

What conditions does Plato expect a good definition to meet? Is he right to impose them?

In this essay we will be discussing the conditions Plato requires a definition to meet in his dialogue *Meno*. We will analyse the reasons for Plato placing a great importance upon the definition of terms before going on to try and set out these conditions in a clear manner. We shall then examine whether his conditions lead to a successful definition or if they are actually self-defeating and actually lead to the proposition that a great many terms are indefinable.

1. Why is the issue of definition so important to Plato?

Plato's *Meno* is superficially concerned with the question 'Is virtue teachable?' However, before such a question can be answered, the character Socrates stipulates that the term 'Virtue' must be defined: "I'm so far from knowing whether it is something teachable or isn't something teachable that I don't even happen to know at all what in the world virtue itself is."¹ Through this pretext, Plato uses *Meno* to pose two questions regarding the definition of virtue. The first is of the form 'Is X Y?' For example, 'Is virtue justice?' or, more immediately, 'Is virtue teachable?' Whilst *Meno* opens the dialogue by posing a question of this type – "Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue is something teachable?" – Socrates reproaches him for this and replaces the initial question with one of another form. This is a question of the form 'What is X', or, more specifically, 'What is virtue'.

Plato seems to take it as self-evident that this question supersedes any other question about 'X'. Socrates operates upon this principle when proclaiming that in order to know if virtue is teachable one must adequately define it: "And as for that about which I don't know *what* it is, how would I know what *sort* of thing it is?"

¹ Plato, *Meno*

Or is it possible in your opinion for anyone who doesn't know at all who Meno is to know whether he is beautiful..." This principle has become known as the 'Priority of Definition'. The relevant aspect of the Priority of Definition is that one cannot answer a question of the form 'Is X Y?' – where 'Y' is any defined property – unless one can answer the question 'What is X?'

Such great importance is therefore placed upon the notion of a definition because if one is able to define X, one is able to know "whether or not you are predicting correctly anything about [X]"² Therefore one is given extremely strong reason for correctly defining any X which one desires knowledge of or about. We seem to have ascertained that we must arrive at some procedure for defining any 'X', however it is not instantly clear exactly what type of definition Plato has in mind in defining the word 'virtue'.

2. What kind of definition is Plato seeking?

Socrates seems to be looking for a specific type of definition in posing the question, 'What is virtue?' The definition he seeks is not that of a man who does not know what a word means. Socrates does not require a dictionary definition of 'virtue'. Robinson states: "Socrates knows the application of the word but not what it means."³ Rather, Robinson believes that Socrates wishes to find an equivalence of the word in question. This equivalence takes the form "X is F", where X is F and nothing else is F. If X is F but other things are also F, Socrates asks for a further definition of a kind that will define what part of F is exclusively X.

To illustrate this specificity, Socrates makes it clear that Meno's initial definition, which is of the form of a list of virtues, will not suffice: "Though we seek only one, we have again discovered many virtues... but as for the one virtue which is

² Vlastos, *Socratic Studies*

³ Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*

present throughout all these, we aren't able to discover it." Socrates proceeds to use an analogy employing a definition of shape. This analogy is roughly that, if asked what shape is, the answer 'roundness' would not suffice. This is because roundness is not 'shape' itself, but is rather an example of a shape. In listing all the shapes in the world one does not reach what Plato would seem to deem an adequate definition of 'shape'. Rather, one must ascertain what it is that is common to all shapes in order to define 'shape' itself. Socrates eventually decides that 'shape' is "The limit of a solid". It is a definition of this kind that Socrates, and, one can assume, Plato desires for 'virtue': "I am seeking that which is the same in all these cases."

Whilst this aspect of the platonic definition seems necessary, it is by no means sufficient. To illustrate this, we need some appreciation of the platonic sense of the word 'essence'. Whilst freely using 'essence' in his discussion, Robinson does not seem to adequately define it. From Robinson's use of 'essence', we may suppose the essence of a word to pick out that which is unique to the word. Robinson gives the example, "Virtue is the only human characteristic which can never be misused"⁴. Here we have a true statement about virtue. This may even be said to be some sort of definition of virtue. However, Robinson declares this statement to give an equivalence of virtue without giving its essence and thus not giving a satisfactory platonic definition of the term. It is not clear exactly what the distinction is here. The structure of the statement – that is, its containing the definite description 'the only...' – suggests that, if true, it picks out a unique feature of virtue. Perhaps the answer lies in the vague nature of the above statement. It seems reasonable to suggest that once we have knowledge of the essence of a term we should be able to easily discern examples of this term – this cannot be said of the above statement.

However, the reader is left to fill in such gaps himself. Robinson goes on to suggest that, in defining X, rather than simply distinguishing X from all else, Plato

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wishes to discern the essence of X. Whilst the lack of definition of 'essence' does pose a problem, one can see that a more precise definition of virtue would serve us better. Nevertheless, without a precise definition of 'essence' we cannot say with confidence whether a definition is suitably precise or not.

