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PLATO *THEAETETUS* 145–147

David Sedley and Lesley Brown

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THEAETETUS: KNOWLEDGE AND DEFINITION, PARTS, ELEMENTS AND PRIORITY

The opening exchanges between Socrates and the young Theaetetus have attracted attention for two principal reasons. First, for the famous image of Socrates as midwife; barren of wisdom himself, his role is to ease the birthpangs of men pregnant with ideas, and then to assist in discerning which offspring are true and worth rearing, which false and to be discarded. The second focus of interest has been the opening moves in which Socrates rejects Theaetetus' first attempt to answer his question 'What is knowledge?' by citing geometry and other sciences, carpentry and other crafts (*Tht.* 146c–d). Wittgenstein railed against Socrates' high-handed rejection of this answer.² Geach followed up the attack, charging this procedure with what he called the Socratic Fallacy. Later commentators have pointed out that, whatever the merits of Socrates' refusal to countenance such an answer to the question 'What is knowledge?', the argument in which he claims that one who doesn't know what knowledge is will not understand what cobblery, etc., are, is interestingly fallacious.

David Sedley's paper gives a fascinating and sympathetic account of the treatment of these opening pages of *Tht.* by the Anonymous commentator. Anon. has not on the whole received a good press—John Dillon said of the work that it 'in general maintains a level of stupefying banality'.³ Sedley has demonstrated that a sympathetic and careful study

- 1 This reply to David Sedley's 'A Platonist Reading of *Theaetetus* 145–7', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* LXVII 125–147 was prepared in place of that due to be given by Michael Woods, whose untimely death in April 1993 is a great loss to philosophy, and in particular to ancient philosophy.
- 2 'When Socrates asks the question, "what is knowledge?" he does not even regard it as a preliminary answer to enumerate cases of knowledge.' *Blue and Brown Books* 20
- 3 John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (London 1977) 270

of the commentary yields dividends; even if we are not convinced or enlightened by Anon.'s interpretations, the chance to see a card-carrying Platonist at work with Sedley as our guide is an exciting one. It is ironic, though, that the best philosophical nugget he unearths is in a criticism which Anon. reports but rejects.⁴

In the first part of my reply, I focus on the defence Anon. offers to the rejection by Socrates of Theaetetus's examples of branches of knowledge. Under Sedley's lucid exegesis, Anon. turns out to be making a point about the alleged priority of the simpler genus over the more complex species, (section I). In section II I draw a comparison with a similar point in *Meno* (where the priority for knowledge of whole over part is asserted), then show that Plato, at the end of *Tht.*, seems to hold a conflicting view (section III). Section IV pursues this theme, examining different notions of part (elements and species) and different kinds of priority, and confirms that in later Plato, including the end of the *Theaetetus*, priority is given to parts or elements, including species, over complexes, including genera—a very different emphasis from that discerned by Anon. early in *Tht.*, and from that found in *Meno* 78–9.

I

Definition and complexity at Tht. 146–7. Socrates' response to Theaetetus' first answer is to laud Theaetetus' generosity: asked for one thing, he has given many, and *poikila anti haplou*, fancy things instead of something simple. We are familiar with an interlocutor offering *polla* where one thing is wanted, and this is often discussed as the rejection of examples as an answer to the 'What is it?' question. But the many are usually types rather than tokens of F. Even where we might seem to have the clearest example of a token F offered in answer to 'What is F?', when Euthyphro says 'The holy is what I'm doing now' it becomes clear as he proceeds that he has a type of action in mind, with a broad disjunctive specification: the holy is prosecuting a wrong-doer, whether thief or murderer or ... and whether it's your father or someone else. (*Euthyphro* 5d8–e2). The *polla* offered by Meno are, on both occasions when he makes this mistake, types of excellence; at first he offers excellences attached to roles (excellence of a man, of a woman etc.), then branches, or to use the traditional terminology, parts of excellence—justice, temperance etc. So much, for now, for the one-many contrast.

