad absurdum* argument
- Sound argument
- Valid argument
- The correspondence theory of truth
- Fact

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The elenctic method (part 1): on Meno’s enumerative definition of (human) virtue

*On Platonic realism & Socratic definitions.* According to Plato, a central part of philosophical inquiry involves an attempt to understand the Forms. This implies that he is committed the view we will call *Platonic realism*, namely, the view that

*Platonic realism.* The Forms exist.

So, according to this theory, Reality contains the Forms. But what are the Forms? That question is best answered as follows. Much of the most important research that philosophers and other scholars do involves an attempt to answer questions of the form ‘what is x?’ Physicists, for instance, ask ‘what is a black hole?’; biologists ask ‘what is an organism?’; mathematicians ask ‘what is a right triangle?’ Let us call the correct answer to a what-is-x question the Socratic definition of x. We can say, then, that physicists are seeking the Socratic definition of a black hole, biologists investigate the Socratic definition of an organism, and mathematicians look to determine the Socratic definition of a right triangle. What does that mean exactly? What are Socratic definitions?

Socratic definitions are not dictionary definitions; they are not a description of the agreed upon usage of word or phrase by a linguistic community. Rather, a Socratic definition of some x is a conceptual analysis of the category of x, what we might call x-ness.

When the groups of scholars noted earlier attempt to answer their respective what-is-x questions, each is investigating a very specific issue: each is investigating the nature of the thing in question. It is important to note, however, that that does not simply mean that our imagined physicists, for example, are merely asking about the properties of some particular black hole. While it is certainly true that that is of interest to physicists, that is not what they are doing when they ask the question ‘what is a black hole?’ No, in asking this question, they are attempting to work out a conceptual analysis of the type or kind of thing that English speakers call ‘a black hole’; again, the category or black holeness. In the same way, our envisaged biologists and mathematicians are attempting to work out conceptual analyses of organismness and right triangleness, respectively. In so doing, we are trying develop a precise, correct concept of the type of thing in question. And that involves an attempt to develop a complete theory regarding the nature of the type of thing in question. Again, we are not merely trying to determine the properties of some particular instance or token of the type; we are trying to determine what properties are had by every (possible) instance of that type. That said, we can answer the question ‘what are the Forms?’ as follows: what I have been calling the type of thing x, Plato calls the Form of x (i.e., the x-ness). Accordingly, ‘the Forms’ is simply Plato’s preferred phrase for referring to types.

Before we move on, we need to note the following. It should be clear that when a theorist proposes a Socratic

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1 The ancient Greeks called such an analysis a logos.
definition, that does not by itself imply the proposed analysis is correct. Not at all. Sometimes we discover that a proposal is correct, e.g., that gold does have seventy-nine protons in its nucleus. Sometimes, however, we discover that a proposal is not correct. Geometers, for example, used to think that a shape s is a right triangle only if s has the Pythagorean property (i.e., s satisfies the theorem that the square of the hypotenuse is equivalent to the sum of the squares of the other two sides). However, at least as early as the mid-nineteenth century, mathematicians discovered that there are right triangles that do not have the Pythagorean property. Accordingly, what we should say is this: when a person proposes such Socratic definition, she provides what is purportedly the correct answer to a particular what-is-x question. Yet, once a proposal is offered, we then seek to confirm or disconfirm the proposal. When is a proposed Socratic definition correct? A proposed analysis is correct iff the analysis corresponds to the actual nature of the type in question. When a proposed analysis a does correspond, then a is correct. If, however, a fails to correspond, then a is not correct. It is obviously not easy in all—even most—cases to determine whether or not a proposed conceptual analysis corresponds to a type of thing’s actual nature. (This is one reason why scholarly research progresses very slowly.) To determine whether or not a proposed does so correspond, we look for evidence that helps us to a sufficient degree determine if it is correct. Once such method for doing so is to look for counterexamples. In the event that we find a counterexample to a proposed Socratic definition of x, then we have found evidence that demonstrates that that proposed analysis of x-ness is in fact false (e.g., as in the case of right triangles). Of course, it must be noted that the mere fact that scholars don’t find a counterexample to proposed Socratic definition does not imply the proposal is in fact correct. No, it might turn out that they simply have yet to find one. Again, this is one part of the reason that makes this type of work is so difficult (but, also so interesting).

The elenctic method (part 2): on Meno’s dynamic & beatific definitions of (human) virtue

Having agreed with Socrates on the insufficiency of enumerative definitions for the purpose of understanding the nature of (human) virtue, Meno proposes two more definitions. We can test his proposals by determining whether or not there are any counterexamples or arguments against the proposed Socratic definition.

Socrates’ refutation of Meno’s dynamic concept of virtue: two problems

Socrates proposes two counterexamples to Meno’s dynamic concept of virtue: (a) the problem of women, children, and slaves, and (b) the problem of tyrants. Before we consider these, let us make sure that we understand the concept of a counterexample.

