DEFINITION AND ESSENCE IN THE PLATONIC DIALOGUES

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I.

What are variously called “Socratic definitions”, answers to the “what is F?” question, “real definitions” λόγος of Forms, etc., have been subjected to extraordinary scrutiny, especially within the English-speaking scholarly world. There is not a great deal of common ground among the scholars beyond the generally agreed upon view that the definitions Socrates seeks in Plato’s dialogues are supposed to be definitions not of words or concepts but of “things” that are real or, let us say, extramental.1 I do not wish to controvert this view. But as Richard Robinson complained some fifty years ago, the question “what is F?” where “F” is supposed to represent a Form is almost impossibly vague.2 It is not just vague; it is deeply puzzling. What after all is piety but piety? What is virtue but virtue? What other sort of answer could the “what is F?” question be expecting?

The thesis I am going to defend in regard to these sorts of definition is this. A λόγος of an οὐσία is an expression of an understanding of the material identity of an instance of that οὐσία (the definiendum) and some property or properties of that instance and all other instances of the identical οὐσία (the definiens). The term “material identity” as used here refers, generally, to a case in which it is asserted that A = B, as opposed to formal identity, where it is asserted that A = A. The material identity of A and B is usually expressed in Plato’s Greek by saying that A and B are “the same” (ὁμολογοῦν).3

I leave the meaning of “property” in this context vague for the moment. I will try to make it more precise in section II. In fact, we do not find a canonical form for such definitions in the dialogues. At least part of the reason for this is that the focus of the entire enterprise is elsewhere, namely, in showing the reader (and, of course, the interlocutor) that without such λόγος at hand, our ability to recognize instances of the οὐσία is in serious doubt as well as our ability to know whether

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putative instances possess certain properties. My central contention, however, is that the ability to provide such a λόγος is posterior to the understanding of the material identity of any instance of the οὐσία and its properties. I aim to show that this interpretation, if true, puts in doubt much of the contemporary views about these λόγοι. What is wrong with these views is that they start from one or another unsupportable assumption about the metaphysical and epistemological basis for these definitions.

These assumptions regard (a) the nature of the λόγος itself; (b) the relation of the λόγος to the one who gives it or knows it; and (c) the nature of the οὐσία that is to be defined. I consider briefly each assumption.

As R. E. Allen argued many years ago, the λόγος being sought is almost certainly not to be understood is a definition of F per genus et differentiam. Such a definition is precluded, first of all, by the simplicity of the definiendum. Perhaps more decisively, an Aristotelian genus, at any rate, is in potency to its species, whereas there is no textual basis for attributing potency to any Form in relation to any other. Allen wants to argue that, nevertheless, there is a kind of generic-specific “hierarchy” within Plato’s intelligible world, and that the correct way to give a response to the question “what is F?” is with a “map” of a specific Form within the wider or larger generic Form to which it belongs. According to Allen, Forms are definable by “tracing their relations to the broader Forms which contain them”. This seems to involve, at least, “difference, implication, and compatibility”.

There is no doubt some good sense in this approach, though it cannot be completely right. For one thing, implication and compatibility are relations among propositions, and Allen himself would deny that Forms are propositions. For another, a Form’s difference from another Form would only seem to be discernible on the basis of its “location” within the map. But then what would a statement of difference add to the knowledge which is supposed to be contained within or expressed within the λόγος? Indeed, merely asserting that, say, piety is different from justice could hardly be constitutive of a definition of piety. Yet to say that piety is different from justice in a certain respect, namely, the respect in which it is different, is implicitly to raise the question of what this “respect” is supposed to be over and above what piety is.

Under (b) is the assumption that knowledge of a Form is identical with the ability to give or express this λόγος or at least extensionally equivalent with that ability. On the face of it, this simply cannot be correct. For one thing, if A who

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5 Ibid., 90-91.
6 See e.g., Allen, Plato’s Euthyphro, 105: “To know is to be able to render an account; to be able to render an account is to know”. Cf. G. Fine, “Knowledge and Logos in the Theaetetus”, Philosophical Review 88 (1979) 394: “To know any object, Plato has already told us, is to be able to provide an account of it relating it to other objects in the same field, objects whose interrelationships, in turn, can also be suitably specified”. Also, J. Moline, Plato’s Theory of Understanding, Madison 1981,