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Examples in Epistemology: Socrates, Theaetetus and G. E. Moore

M. F. BURNYEAT

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, *Euthyph.* 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.[1] 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.

Another distinguishing feature of the *Theaetetus* is its subject-matter: the nature of knowledge. The parallel episodes in earlier dialogues concern

[1] 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 recognizably 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.

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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.[2] 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 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

[2] 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.

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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.[3]

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.[4] 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.[5] 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,

[3] P. T. Geach, 'Plato's *Euthyphro*: An Analysis and Commentary', *Monist* **50**, No. 3 (July 1966), cited from his *Logic Matters* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), 33–34. Others have attributed (A) to Socrates without pursuing its consequence (B), e.g. Sir David Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 16; Richard Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*[2] (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 50–51. On the other hand, Albert Anderson, 'Socratic Reasoning in the *Euthyphro*', *Review of Metaphysics* **22**, No. 3 (March 1969), 462–465, and Gerasimos Santas, 'The Socratic Fallacy', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* **10**, No. 2 (April 1972), impressed with the fact that examples are after all used in Socratic inquiries, deny the attribution of both (A) and (B); cf. also Alexander Nehamas, 'Confusing Universals and Particulars in Plato's Early Dialogues', *Review of Metaphysics* **29**, No. 2 (December 1975), 287–306. 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.

[4] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Blackwell, 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'.

[5] The claim is explicit in the parallel passage of the earlier *Philosophical Grammar*, trans. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), §76: '. . . our answer consists in giving such an enumeration and a few analogies'.

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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 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 (201ac). 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

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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.[6]

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 specialized branches of knowledge such as Theodorus professes.[7]

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 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

[6] Thus George Nahknikian, 'Elenctic Definitions', in Gregory Vlastos (ed.), *The Philosophy of Socrates* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 144–148, 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.

[7] This is relevant to Geach's further objection (op. cit., 34–35) that 'the definition "Knowledge is sense-perception" could have been dismissed at once by looking to Theaetetus' examples of knowledge'.

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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 emphasize the scope of his question (*Euthyph.* 5cd, 6d, *Lach.* 191a–192b, *Meno* 72ac, *Hipp.ma.* 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 generalization.[8] 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 (*Euthyph.* 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, *Gorg.* 462cd, 463c), and particular questions as to who exemplifies the virtue of temperance or the relationship of loving (*Charm.* 176a, *Lys.* 223b; cf. *Hipp.ma.* 286ce, 304de).[9] This does not mean that speakers do not have beliefs about the answers to these questions. They do (cf. esp. *Lys.* 223b, *Charm.* 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 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,

[8] Santas, op. cit., 129–133.

[9] Santas, op. cit., 134–139, 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 *Theaet.* 147ab, to be discussed shortly, and its predecessor *Meno* 79bc.

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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 generalization 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.[10]) The argument is

[10] Thus *Soph.* 243b and, probably, *Theaet.* 184a. As these two passages illustrate, the Greek verb *sunienai* is used not only for plain linguistic competence (*Charm.* 160a, *Prot.* 325c, e, *Laws* 791e) but also for deeper kinds of understanding which presuppose the linguistic one (*Ion* 530c, *Prot.* 339a and, in connection with definition, *Phdr.* 249b).

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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 commonplace, 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 familiarized 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.[11] 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 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)

[11] The interpretation may be compared with that of John McDowell, *Plato: Theaetetus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 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.

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of y, then a knows y (what y is).[12] 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 generalized, 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 all of which are clay'. For, if he does not understand 'clay', neither will he understand such expressions as 'potters' clay'. It is on this, rather than a dubious generalization, that Socrates puts the weight of his argument. But it is of little help to his cause.

In the analogy the objectionable expressions make direct use of the definiendum 'clay'. But Socrates has to paraphrase 'carpentry' and 'cobbling' to bring 'knowledge' into Theaetetus' answer and convict it of a comparable circularity. And it is all too evident that the following is not valid:

[12] The expansion of 'a knows x' into 'a knows what x is' is standard and can be observed at *Meno* 79c8–9, *Theaet.* 147b2–5.

