

CONFUSING UNIVERSALS AND PARTICULARS IN PLATO'S EARLY DIALOGUES*

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THAT Socrates did not always find it easy to make himself understood by his interlocutors in Plato's early dialogues, and that this difficulty was caused by his radically new approach to philosophy is standard doctrine and, for what it is worth, true. Along with this standard doctrine, however, comes the following explanation of his difficulty; and this explanation, it can be argued, is not true.

It is said that when Socrates is made to ask questions like "What is the pious and what the impious?" (*Euth.* 5D 7), "What is courage?" (*Laches* 190D 8, E 5), or "What is the beautiful?" (*Hip. Maj.* 287D 3), he is asking for the definition of a universal. For the "average" Greek of his time, however, this is a radically new question about a radically new sort of object, and Socrates' interlocutors do not understand it. They usually answer it as if it were a different, if related, question: they tend to provide concrete instances of the universal in question rather than a definition, however inadequate, of the universal itself. Socrates always tries, but does not always succeed, to make himself clear: Meno, for example, is supposed never to get the point.

This approach is indeed common. We can find it, for example, in John Burnet:

In several of Plato's dialogues Socrates is made to criticize the confusion of the universal . . . with some particular of which it is predicated.¹

R. E. Allen states this view as follows:

As universals, Forms play a regulative role in dialectic; they are the antecedents of *esti* in questions of *ti esti*, 'What is it?', and

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¹ John Burnet, *Plato's Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates, and Crito* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), p. 32.

they therefore specify the nature of that question, and so restrict the range of answers that can be sensibly given to it . . . because holiness and temperance and beauty are universals, answers to the question of what they are cannot merely provide examples of them.²

I. M. Crombie also accepts this approach, and tries to explain why Socrates' interlocutors missed Socrates' point:

. . . one can ask what the beautiful is (meaning 'What is beauty?') or what man, or the man, is (meaning 'What is the essential nature of mankind?'). When this idiom is used no distinction is drawn between the property (beauty) and the class of things which have the property (the beautiful in the sense of that which is beautiful). It is thus natural for the man in the street, when asked what the beautiful is, to think first of the class and to reply by citing some of its prominent members or sets of these. . . One has to labour, as Socrates labours with Hippias, to show the man in the street what is wanted. . . Socrates explains that he wants no instance, but 'that the presence of which to anything makes that thing beautiful.'³

So "What is the beautiful?" is supposed to be ambiguous in Greek. Socrates' interlocutors tend to take it as "What is beautiful? Point out a beautiful thing," while Socrates himself always takes it as "What is beauty? What is it that enables us to point out things as beautiful?" The innovation of Socrates and Plato is held to have been their insistence on this ambiguity and their belief that the former question cannot be answered unless the latter is answered first.

It is beyond question that something about what Socrates was asking was not clear to his interlocutors, but this view does not account for it. This well-established interpretation does not fit the text of Plato's dialogues, and it commits us to a very peculiar view of the philosophical setting for Plato's work.

I

In discussing the *Euthyphro*, P. T. Geach employs the approach that I want to criticize.⁴ Socrates, in this dialogue (5D 7), asks

² R. E. Allen, *Plato's 'Euthyphro' and the Earlier Theory of Forms* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 70.

³ I. M. Crombie, *Plato: The Midwife's Apprentice* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 44.

⁴ P. T. Geach, "Plato's *Euthyphro*: An Analysis and Commentary," *The Monist*, Vol. 50 (1966), pp. 369-382.

Euthyphro to tell him "what is the pious and what the impious," and when Euthyphro answers (5D 8ff.), Socrates

adopts a line of argument that we find paralleled in many dialogues. If Euthyphro really knows that his own action is pious, then he must be able to say what is pious; he must not give examples of pious actions (pp. 370–371).

