

## **Bergen Lecture 2: Ancient Philosophy: Socrates vs. Wittgenstein**

Wittgenstein was infamous for being rather poorly read in the history of philosophy, and really in philosophy generally. For example, he confessed to his students (Drury, p. 158; Britton, p. 209) that he had never read any Aristotle! But another friend and student, von Wright (p. 33), reported that “he did read and enjoy Plato.” And von Wright conjectures: “He must have recognized congenial features, both in Plato’s literary and philosophical method and in the temperament behind the thoughts.” Wittgenstein’s manuscripts contain dozens of mentions of, or allusions to, Plato’s dialogues, especially the *Theaetetus*, but including several others. And at his death a 5-volume German translation of the complete dialogues was found in his possession.

Socrates, in Plato’s early dialogues, regularly asks “What is x?” where x may, for example, be piety (in the *Euthyphro*), virtue (*Meno*), or knowledge (*Theaetetus*—not, however, an early dialogue). We construe this as a request for a definition, yet his interlocutors initially respond only with examples or instances of the term. A pious action, says Euthyphro, is “what I am doing now” (5d). Socrates always responds by pushing the interlocutor for a definition that provides what we would call an essence—a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the concept—what it is that underlies the instances, in virtue of which they are instances of the concept in question (6d): “Bear in mind then that I did not bid you tell me one or two of the many pious actions but that form itself that makes all pious actions pious....” The interlocutors generally come to see what he is looking for, and offer some essence that turns out to be either too broad, or too narrow, or both. Discussion proceeds

until, usually, the interlocutor tires or pleads other obligations (15e). The dialogue generally ends before a satisfactory definition is found.

Socrates, in these early dialogues, does not imagine that these concepts might fail to have, and thus not need, such an essence. Socrates seems not to even consider the possibility that the concept might lack such an essence. But, if you think about it, not all concepts can have essences of this sort—short of circularity or infinite regress—so one should always keep in mind that a concept may lack an essence.

This line of response is Wittgenstein's well-known critique of essentialism regarding the unity of a concept. He tries to reduce our expectations for what is a satisfying resolution of Socrates' question—What is x? In the *Blue Book*, dictated in 1933-34, Wittgenstein warns that (BB 17) "what makes it difficult for us to take this line of investigation is our craving for generality" and our "contemptuous attitude toward the particular case" (18).

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein addresses this issue in connection with games. Wittgenstein sees Socrates' demand for an essence for a concept as a compulsion that holds us captive: "There *must* be something common" (§66). To escape from this prejudice he recommends: "don't think, but look!" *Thinking* leaves us beholden to the temptations of our times; *looking* brings us back to earth. There we see only "a complicated network of similarities." As he said in a lecture on June 1, 1936 (PO, p. 367):

We might solve certain puzzles by pointing out that we mustn't look for one common property to be found in all cases: a kinship may be there, but with no common property to which you can point.

—what he called a “family resemblance.”

Some have responded to Wittgenstein by trying to offer especially careful definitions of “game.” (See, for example, Bernard Suits’ book-long attempt to offer and defend a definition of “game”: *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*.) Even if this were successful, it would not undermine Wittgenstein’s point. (Here, I wish in his lecture he hadn’t said that we “mustn’t look for” but rather that we *needn’t insist on finding*.) Wittgenstein surely admits that some terms are definable in essentialist terms. In the *Blue Book* (25) he offers the “defining” criterion of angina as having “the bacillus so-and-so in his blood.” And no one could doubt that the definition of a triangle is a closed plane figure whose sides form three angles. Let us call such terms with essential definitions “technical terms.” Wittgenstein does not object to the existence of technical terms. He objects to the Socratic prejudice that all terms are technical terms.

Wittgenstein makes similar points about the concepts of “goodness” (PI §77 and *Wittgenstein’s Lectures: Cambridge, 1932-1935*, p. 33), “punishment,” “revolution,” “knowledge,” “cultural decay,” and “music” (*Eine Philosophische Betrachtung*, p. 190).