On the concept of a counterexample. A proposed Socratic definition of x is correct only if it is not subject to a counterexample. What is a counterexample? A counterexample is an example of something that demonstrates that the proposed Socratic definition of x is too narrow or too broad in scope. By ‘too narrow or too broad in scope’ I mean this. To say that a proposed Socratic definition of x is too narrow in scope is to say that the analysis of x does not account for or capture all x’s; to say that a proposed Socratic definition of x is too broad in scope is to say that the analysis of x does not account for only x’s. For instance, imagine that Jones proposes the claim that

A. All ravens are black,

but his friend Smith notes that there are white ravens in Vancouver, BC. Smith has presented a counterexample to (A). In replying that there are ravens that are not black, Smith has asserted that

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2 Note well. When a person proposes a Socratic definition d, that does not imply that she believes d is the correct account. She may believe d is correct, but that is not necessary. She may simply be considering a view that someone else has suggested for the purposes of demonstrating that it’s mistaken. For instance, consider the fact that Plato provides various proposals regarding the nature of (human) virtue in Meno, yet ultimately seeks to refute each of them.
B. There is at least a raven that is non-black.

If Smith is right (that is, if (B) is true), then it follows that

C. Some ravens are not black.

Since (C) contradicts (A), (A) and (C) cannot both be true. And given that (C) is true, it follows that (A) must be false.³

Questions: What are the counterexamples raised by (a) the problem of women, children and slaves, and (b) the problem of tyrants? Do these claims reveal that Meno is wrong?

**Socrates’ attack of Meno’s beatific concept: the argument from psychological hedonism**

The goal. Prove that the desire for good things cannot be part of what delineates virtuous and non-virtuous humans.

The argument. Socrates reasons against Meno’s beatific concept as follows:

1. Whatever the essence of (human) virtue is, a virtue of a thing T is any property that makes T good. [premise]
2. Given (1), if a thing T₁ has a virtue v and another thing T₂ lacks v, then T₁ is better than T₂ (at least with respect to v). [premise]
3. Assume that (human) virtue includes a human’s having a desire for good things. [assumption for RAA]

Therefore,

4. If a human H₁ desires good things and another H₂ does not, then H₁ is better than H₂. [from (1)-(3)]

However,

5. Humans are psychologically disposed in such a way that they are ultimately motivated to do pleasure-producing and pain-avoiding actions (except when a pain-producing action will produce greater pleasure or minimize pain over every other possible action available to them). [psychological hedonism]

6. If (5) is true, then humans ultimately want only what they believe is good and do not want what they believe is bad (even if their evaluations are mistaken). [premise]

Accordingly,

7. Humans ultimately want only what they believe is good and do not want what they believe is bad (even if their evaluations are mistaken). [from (5) & (6)]

8. If (7) is true, then no human H₁ is better than another H₂ with respect to what they ultimately want. [premise]

9. If no human H₁ is better than another H₂ with respect to what they ultimately want, then H₁’s and H₂’s wants is not part of what makes H₁ better than H₂. [premise]

10. If a human H₁’s and H₂’s ultimate wants is not part of what makes H₁ better than H₂, then the desire for good things cannot be used to delineate virtuous and non-virtuous humans. [premise]

Therefore,

11. The desire for good things cannot be used to delineate virtuous and non-virtuous humans. [from (7)-(10)]

On evaluating arguments

Whenever someone presents us with an argument, we need to evaluate it to determine if it is good or not. For the purposes of this course, we are going understand the concept of a good argument as follows:

GA: An argument A is logically good iff A is sound.

³ Note: one counterexample is sufficient to reveal a theory is false. Thus, there’s no need to look for others.
Given (GA), we need to determine whether or not an argument that someone offers us is sound. We do so using the following to (ordered) steps:

**STEP 1:** Determine if the argument is valid.

**STEP 2:** Determine if the premises are actually true.

(Note: it should be clear why these are the steps given the definition of ‘sound’.) If an argument satisfies **STEP 1** and **STEP 2**, then it satisfies (GA), and vice-versa. However, if an argument satisfies **STEP 1**, but not **STEP 2**, then, although the reasoning of the argument is “on the right track,” it nevertheless falls short of being logically good given that one or more of the premises is false.

One last thing. If an argument fails to satisfy **STEP 1**, there is no need to go onto **STEP 2**. Why? As we know, if an argument is invalid, then it involves a pattern of reasoning that makes it possible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false. So, even if the conclusion is true, there’s nothing about the reasoning that establishes it is. And since that is the point of an argument—to establish the truth of the conclusion—then we need not think any further about a particular argument that is invalid as a means to that end. We might look for other arguments for the conclusion in question, but we need not wonder anymore about the invalid one.

**Question:** Is the argument from psychological hedonism sound?

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<th>IMPORTANT TERMS AND CONCEPTS</th>
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**Argument:** a method for justifying the claim that a statement is true, namely:

**ARGUMENT:** x is an argument iff x is a group of statements such that: at least one premise purports to provide evidence that the conclusion is true.

**Logical soundness:** a property of an argument (and only an argument) such that:

**SOUND ARGUMENT:** An argument A is sound iff: (i) A is valid and (ii) the premises of A are (actually) true.

**Logical validity:** a property of an argument (and only an argument) such that:

**VALID ARGUMENT:** A property of an argument A such that: if the premises of A are true, then the conclusion of A cannot be false. (Alternatively: a property of an argument A such that it is impossible for A to have true premises and a false conclusion.)

**The Correspondence Theory of Truth:** a property of a statement (and only a statement) such that:

**TRUTH:** A statement p is true iff it is a fact that p.

**On the Nature of Facts:** a state of “the World” such that:

**FACT:** It is a fact that p iff “the World” is actually that way (whether anyone knows so or not).4

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