

Socratic Definition and the Elenchus

I. The Standard Pattern of Socratic Elenchus (Adapted from G. Vlastos: "The Socratic Elenchus")

Description:

A search for (moral) truth by adversary argument (of question and answer) in which:

(1) a thesis is debated only if the one answering asserts it as sincerely held belief; [the "say what you believe requirement"],

and

(2) the thesis is refuted if and only if its negation is shown to follow from some set of beliefs agreed upon by questioner and answerer.

Purpose:

The Socratic elenchus has a double purpose: to discover truths about how one ought to live (i.e., to discover moral truths), and to test the person who is answering to determine if they are living a moral life. Thus, its purpose is both *philosophical* and *therapeutic*. Note that this underscores the importance of the requirement that the interlocutor satisfy the "say what you believe" requirement. The elenchus will provide a test of the interlocutor's virtue, and will assist one in the task of becoming virtuous only if participation is sincere.

Procedure:

1. The interlocutor asserts a thesis P which Socrates considers false and targets for refutation.
2. Socrates secures agreement to some further premises, e.g., Q, and R. Q and R are (normally) not argued for.
3. Socrates then argues, and the interlocutor agrees, that Q and R entail not-P.
4. Thereupon, Socrates claims that P (the target thesis) has been shown false, not-P true.

Example: (taken from Euthyphro 5c-6e with some re-ordering and adjustments):

Question: What is piety and impiety, both with regards murder and other things?

Target thesis (P): The pious is what I am doing now, to prosecute the wrongdoer...not to prosecute is impious.

Auxiliary hypotheses agreed upon:

(Q): The pious itself is the same and alike in every pious action.

(R): The impious is the opposite of all that is pious.

(S): Everything which is impious presents us with one form or appearance insofar as it is pious (e.g., both in murder and other things).

(T): There many other pious actions other than prosecuting the wrongdoer.

Conclusion (not-P): Then it is not the case piety (or the pious) is prosecuting the wrongdoer (because prosecuting is not common to all pious actions).

In this passage Socrates aims to refute the proposal (P), by showing that it conflicts with other beliefs Euthyphro holds, viz., (Q), (R), (S), and (T). His explicit challenge to Euthyphro's definition of piety relies primarily on (Q) and (T). One cannot consistently hold that piety is what is common to all pious actions, that piety is prosecuting the wrongdoer, and that

prosecuting the wrongdoer is not common to all pious actions. This example is not only a paradigm of elenctic argument, but is also a paradigm of Socrates' quest for definition.

II. The Socratic Quest for Definitions

Regardless of the question being raised in discussion, Socrates typically leads the conversation to a concern with definition: What is virtue? What is piety? What is love?

Assumptions:

Commonality: There is a form (EIDOS) of piety that is the same in all and only pious things. (5d2-5)

Explanatory Priority: The form of piety makes pious actions pious, i.e., it is what is responsible for their being pious, and explains why they are pious. (6d10-e1)

--the form is the essence or nature of piety

Ideal/Standard: The form is a standard by which to judge which things are pious and which are impious. (6e3-6)

Object of Definition: This form or nature or essence of piety is what we seek in giving a definition, i.e., it will provide the correct answer to the "What is X?" question.

Corollaries:

1. The answer to "What is X?" cannot be an individual instance of X, since it must be common to all instances.
2. Because the form must be the standard or ideal pattern for X's, it cannot be qualified by its opposite, i.e., it cannot be not-X.
3. Since one role of the standard is to provide a basis for recognizing instances, we can make knowledgeable claims about instances of X, only if we have a definition.

Example of an argument relying on *explanatory priority*: Euthyphro on Piety: 9d1-11b1

Assume that:

- 1) What is pious (i.e., what piety is) = what is loved by (all) the gods. (To be pious = to be loved by all the gods)
- 2) Piety is what makes actions pious.

But:

- 3) The gods love what is pious because it is pious,

But not:

- 4) The gods love what is pious because it is god-loved.

Contrast:

Being pious is what makes actions god-loved.

Being god-loved is what makes actions pious.

How exactly does this argument work? Is it convincing?

III. Questions

Is Socrates entitled to claim, on the basis of his method, that he has proven the target thesis false? I.e., is Socrates entitled to conclude that the hypothesis (P) is false and (not-P) true because he has shown that (P) is inconsistent with some further agreed upon premises?

The worry behind this question stems from the observation that one can avoid inconsistency in a set of beliefs by denying any one of the set. In the example considered, Euthyphro need not have agreed with Socrates to reject the target thesis. Instead, he might have chosen to reject (Q), viz., that the pious itself is the same in every pious action, or (T), viz., that there are other sorts of pious actions besides prosecuting the wrongdoer; in doing so, he would still avoid inconsistency. In fact, Socrates' interlocutors typically agree with him that the thesis to reject is the target thesis, but this doesn't avoid the problem. The question remains: how do we know which belief to give up when we find an inconsistency in our beliefs? What conclusions should we draw about the individual beliefs when we find an inconsistency?

Example:

1. (P) Jones is the best chess player in town.
2. (Q) The best player always wins.
3. (R) Jones lost last night to Smith.

Given that we believe (1-3), and that they are not consistent, what should we conclude? We have 3 options:

4. (not-P) Jones is not the best chess player in town.
- 4*. (not-Q) It is not the case that the best player always wins. (Sometimes the best player loses.)
- 4**. (not-R) Jones did not lose last night to Smith.

No doubt we have to reject the belief which seems weakest to us. Of course, further inquiry may show us that we gave up the wrong belief. But we continue, doing the best we can, to test our beliefs for inconsistency, knowing that if we find an inconsistency then at least one of the beliefs is false. This suggests that through elenctic inquiry we can never be certain that we have proven a target thesis false, or its negation true; the most we can claim to have proven is that one or another of the beliefs we considered is false.

This fact is connected to Socrates' disavowal of knowledge. Through elenctic inquiry he finds that his interlocutors are willing to assent to inconsistent claims; this shows that they have false beliefs, i.e., that they lack knowledge. His own commitment to elenctic inquiry is a commitment to test his own beliefs for hidden inconsistencies. Perhaps he thinks that until he can show his beliefs to be wholly consistent, he is not entitled to claim knowledge. Although he thinks his beliefs are consistent, inconsistency is sometimes difficult to find; only diligent testing and retesting will establish their coherence. He differs from his interlocutors because he, unlike they, respect the difficulty of achieving consistency in one's beliefs. Perhaps the only thing he can say he knows with confidence is that he lacks the required assurances of consistency, and so lacks knowledge.

Some may want to push this idea even further. The fact that a set of beliefs is consistent is no guarantee of their truth. As we saw above, one might gain consistency in a set of beliefs by rejecting one which is, as a matter of fact, true. It might be that this danger was what prevented Socrates from claiming knowledge. Even if he was confident in the consistency of his beliefs (due to years of conscientious elenctic inquiry), he must acknowledge that his inquiry is fallible, that some of his beliefs may nevertheless be false. This fallibility is the hallmark of human knowledge, and what distinguishes it from infallible divine knowledge. Socrates'

human wisdom is to acknowledge this fallibility in the elenchus, which is the best procedure we humans have to achieve knowledge.