In our passage (*Tht.* 146) the familiar complaint—you've been generous and given me many when I wanted one—is followed by a less familiar one:

4 Sedley 136–9, discussed below in section VI

Theaetetus has given *poikila anti haplou*. Is this a new point or a variant on the old? According to Anon. this is a new point. The contrast: plain/fancy—as I provisionally translate *haploun/poikila*—alludes in Anon.’s view to the complexity of the species in contrast to the simplicity of the genus.⁵ Anon. claims that the species is more fancy or complex than the genus which is simple and uncompounded. Given Anon.’s general reliance on Aristotle’s *Topics*, one might expect a source there for this claim that the genus is simple, species complex, but it does not figure there in that form.⁶ What we certainly get in *Top.* is the insistence that *definiens* not be posterior to the *definiendum*, together with the claim that genus and differentia are (?severally or jointly) prior to the species.⁷ As Sedley remarks, Anon. reads Plato’s remark: *don’t define knowledge in terms of geometry, cobblery etc.*—as making the Aristotelian point: *don’t define prior by posterior* in terms of generic simplicity (and therefore priority) versus specific complexity (and therefore posteriority).

Let us assume for the moment that Anon. is right a) that two contrasts, not just one, are in play and b) that *poikilon* refers to some kind of complexity. The first question to ask, as Sedley does, is this: is complexity as such a black mark for a definition? Surely not, and, as he points out, many of the definitions of knowledge welcomed (though eventually found wanting) in *Tht.* are complex (e.g. ‘knowledge is true judgement with a *logos*’). He might also have remarked that in almost the next breath, when Socrates offers a definition of clay or mud as ‘earth mixed with water’, this evidently complex definition (X is Y plus Z) is actually called a simple and plain answer (*phaulon pou kai haploun*).⁸ Since this complex definition is hailed as plain or simple (*haploun*), the objection to the earlier definition must have been a different one. Indeed the point, as read by Anon., is not that the definition (Knowledge is X and Y and Z) is complex, but that the items in the definition (X, Y etc.) each possess an unwanted complexity.⁹ But note that even if *poikila* indicates a further contrast, the point need not be that the many items are severally variegated, i.e.

5 Anon. 18.11–19.20, quoted at Sedley 133–4.

6 Sedley (n 22) cites *Met.* Z12 for the Aristotelian background, but the claim that genus is incomposite is neither made there nor, as far as I can see, implied. It is, however, suggested that the genus ‘simply is not’, i.e. does not exist, over and above the species; this is hardly a likely source for the idea that the genus is prior. The latter is, however, stated in *Top.* vi.4

7 *Top.* vi.4

8 *Tht.* 147c5

9 So Anon. is not (*pace* Sedley 134) taking Plato to be castigating the complexity of Theaetetus’ definition; the point is not that the definition is *poikilon* but that it mentions *poikila*, complex items. Even had it mentioned only one of these *poikila*, says Anon., it would have committed the fault of defining simple by complex, hence prior by posterior.

internally complex. It may rather be that Theaetetus has offered ‘many and various items’¹⁰ (and not many similar items—one might think of a handful of Smarties in contrast to a handful of Polo mints; or again (with *Protagoras* 329d) of the parts of the face rather than the parts of gold). It is crucial to Anon.’s interpretation, however, that the items in Theaetetus’ first answer are, each of them, undesirably complex.

And, of course, we immediately learn why the complexity is undesirable. It is because the terms X and Y, when themselves analysed, turn out to contain knowledge, the *definiendum*, as one of their elements. In a notorious little argument, Socrates applies a point about defining clay to the case of knowledge. If A is asked what clay is, it would be silly to reply ‘potter’s clay, brickmaker’s clay...’. Likewise, he claims, one who doesn’t know what knowledge is won’t understand what knowledge of shoes is, so (since cobblery is knowledge of shoes) he won’t understand what cobblery is, not knowing what knowledge is (*Tht.* 147 a-b).¹¹ The argument is notorious, because it involves a fallacious substitution (*cobblery* for *knowledge of shoes*) in an intentional context.¹² I return later (section VI) to Anon.’s fascinating treatment of the suspect inference, which, as Sedley shows, reports but rejects a criticism which comes close to identifying the fallacy involved.

