

PART I

*Knowledge*

## CHAPTER I

*Examples in epistemology: Socrates,  
Theaetetus and G. E. Moore*

Theaetetus, asked what knowledge is, replies that geometry and the other mathematical disciplines are knowledge, and so are crafts like cobbling. Socrates points out that it does not help him to be told how many kinds of knowledge there are when his problem is to know what knowledge itself is, what it means to call geometry or a craft knowledge in the first place – he insists on the generality of his question in the way he often does when his interlocutor, asked for a definition, cites instead cases of the concept to be defined (Plato, *Theaetetus* 146ce).

Episodes such as this are familiar to anyone who has looked at Plato's early Socratic dialogues (cf. *Lach.* 190e, *Euthphr.* 5de, *Meno* 71e ff.). The *Theaetetus* is from Plato's later period, but the dialogue introduces itself as an example of the Socratic method, and its first and longest part, discussing the thesis that knowledge is perception, is quite the most elaborate specimen we have of Socrates' dialectical method at work.<sup>1</sup> If we want to understand what Socrates is doing when he rounds on someone for giving examples instead of a definition, the *Theaetetus* offers plenty of material. Not only does the episode just sketched continue with a defence of Socrates' procedure, which we do not find in other dialogues, but once Theaetetus has suggested that knowledge is perception and thus formulated his first proper definition of knowledge, the ensuing discussion shows a lively awareness of the methodological implications of its treatment of examples.

<sup>1</sup> In speaking of Socrates' dialectical method here I intend two limited historical claims: (i) that Socrates had an identifiable method, the method we see exhibited in Plato's early dialogues; (ii) that this method is recognisably practised in the *Theaetetus*, albeit on a larger scale and with a content that reflects Plato's own later concerns, including a concern with methodology, not the views of the historical Socrates. (i) is by now relatively uncontroversial; the case for (ii) will be made in the following pages to the extent that I succeed in offering a perspective in which the *Theaetetus* and the early dialogues can usefully be compared. The aim of such comparison will not be to add directly to our knowledge of the historical Socrates, but to further the understanding of Plato's conception of the Socratic method and of problems of philosophical methodology generally.

Another distinguishing feature of the *Theaetetus* is its subject matter: the nature of knowledge. The parallel episodes in earlier dialogues concern || ethical concepts, but it may be that the status of examples in ethics is different in important ways from their status in epistemology, although the Socratic method treats the two cases alike. That, at any rate, is the philosophical point I want to bring up for consideration, and I shall refer in this connection towards the end of the paper to the work of G. E. Moore, which I take to represent the extreme opposite to the Socratic position on the relation of examples and definition in epistemology.

But first we have to understand Socrates' procedure and the rationale for it. This will involve analysing in some detail two passages that bear directly on our question, 146c–147c from which we began and a later section 196d–197a, and relating the evidence these provide to the dialectical practice of other parts of the dialogue.

My question, then, is this: why does Socrates habitually maintain that examples (whether of the kinds to be included under a concept or of its instances) give the wrong sort of answer to questions of the form 'What is courage?', 'What is knowledge?', and the like? One account of the matter, due to P. T. Geach, is that Socrates makes two assumptions:

(A) that if you know you are correctly predicating a given term '*T*' you must 'know what it is to be *T*' in the sense of being able to give a general criterion for a thing's being *T*;

and consequently,

(B) that it is no use to try to arrive at the meaning of '*T*' by giving examples of things that are *T*.

(B) is a consequence of (A) because if you are unable to give a general criterion for '*T*', then, by (A), you cannot be sure of the genuineness of your examples, since you do not know you are predicating '*T*' of them correctly; a definition built on examples presupposes at least some examples that are known to be such.<sup>2</sup> Now, Geach argues, these two assumptions are a fallacy (he calls it 'the Socratic fallacy' because its *locus classicus* is the Socratic dialogues). People know heaps of things without being able to define the terms in which they express their knowledge, and in a given case examples may be more useful for elucidating the meaning of a general term than a formal definition. A profitable discussion must proceed either

<sup>2</sup> One might think it enough to know that at least some of a certain range of examples were genuine, without knowing, in advance of settling on a definition, which they were. This is a complication which both Socrates and Geach ignore, but since the knowledge in question, if it really is knowledge, would need to rest on some general principle about the status of examples *vis-à-vis* definition, it will not in the end affect matters if we ignore it too.