Socrates is dissatisfied with Euthyphro's answer, Geach continues, because he makes two assumptions:

(A) that if you know you are correctly predicating a given term "T" you must "know what it is to be T," in the sense of being able to give a general criterion of a thing's being T; (B) that it is no use to try and arrive at the meaning of "T" by citing examples of things that are T (p. 371).

Geach calls the way of thinking involved in making these assumptions "the Socratic fallacy, for its *locus classicus* is the Socratic dialogues" (p. 371). He certainly is not alone in reading Plato in this manner; but the question should be reopened: does Socrates commit this "Socratic" fallacy? I am not disputing whether making these two related assumptions constitutes a fallacy—my question is more simple-minded. Is it really clear that Euthyphro and others like him respond to the Socratic question by citing concrete instances of universals instead of universals themselves, and does Socrates ever complain that they do?

My answer to both these questions is categorically negative. My argument for this will consist in a careful reading of the relevant Platonic texts without assuming in advance that these texts exhibit instances of the confusion between universal and particular, definition or criterion and concrete example.

This is what Euthyphro actually says in response to Socrates' question:

I say then that the pious is what I am now doing: prosecuting anyone who is in the wrong in questions of murder or of sacrilegious theft or fails to do the right thing in any situation of this sort, whether he is [your] father or mother, or anyone else for that matter; and not prosecuting is impious (5D 8-E 2).⁵

The temptation to suppose that Euthyphro has offered a concrete example of a pious action rather than a statement of what constitutes piety may spring from concentrating exclusively on his opening

⁵ The translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

words: ". . . the pious is what I am now doing." But this is not all that he says; it is, in fact, the smallest part. The main burden of his statement falls on what follows this phrase, and that is very general and abstract indeed; its force is that to prosecute anyone who has wronged the religious order is (the) pious, or, for that matter, piety, and that its opposite is (the) impious.

Of course, this is not an adequate definition of piety, as Socrates will presently show. Naive as Euthyphro may be, however, he simply does *not* say that his prosecution of his father, a particular action, is pious (or, even worse, piety). He says that every prosecution of a religious wrong is pious, and that since his action is such a prosecution, it, too, is pious.

We might then ask why Euthyphro brings his own action into his response at all, if his point is the very general one which I think we should attribute to him, and not the particular point that he is usually supposed to be making.

To answer this we must recall that Socrates has been pressing Euthyphro to say how he knows that prosecuting his own father, which Euthyphro is about to do, and about which he is obviously sensitive, touchy, and, in a slightly perverse way, proud (cf. 4B 7-E 2, 6A 3-5), is in fact pious. Now prosecuting one's own father is not an everyday affair, and Plato relies on this to set up the dialectical situation of the dialogue.⁶ It is a strange, uncommon, and disputable action that Euthyphro is engaged in, and Socrates, or anyone else, need not accept the assumptions that constitute the "Socratic" fallacy in order to question Euthyphro on what he takes piety to be. If someone claimed that stealing from the poor is just, it would be a good idea, and not a logical error, to ask him what he means by justice, and even to suppose that he has some explicit view on the subject. This is what Socrates has done (and it is all that he has done), and Euthyphro mentions his action in his reply in order to respond to that challenge. Avenging religious wrongs, he says, is pious, and his action is pious because it is an avenging of a religious wrong.⁷ There is thus no evidence

⁶ See, for example, Socrates' undisguised shock at 4A 5-B 6, and Euthyphro's response at 4Bff.

⁷ Perhaps one might be tempted to find the "Socratic" fallacy in what Socrates says at 6E 3-6: "So teach me what this characteristic (*idea*) is, so that by looking at it and by using it as a standard, I

so far that Euthyphro misunderstands Socrates' question in the way that is usually supposed. He says that to be pious is to do so-and-so in such-and-such circumstances, and this, inadequate as it may be, is not pointing to a particular; it is, if we want to keep to this vocabulary, specifying a universal.