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Socrates does not know what knowledge of making things in wood is.
Carpentry is knowledge of making things in wood.
Therefore, Socrates does not know what carpentry is.

Nor, for any sense of 'understanding', is the alternative version:

Socrates does not understand 'knowledge of making things in wood'.
'Carpentry' means knowledge of making things in wood.
Therefore, Socrates does not understand 'carpentry'.

Both arguments involve substituting into an opaque context.

We should be charitable towards this error. It is from the vantage point of centuries of philosophical experience that we detect Plato having trouble with the many problems to which opaque contexts give rise. Elsewhere in the *Theaetetus* he is tempted to suppose that, if a knows x and x is identical with y, it can be inferred that a knows y (cf. 199d, 203cd), a principle with an obvious resemblance to the part-whole principle we considered in connection with the *Meno*. But whatever the diagnosis, the argument for rejecting Theaetetus' examples fails.

So the attempt to justify (A) is unsuccessful. The only other arguments Plato gives for making definitional knowledge of a general notion prior to knowledge of its kinds or instances are middle period arguments which rest on the metaphysics of the theory of Forms (most famously, the recollection argument of *Phaedo* 72e ff., but cf. also *Rep.* 520c on the philosopher's return to the Cave); in the middle period dialogues (A) becomes the doctrine that to know that x is F one must be able to formulate and defend a definition of the Form which 'F' stands for. By contrast, it seems significant that in the *Sophist* (239d–240a), when the question is raised 'What is an image?' and Theaetetus gives a list of examples such as mirror-images and pictures, the demand for a general definition as opposed to examples is presented as one that would be put up by a sophist shutting his eyes and making out that he cannot see. The irony is appropriate because the new methods of definition and inquiry which Plato elaborates in his last works imply a relaxation of Socratic principles and a rather less disparaging attitude to examples.[13] But it would be wrong to leave the matter there. Although the *Theaetetus*' explicit argument for (A) is defective, a better defence can be found in the nature and practice of the dialectical method itself.

One good reason why we should look to the dialectical method if we want to appreciate the true force of the Socratic position is that Socrates does

[13] Consider from this point of view *Soph.* 231b–236c, the survey which leads to the idea that the key notion needed in defining the sophist is the notion of an image—one of many passages relevant to the issue, which it would take us too far afield to explore here. McDowell, op. cit., 115 refers to *Phil.* 12c–18d as allowing a connection, in some cases at least, between an account of what X is and an account of the instances or kinds of X.

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not normally, and certainly not in the present context, require that the definitional knowledge he is looking for be immediately available on demand.[14] It may be simple enough to explain what clay is (cf. 147c), but an account of knowledge such as Socrates is interested in is something to be *discovered*, and its discovery is regarded by Socrates as a supremely difficult task (148c). The Socratic method is a procedure for working *towards* an analytic understanding of philosophically difficult concepts like justice or knowledge; the interlocutor's knowledge, if he has it, of what these things are is something to be arrived at step by step, with many false starts and reformulations along the way. This feature is most famously illustrated by the geometry lesson in the *Meno* (82a ff.), but the discussion in the *Theaetetus* displays it to no less a degree. And if (A) is taken to mean that a person who knows examples of a general notion must be able to formulate a general criterion for it, not immediately but after and with the help of searching dialectical discussion,[15] then Socrates' position becomes both less paradoxical and more challenging.