II

Definition and the priority of whole over part (Meno 79 and Tht. 146–7). So the fault with Theaetetus’s first answer, if Anon. is right, is that ‘Knowledge is cobblery, carpentry, etc.’ gives the species, which are posterior, in answer to a question about the genus, which is prior. Now compare a very similar line of argument in *Meno*. After Meno has been given a lesson in definition and has learnt the difference between excellence and an excellence, he comes up with the suggestion that excellence is to wish for good things and to be able to get them. Among many faults Socrates finds with this is the following: to be able to get goods is excellence only if the getting is done with justice and temperance (*Meno* 78d). But Meno has agreed that justice is a part of excellence, so his statement that

Excellence is doing A with justice

turns out to be equivalent to

¹⁰ As suggested to me by C. C. W. Taylor.

¹¹ *Tht.* 147b

¹² Ably discussed by McDowell 114 and Burnyeat ‘Examples in Epistemology’ *Philosophy* 52 1977, 390.

Excellence is doing A with a part of excellence.

Socrates concludes with the rhetorical question: *do you think someone can know what a part of excellence is, who does not know excellence* (i.e. what excellence is)? (*Meno* 79c). The argumentation is equally objectionable to that at *Tht.* 147b. Again there is an invalid substitution in an intentional context; again a resource for gaining understanding of a term is unfairly disqualified.

One could caricature the argument as follows: A doesn't know what mayonnaise is; B explains that it is a liaison of egg-yolk and olive oil. C then objects that since A doesn't know what mayonnaise is, she won't know what egg-yolk, a part of mayonnaise, is, so it's no good B trying to explain it in that way. Of course this is a caricature of the argument, and Plato would doubtless reply that while egg-yolk is something independent of mayonnaise, justice is not something independent of excellence. It is essential to justice that it is a part of excellence. More on this reply in section VI.

Let me extract from *Meno* 79c the following principle:

T1: You can't know what a part of F is if you don't know what F is.¹³

And if we accept Anon.'s reading of *Tht.* 146–7, Plato is there relying on a similar principle:

T2: You can't know what a species of F is if you don't know what F (the genus) is.

Given that Plato regularly regards the species as a part of the genus,¹⁴ we can add

T3: A species of F is a part of F

so that T2 is seen as a special case of T1.

But now I want to strengthen T1 and T2 to bring out an asymmetry. For, as they stand, T1 and T2 say nothing about priority but allow that part and whole, species and genus, might be on a par, such that neither could be known without the other. But I ascribed T2 to Plato on the strength of Anon.'s interpretation of *Tht.* 146–7, where it is licensed by an appeal to the idea that prior must not be defined in terms of posterior. In other words we can add to T2 another, complementary, principle

T2a: You can know what the genus, F, is without knowing what the species of F are.¹⁵

13 This principle can be given several readings, depending on whether it is taken *de re* or *de dicto*. One might suppose that only on a *de dicto* reading has it any hope of plausibility.

14 I defend this below in section IV.

15 Aristotle, *Top.* vi.4, makes this claim explicitly, see below section VI.

And likewise with T1; although the *Meno* passage is not explicit, again we suspect Plato envisages an asymmetry here, so that he would hold also

T1a: You can know what F is without knowing what a part of F is/the parts of F are.

In short, both the *Meno* discussion and this early part of *Tht.*—if Anon.'s diagnosis is correct—insist on the priority for knowledge and definition of the whole (the genus) over the part (the species).