It is a bad answer, however, and in Socrates' refutation (6D) some have seen an accusation that Euthyphro provided a concrete example rather than a definition of piety. This interpretation has been so widely accepted that it has even entered a number of translations of this passage; this, for example, is Lane Cooper's version:

For, my friend, you were not explicit enough before when I put the question. What is holiness? You merely said that what you are now doing is a holy deed—namely, prosecuting your father on a charge of murder.⁸

In this way, Socrates is represented to take Euthyphro to have offered "My prosecution of my father" as his answer to the question "What is piety?" But we have seen that this is not what Euthyphro said. Why then does Socrates, if I am right, have this reaction?

Well, *does* Socrates have this reaction? Here is the last part of his statement in Greek:

ἀλλά μοι εἶπες ὅτι τοῦτο τυγχάνει ὅσιον ὄν ὃ σὺ νῦν ποιεῖς,
φόνου ἐπεξίων τῷ πατρί.

These translations assume that the crucial last phrase is epexegetic, that it specifies what Euthyphro is now doing, namely, prosecuting

can consider pious anything that you or anyone else does, and which is like it, and not consider pious whatever is not like it." This statement implies that a definition of piety will settle all questions of what is and is not pious; it may even imply that only such a definition will settle them. But it does not imply that we cannot decide whether *anything* is or is not pious unless we first have the definition. And it is this latter idea that constitutes the "Socratic" fallacy, not the reasonable point that we cannot settle *all* cases of piety and impiety without a definition.

⁸ In Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (eds.), *Plato: Collected Dialogues* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 174. Compare R. E. Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 27: "You said that the thing you are now doing is holy, prosecuting your father for murder," and Hugh Tredennick, *Plato: The Last Days of Socrates* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1954), pp. 24–25: "You said that what you are doing now—prosecuting your father for manslaughter—was a pious action."

his father. But Socrates has not used the infinitive (*epexienai*) of the Greek verb for "to prosecute," but its present participle, which must be translated not as "prosecuting" but as "in prosecuting," thus:

You said that what you are now doing, in prosecuting your father, is pious.

And this is a very different statement. Socrates is not saying that Euthyphro only said that his particular action is pious; on the contrary, he acknowledges that Euthyphro has offered an explanation of that action's being pious. His point is this: You said that what you are now doing in prosecuting your father, *namely, avenging a religious wrong*, is pious. Rather than giving us evidence that Socrates' interlocutors confused universal and particular, this passage, read correctly, shows that this problem is absent from the *Euthyphro*; and, by being so often misread, it provides us with an instance of a universally accepted interpretation imposing an unnatural reading on a particular text.⁹

What is it then that Socrates dislikes about Euthyphro's answer? To answer this we must notice that Socrates' objection is not wholly contained in the statement that we have just been discussing. In fact, he concedes that Euthyphro may have been correct in what he said (*isōs*, 6D 6). Euthyphro, we should notice, has actually given an argument:

⁹ M. Croiset, *Platon: Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1953), Vol. I, p. 190, translates this as follows: "Tu t'es contenté de me dire que, en accusant ton père d'homicide, il se trouve que tu as fait un acte pieux." He takes, that is, the participial construction correctly; ironically, however, and probably because of his philosophical interpretation of the dialogue, he inserts the gratuitous "un acte" in the translation.

It should be noticed in this connection that H. W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1920), does not mention such a possible use in his discussion of the participle (pp. 454-479), while he does mention it in his discussion of the infinitive (p. 442). The only expegetic uses of the participle listed in J. D. Denniston, *Greek Prose Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 83, involve the repetition of the main verb, and have a sense quite different from what must be attributed to this construction in the *Euthyphro*.

It is also very important to recall that when, at 6D 8-10, Plato uses "prosecuting anyone etc." as an expegesis of "what I am now doing," he employs the infinitive and not the participial construction.

Prosecuting my own father is pious
 because (1) prosecuting one's father in such circumstances
 is avenging a religious wrong,
 and (2) avenging a religious wrong is (the) pious.

