

Socrates Study Guide

PHIL301

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Readings: 127-134 (general remarks), 135-152 (*Euthyphro*), 153-178 (*Apology*)

Note on Plato Citations:

Plato's works are cited by reference to *Stephanus numbers*, owing to the type-setting of a 16th Century French printer, Henri Estienne. These numbers will be found in the margins of our text. *Apology*, thus, begins at 17a (see p. 153). In-text citation of Plato's works should appear as follows: (*Apology* 17a). Where the context has been made clear and to facilitate repeated citations, you may cite simply line numbers: (17a). See further instances below and throughout my notes.

Our study of Socrates continues our general study of rationalism in the ancient Greek philosophical era. See also the notes on *Euthyphro* and *Apology* in the two Socrates Notes files on our webpage.

Study Questions:

In General

1. In what ways, if any, is Socrates' thought different from that of the Pre-Socratics? In what ways is it similar? Is Socrates' thought rationalistic?
2. What general principles (*archia*) appear present in Socrates' thought, if any? What are his primary concerns? What is his general way of understanding the world? How is the world ordered, as Socrates sees it, if at all?
3. By what means does Socrates attempt to investigate the world? What are his *methods*? How does these methods reflect a rationalist world view, if at all?

Euthyphro

4. Who is Euthyphro and what is his social position?
5. What is Socrates' attitude towards Euthyphro?
6. What is Socrates saying about the form of piety at (5c-d), (6d-e), and (11a)? What kind of account of piety would satisfy Socrates?
7. What exactly is wrong with Euthyphro's first definition of piety (5d/e)?
8. What is wrong with his second (7a) and third (9d) definitions?

Apology

9. What are the charges brought against Socrates by Meletus? What is Socrates' response to these charges? (Note, in particular, Socrates' methods of argumentation, here.)
10. What does Socrates take to be the meaning of the Delphic oracle? What distinction in wisdom does he draw at 20d? What is human wisdom, according to Socrates?
11. Why has Socrates avoided public office?
12. What is Socrates' "daimon"? What is Socrates' attitude towards gods and religious matters?
13. Why does Socrates not appeal to the Assembly for mercy?

14. Why does Socrates believe that the unexamined life is not worth living? What constitutes human virtue, according to Socrates? What is the relationship between human virtue and human happiness, on his view?
15. Why does Socrates believe that it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it? Why does he maintain that a good man cannot be harmed?
16. What is Socrates' argument for not fearing death?

Some general notes on Socrates:

Socrates and Plato

- (See timeline, p. xiv.) Socrates was born in 470BCE, about 150 years after the birth of Thales. He was executed in 399BCE. Plato was a friend and protégé of Socrates, born 428BCE and died 348BCE.
- Philosophy has evolved significantly in the 200 years or so preceding Plato's probable period of work. From relatively rudimentary metaphysical and epistemological claims and theories have grown the complex, sophisticated, and wide-ranging thoughts of a great philosopher.
- Our appreciation of Plato owes in no small part to the volume of his surviving work. In addition to its philosophical merit, Plato's work is significant for its artistry. He wrote in *dialogue* form, creating more or less fictional conversations as vehicles of his thought; the characters of the dialogues were his contemporaries – friends, associates, even family members. Unlike the other great Greek philosopher, Aristotle, Plato infuses much of his work with drama and passion.¹
- Socrates wrote nothing (evidently); his method was entirely oral. Plato is our primary record of his thought, though other records exist, notably those of Xenophon and Aristotle. Aristophanes parodies Socrates in his comic play, *The Clouds*. Plato's affection for and admiration of his mentor is evident in much of his writing.
- Socrates thought is (thought to be) reflected in the "early" dialogues, such as *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito*, and in the first book of *Republic*. In other Platonic dialogues, Plato uses the character of Socrates to advance his own views. The difference between their methods and beliefs is particularly evident in *Republic*.
- The *Sophists*: (See pp. 104-5 for a useful, brief discussion.) The Sophists were professional instructors of rhetoric and philosophy – especially moral philosophy: they charged money for their services, in some cases, evidently, a great deal. Their services became valuable with the development of democratic political institutions. Sophists provided philosophical examination of moral truth and also the rhetorical means of advancing one's political agenda. Famous Sophists include Protagoras, Gorgias, Critias, and Antiphon. Both Socrates and Plato were scornful of the Sophists' mercenary ways and reputed disregard for truth. They (Plato and Socrates) thought a proper regard for truth to be essential to our political and personal well-being. Gorgias and Critias appear in dialogues by those names; Protagoras' views (including the dictum that man is the measure of all things) are addressed in the *Theaetetus*, an important dialogue on thought and language.