III

Elements and complexes: a reversal of priority? But now I want to suggest that these priorities are reversed by the end of *Tht.*, and that the reversal comes in Plato's criticisms of the Dream Theory. During the examination of the third suggestion, that knowledge is true judgement with a *logos*, Socrates' Dream is related and then refuted. The heart of the Dream Theory is its distinction between elements and complexes, the former unknowable, the latter knowable. Knowing a complex consists of being able to give an account or *logos* of the complex, an account listing its elements. So though the elements are (on this theory) unknowable, to know a complex is to be able to analyse it into its constituent but unknowable elements. When Socrates turns to refute the Dream Theory, he uses two arguments; following Bostock let's call these the theoretical and the empirical arguments.¹⁶ The theoretical refutation proceeds by a dilemma and concludes that (whether or not a complex is identical with its elements) it cannot be that the complex is known/knowable while its elements are not. In short, it denies the asymmetry of knowability which is at the heart of the Dream Theory. The empirical argument rams this point home by claiming that, if we think about how we learn the arts of spelling and music, we will realise that 'we have a clearer knowledge of the elements than of the complex, a knowledge which is more important with a view to getting an understanding of each thing'.¹⁷ It seems to me that this passage is asserting the following principle¹⁸

T4: You can't know a complex if you don't know its elements.

16 David Bostock, *Plato's Theaetetus* (Oxford 1988) 211. However I disagree below with Bostock's reading of the empirical argument, 219.

17 *kuriōteran pros to labein teleōs hekaston mathēma Tht.* 205b8–10

18 Bostock disagrees (op cit 219): 'Knowing a thing, then, is here being construed as having the ability to recognise it, in the various contexts in which it occurs, and to discriminate it from other similar things...on this view of knowledge it is evidently possible to know a complex without yet knowing its elements (for we learn to recognize and distinguish spoken words long before we learn to spell them).' See also n.26 on Fine's view.

And the passage clearly asserts that in some cases we *do* know the elements of a complex before we know the complex (for we learn to recognise individual letters before we can read the syllables they constitute). *Ab esse ad posse* licenses a further principle

T4a: You can know the elements of a complex without knowing that complex.

If we add the natural assumption, which I justify shortly, that

T5: Elements are parts, a complex is a whole

then we can formulate

T6: (T4 + T5) You can't know the whole if you don't know its parts and again

T6a: (T4a + T5) You can know the parts (elements) without knowing the whole (complex).

Indeed Plato seems to assert that, in some disciplines at least, in order to get to know the whole you must first get to know the parts.

So we have found in Plato an inconsistent set of principles. T1a and T2a give the priority to knowing the whole (the genus) while T4a and T6a give priority to knowing the parts (the elements).

IV

Aristotle and Plato on parts and priority. One recourse would be to discern different senses of 'part'. The term is notoriously slippery, and puzzles concerning the whole-part relation were a staple of ancient philosophy from its earliest times.¹⁹ One might hope that Aristotle's distinctions among ways of being a part (notably at *Met.* Delta 25, but also at Z10) would provide some useful clarification, but though aware of important distinctions he does not clearly distinguish real from conceptual parts. Delta 25 recognizes that in one sense the species is part of the genus, while in another—that in which the things contained in a definition of F are its parts—the genus is part of the species.

Another resource Aristotle could have used to advantage is his distinction between different kinds of priority. Indeed, as Sedley shows, Anon. appeals to the *Topics*' treatment of priority in support of his

¹⁹ Jonathan Barnes, 'Bits and Pieces' in *Matter and Metaphysics* edd. J. Barnes and M. Mignucci, (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1988) surveys the history of whole-part *aporiai*, for which Plato's dialogues, especially *Parm.* are a prime source. At n.15 he remarks that from the discussions in *Parm.* and *Soph.* 'the ancestry of the topic is clear: it was Parmenides who sired the monster'.