Wittgenstein sums up his position in dictations to Waismann for Schlick in the early 1930s (*Voices of Wittgenstein*, p. 33):

I can characterize my standpoint no better than by saying that it is the antithetical standpoint to the one occupied by Socrates in the Platonic dialogues. For if I were asked what knowledge is, I would enumerate instances of knowledge and add the words ‘and similar things’.

In a contemporary typescript (BT, p. 56), after a similar discussion of Socrates' essentialist expectation, and his own satisfaction with enumeration and kinship, he remarks parenthetically: "(I'm making it easier and easier for myself in philosophy. But the difficulty is to make it easier for oneself and yet to remain precise.)" "Easier" by having reduced expectations for what is required of a legitimate concept. A voice in the *Philosophical Investigations* complains (§65): "So you let yourself off the very part of the investigation that once gave you yourself most headache...."

It is an interesting question how one might decide whether a term was susceptible of an essentialist definition, or when you can let yourself off the search. What are we to make of the fact that in the Socratic dialogues discussion generally ends before a satisfactory definition is found? When Wittgenstein was discussing the Socratic dialogues with his friend Drury sometime around 1930, Drury suggested ("Conversations with Wittgenstein," 116): "It may be significant that those dialogues in which Socrates is looking for precise definitions end, all of them, without any conclusion. The definition he is looking for isn't reached, but only suggested definitions refuted. This might have been Socrates' ironical way of showing that there was something wrong in looking for one exact meaning of such general terms." Apparently Wittgenstein did not pick up on this suggestion. But the early dialogues generally do end in *aporia*—puzzlement. No definition is found. One might conclude that there is no definition to find, or one might conclude that we just have not tried hard enough. This later conclusion seems to be that one that Socrates prefers: the dialogues often end inconclusively because those Socrates is talking with run out of patience. Consider *Euthyphro* 15e: "Some other time,

Socrates, for I am in a hurry now and it is time to go.” *Protagoras* 361e: “We will examine these things later, whenever you wish; now it is time to turn our attention elsewhere.” *Republic* 331d, where Cephalus bows out: “I’ll hand over the argument to you, as I have to look after the sacrifice” even though he had just come from the sacrifice (328c). And the *Symposium* 223d, where Socrates drinks all his companions under the table, and then goes off to spend the rest of the day “just as he always did.” (In this respect Wittgenstein was not so unlike Socrates. As Russell recalled their early discussions (*Autobiography*, v. 2, 137): “He used to come to see me every evening at midnight, and pace up and down my room like a wild beast for three hours in agitated silence....I did not like to suggest to him that it was time for bed....”)

The former conclusion seems to be the conclusion that Drury reached: that there is no definition to be found. But after all, there is no way to *show* that a particular term is indefinable. At most there could be inductive evidence for such a conclusion. Recall G. E. Moore’s discussion of Good in *Principia Ethica*. While he insists that it cannot be defined, his evidence for this is really inductive—none of the proposed definitions succeed. They all fail the “open question” test. But Moore offers no reason to suppose all proposed definitions must fail the test. (It was only later non-descriptivists, like R. M. Hare (*The Language of Morals*), who offered principled arguments against the possibility of definition.)

The *Republic* is an interesting dialogue in part precisely because it does reach a definition (of “justice”) that all interlocutors seem to accept. (Not that we are necessarily impressed, or should be!) But it takes a good 4 “books”—much longer

than the so-called early, Socratic dialogues. So that may be evidence that a satisfactory definition is just hard to find. And it leaves open the possibility that Moore just did not try hard enough to define “good”, and Wittgenstein did not try hard enough to define “game”. But I think Wittgenstein would not want to formulate his difference with Socrates as being over whether there really IS a satisfactory essentialist definition of “game.” Rather, he would put their difference as being over whether there NEEDS to be a satisfactory essentialist definition of “game.” It is not that Wittgenstein tires of the search (as the interlocutors in the early dialogues did). But rather that he is willing to rest content without achieving the outcome that Socrates seeks.