It is indeed well known that Plato was deeply impressed with the fact that people have more to say about philosophically difficult concepts like justice or knowledge than they can immediately formulate on demand. In their different ways both the theory of recollection in the *Meno* (81c ff.) and the picture in the *Theaetetus* (149a–151d) of Socrates as the midwife of ideas affirm the importance that the phenomenon held for him. Socratic questioning can elicit from an interlocutor both general principles relating to a concept and views about particular cases which are not otherwise available to him in explicit form. Now, there is no guarantee that, once made explicit and confronted with each other, general and particular beliefs will be wholly compatible; still less when the consequences of these beliefs are drawn out and examined. As Socrates and Theaetetus develop the thesis that knowledge is perception, it turns out to be highly revisionary, both linguistically and in relation to common sense opinion (cf. 152de, 157bc, 160bc, 162de, 163a, 166a–168c), to an extent that Theaetetus hardly suspected at the outset (cf. 157c2–157d11, 162cd, 163d6). But their advance into unorthodoxy is by no means arbitrary. When Socrates raises the matter of dreams and disorders and Theaetetus realizes, what had not struck him hitherto, that he is reluctant to deny that certain perceptions are false (158ab), the consideration that weighs in deciding which belief he should surrender is whether any sound reason can be given for discrimi-

[14] Even at *Laches* 190c, where Socrates claims that one who knows what something is should be able to say what it is, he at once makes clear that he envisages a considerable inquiry to lie ahead (190cd); it is Laches who thinks he can say straight off what courage is (190e4). Cf. also *Hipp. ma.* 295a.

[15] Santas, op. cit., 134, note 6, says he does not dispute that Socrates holds this version of (A); yet it is sufficient for (B)'s rejection of examples, which Santas does dispute.

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nating in favour of the perceptions of normal healthy waking life (158b ff.). As Theaetetus comes gradually to see where his thesis leads, he has to reflect at each stage whether to go on with it and how far he can honestly revise other beliefs, including beliefs about examples, to arrive at a coherent overall view.[16] The decisions Socrates helps him to make on these points are reasoned ones, not a ruthless scything down of accepted opinions standing in the way of his definition, and the reasons that control them are the progressive elaboration of a considered body of theory.

In the process Theaetetus does in fact come to see that he must deny his original examples from various fields of expertise (cf. 162c–163a, 169a); it takes argument to restore his faith in them, the argument (169d ff.) which dismantles all that has been built on the thesis that knowledge is perception. Until this uncertainty is removed and the arguing to and fro is over, his beliefs, both general and particular, will not be secure knowledge, for the good reason that the full range of relevant beliefs is not known in advance of the discussion which elicits them, and the discussion may at any stage bring to light an inconsistency calling for revision in some part of them. Accordingly, none of these beliefs can be regarded as wholly secure from revision until the inquiry has finally reached a successful conclusion; that is, until a coherent overall theory of knowledge has been achieved, centred on a thoroughly tested definition of knowledge in the light of which, together with related principles of the theory, the examples can be explained and their acceptance justified. Something of this magnitude, as his subsequent practice shows, is what Socrates is after when he makes it the aim of the inquiry to get an adequate grasp (knowledge) of what knowledge itself is (145e, 146e) and argues that without this there can be no understanding—and that means also no justifiable claims to knowledge—of particular cases of knowledge. Seen in proper perspective, his position has a rationale and is consistent with the emphasis at 196e–197a on the point that the inquiry could not go forward in any serious or profitable way without examples to work with. It remains to consider whether it is fallacious.

The objection was that people know heaps of things without being able to define the terms in which they express their knowledge, and that in a given case examples may be more useful for elucidating the meaning of a general term than a formal definition. Now in a given case this may well be so, depending on the sort of concept in question and the kind of understanding aimed at. If the project is simply to enable someone to grasp the meaning of an unfamiliar word, then indeed not only are examples likely to be essential but often they are sufficient on their own. A requirement for a definition usually supposes a more theoretical purpose than that. Even then, however, examples may be an essential element in the elucidation.

[16] Cf. also his dilemma at 154cd and the way it is resolved.

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Suppose one takes the view that 'Romanticism' means nothing if it does not apply to the work of certain poets and painters, or that 'polyhedron' must at least pick out the five regular solids: substantive issues in cultural history and mathematics turn on what the definitions and the further extensions of these terms should be, but any account will need to defer in some appropriate way to the original and by now incontrovertible examples.[17] Another kind of case is where a definition is itself formulated by reference to examples, as when a species of animal is defined in terms of types that can interbreed. It may be a corrigible matter which example(s) to choose for the purpose of such a definition,[18] but the examples do not wait to be certified by a definition in the manner laid down by (A). Here, then, are several cases—doubtless others could be distinguished and described—where examples take a less subordinate role than the dialectical method allows.

