

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art
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Forms and Conceptual Analysis

*Socrates on the search for Forms (translations by Benjamin Jowett):

From *Euthyphro*:

Soc. I dare say; and you shall tell me them at some other time when I have leisure. But just at present I would rather hear from you a more precise answer, which you have not as yet given, my friend, to the question, What is "piety"? When asked, you only replied, Doing as you do, charging your father with murder.

Euth. And what I said was true, Socrates.

Soc. No doubt, Euthyphro; but you would admit that there are many other pious acts?

Euth. There are.

Soc. Remember that I did not ask you to give me two or three examples of piety, but to explain the general idea which makes all pious things to be pious. Do you not recollect that there was one idea which made the impious impious, and the pious pious?

Euth. I remember.

Soc. Tell me what is the nature of this idea, and then I shall have a standard to which I may look, and by which I may measure actions, whether yours or those of any one else, and then I shall be able to say that such and such an action is pious, such another impious.

From *Meno*:

Soc. By the gods, Meno, be generous, and tell me what you say that virtue is; for I shall be truly delighted to find that I have been mistaken, and that you and Gorgias do really have this knowledge; although I have been just saying that I have never found anybody who had.

Men. There will be no difficulty, Socrates, in answering your question. Let us take first the virtue of a man—he should know how to administer the state, and in the administration of it to benefit his friends and harm his enemies; and he must also be careful not to suffer harm himself. A woman's virtue, if you wish to know about that, may also be easily described: her duty is to order her house, and keep what is indoors, and obey her husband. Every age, every condition of life, young or old, male or female, bond or free, has a different virtue: there are virtues numberless, and no lack of definitions of them; for virtue is relative to the actions and ages of each of us in all that we do. And the same may be said of vice, Socrates.

Soc. How fortunate I am, Meno! When I ask you for one virtue, you present me with a swarm of them, which are in your keeping. Suppose that I carry on the figure of the swarm, and ask of you, What is the nature of the bee? and you answer that there are many kinds of bees, and I reply: But do bees differ as bees, because there are many and different kinds of them; or are they not rather to be distinguished by some other quality, as for example beauty, size, or shape? How would you answer me?

Men. I should answer that bees do not differ from one another, as bees.

Soc. And if I went on to say: That is what I desire to know, Meno; tell me what is the quality in which they

do not differ, but are all alike;-would you be able to answer?

Men. I should.

Soc. And so of the virtues, however many and different they may be, they have all a common nature which makes them virtues; and on this he who would answer the question, "What is virtue?" would do well to have his eye fixed: Do you understand?

Men. I am beginning to understand; but I do not as yet take hold of the question as I could wish.

Soc. When you say, Meno, that there is one virtue of a man, another of a woman, another of a child, and so on, does this apply only to virtue, or would you say the same of health, and size, and strength? Or is the nature of health always the same, whether in man or woman?

Men. I should say that health is the same, both in man and woman.

Soc. And is not this true of size and strength? If a woman is strong, she will be strong by reason of the same form and of the same strength subsisting in her which there is in the man. I mean to say that strength, as strength, whether of man or woman, is the same. Is there any difference?

Men. I think not.

Soc. And will not virtue, as virtue, be the same, whether in a child or in a grown-up person, in a woman or in a man?

*In these passages Socrates is concerned with finding *Forms*, for piety and virtue respectively. Platonic Forms are supposed to be mind-independent, transcendental entities. But putting aside that eccentricity, we can see Plato's Socrates as engaged in an activity that is still natural to many philosophers. Actually, there is a family of activities, going by several names, which has this Socratic search for Forms as an ancestor. These activities include:

- The search for a definition.* What is the definition of 'piety' or 'virtue'?
- The search for an essence (or nature).* What is the essence of piety, or of a pious action? What is the essence of virtue, or a virtuous action?
- Conceptual analysis.* What is the correct analysis of the concept *piety*, or *virtue*?
- The search for necessary and sufficient conditions.* What features are common to all, and only, pious actions? What features are common to all, and only, virtuous actions?

Socrates knew some canonical examples of pious actions, but he wanted to know what *made* those actions pious. He didn't want just a list. We might ask, "*In virtue of what* are the pious actions pious?" The answer to this question will be the form, essence, etc. of piety. We can then turn to this form, essence, etc. to determine if other actions count as pious or not.

*Our project in section 1 of this course is to take this Socratic approach to the concept of 'art'. We can provide a list of many works of art—particular paintings, sculptures, buildings, musical works, poems, etc. They are a diversified lot. Some of them are two-

dimensional, others are three-dimensional, and still others seem not to be located in physical space in any conventional sense (e.g., musical works and poems). Some make us laugh, some make us cry, some bore us, and others intrigue us. But they are all still works of art (recall the bees discussed in *Meno*). *In virtue of what* are all these works of art works of art?

Let's search for the definition of 'art', where this is understood in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. What features are common to all, and only, works of art? If we can come up with an answer to this question, then we will have a recipe for determining if some as yet unclassified object is a work of art. And perhaps uncovering the essence of art will make clear the standards that all works of art should aspire to satisfy. Or maybe we'll discover that there is no essence to be found. (There would still be art then, right?) Whatever the outcome, this is the project for our first month.