interpretation of *Th.* 146–7. In asking whether parts are prior or posterior to wholes, Aristotle could profitably appeal to his distinction between natural priority, priority of knowability and of definition. Unfortunately, despite distinguishing these, Aristotle strives wherever possible to accord all three kinds of priority to the same items.²⁰ Insofar as he considers species part of the genus, he could have argued that the species is *prior for knowledge* (more *gnôrimon*)—i.e. more easily known or intelligible than the genus. After all, we know man before we know animal, blue before colour, circle before shape. This is exactly the point we need to reply to Plato’s claim that one can’t know the part without knowing the whole. Where generic wholes are concerned, (excellence, shape etc.) we do, in an everyday sense of *know*, know the part without knowing the whole. To say this is not to deny that the whole may be prior in definition. But as Sedley shows, Aristotle fails to exploit this useful distinction, for he further subdivides *more intelligible* (more knowable) into *more intelligible absolutely* and *more intelligible to a given person* (*Top.* vi.4) and equates the more intelligible absolutely with what is prior in definition (and, by and large, also naturally prior) ‘so that any division between intelligibility and logical priority is erased’ (Sedley 143).

So Aristotle’s potentially helpful distinctions between senses of *part* and of *prior* do not, in his hands, provide the resolutions we might hope for. Indeed, as we shall see, his views on the alleged priority (for both knowledge and definition) of genus over species, whole over part, provide Anon. with some ammunition of dubious value (section VI below).

Plato on parts, species and elements

Returning to Plato, one might try to dissolve the contradiction I have found by one of two strategies, i) by denying that, for Plato, species are parts; ii) by denying that, for Plato, elements (whose priority for knowledge he insists on at the end of *Th.*) are parts in the same sense as species. Neither strategy, I suggest, will succeed.

Are species parts, for Plato?

The short answer is yes, at all stages of Plato’s writings. Not, of course that all parts are species, and those who want to delimit the use of the term species will deny that the relation of justice to excellence is that of species

20 E.g., in the question whether the parts of a substance are prior or posterior, where he could have said that material parts are naturally prior (since they can persist when the whole is dismembered) but posterior in knowledge and definition (for man is not defined by his head and hands). But, unwilling to countenance the severing of different kinds of priority he asserts that hands etc. are not naturally prior, for what survives when dismembered is only homonymously a hand—thus he does not need to admit any sense in which material parts are prior to the whole. See *Met.* Z10 which wrestles with the questions whether a definition of a whole should name the parts, and if so which, and whether (some) parts are prior to the whole.

to genus.²¹ If species are necessarily non-coinstantiable, then the ‘parts’ of excellence, justice, temperance etc., are certainly not its species.²² But Plato is clearly happy to use the terminology of whole/part for a great variety of relations between superordinate and subordinate, determinable and determinate concepts.²³ And species, or *eidê*, are clearly regarded as parts even in the late dialogues where the emphasis is on the method of division. There, although not all parts (but only natural ones) are *eidê*,²⁴ *eidê* are always parts (eg *Soph* 223c6–7 where the interchangeability of the terms is most evident). Division *kat’eidê* is thus division into parts (and not, or not merely, according to properties).²⁵

Elements, parts and species

The second strategy I proposed was to deny that the elements on whose priority Plato insists at the end of *Tht.* are parts. That way we could resolve the contradiction by allowing Plato simultaneously to insist on the priority of elements over complex, and on that of whole over part when thinking of wholes such as excellence or knowledge, generic wholes. Indeed, it could be objected that the context from which I derived the problematic principles T4a and T6a is clearly not discussing parts in the sense of subordinate concepts or species, but in the quite different sense of elements or ingredients. Plato’s prime example of elements/complexes is that of letters/syllables; he also uses that of musical notes/harmonies and the parts of a waggon/the whole waggon. Since these wholes are quite other than generic wholes, his insistence on their posteriority (if he does so insist) need not conflict with an insistence on the priority of generic wholes.

Given the exact context from which I plucked T4 and T4a, the reply is a fair one. But it is well known that in his later work Plato makes increasing use of the notions of element/complex, especially as illustrated by the example of letters/syllables. He is happy to characterise the relation of

21 See Vlastos, ‘Socrates on “The Parts of Virtue”’ in *Platonic Studies* (2nd ed 1981) 418–423.

22 The members of the other division of excellences, the excellence of a man, of a woman etc., presumably are non-coinstantiable.