Let that be admitted. My argument has been that Plato's methodology makes sense, not that it is always appropriate. Granted that Plato does not discuss specific limitations, nevertheless it is important that he is dealing with particular concepts one at a time. He does not put forward (A) and (B) with the unrestricted generality of Geach's formulation; inasmuch as the charge of fallacy assumes this, it is unfair. It is unfair also to pass over indications that in Plato's view many questions can be adequately settled without recourse to definition, by calculation or measurement in suitable instances (*Euthyph.* 7bc), on the strength of generally agreed notions in others (*Phdr.* 263a on the application of terms like 'iron' and 'silver'); in the very next section of the *Theaetetus* itself we learn of a series of examples of incommensurability which Theodorus proved to be such before his pupils formulated a general definition of that important mathematical notion (147d–148b).[19]

The dialectical method is at its strongest in its original setting in discussions of value concepts like courage and justice, terms whose application is characteristically in dispute in a way that other terms are not,[20] and for reasons which ramify into people's whole outlook on life. The same kind of

[17] Illustrations from the useful discussions of, respectively, Richard Robinson, *Definition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), 113–114, and I. Lakatos, 'Proofs and Refutations', *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* **14**, No. 53 (May 1963)–**14**, No. 56 (February 1964).

[18] Cf. Douglas Gasking, 'Clusters', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* **38**, No. 1 (May 1960), 30–31, from whose discussion the illustration is borrowed.

[19] Santas, op. cit., 138, notices the difference between morals and mathematics, and he too uses it to impugn the generality of Geach's (A)—but at the same time he virtually concedes that (A) does hold for moral concepts.

[20] As is emphasized at *Euthyph.* 7b–8e (a passage Geach goes on to take issue with (op. cit., 35–7)) and *Phdr.* 263ac, which adds love as another disputed item; cf. also *Gorg.* 451 ff.

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conflict can be found within a single person's scheme of values (*Phdr.* 263a10), and this makes it all the more plausible to maintain that prior to critical reflection people do not *know* what instances exemplify their values. After all, the idea that in the sphere of morals there are opinions in plenty but little knowledge worthy of the name is not an invention of philosophers, sceptical as many of these have been about the very possibility of knowledge in the area of values. But what of knowledge itself? How far is that a concept whose extension is genuinely open to discussion and philosophical reconstruction?

Traditionally, philosophy has on the whole agreed with Plato that there is scope for argument about the extension of the term 'knowledge' no less than about its definition or analysis. The ordinary man's claims to knowledge may not be so much in dispute as his value judgments, but the philosopher's imputation has often been that the grounds for dispute are not significantly less. On this view, a Socratic approach to the subject would be perfectly appropriate. In our time, however, G. E. Moore and Wittgenstein have in their different ways made a powerful case for doubting that this is so. According to Moore, if any philosophical principles about knowledge lead (as Plato's principles, like those of Moore's immediate target, Hume, threaten at times to lead) to conclusions of the order 'We cannot know that this is a pencil', that by itself constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of those principles, however plausible they may seem in the abstract. There are innumerable examples of knowledge which should be accepted as such independently of any analysis or theory of knowledge, because they are more certain than any principles tending to upset them could possibly be. Hence, Moore says, 'the strongest argument to prove that Hume's principles are false is the argument from a particular case . . . in which we do know of the existence of some material object'; and the same holds if we have the more constructive aim of proving in general that we know of the existence of material things.

This is from Moore's lectures of 1910–11 which were subsequently published under the title *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*.[21] The argument reappears in a paper published in 1918–19, 'Some Judgements of Perception', and is at least implicit in the celebrated 'Proof of an External World' (1939).[22] In the latter, Moore's official purpose is only to prove from a premise which he knows, viz. that here is one hand and here is another, the conclusion that there are in existence at least two hands, and hence at least two 'external things'. But if he has proved his conclusion, and

[21] G. E. Moore, *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin; New York: The Macmillan Co., 1953), 119–126.