This same pattern of difference between Socrates and Wittgenstein seems to emerge in another context. On December 17, 1930, while in Vienna between academic terms, Wittgenstein met with Moritz Schlick to discuss Schlick’s just-published book *Fragen der Ethik* [Problems of Ethics]. Waismann’s notes of the meeting record Wittgenstein’s comments (W&VC, p. 115):

Schlick says that in theological ethics there used to be two conceptions of the essence of the good: according to the shallower interpretation the good is good because it is what God wants; according to the profounder interpretation God wants the good because it is good. I think that the first interpretation is the profounder one: what God commands, that is good. For it cuts off the way to any explanation ‘why’ it is good, while the second is the shallow, rationalist one, which proceeds ‘as if’ you could give reasons for what is good.

The first conception says clearly that the essence of the good has nothing to do with facts and hence cannot be explained by any proposition. If there is any proposition expressing precisely what I think, it is the proposition 'What God commands, that is good.'

It would be hard to find a clearer statement of Euthyphro's position.

In that Platonic dialogue, after Euthyphro has proposed the view (9e) that "the pious is what all the gods love," Socrates asks him this question of conceptual priority (10a): "Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?" It is clear what Euthyphro should say—that it is pious because it is being loved by the gods—just what Wittgenstein asserted. But Euthyphro does not understand the question. After a marginally helpful explanation, Socrates returns with the question (10d): "Is it being loved then because it is pious, or for some other reason?" This is clearly a trick question, for it builds in the presupposition that it is being loved *for some reason or other*. Euthyphro does not notice the trick, and quickly answers "For no other reason." After all, if you have to come up with a reason, that seems the most plausible one. When Socrates draws out the unfortunate implication for his view, Euthyphro responds "Apparently." Euthyphro sees something has gone wrong, but can't put his finger on it.

The trick that Socrates plays, the presupposition that he builds in, is precisely the hidden assumption that many of us would accept—that the gods act for reasons, that commands can be justified. Euthyphro should have responded: "For no reason at all, Socrates." That response "cuts off the way to any explanation 'why' it is good." Socrates is so gripped by the urge to justify that either he does not himself see that

he is presupposing that, or else he is cynically using but concealing that presupposition against Euthyphro. In his diary not long after the discussion about Schlick's book (PPO, p. 83; May 6, 1931) Wittgenstein writes: " 'It is good because God commanded it' is the right expression for the lack of reason [*Grundlosigkeit*—absence of justification]."

Here we again see the accuracy of Wittgenstein's remark: "I can characterize my standpoint no better than by saying that it is the antithetical standpoint to the one occupied by Socrates in the Platonic dialogues." Wittgenstein stands with Euthyphro and the divine-command tradition in ethics. Where Socrates insists on a reason behind the commands, Wittgenstein is willing to rest content without achieving the outcome that Socrates seeks.

The question when to press, or halt, the process of explanation or justification comes up in a variety of contemporary philosophical discussions. Thomas Nagel has an interesting discussion of this issue as it relates to the meaning or absurdity of life. The ability to step back from our life and press for a justification of our activities is one of the things that makes us most human ("The Absurd," pp. 14-15). This is indeed what Socrates seems to have had in mind when he said (*Apology* 38a): "the unexamined life is not worth living for men." Yet absurdity results from this "perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary" from a larger perspective. Nagel thinks that this "collision within ourselves" is best faced with a sense of irony. The only way to avoid this sort of collision of self-consciousness "would be either never to attain it or to forget it—neither of which can be achieved by the will" (pp. 13, 17, 21). Here I can imagine



we would again find Wittgenstein at odds with Socrates. Socrates doesn't know when enough is enough, as we say. "The difficulty here," Wittgenstein says (Z §314), "is: to stop." While the unexamined life may not be worth living, the endlessly examined life, on the other hand, is not livable. Nagel says that once the issue is raised we cannot "forget it" through an act of will. But what one can do is willingly submit oneself to a process that might predictably lead one to forget it, or care less about it.

So we find several ways in which Wittgenstein is clearly at odds with Socrates. In each of these cases it is because Socrates wishes to push questions further than his interlocutors—find something deeper. And in each case, Wittgenstein is willing to rest content with something less, I believe.