23 Vlastos (*op.cit.* n21) notes that Plato uses ‘part’ for three types of case i) necessarily non-coinstantiable items (odd and even as parts of number, *Euthyphro* 12c–e), ii) necessarily co-instantiable items, (as the person-virtues are conceived in *Protagoras*), and (iii) different ‘parts’ of pleasure (*Hipp.Maj.* 299b) which may be co-instantiable.

24 *Politicus* 262d–e: to divide number into ten thousand and the remainder is to divide it into parts which are not *eidê*; to divide it into odd and even is to divide into *eidê*.

25 See the debate between Moravcsik and S. Marc Cohen on this topic in J. M. E. Moravcsik (ed) *Patterns in Plato’s Thought* (1973). As Marc Cohen points out, the ‘part’ terminology irresistibly suggests an extensional picture, though with some intensional elements, even though the *megista genê* of the *Sophist* cannot be extensionally conceived, if same, different and being are to be distinct *genê*.

genus to species, or determinable to determinate, as that of syllable to letter (e.g., at *Philebus* 16–19, *Sophist* 253a–c). The treatment of pleasure in the *Philebus* passage is of especial relevance here. Since pleasure takes so many different forms, a proper discussion of it should consider all its forms, which are as different from each other as the colours black and white.

Not only does *Philebus* urge this new approach to the ‘What is F?’ question, it even uses the label *poikilon*, fancy, to characterise pleasure, as a genus with very diverse species. The genus, with its simple sounding single name (*akouein men houtôs haplôs, hen ti*, 12c6–7) is in fact *poikilon* (12c4). Whereas, to return to our starting point at *Tht.* 146–7, the species terms cobblery, carpentry, were labelled *poikila* because (according to Anon.) they are equivalent to knowledge of shoes, knowledge of wood-working.

So the two suggested ways of resolving the apparent contradiction have failed. Although no doubt there are many distinctions we might wish to draw, and Plato occasionally does draw, between part, species and element, he clearly, in the later dialogues, insists on a priority of knowledge for elements (or at the very least allows that elements can be known before the complexes they constitute) and also thinks of the species/genus relation in terms of the element/complex relation. What is more, he now applies to the genus (pleasure) the very term *poikilon* which, if Anon. is right, he used to mark the complexity of the species, in contrast to the simple, and prior, genus.

To sum up so far: pursuing the lead suggested by Anon.’s reading of *Tht.* 146–7, that the rationale for the rejection of Theaetetus’ answers as *poikila* was their complexity as compared to the simplicity of the genus, knowledge, I suggested that while this harmonises with *Meno* 79, a different and incompatible picture is suggested by the end of *Tht.* and in later dialogues, especially *Philebus*. With the change in terminology to pick out the species, which are now thought of as elements (*stoicheia*) rather than parts, comes a natural change in emphasis, for while part is obviously secondary (in an intuitive sense) to whole, complex takes second place to element.²⁶ So, while the beginning of *Tht.* seems to

26 Mention should be made of Gail Fine’s reading of the end of the *Tht.* (‘Knowledge and Logos in the *Theaetetus*, *Philosophical Review* 88 1979, 366–397, esp 388). She takes the moral of the Dream Theory to be that knowledge of a complex system such as music consists in the ability to identify and interrelate its elements. In other words, there is no priority of knowledge between elements and complexes; each is knowable and is capable of a logos (which will mention the other). Even though I believe Plato does clearly accord priority to knowing the elements, this of course is compatible with his holding that elements are relative to the complexes they make up. As Burnyeat writes (*The Theaetetus of Plato*, (1990) 210 n94) ‘the knowledge of elements on which literacy is based is not just familiarity with certain shapes and sounds. It is knowing the letters *as* the elements

espouse early doctrine, the picture is very different by the closing pages. One wonders what Anon. made of the later part of the dialogue.