¹ We are told, however, that Aristotle did write fictional or dramatic works of considerable quality; none has survived.

Socrates' Method and General Views

- Socrates' philosophy is striking for its focus on *virtue*.² Whereas most of the Pre-Socratic philosophers examined metaphysical and epistemological matters, primarily, Socrates is concerned almost exclusively with ethics³. To some extent, this is a consequence of his times: the Peloponnesian Wars (431-404BCE), among others, disrupted social life, giving rise to increased discussion of ethical and political matters; the Sophists formed an important part of this discussion.
- *Elenchus* (ἔλεγχος): This term refers to Socrates' method, a process of examination involving successive definition of some important term (justice, piety, courage, etc.) and evaluation of that definition by reference to common belief. The method is repetitive: new definitions are offered and examined as previous ones are found lacking. We see this method displayed in *Euthyphro* and in Book I of *Republic*.
- Implicit in the *elenchus* is Socrates' belief in a single *eidos* (form, idea) giving substance to the given virtue (justice, piety, etc.). See e.g. *Euthyphro* 6d. These *forms* are the objects of intellectual thought and represent true reality. It seems likely that this view influenced Plato's development of his theory of forms.
- In addition to discovering a specific moral truth, the *elenchus* was intended by Socrates to improve the moral quality of its subject. Socrates believed that each of us should engage in a regular, continual process of self-examination, and that doing so was both necessary and sufficient for a happy, prosperous life. The unexamined life, in other words, is not worth living. (See *Apology* 38a.)
- Socratic Wisdom: knowing that we don't know. In the *Apology* we see recounted Socrates' famous charge handed down by the Oracle at Delphi. The Oracle declared that none in Athens was wiser than Socrates. Socrates' elenctic examination of his peers constitutes his effort first to interpret and then to sustain the Oracle's proclamation. At first, Socrates is puzzled, and examines those renowned for wisdom – political leaders, poets, and craftsmen. He finds the Oracle confirmed when he realizes that he, at least, is aware of and professes his ignorance of important moral truths. Socrates goes on to make it his business (as “gadfly”) to keep Athenians honest about their moral knowledge (i.e., their lack thereof).
- Socrates' major beliefs: despite his avowals of ignorance, Socrates appears to hold a number of positive claims.
 - o Unity of Virtue: the various, individual virtues (such as courage, piety, moderation, etc.) are all aspects of a single, over-arching virtue, namely *wisdom*. Note that this implies that the individual virtues are themselves *noetic* states – i.e., states of knowledge. Evidently, for Socrates, to know (the definition of) courage is necessary and sufficient for being courageous.
 - o Virtue its own reward: Socrates believes that wisdom is necessary and sufficient for happiness (i.e., *eudaimonia*, living well; see Aristotle for further discussion of human happiness). As above, wisdom is to be the result of elenctic inquiry.
 - o No Weakness of Will: Socrates held that no one knowingly acts except in his/her best interest. This means that “weakness of will” is impossible: one cannot know that act A is better than B, but do B for lack of will-power. In such cases,

² The term ‘virtue’ is a translation of the Ancient Greek, *arete*, which is a general term for any state of excellence or virtue. Like our term, good, it can apply equally to human and non-human things (good hammers, good horse, good man). The term also has a more specific use in application to human life, where the “virtue” are those qualities defining a “good person” and “good life.” In the patriarchal ancient Greek culture, the focus would have been on the “good man;” women were second citizens.

³ ‘Ethics’ derives from the Greek *ethos* meaning custom or habit.