on the basis that the parties agree, broadly speaking, on the examples to be called ‘*T*’ and are seeking a general criterion to fit them, or on the basis that they agree about the criterion and are trying to determine in the light of it whether a given example is in fact *T*; either is possible, but examples || and criterion cannot both be in dispute at the same time, or else the discussion is bound to be futile for lack of any common understanding of what is being talked about.<sup>3</sup>

The criticism has something in common with a passage of *The Blue Book* in which Wittgenstein takes Socrates to task for being so obsessed with discovering the essence of knowledge that he refuses to look at Theaetetus’ examples, even by way of a preliminary survey of the territory a definition would have to cover.<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein’s may be a more radical objection, however, for he can be understood to mean that it is a mistake to think there is such a thing at all as the essence of knowledge, over and above all the examples, if by essence is meant a set of common characteristics which could be formulated in a definition stating necessary and sufficient conditions for anything to count as knowledge. On this interpretation Wittgenstein’s claim is that Theaetetus’ listing of examples *is* an answer to Socrates’ question, an answer of the only kind there can be.<sup>5</sup> This is an extreme position, and the negative existential proposition ‘There is no definition of knowledge to be discovered’ can hardly be conclusively established, although it might recommend itself as the moral to be drawn from the dialogue’s failure to find an adequate definition of knowledge. Geach’s argument evinces no such hostility to the Socratic enterprise of seeking definitions, only to Socrates’ way with examples. But both criticisms raise profound issues about the role of examples in philosophy.

Plato is far from disputing the importance of examples for his inquiry. Even if the examples he gives in the course of it are not as richly varied as might be wished, the dialogue turns up a decent number of them; enough, || certainly, to blunt Wittgenstein’s charge of contempt for particular cases of knowledge. At 196e Socrates expressly calls Theaetetus’ attention to the fact that ignorance of what knowledge is has not prevented their discussion

<sup>3</sup> Geach (1966/1972) 33–4. Others have attributed (A) to Socrates without pursuing its consequence (B), e.g., Ross (1951) 16; Robinson (1953) 50–1. On the other hand Anderson (1969) 462–5 and Santas (1972), impressed with the fact that examples are after all used in Socratic inquiries, deny the attribution of both (A) and (B); cf. also Nehamas (1975). We shall see that the mere use of examples is not to the point where (B) is concerned, although it is relevant to Geach’s conditions for sensible discussion.

<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein (1958) 20: ‘When Socrates asks the question “what is knowledge?” he does not even regard it as a *preliminary* answer to enumerate cases of knowledge.’

<sup>5</sup> The claim is explicit in the parallel passage of the earlier *Philosophical Grammar* (Wittgenstein (1974) §76): ‘... our answer consists in giving such an enumeration and a few analogies’.

making repeated use of epistemic terms to instance things they know and do not know. He represents this dependence on examples as an impurity in method, but the irony of the confession and its real meaning come out in his further comment (197a) that only a professional controversialist – i.e. no serious philosopher – would see fit to proceed otherwise. What is problematic is not the use of examples but their status.

It is a feature of the Socratic method of dialectic that examples come up for consideration after, not before, a definition has been proposed. The definition is tested against them, but their force is dependent on their being accepted as *bona fide* instances of the concept to be defined. There does not have to be agreement between the parties to a discussion, because a Socratic discussion is typically an examination of the internal coherence of the views of Socrates' interlocutor. It is the interlocutor who must agree with himself. His definition, proposing a general criterion for the concept under discussion, is tested against his examples and any other relevant beliefs of his that Socrates may extract; and it is standardly refuted either by Socrates showing that it leads to indisputable absurdity (as finally happens at 182d–183b with the definition of knowledge as perception) or by a counter-example such as the one which disposes of the definition of knowledge as true belief later in the dialogue, when Theaetetus admits that in the example of a jury reaching the right verdict Socrates has a case of true belief which should not be called knowledge (201a). Theaetetus' acceptance of the counter-example is crucial. In principle it is open to him to challenge any alleged counter-example, denying that it is a case of knowledge which his definition does not fit or, in the present instance, that his definition is at fault if it counts the jury example as a case of knowledge. That is the way Nicias proceeds in the *Laches* (196e–197c) when it is objected to his definition of courage as knowledge of what is to be feared and what dared that it withholds the virtue from certain animals and many humans who are commonly agreed to be courageous: he simply denies that these are examples of courage rather than boldness. Likewise, when Thrasymachus presents his account of justice in the first book of the *Republic* (338c–341a), he has no scruples about departing from ordinary usage (340d5–7, 340e6) to avoid a counter-example which argues against the letter of his theory rather than its spirit: having defined just behaviour as obedience to the laws which the rulers in any given society dictate to further their own interests, he is met with the objection that rulers may make mistakes about what is in their interest, and he replies that where and to the extent that this happens he does not agree with common parlance in counting the mistaken legislators as rulers. And something