In certain ways I think this brings Wittgenstein closer to Plato. I think an important way in which Plato differs from his mentor Socrates is that Plato came to think that Socrates' approach to issues was excessively intellectual. It made too little room for the rest of, the whole, human being. In particular, it left too little room for the emotions. So it is, for example, that Plato's so-called Middle Dialogues had mythical stories in them. Wittgenstein's friend Oets Bouwsma reported a conversation that they had in 1950 (p. 61): "Wittgenstein reads Plato—the only philosopher he reads. But he likes the allegories, the myths." Perhaps in the myths Wittgenstein saw the (April, 1947; C&V 62/71) "quite different artillery" that he sought, but never found, in his own work (1933 or 1934; C&V 24/28): "I believe I summed up where I stand in relation to philosophy when I said: really one should write philosophy only as one *writes a poem* [*dichten*]. That, it seems to me, must

reveal how far my thinking belongs to the present, the future, or the past. For I was acknowledging myself, with these words, to be someone who cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do.”

One striking similarity between Plato and Wittgenstein is that both employ the dialogue format—Plato almost always; Wittgenstein at least sometimes in the *Philosophical Investigations*. There has been a great deal of work on “characterization” in Plato’s dialogues (e.g., Ruby Blondell, *The Play of Character in Plato’s Dialogues*). A whole book has even been written on who the people were that make appearances in the dialogues (viz., Debra Nails’ *The People of Plato*). The dialogue format makes clear how philosophy is for Socrates an ad hominem activity. Socrates is not interested in philosophical theories in the abstract. He is interested in what a particular person believes, and how that fits with other things that person believes. His method of “elenchus” (or refutation) only works to show the inconsistency of a set of beliefs all held by the same person. This is supposed to have a special motivational force since an inconsistent set of beliefs cannot all be true, and if I am the one that holds all those beliefs, then I am holding at least one false belief. If I were to try to refute you by showing that one of your beliefs is inconsistent with some other belief that I hold, that is likely to have much less interest to you, since you can simply assume that I am the one holding the false belief.

But Plato’s dialogue format is interesting for another reason. We generally know a good bit about Socrates’ interlocutor. So we can see how emotion and circumstance can influence belief. While Socrates himself seems to want his

interlocutors to rise above these peculiarities of circumstance and attend to the pure rationality of the argument, the reader can see the limitations of this approach. And especially for readers who are familiar with ancient Greek history—in particular, Plato’s own contemporary readers, who would have known (of) the people talking with Socrates—it is possible to see how the views that the interlocutors held played out in their own lives.

One example of this is the conversation with Cephalus and Polemarchus in Book I of the *Republic* (Gifford, “Dramatic Dialectic in *Republic I*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 2001, pp. 35-106). Plato’s readers would have known that Cephalus was an arms manufacturer in Athens whose weaponry supplied Athens with the means to pursue its doomed ambitions in the war with Sparta. Of course he was paid for these arms by the democratic regime, but he was giving what was owed to madmen—the Athenian democrats—who were causing great harm through this otherwise just deal. So Cephalus’ life itself constituted the very counter-example that Socrates raised. But that’s not all. His son Polemarchus, who “inherited the argument” from his father, also inherited his guilt. For when the Thirty Tyrants took power in the aftermath of Athens’ defeat, they took revenge by summarily executing the son Polemarchus. Of course Polemarchus was the one who had advocated the traditional view that justice required helping friends and harming enemies. And it was this very principle on which the Tyrants acted, since he and his family were an enemy of the regime, in executing him. So Polemarchus died at the hands of his own faulty principle of justice. (A similar dramatic strategy is employed by Dostoevsky in his writings, especially in the *Brothers Karamazov*, in which Dostoevsky shows us

in the lives of his characters the flaws in the views advocated by those characters. E.g., the disintegration of Ivan's life lived according to the rejection of God.)

Wittgenstein criticized Plato's dialogic approach in an interesting way. In the conversation with Bouwsma cited above, we read (p. 60):

Plato's arguments! His pretense of discussion! The Socratic irony! The Socratic method! The arguments were bad, the pretense of discussion too obvious, the Socratic irony distasteful—why can't a man be forthright and say what's on his mind? As for the Socratic method in the dialogues, it simply isn't there. The interlocutors are ninnies, never any arguments of their own, say 'Yes' and 'No' as Socrates pleases they should. They are a stupid lot.

Perhaps Plato is no good, perhaps he's very good. How should I know? But if he is good, he's doing something which is foreign to us. We do not understand. Perhaps if I could read Greek!