V

Looking back, and forward. In sections I–IV I have provisionally accepted Anon.’s reading of *Tht.* 146–7, which Sedley expounds so illuminatingly, following up the idea that Socrates’ rejection of Theaetetus’ suggestion is founded on a claim about the priority of the simple genus, the whole, over the complex species or part. I then explored the manner in which Plato seems to rethink this priority at the end of *Tht.*, introducing a new contrast between element and complex, and opting for a priority of knowledge of elements. Finally I showed that Plato comes to consider species as elements and to accord them a priority for knowledge consonant with the new idea that the species as element is the simpler, hence prior, item.

I next return to *Tht.* 146–7 and what I called earlier the best philosophical nugget to be found in the section of Anon.’s commentary discussed by Sedley. This is the passage where Anon. reports some unknown critics (I label them the UCs) whose line of argument shows considerable sophistication. What they show, and what later commentators have shown with the help of more sophisticated analytical tools, is that, whatever the merits of Socrates’ rejection of Theaetetus’ first stab at defining knowledge as cobblery, carpentry, geometry etc., the actual argument Socrates uses is interestingly fallacious.

VI

The Unknown Critics’ philosophical nugget. The UCs’ discussion, as I read it, is designed to show that Socrates’ argument could be used to disqualify even a perfectly good definition, such as a definition of man as rational mortal animal. (I take it that the objection is effective just because it chooses a correct, or possibly correct, definition.) As reported by Anon., they argued as follows:

For the object and the definition are convertible, but the definition does not mean exactly the same as the name. For if one person asked ‘What is a man?’ and the other replied ‘A rational mortal animal’, just because a rational mortal animal is a man, we won’t say that

of syllables and words.’

when asked ‘What is a man?’ he replied ‘A man’. (Sedley’s translation of 19.46–20.14)²⁷

In effect they are suggesting an argument parallel to that at *Tht.* 147b–c where Socrates rejected a definition of knowledge as cobblery +..., with the following argument:

argument i) It’s no good answering ‘What is knowledge?’ by ‘Knowledge is cobblery +...’, because x, who doesn’t know what knowledge is, won’t know what knowledge of shoes is, hence *since cobblery = knowledge of shoes*, x won’t know what cobblery is. (*Tht.* 147b–c)²⁸

The UCs suggest that in like manner one could (absurdly) argue against defining man as rational mortal animal, as follows:

(argument ii) It’s no good answering ‘What is a man?’ by ‘a man is a rational mortal animal’, because x doesn’t know what man is, hence *since rational mortal animal = man*, x won’t know what rational mortal animal is.

As I read the UCs, this is the force of their counterexample: by this reasoning, one who says that man is rational mortal animal says no more than that man is man, so can’t enlighten anyone that way. In effect, the UCs point out that one cannot substitute for one another co-referring expressions *a*, *b*, in a context such as ‘x said that a is b’ or ‘y doesn’t know b (what b is)’, and that Socrates’ argument does just this.

A defender of Plato here could object to the parallelism claimed above, by saying that in (i) the vital premise (which is imported from 146d7–8) should not be represented as ‘Cobblery = knowledge of shoes’ but as ‘Cobblery =df knowledge of shoes’.²⁹ In other words, the argument depends on the relation between cobblery and knowledge of shoes being that of ‘is defined as’, which is asymmetrical. So (the defender continues) argument ii) is not parallel, since its premise ‘rational mortal animal = man’ cannot be represented as ‘rational mortal animal =df man’. So argument ii) is not, after all, parallel, and could not be used to rule out a good definition (which, I have suggested, was the strategy of the UCs).

27 Note that ‘object’ and ‘name’ are used interchangeably, for ‘man’ in the example that follows. Where Sedley translates ‘the definition does not mean exactly the same as the name’ one might prefer ‘the definition does not in all cases say the same as...’