of the sort occurs in the *Theaetetus* when memory-knowledge is cited as a counter-example || to the thesis that knowledge is perception: for one thing, memory presupposes personal identity and, for reasons discovered earlier in the dialogue, a consistent follower of the thesis should not hesitate to deny that anyone is the same from moment to moment (166b with 163d). The method is designed not to account for all the examples sanctioned by ordinary usage or common opinion, but for those that the proponent of a definition himself acknowledges, and which these will be depends, in part at least, on the philosophical motivations behind his definition.<sup>6</sup>

So far as concerns the definition of knowledge as perception, this is backed up and elaborated on the basis of the doctrine of Protagoras that whatever appears to a person in his perceptual experience is so for him, and it is made plain that it counts for nothing against this theory that the perceptions people have when dreaming or when suffering from disease and mental derangement are commonly thought to be false, incompatibly with the theory (157e ff.). Protagoras can happily deny that such perceptions are really false because one of the motivations of his doctrine is to dispute the idea that there can be any rational grounds for distinguishing conditions under which how things appear to someone can be set aside as not reliable and authoritative. Similarly, it is remarked (169a; cf. 161ce, 162ce) that Protagoras' philosophy does not allow any claim to special expertise such as that of Theaetetus' teacher, the mathematician Theodorus, or anyone else who professes knowledge of things that the ordinary uninstructed person does not know; a choice has to be made, so to speak, between Protagoras and Theodorus, from which it is clear that it would be no use appealing to Theaetetus' initial examples as showing that there is knowledge, e.g., mathematical knowledge, which cannot be accounted for in perceptual terms. The definition of knowledge as perception and the Protagorean epistemology that goes with it constitute a challenge to the very existence of specialised branches of knowledge such as Theodorus professes.<sup>7</sup>

Doubtless, it will not do to challenge all putative examples in this way. But no serious investigator would want to do that. (Typically in the dialogues a definition is motivated by certain favoured examples which the interlocutor takes to be in some sense paradigmatic cases of the concept

<sup>6</sup> Thus Nakhnikian (1971) 144–8, goes seriously wrong, from the point of view of historical accuracy, when he speaks of pre-analytically accepted facts or data to which a Socratic definition is expected to conform.

<sup>7</sup> This is relevant to Geach's further objection (1966/1972, 34–5) that 'the definition "Knowledge is sense-perception" could have been dismissed at once by looking to Theaetetus' examples of knowledge'.

to be defined.) And so long as some examples are acknowledged, the procedure is proof against Geach's contention that it is necessarily futile to discuss at || the same time examples of a general notion and the criterion for picking them out. Socrates does not examine a definition without reference to examples, but probes a complex position which, because it includes examples volunteered or admitted by the interlocutor, can be said, taken as a whole, to satisfy Geach's conditions for sensible discussion. What we have to understand is why, nevertheless, Socrates should be so opposed to examples taking the place of a formal definition.

Let us go back to the two assumptions which Geach formulates as (A) and (B). (B) expresses the opposition to examples, (A) the grounds for it. It may appear from the early dialogues that (B) is unjust to Socrates. When his interlocutor gives one or more examples instead of a definition, Socrates is likely to explain that he wants to be told what all examples have in common, and he may even add examples on his own initiative to emphasise the scope of his question (*Euthphr.* 5cd, 6d, *Lach.* 191a–192b, *Meno* 72ac, *Hp. mai.* 288bc). On this basis it has been argued that (B) is a misrepresentation, that while Socrates rejects examples as not by themselves a definition or an adequate substitute for one, he still regards them as the data from which a definition is to be reached by a process of generalisation.<sup>8</sup> But in one place Socrates explains further that the reason he wants to know the common and distinctive features of examples of holiness is in order to be able to tell what is an instance of the concept and what is not (*Euthphr.* 6e), and on other occasions speakers suggest that it will be the function of a definition, once secured, to settle questions involving the disputed concept – both general questions such as whether justice is a virtue and whether virtue is acquired by teaching (*Rep.* 354bc, *Meno* 71ab; cf. *Lach.* 189e–190a, *Grg.* 462cd, 463c), and particular questions as to who exemplifies the virtue of temperance or the relationship of loving (*Chrm.* 176a, *Lys.* 223b; cf. *Hp. mai.* 286ce, 304de).<sup>9</sup> This does not mean that speakers do not have beliefs about the answers to these questions. They do (cf. esp. *Lys.* 223b, *Chrm.* 159a), and that, I have argued, is what enables the discussion to proceed sensibly. But if the beliefs, even true beliefs, will not constitute *knowledge* until a definition is achieved in the light of