Perhaps the key to this problem lies in Robinson's assertion that in order for a term to be defined in a platonic sense it must be univocal – that is, have only one definition and thus be an unambiguous term. This seems to derive from Socrates' desire for the definition of virtue not to be fragmentary. Every time Meno suggests a definition that only covers a part of virtue Socrates reprimands him: "I just now asked you not to break up or to fragment virtue". It seems then, that Socrates requires a definition that will cover all aspects of the term 'virtue'. If we are to arrive at a single definition that covers the whole of the term 'virtue', it seems necessary that virtue is a univocal term. However, it is problematic to try and show a term to be univocal without having a clear definition of it. In addition to this, if a term is not univocal then a definition, in the sense that Plato causes Socrates to use the word, is impossible to arrive at.

Robinson points out that Socrates tries to convince Meno of the univocal nature of 'virtue' by stating that all virtuous people have the qualities of justice and temperance: "And can either a young man or an elder one be good if they are intemperate and unjust? ... Than all men are good in the same way, and by participation in the same virtues?" However, Robinson believes that this argument does not show virtue to be univocal unless virtue *is* justice and temperance – it simply shows extensional equivalence. Robinson cites the example 'all tops are material objects' does not prove that top has just one meaning because 'top' does not mean 'material object'. 'Top' is merely extensionally equivalent to 'material object' – that is, whilst 'top' has several meanings, every one of these meanings necessitates that any sort of top is a material object. Therefore, using Socrates' argument, we can only say that the applicability of 'justice' and 'temperance' to all applications of 'virtue' can lead us

to accept virtue as univocal if 'justice and temperance' *mean* virtue. If this is the case then virtue has been defined and the problem is solved. Socrates clearly does not believe the problem to be solved and thus has failed to demonstrate the univocal nature of virtue – if, indeed 'virtue' is a univocal term at all.

3. Problems with Plato's Theory.

This necessity for a term to be univocal if it is definable hints at some underlying problems with Plato's theory of definition. Robinson takes Plato to assume the existence of a single virtue underlying all applications of the term to be an actual mind-independent feature of the world. Robinson believes this realist ontology to extend to the 'essence' feature of a term. The essence of a term must be thought to actually exist independently of any person's concept of it. In order to provide a definition of X, one must provide an analysis of the essence of X. The analysis of such essence must be such that it is analysed beyond its synonymy with other terms. Instead, this analysis must contain a detailed explication of the structure of X and the related structure of its essence.

We will shortly discuss the problems the notion of an 'essence' creates. However, even if we grant Plato such metaphysical bunkum we are still faced with the problem that the 'essence' of a term may be what Robinson terms a 'primary element' – i.e. a term that cannot be further reduced. If we cannot describe the term's structure we are only left with the possibility of stating what terms mean the same as it. As Plato does not allow us to employ synonymies in our analysis of terms, this quality would render a term indefinable in the Platonic sense of 'definition'.

Here, then, we find a substantial problem with the conditions Plato sets out for a definition to meet. They are such that certain terms appear to be indefinable. However, I do not believe this problem, as Robinson sets it out, to be the

greatest faced by Plato's theory. Robinson confidently asserts that analysis fails where the essence of a term is a primary element. This language makes it easy for us to imagine the essence of a word being much like a fundamental particle, which it is impossible to further divide. As this is the case, we are told that as we cannot properly analyse the structure of the indivisible particle, we cannot analyse the structure of the term – or of its essence. Yet Robinson does not qualify his assertion that an essence could be fundamental in nature or be a 'primary element' and thus has a structure incapable of further analysis. I do not understand what he can mean by this – and think that such an attempted devastation of Plato's theory requires further explanation if it is to be successful. More than this, he apparently attempts to divide the essence of terms in an effort to discern their structure as surely this indivisibility is the only difference between a non-primary and a primary term. Yet this seems to directly contradict what Socrates asks Meno to do. Socrates explicitly tells Meno not to divide a term into its parts: "I asked you to speak about virtue as a whole".

A more poignant attack upon Plato's theory of definitions would target his metaphysical claims. He has no reason for supposing that a term has an 'essence', much less so that its essence is a real metaphysical entity. Such a claim appears to be baseless and rather rash, and as it underpins his theory seems to necessitate a great deal of explanation – which it certainly is not given. Robinson correctly points out that the vagueness of the question 'What is X?' allows Plato to dodge such problems – however this is only possible in an entirely unsatisfactory and superficial manner. Robinson suggests that 'What is X?' amounts to the equivalent demand, 'Make a true statement about X'. This allows problems with, for example, the notion of an essence – or for Robinson the 'primary' structure of an essence – to be avoided by converting the request into an identification request. However, the answer to such a request does not provide a definition of a term in the platonic sense and therefore the conditions Plato requires a definition to entail are self-defeating.