- Socrates maintains, one in fact identifies B as better than A. (Aristotle holds an opposing view.)
- Justice: It is better to suffer injustice than to perform it. (See *Apology* 39e, *Republic* I.) It is only by *performing* an injustice that one can harm oneself. A corollary: one cannot be harmed by others; one can be harmed only by oneself. (Cf. Socrates' attitude towards Meletus and Athens and to the threat of harm to himself in *Apology*.)
 - Equality: Socrates believes that all persons are equally capable of wisdom. Everyone should participate in self-scrutiny. Compare Plato and Aristotle, who maintain that some are better capable of morality and goodness than others.
- Reconciling Socrates' major beliefs: It is not clear that all of Socrates' claims can be true.
- Will the *elenchus* yield its intended result? Are its two primary goals (discovery of truth, wisdom) compatible?
 - Socrates frequently finds fault with his interlocutors' understanding of the virtues. It is not clear, however, that this examination will result in the interlocutor's coming to care about the state of his/her soul. This suggests that elenctic self-examination may not be sufficient for moral well-being.
 - There is a significant tension between Socrates' claim that virtue is knowledge, on the one hand, and his claim that he himself knows only that he knows nothing, on the other. If he truly knows nothing, then he cannot claim to know that virtue is knowledge. Worse, if knowledge is virtue, and if Socrates himself is ignorant, then he cannot be a virtuous man; yet he presents himself as such (in *Apology*, e.g.). Whether he is or is not himself virtuous, the question remains open what can be the intended, moral effect of self-examination if the best we can hope for is recognition of our ignorance.
 - Some maintain that Socrates' disavowal of knowledge is *ironical* – that he only says this to justify his elenctic examinations of others. It is difficult, however, to reconcile such a practice with virtuous behavior, as it is disingenuous if not outright dishonest. (In the context of *Apology*, this problem seems particularly acute.) More specifically, Socrates frequently seems to chide his interlocutors for their prideful ways. He seems to scorn their hubris; his sarcasm can seem sharp indeed. Such attitudes, however, can be justified only assuming some understanding of moral truth, which Socrates officially disavows.
- Socrates within the development of Ancient Greek thought
- We have seen various means by which ancient Greek thinkers sought to depict reality as a logical cosmos, and that the sophistication of these accounts increases during the period leading up to Socrates' time.
 - Socrates himself, as represented by Plato, deploys an impressive array of logical tools and extends the reach of logic specifically into the human realm. As we shall see, Socrates' argumentative skills are formidable and demonstrate a keen eye for logical detail. His pursuit of virtue manifests his conviction that our moral world is equally governed by logical law, though our access to these laws is imperfect.
 - Socrates and religion: Socrates clearly expresses belief in the Greek panoply of gods as well as in his own, private "*daimon*". On the other hand, Socrates rejects the traditional stories about the gods that represent them as morally defective. (See *Euthyphro* 6a and compare *Republic* II and III.) This represents an important development in ancient Greek thought, namely, the notion that the

divine world is a world governed by moral laws *as understood by us*.⁴ Where Hesiod evidently sees no tension in recounting the savage behavior of the divines, Socrates cannot reconcile *divine* with *immoral* conduct.

- A further important aspect of Socrates' thought is the distinction he draws between divine and mortal knowledge (wisdom). See *Apology* 20d, 21b, 22a, 23a-b, 29a. It is "pretty certain," for Socrates, that it is only a god who is "really wise," whereas by comparison "human wisdom is worth little or nothing" (23a). Human wisdom, at best, consists in recognizing this, that we, like Socrates, are "truly worthless where wisdom's concerned" (23b). This calls into question the extent to which we may characterize Socrates as a rationalist. On the whole, we may say, Socrates asserts the logical structure of the universe. On the other hand, like some of the Pre-Socratics, he acknowledges significant limits to human access to this structure. At best, it would seem, we can make educated guesses, and remain ever-watchful lest our guesses turn out wrong. This would characterize human wisdom as a form of *practical reason*: as opposed to *theoretical reason*, whose object is truth, practical reason helps us to manage our lives. Knowing that we don't know will help us to avoid the errors of behavior that accompany errors of belief.

⁴ For a Pre-Socratic anticipation of this view, see Xenophanes, §1/B1. Compare Heraclitus, §111/B15.