Socrates accepts this as far as it goes. But he thinks that it does not go far enough: "Still, Euthyphro, you do say that many other things are pious," he goes on to say (6D 6-7). What are these many other pious things, these "many other piouses," as he puts it? I suggest that, consonant with my interpretation, they are other explanations of why particular actions are pious, and not these particular actions themselves. That is, Socrates remarks and Euthyphro agrees (6D 8), as well he might, that avenging religious wrongs is not the only explanation why actions are pious. There are many other nonoverlapping explanations, for example, sacrificing before a journey. Euthyphro thus admits in this exchange that he is prepared on occasion to give a different principle, instead of (2) above, in similar arguments. And *this* is what Socrates objects to, as he in fact goes on to say at 6D 9-E 1: it is the unity, and not the universality, of the pious that Euthyphro has failed to capture. Since sacrificing before a journey is also (what it is to be, or the) pious, and since it is different from avenging religious wrongs, Euthyphro has not yet said what the pious is, especially since he has explicitly admitted (5C 8-D 6) that the pious is one and the same in all that is pious, that there is a single explanation of all piety. Given this admission, to which Socrates refers at 6D 9-E 1, Euthyphro's answer, in characteristic elenctic fashion, is shown to be inconsistent with it. He does not, to repeat, confuse universals with their instances: he offers too narrow a definition of what to be pious is. In this way he either excludes obviously pious things (all sacrifices before journeys, for example); or else he admits, contrary to his earlier claim, that there is, after all, nothing common to all those things that we consider pious. The "many other piouses," *pace* Burnet,¹⁰ are not particular pious things, but distinct explanations of what makes everything that is pious, pious.

¹⁰ Burnet, *op. cit.*, p. 36: ". . . one or two particulars of which to *hosion* [the pious] can be predicated."

I will return to a number of questions raised in this discussion in later sections of this paper. What I hope to have shown so far is that the "Socratic" fallacy is not committed by Socrates in the *Euthyphro*: that Euthyphro does not confuse universals with particulars, that Socrates does not take him to have done so, and that he does not object to Euthyphro's first definition on the illegitimate grounds that Geach and the standard approach attribute to him. Furthermore, a quick look at the *Charmides*, the *Laches*, and the *Meno* will show that this sort of confusion is not to be found in these early definitional dialogues any more than it is to be found in the *Euthyphro*.

II

Gerasimos Santas has recently stated that the *Charmides* does not exhibit the confusion between universals and their instances.¹¹ He writes that

all the definitions [of temperance in this dialogue] have the generality required of a Socratic definition. Unlike most typical Socratic dialogues where a definition is sought, Charmides and Critias do not begin by giving the wrong *kind* of definition . . . somehow they seem to know the sort of thing that Socrates is after, which is rather surprising in the case of Charmides at least since he has just met Socrates for the first time (p. 110).

Santas contrasts the *Charmides*, in this respect, with the *Euthyphro*, the *Laches*, and the *Meno*. And I agree that some of the definitions in these dialogues lack a required generality; but I don't agree that this is the same as to confuse universals with particulars. Having shown this for the *Euthyphro*, I will now try to show it for the other two works. In that way, I hope to show that there is nothing surprising in Charmides' response to Socrates.¹²

¹¹ Gerasimos Santas, "Socrates at Work on Virtue and Knowledge in Plato's *Charmides*," in E. N. Lee, A. P. D. Mourelatos, and R. M. Rorty (eds.), *Exegesis and Argument: Studies in Greek Philosophy Presented to Gregory Vlastos* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1973), pp. 105–132.

¹² I am not certain that Santas identifies these two failures here; he does not discuss this issue. In his "Socrates at Work on Virtue and Knowledge in Plato's *Laches*," in Gregory Vlastos (ed.), *The Philosophy of Socrates* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 177–208, Santas says that Laches' first definition of courage is not general enough