28 I have italicised what I call below the vital premise, imported from 146d7–8. I am assuming that the criticism reported by Anon in commenting on 146d7–8 anticipated the use Socrates makes of this premise at 147bc: a large assumption perhaps.

29 As Anon. indeed insists; Sedley 135

But to represent the argument in this new way shows how Plato would be begging the question. In the new version, which is how Anon., in rebutting the UCs, reads the text, Socrates must assume (and assume agreement to) 1) cobblery =df knowledge of shoes, 2) that if a is correctly defined in terms of b, b cannot also be correctly defined in terms of a and 3) that to know (or understand) a is to know the definition of a.

But these (at least 2) and 3)) are very large assumptions, for which readers of Plato seek justification.³⁰ Furthermore, they lead Plato into a regress of a familiar nature.³¹

So Anon.'s defence of Plato fails as a defence of his *argument*, even though he may correctly represent the philosophical *doctrines* underlying *Tht.* 146–7, albeit in somewhat anachronistic, Aristotelian terms. For Aristotle implausibly claims that one cannot know the posterior, man, without knowing the genus and differentia, animal and footed, though the converse is, he claims, possible.³² As Sedley shows, what Anon. does is read Plato in this Aristotelian way whereby to know/understand³³ is to have 'that idealised scientific understanding which Aristotle describes as absolute' (Sedley 143). But to introduce these as premises in the argument makes Plato assume the very points about the priority of definitional knowledge which his argument ought to be establishing.³⁴

So Anon.'s helping hand, which involves assuming that 146d6–8, the vital premise equating cobblery with knowledge of shoes, must be read as a definition, does not really rescue the argument. While if, with the UCs, we read the premise as simply 'Cobblery = knowledge of shoes' then their objection is an important one. It shows they have a good nose for a weak argument, and a nice feel for how to expose its weakness. Their insistence that alternative designations, such as 'Achilles'/'the son of Peleus' and 'man'/'rational mortal animal', cannot always be substituted *salva veritate* is a vital philosophical insight. That insight would have

30 See Burnyeat, 'Examples in Epistemology', cited at n12

31 cf Burnyeat *ib* 389 'if it is always to be a requirement on the attainment of such knowledge <i.e. articulate knowledge, formulated in a definition>, that the terms in which a definition is cast should be known in the same explicit way, then no philosophical analysis can ever get started'.

32 *Top.* vi.4: the framer of a good definition must define the species in terms of the genus and differentia, which are prior to it, and more intelligible absolutely (though not, perhaps, to us). For one who knows the species, knows the genus and differentia, but not necessarily *vice versa*, e.g., he who knows (*gnôrizēi*) man, knows animal and footed.

33 *Tht.* 147b slips between these terms.

34 One might object even more strongly to the parallel argument at *Meno* 79, which, read in this way, assumes that justice =df the virtue that is XYZ. Modern critics might insist that 'thick concepts' such as justice and temperance were prior to the 'thin concept' virtue, and so would simply refuse to admit the premise justice =df the virtue that is XYZ, though they would allow justice = the virtue that is XYZ.

found a valuable place in the discussion of some of Plato's most interesting arguments, including especially the paradoxes of false judgement later in *Tht.*³⁵ How the subtle unknown critics, or the more pedestrian anonymous commentator, read that intriguing passage we shall, alas, never know.

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35 E.g., in the *allodoxia* section, *Tht.* 189c–190e, where to mistake an ox for a horse is recast as saying to oneself that an ox is a horse, or *Tht.* 199b where the mistake of thinking that $7+5=11$ is represented as thinking that 11 is 12. Sedley n.46 lists as places where Plato falls victim to fallacious substitution of co-referring expressions the following: *Tht.* 191d, 203 c–d, *Gorg.* 468d1–e5, *Meno* 77e5–78b2, *Phd.* 74b7–c6. One might add *Prot.* 355b–d, where, as Taylor's commentary points out, even if pleasant = good, *to be overcome by <the desire for> the pleasant* cannot be replaced by *to be overcome by <the desire for> good*.