

SOCRATES AND KNOWLEDGE

How does the wise man discover true knowledge?

Stage 1. Strip away prejudices/prejudgement.

Stage 2. Reduce interlocutor to state of confusion/doubt > realisation that he does not know what he thought he knew.

Stage 3. Build up premise again by means of:

question and answer/discussions/argument
definitions

examples

until a final definition of the "essence" of moral quality

under discussion is reached (or not, as the case may be)

Example 1. Cross-examination of Meletus in the Apology.

This is not the "full treatment" - rather the destruction of Meletus:

Socrates traps Meletus:

(a) into making universal assumptions (p.46)

(b) into declaring him an atheist (not part of the charge) (p.49)

(c) into equating "supernatural beings" with gods
(without drawing any distinction > universalising again?)

All this interspersed with jibes and rhetoric>

obscuring the weakness of the arguments.

Example 2. The Euthyphro

A complete example of the process.

Starting point: prosecution of father.

Question: is this an unholy/impious action?

The issue: what is holiness/piety?

Stage 1.

Socrates seeks definition:

What is the "essential" of piety, which makes an action pious?

First response: by present example of prosecuting father

Socrates' reaction: unacceptable- example not universal.

Second response: by universal application

"what is agreeable to gods is holy/pious"

Socrates' reactions: demand for proof>

For since gods dispute among selves,
not ALL gods will find same things agreeable>
hence definition fails as a universal definition

Third response: a new universal definition:

"what all gods approve of is holy/pious"

Socrates' reaction: initiates debate on

difference between state and performance
of any god-approved action.

At end of this no nearer finding the "essential"

Stage 2 Euthyphro admits his confusion.

Stage 3.

Socrates now leads with his definition:

introduces the idea of holiness as aspect of justice
via analogy of shame and fear:

"what is holy is also just; what is just is not necessarily holy"

ie. holiness is sub-division/off-shoot/by-product of justice.

Euthyphro now makes a fresh start, based on this premise.

First move: care of gods = piety/holiness; care of men = justice.

Socrates picks up care:

by analogy (via animals examples)

care > benefit and improvement

hence piety = benefit and improvement of gods - impossible premise

Second move: piety = doing service to gods

Socrates picks up service;

By analogy (via specialist service industries examples)

service > practical achievements

Hence piety = helping gods to achieve - impossible premise

Third move: piety = gratifying the gods (by prayer and sacrifice)

Socrates picks up means of gratification

by demonstrating the bargaining/trading basis behind it

Hence this can not be gratifying since gods offer us good things, not vice versa.

Fourth move: piety = gratifying gods (via offering honour & tokens of esteem)

Socrates sums up: piety = gratifying the gods,

not benefitting them, or winning their approval

Fifth move: gratifying the gods = the thing most approved by them

Socrates links moves 4 & 5: the holy is what is approved by the gods

This takes us back to the third original response and attempted definition:

"what all gods approve of is holy"

So we are still no further forward:

(a) we have eliminated some false definitions

(b) the true definition of the "essence" still eludes us.

N.B. Some flaws in the argument?

1. Isolated instances should not be generalised.

2. Use of analogy can lead to false inferences:

ie. the assumption that an analogy has general application

3. Confusion of action and state, concrete actions and abstract qualities

4. Equation of gods with men as a conception.

Final question:

Is the "essence" of any moral quality

(a) an abstraction like the quality itself

(b) a hypothetical assumption of philosophy

(c) something can be logically calculated and known

(You don't have to answer the question; but

think about it - it will help determine your view of Socrates

and his attempts to find the absolute truth)