[22] The first paper is to be found in G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Studies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), the argument under discussion being on p. 228, the second in his *Philosophical Papers* (London: George Allen & Unwin; New York: The Macmillan Co., 1959).

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he claims that he has, then he knows it. His implied claim to knowledge of the existence of 'external things' can be based on the premise (which Moore certainly thinks he knows) that he knows that here is one hand and here is another. So it is something of a surprise to discover Moore, in his 'Reply to My Critics' (1942), denying that he had argued for anything but the ontological conclusion 'There are material things', denying indeed that he had ever implied that the proposition 'Nobody knows for certain that there are any material things' could be proved false simply by holding up a hand and arguing 'I know that this hand is a material thing; therefore, at least one person knows that there is at least one material thing'.[23] Moore's memory deceived him, and the argument is none the worse for being simple. Let me quote the version printed in 'Some Judgements of Perception':

> . . . it seems to me a sufficient refutation of such views as these [sc. views implying that we cannot know that this is a finger], simply to point to cases in which we do know such things. This, after all, you know, really is a finger: there is no doubt about it: I know it, and you all know it. And I think we may safely challenge any philosopher to bring forward any argument in favour either of the proposition that we do not know it, or of the proposition that it is not true, which does not at some point, rest upon some premiss which is, beyond comparison, less certain than is the proposition which it is designed to attack.

Here, then, is one application of the argument. And if we allow that it is successful, we must admit that parallel arguments will have equal force in other cases. There will be a whole set of arguments from a variety of cases of knowledge, none of which needs certification from any analysis or theory of knowledge because the cases, the examples, are perfectly certain in their own right and very much more certain than any philosophical principles which might qualify or disqualify them as knowledge.

This contention has undeniable force. It is not put down by the reply, sometimes to be met with from those who want to carry on in traditional ways, that philosophy questions what we know in order the better to understand or secure our knowledge of it. For the contention is that examples of knowledge like 'This is a pencil', 'Here is a human hand' do not need and cannot be given a higher degree of certainty than they already possess, and any understanding of what knowledge is here must rest on a whole-hearted acceptance of this fact. In other words, philosophical questioning should be as serious as any other, and kept for matters that are truly questionable.

With the counsel of seriousness Socrates and Plato would surely agree.

[23] Paul Arthur Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore* (New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1942), 668–669; cf. also 673–674.

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But is not the distinction between what is and what is not open to question and discussion itself theory-laden? Some general principles about the conditions under which certainty is achieved by the normal functioning of human cognitive equipment would seem to lie behind the ascription to someone of the knowledge that he has a pencil in his hand, and therefore to be involved also in the stand Moore takes on behalf of such examples. Moore did think that the certainty of his examples could be explained, and it is instructive to follow his changing statements about the form the explanation should take.

At first, Moore claimed that his premise, viz. 'I know that this pencil exists', is something known immediately; that is to say, '*not merely* because some other proposition is known from which it follows'. It is not only much more certain than any proposition which could be used to prove it false, but also much more certain than any proposition which could be used to prove it true.[24] But already in 'A Defence of Common Sense' (1925) he speaks of his knowledge that he is now perceiving a human hand as 'a deduction' from the simpler propositions 'I am perceiving *this*' and '*This* is a human hand',[25] and in writings of the 1940s he began to doubt that propositions about material things are ever known with the immediacy he had previously claimed. He still thought they were known with certainty, but this certainty was established by evidence, in particular, the evidence of the senses.[26]

Unfortunately, the appeal to evidence led Moore right back into the traditional maze of epistemological argument. We find him saying that it is not certain that he does have the evidence of his senses in favour of the proposition that he is standing up unless it is certain that he is not dreaming, and he embarks on the fruitless question of whether, despite much philosophical experience to the contrary, it is not after all possible to prove that one is awake and not dreaming. If it is not, then all he feels able to conclude is that the argument 'I know that I am standing up, and therefore I know that I am not dreaming' is at least as strong as the sceptical argument, 'You do not know that you are not dreaming, and therefore do not know that you are standing up'.[27] We are told that Moore was dissatisfied with this

[24] *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, op. cit., 124–125.

