

# The Socratic Turn



*A Broad Torpedo Fish*

# The Socratic *Elenchos* 1

## ❖ Phase One:

- ❖ Socrates asks a question of the form: What is F-ness? (What is courage? What is justice? What is virtue?)
- ❖ The respondent answers: F-ness is G. (Courage is standing firm in battle. Justice is helping one's friends and harming one's enemies. Virtue is the ability to acquire good things.)
- ❖ Socrates elicits additional beliefs from his respondent. (Is it possible to stand firm in battle because of being frozen by fear? Is it just to help one's friends when they have themselves been unjust? Is virtue always just? Cannot one acquire good things unjustly?)

# The Socratic *Elenchos* 2

- ❖ Phase Two:
  - ❖ Socrates shows his interlocutors that their views are internally inconsistent.
    - ❖ It is not possible to hold simultaneously, e.g.: (i) virtue is the acquisition of good things; (ii) virtuous activity is always just activity; (iii) the acquisition of good things is sometimes unjust.
  - ❖ Socrates' interlocutors realize that they have endorsed an inconsistent set of propositions and so must give something up. Often they feel stung and embarrassed. (*Meno* 80d)
    - ❖ They almost invariably give up their initial response to Socrates' request for an analysis.
  - ❖ Socrates professes to share their ignorance and recommends a renewed search for the essence of the moral quality under consideration.

# The Socratic *Elenchos* 3

- ❖ More formally, Socrates elicits from his interlocutors some inconsistent triad, such as:
  1. All  $\phi$ -things are  $\psi$ -things.
    - ❖ All instances of virtue involve acquiring good things.
  2. Some  $\psi$ -things are not  $\theta$ -things.
    - ❖ Some instances of acquisition are unjust.
  3. Yet, all  $\phi$ -things are  $\theta$ -things.
    - ❖ All instances of virtue are just.
- ❖ It is not possible to maintain (1), (2), and (3). Hence, something must go.
- ❖ Almost invariably, that something is (1), the initial definition offered by the interlocutor.

# The Socratic *Elenchos* 4

- ❖ An observation and two questions:
  - ❖ An observation: From the standpoint of logic, any one of (1), (2), or (3) could be rejected.
  - ❖ Question One: Why should the interlocutors almost invariably give up (1)?
    - ❖ They could simply give up either (2) or (3) and so continue to maintain their original definition.
  - ❖ Question Two: If Socrates is ignorant, as he suggests he is, how is he able to perform the *elenchos* with such remarkable success?
    - ❖ The suggestion lies near that Socrates' protestations of ignorance are disingenuous.
      - ❖ Perhaps he should be understood to be speaking ironically?

# Civil Disobedience in the *Apology*

- ❖ To all first appearances, in the *Apology* Socrates seems poised to engage in civil disobedience (*Apo.* 29c-d):
  - ❖ He recounts how he refused to engage in actions he regarded as illegal or unjust:
    - ❖ For instance, he rebuffed those who insisted that members of his council prosecute ten generals who had failed to rescue the Athenian survivors at the battle of Arginusae due to a violent storm. (*Apo.* 32b)
  - ❖ He reports that when the Athenian democracy fell to the oligarchs in 404, he refused to obey their direct commands. (*Apo.* 32c)
  - ❖ In general, Socrates intimates that in cases of conflict, he will obey the demands of god rather than those of the city.
- ❖ Indeed, he seems to hold an uncompromising principle:
  - ❖ (AJ) One must always do what justice demands.

# Civil Disobedience in the *Crito*

- ❖ Things seem rather different in the *Crito*.
- ❖ In this dialogue, Socrates seems to hold rather:
  - ❖ (NCD) Civil disobedience is never justifiable.
- ❖ (AJ) and (NCD) are formally consistent, but their consistency requires that the laws of the state are unfailingly just.
  - ❖ Yet this, as we have seen, Socrates evidently knows that this is false.
  - ❖ What is more, we can all see upon a moment's reflection that it is plainly false: some states at some times have unjust laws.
- ❖ So, how should we understand Socrates' position here?

# The Arguments of the *Crito*

❖ The overarching argument:

1. It is never just to wrong anyone willingly (49a).
2. Hence, it is never just, when wronged, to wrong someone willingly in return (49b-c).
3. If Socrates disobeys the law, he will wrong Athens willingly (50b).
4. If Socrates escapes, he will disobey the laws of Athens.
5. Hence, if Socrates escapes, he will wrong Athens willingly.
6. Hence, if Socrates escapes, he will be acting unjustly.

# On Behalf of (3)

1. If S has a justly made contract with S', then S willingly wrongs S' if S knowingly breaks that contract without having been released from it.
2. Socrates has a justly made contract with Athens either to persuade it as to the nature of justice or to obey its laws. (51b)
3. Socrates has not persuaded Athens as to the nature of justice.
4. Hence, Socrates has a justly made contract with Athens to obey its laws.
5. If Socrates escapes, he will disobey the laws of Athens.
6. Hence, if Socrates escapes, he will knowingly break his contract without having been released from it.
7. Hence, if Socrates disobeys the law, he will wrong Athens willingly (50b).

# The Source of this Contract?

- ❖ Three Arguments (51e-54d)
- ❖ Two by Analogy, both rather dubious:
  - ❖ The Laws are to Socrates as parents are to a child. (51e)
  - ❖ The Laws are to a citizen as master to slave. (52d)
- ❖ One from Tacit Consent, rather more promising (51e)

# Tacit Consent

- ❖ How did Socrates enter into his contract with Athens?
- ❖ One claim: he tacitly consented to its terms. (51e)
  - ❖ One query: have you tacitly consented to a contract with the USA (or the land of your birth citizenship)?
    - ❖ If so, what were the precise terms of that contract?
      - ❖ Persuade or obey? (51b)
        - ❖ What if the law commands you to do something manifestly unjust?