Or perhaps if he knew more about Greek history!

I do sympathize with his criticism of the interlocutors as "yes-men". I have created an assignment for my Ancient Greek Philosophy class in which students choose portions of the dialogues and rewrite them, giving the interlocutors better lines—and then act them out. I find that the students do very well with this.

But Wittgenstein's understanding of irony here is rather shallow. Of course there is the surface irony, where Socrates patronizes his interlocutors, but there is also a deeper irony—perhaps we should call it Platonic irony—in which Plato undermines his interlocutors. This is very much a part of the dialogic method. And it comes from Plato's wider understanding of the problems of argument. Socrates

failed in his attempts to change people. We can see that by the fact that the people he tried to change ended up executing him. (And it is not clear that we can point to any characters in the dialogues who are improved by their contact with Socrates—perhaps Euthyphro?) But Plato may have opened up a new way of addressing issues by way of engaging the whole person—the person’s life and not just the person’s intellect.

Wittgenstein does not write in an obviously dialogic fashion. But at least some of the *Philosophical Investigations* lends itself to that interpretation. For occasionally there are lines put in quotation marks or between dashes—seeming to suggest another voice entering the train of thought. Stanley Cavell (p. 71) has written: “The voice of temptation and the voice of correctness are the antagonists in Wittgenstein’s dialogues.” And further research (Stern, pp. 22ff) has claimed to identify a “commentator”—a third “ironic” voice—in addition to the voices variously identified as “narratorial,” and “interlocutory.”

Seeing the *Investigations* as a sort of dialogue has not been straightforward, because it has very few of the markings of a dialogue—most importantly, no characters are named. Names alone may accomplish rather little, though Nails does a lot with the historical associations of names mentioned in Plato’s dialogues. But even made-up names would allow us to track who is speaking, and thereby allow us to gather comments from a given speaker together to form a point of view. Wittgenstein not only names no speakers, but, while he does use some markers—which are taken to identify a voice, he does not even use them consistently (in my opinion) so that sometimes an alternate voice is quoted and sometimes just voiced.

And of course this makes it even harder to make the case that there are three voices. This can be done only by theorizing about the content of the various things that are voiced.

(The interpretation of Plato's dialogues raises the question of whether or when one can attribute a view to Socrates or Plato based on the fact that some character, say, Socrates makes an assertion. A similar problem arises with the *Investigations*. Just because a sentence appears in it, does not mean that Wittgenstein is asserting that. This is a problem that arises in both my Greek Philosophy course and my Wittgenstein course.)

One might well think that the voices in the *Investigations* are not, after all, different characters or people, but different inclinations within oneself. "Almost the whole time I am writing conversations with myself. Things I say to myself tête-à-tête [*unter vier Augen*]" (December 26, 1948; C&V 77/88). If this were so, then it might well be difficult to separate and identify them—which would take a sort of psychoanalysis. But even if Wittgenstein thought these various voices were in all of us, he also presumably supposes that a certain voice is stronger in some of us, and another voice is stronger in others. (I believe this is much closer to the situation, since Wittgenstein makes such a big deal about the fact that other people will not understand him.)

A value of the, at least somewhat, dialogic character of the *Investigations* is that it is a means to address some of the non-cognitive aspects of belief formation and argumentation, and to personalize that address. This is connected to what I called Wittgenstein evangelism, in my previous talk. It has to be noted that in the

Preface to the *Investigations* Wittgenstein confesses that he did not find the book to be successful, and had given up on trying to improve it. But one might wonder how it could be changed. Could Wittgenstein have written a dialogic book in which there was a clearer sense of what/who the voices were? As it is, they come off as anonymous “voices in the head.” Might they take on more identity and character? Might this have given Wittgenstein more traction in engaging viewpoints that he found uncongenial? I wonder. Perhaps that would have required him to “write philosophy only as one *writes a poem*,” and that was just what he found that he could not quite do.

In “the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry” (*Republic*, 607B), we can see Wittgenstein wishing to side against Socrates but, I would say, *with* Plato—who found ways of making philosophy poetic. Yet Wittgenstein expresses the feeling that he is yet unable to participate in the quarrel except on Socrates’ terms.