[25] *Philosophical Papers*, op. cit., 53.

[26] Cf. 'Four Forms of Scepticism' in *Philosophical Papers*, op. cit., 225, 'Certainty', ibid., 243, and an entry on 'Immediate Knowledge' in Casimir Lewy (ed.), *The Commonplace Book of G. E. Moore* 1919–1953 (London: George Allen & Unwin; New York: The Macmillan Co., 1962), 173–178. On the basis of Moore's indications in the Preface to *Philosophical Papers*, the two papers are to be assigned to the period 1940–44, although they were not published until later; the third item is from a notebook of *circa* 1941–42.

[27] 'Certainty', *Philosophical Papers*, op. cit., 244–251; compare and contrast 'Proof of an External World', ibid., 149.

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conclusion,[28] and he was right to be dissatisfied. For here he was back in the traditional epistemological predicament, when the promise of the argument from particular cases had been that it would cut free of that long history of inconclusive dispute.

What went wrong? Wittgenstein drew the moral that it was self-defeating to try to explain the certainty of Moore's favoured examples in terms of evidential support and inference: '. . . why shouldn't I test my *eyes* by looking to find out whether I see my two hands?'[29] Rather, one should study the way examples of knowledge and certainty actually function in our lives. Behind this recommendation lies a quite *general* view as to the role of examples in philosophy. No doubt Wittgenstein would be reluctant to say he had a philosophical theory about the status of examples, but he repeatedly calls attention to their fundamental place in his method. And this, I think, brings us to the heart of the matter.

What is questionable about Moore's examples is not their certainty but the use he puts them to. Moore went chasing after a proof of their certainty when what was needed was a general rationale for the stand he was taking on examples as such. It is symptomatic that Moore tended to select strikingly simple cases where in practice, as Wittgenstein was to urge, it would be unintelligible to doubt the claim to know and, in Wittgenstein's view, unintelligible to make the claim in the first place.[30] On Moore's own showing, all he needs to mount his argument against Hume is a particular case of knowledge. Any case should do, provided—and this is the point to insist upon—Moore explains and justifies his belief that examples of knowledge, or at least a certain range of examples, are the primary thing to which a philosopher should respond. Otherwise one is entitled to feel that one is being bullied into, not reasoned into, accepting Moore's examples as the right starting point for epistemology.

It is not, however, my business here to decide the issue between Moore and Socrates. An epistemologist who allows himself to be pulled now one way, now the other, is not necessarily to be censured for failing to make up his mind; the tension, if fully experienced, may be profitable. My concern has been to urge that someone who takes his stand on examples, in the manner of Moore and Geach, is as much in need of a general rationale—a philosophical methodology, if you like—as someone who holds the Socratic theses (A) and (B). In the *Theaetetus*, though perhaps not earlier, Plato saw the need for a rationale and attempted to provide one. The attempt, I have argued, was not successful, even if, as I also argued, a better defence lies close to hand in the character of the dialectical method; and I briefly suggested that, to judge by later dialogues, the *Theaetetus* rationale did not

[28] Cf. the editor's note, *Philosophical Papers*, op. cit., 251.
[29] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), §125.
[30] *On Certainty*, op. cit., §10.

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long convince Plato himself. No matter. If Plato did change in this respect, that only confirms that he regarded the status of examples in philosophy as something amenable to reason and discussion. The same holds for Wittgenstein's version of the anti-Socratic view: the authoritative position assigned to examples in Wittgenstein's work is backed up and supported by a host of considerations about language and about the character of philosophy. In the end, despite the disagreement about the primacy of examples, Wittgenstein is closer to the spirit of the Platonic Socrates than he is to Moore. It was Moore who began the unargued, unexplained acceptance of examples which has been both an unadmirable feature of certain trends in twentieth-century philosophy and, in consequence, an obstacle to a sympathetic historical understanding of the Socratic method itself.[31]

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