<sup>8</sup> Santas (1972) 129–33.

<sup>9</sup> Santas (1972) 134–9, arguing against the attribution of (A) to Socrates, insists that the latter group of passages do not actually say that *only* a definition will settle the questions about examples. True enough. But they strongly suggest it, giving no hint of any other way of coming to know the answers; and *Meno* 71ab (which Santas does not mention) is explicit that a definition of virtue is necessary for knowing whether virtue is acquired by teaching. Moreover, Santas does not take account of the evidence of *Thr.* 147ab, to be discussed shortly, and its predecessor *Meno* 79bc.

which they can be explicitly justified, then we can understand the sense in which Socrates holds (B), the sense determined by its grounding in (A). If a definition is the final arbiter of what examples there are of a general term, || examples cannot be regarded as independently given, known data with the authoritative status they sometimes assume in Wittgensteinian or analytic philosophy. They cannot settle any questions. In particular, they cannot settle questions, though they may suggest answers, pertaining to the nature of knowledge, and they offer no basis, other than a tentative, preliminary one at best, for constructing a definition by generalisation or abstraction. By themselves, beliefs about examples are no more than that, since they lack the co-ordinating, justifying power which a secure definition brings to bear. Consequently, any beliefs Theaetetus may have about examples belonging to the extension of ‘knowledge’ must be assessed along with, not independently of, his beliefs about the nature of knowledge. His examples are up for discussion as much as the general notion on which they depend.

The problem therefore shifts from (B) to (A). Is this just an assumption – and, if Geach is right, a fallacious assumption at that – or can some rationale be found for it? The *Theaetetus* does offer a justification, but it is a poor one and some interpretative work is needed to see what it amounts to. It involves the assertion (147ab) that a person who does not know what knowledge is does not understand expressions like ‘carpentry’ and ‘cobbling’ – the names of the various specialisms or branches of knowledge which give particular experts their claim and title.

This may seem an absurdly extreme stand, more in keeping with the professional controversialist of 197a than with anything Socrates can be found saying in other dialogues. His reasoning shows, however, that he is not denying, but presupposing, the kind of linguistic understanding revealed by the ability to give a paraphrase: it is because ‘carpentry’ means knowledge of making things in wood (cf. 146e), because the cobbler’s craft is knowledge about shoes, that someone who does not know what knowledge is does not know what carpentry or cobbling is either, and in this sense does not understand the terms. For in this same sense neither does he understand ‘knowledge’, ‘understanding’ itself or any epistemic term (196e). Socrates and Theaetetus do not know what knowledge is, and their lack of understanding of ‘knowledge’ and of the expressions they have, after all, just paraphrased is certainly not that of a foreigner who does not speak the language at all. What they do not have is a deeper kind of understanding, one that involves philosophical clarity about something: the sort of understanding that comes with a satisfactory definition giving knowledge of the thing in question (cf. 147b2). (When a philosopher says ‘I

do not understand what you are saying,' he often means that in one sense he understands perfectly well, but finds it philosophically perplexing.<sup>10</sup>) The argument is || that they do not have this understanding for the term 'knowledge' itself, and consequently are in the same position with any other term whose definition makes essential mention of knowledge. For example, a definition of carpentry as a certain kind of knowledge cannot illuminate, cannot convey the sort of understanding or knowledge appropriate to it, if it is offered to someone who does not know (cannot define) the genus of which carpentry is said to be one kind.

