

PLATO'S METAETHICS

The content of a virtue cannot be explicated by a concrete rule of conduct. This is first intimated within the *Republic* when Socrates objects to Cephalus that it is wrong to identify being just with telling the truth and returning what one has borrowed, for these acts are not always just (as when a borrower is asked to return some weapons by a lender who has gone mad, 1.331c1-d3). A more resilient participant than Cephalus might suppose that one has only to try again, but the objection falls within a pattern to which Socrates later alludes when he describes how the young can be corrupted by counter-examples to attempts to define the just or the fine by appeal to general laws or maxims (7.538c6-e4). This pattern of objection was already familiar from early Platonic dialogues (cf. T. H. Irwin *Plato's Moral Theory*, pp. 43-6). Contrast a possible exception allowed at *Phaedo* 62a (though the interpretation is disputed): perhaps a prohibition on suicide is unusual in being absolute.

Laches 190e: Laches, asked to say what courage is, replies, 'If someone is willing to stand fast in the ranks and fight back at the enemy without running away, such a man you may be sure is courageous.' Socrates replies by reminding him of the varied tactics that have earned admiration in warfare; also that he was not just asking about warfare. Indeed, he wishes to extend courage even to contending with desires or hedonic temptations – at which one might balk. Cf. Myles Burnyeat: 'It is typical of a virtue concept that its range should be liable to controversial extension or modification. For to state and defend criteria for collecting manifestations of a virtue is to articulate a way of grouping certain phenomena which exposes something of one's outlook on life in general' ('Virtues in Action', in G. Vlastos ed. *Socrates*, p. 212).

Euthyphro 7b6-8a2: Some questions can be settled definitively by measurement; others, about right and wrong, good and bad, do not lend themselves to 'a satisfactory decision' (or 'discrimination'), and so are disputed – the concepts are 'essentially contested' (in a well-known phrase of W.B. Gallie's).

Temperance cannot be identified with a quiet or gentle manner (*Charmides* 159b1-160d3), nor with shame (160e3-161b2), nor courage with endurance (*Laches* 192b9-d9). Unlike quietness, shame, and endurance, a virtue is always good (*Charmides* 161a6-b2). We need to add that the endurance is wise – but how is wisdom to be defined (*Laches* 192d10-193a2)? One way out is by a special kind of vagueness: perhaps justice is giving all men their due (*Republic* 1.331e1-4), and temperance is doing one's own (*Charmides* 161b3-6). But such paraphrases either invite the same objection, or move around a moral circle: if giving all men their due does not reduce to returning what one has borrowed and the like, it may more vaguely be equated with giving them what is appropriate to them (*Republic* 1.331e8-332c3) – that is, giving them what they justly deserve.

Republic 4.442e: The 'vulgar' tests of justice that follow are not so called because they are external, but because they are simple and concrete (like those of Cephalus).

The same holds aesthetically: we can't identify beauty with gold (*Hippias Major* 289e-291c). Nor is beauty to be identified with a beautiful girl (287e, 289a-c).

Republic 5.479a: Is there any of 'the many beautiful things' (*ta polla kala*) that will not also appear ugly, or of 'the just things' (*ta dikaia*) that will not also appear unjust?

479d: 'The many opinions of the many' (*ta tôn pollôn polla nomima*) concerning beauty (*kalon*) and the rest roll around between being and not being.

Statesman: There are no reliable generalizations linking the concrete and the abstract: absolute laws cannot do justice to the dissimilarities of men and situations (294a10-b6). A conception of precision can only be sketched imprecisely: expert statesmen, like all practical experts (c2), must be able to measure the greater and the lesser in relation not only to each other but to the 'mean' (*meson*), that is, 'the moderate, the fitting, the timely, the necessary, and all else that falls into the mean between extremes' (e5-8).

[Aristotle was to develop this more fully, but to very different effect: Plato aspires to the precision of an art of measurement, while he appeals to the perception of particular cases (*Nicomachean Ethics* 2.9.1109b22-3). Cf. also Aristotle on equity (*NE* 5.8).]

This is not to say that the application of a value-term does not connect with the application of other terms, concrete and neutral.

Cf. *Phaedo* 100cd: it is beauty that makes things beautiful, not a blooming colour, a shape, or anything like that.

Also *Symposium* 211e: Beauty itself is pure and unmixed, not 'full' of human flesh and colouring – presumably unlike the beauty of bodies.

Yet it cannot be excluded that, e.g., a rosy complexion might lose its beauty through becoming pallid.

Republic 476a: The just and unjust, good and bad, are each one, but seem many through their association (*koinônia*) with actions and bodies and with one another.

The value itself is different. So *Symposium* 211ab: Ideal Beauty is not perishable or increasing/diminishing; it is not beautiful in one respect, ugly in another, nor beautiful now but not then, nor beautiful in relation to this but not to that, nor here but not there, nor to some people but not to others. [These points seem to vary between tokens and types.] Beauty will not appear 'like' (*hoion*) a face or hands, nor as being in another thing; rather, it is 'single in form' (*monoeides*) itself by itself.

However, Beauty is a special case. Cf. *Phaedrus* 250de: When we come to earth, we find Beauty 'gleaming most clearly through the clearest (*enargestatos*) of our senses'. [Cf. *Theaetetus* 179c6, where thinking present perceptions clear (*enargeis*) goes with thinking them to be cases of knowledge.] 'Beauty

alone has acquired this privilege, of being most evident and most loved.' Yet then talk of a man's 'moving keenly from here to there, to beauty itself, when he observes its namesake here'. Hence Beauty is not present *in* faces; rather, it is visible *through* them.

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