The ready use made of paraphrase to elucidate expressions like 'carpentry' is not the only evidence that the argument of the context is at the level of philosophical rather than ordinary linguistic understanding. There are also two model definitions accompanying the discussion, one a definition of clay and the other a definition of the mathematical notion of incommensurability brought forward by Theaetetus in the immediately following section (147c–148b). Clay is expressly cited as a very common-place, mundane item, concerning which one might, nevertheless, ask what it is (147a). Here the question comes through not as the foreigner's inquiry after the meaning (in the simplest sense) of an unfamiliar word, but, more naturally, as a request for (scientific) information as to the nature of a certain type of material stuff. And it is scientific understanding of a more sophisticated kind that is contributed by the definition of incommensurability in the mathematical passage; for that definition is only formulated after a lesson in which Theodorus familiarised his pupils with the application of the notion to a series of examples.

This interpretation puts Socrates' claim not to understand 'knowledge' or 'carpentry' in a better light.<sup>11</sup> It does not, unfortunately, mend the logic of his argument that if he does not understand the former then neither does he understand the latter. To see this, we may begin from a closely parallel passage in the *Meno* (79bc). Socrates argues: to say that virtue is acting justly is to say that it is acting with a part of virtue (since that is what

<sup>10</sup> Thus *Soph.* 243b and, probably, *Tht.* 184a. As these two passages illustrate, the Greek verb *sunienai* is used not only for plain linguistic competence (*Chrm.* 160a, *Prt.* 325c, e, *Laws* 791e) but also for deeper kinds of understanding which pre-suppose the linguistic one (*Ion* 530c, *Prt.* 339a and, in connection with definition, *Phdr.* 249b).

<sup>11</sup> The interpretation may be compared with that of McDowell (1973) 114. He does not distinguish levels of understanding, but takes it that Socrates demands articulate knowledge, formulated in a definition, as a condition for any understanding of an expression. McDowell then rightly objects that the condition is not plausible, even less so when extended to expressions like 'carpentry' which do not themselves contain the word 'knowledge'. On my interpretation, the condition for (philosophical) understanding is reasonable, the crucial extension is not, but we shall see how Plato could mistakenly think it was.

justice is), and one who does not know what virtue itself is will be equally at a loss to know what a part of it is. To argue thus is to assert (A) for those examples of virtue which are kinds rather than instances of the concept. But clearly it would not be acceptable to make it an unrestrictedly general principle that if *a* knows *x* (what *x* is) and *x* is a part (kind, species) || of *y*, then *a* knows *y* (what *y* is).<sup>12</sup> For the not knowing what something is on which the argument turns is lack of articulate knowledge, formulated in a definition, and if it is always to be a requirement on the attainment of such knowledge that the terms in which the definition is cast should themselves be known in the same explicit way, then no philosophical analysis can ever get started. On the other hand, if the requirements for knowing *y* are weakened, those for knowing *x* should correspond, and then there would no longer be grounds for denying that *x* can be known without *y* being known. Thus if Socrates means to rest his argument on a general principle about knowing parts and wholes, it is invalid. But in fact elsewhere in the *Meno* (75cd) Socrates makes a point of saying that a definition should use terms which the other party agrees he knows; this may perhaps be taken as some recognition on his part that not everything can be explained by explicit definition.

The corresponding argument in the *Theaetetus* is formulated in terms of understanding rather than knowledge, but this makes no great difference given the interdependence of knowledge and understanding throughout 146c–147c and later at 196de. The argument is that because ‘carpentry’ means knowledge of making things in wood, someone who does not understand ‘knowledge’ (does not know what knowledge is) does not understand ‘carpentry’ (does not know what carpentry is). And the same reservation applies. Even if one entertains the idea that really to understand, in a philosophical way, what ‘carpentry’ and ‘cobbling’ mean requires a similar understanding of the generic term ‘knowledge’, this must stop short of endorsing an unrestrictedly general thesis which would put understanding quite beyond anyone’s grasp. The reasoning cannot be generalised, hence the argument does not exemplify a generally valid form.

However, Socrates does not claim that it does. It is important to notice that he propounds no general principle of the sort we have been questioning. Instead, he offers an analogy (147ab). Someone who asks what clay is will not understand, in the requisite sense, an answer of the form ‘There is the clay of the potters, the clay of the brickmakers, and so on, each and

<sup>12</sup> The expansion of ‘*a* knows *x*’ into ‘*a* knows what *x* is’ is standard and can be observed at *Meno* 79c8–9, *Tht.* 147b2–5.