

Socrates' method of question and answer

1. Socratic elenchos.

As you've noticed, Socrates asks a lot of questions, but the answers he receives are rarely acceptable to him. In this part of the lecture, you will learn what this question and answer form is. The question-answer format uses is called an "elenchos". It is pronounced "el-en-kos", as though you were saying: "L-N-kos". The Greek word means refutation, cross-examination, or test.

1.2 The structure of an elenchos

The structure of an elenchos is as follows:

Step 1. Socrates asks a question.

Step 2. The interlocutor answers.

Step 3. Socrates finds some problem with the answer.

Step 4. The interlocutor revises his first answer and offers a second answer.

Step 5. Socrates finds some problem with the answer. and so on and so on.....

Step 6. Finally, the examination ends in a stalemate. The interlocutor is at a loss as to what to say. Each of his answers has been refuted. No solution is found, no suitable answer given.

Sometimes, the interlocutor leaves, weary and numb. Other times, the interlocutor gets angry. Usually Socrates expresses his willingness to continue searching for an answer. Often, before he can do so, the interlocutor "escapes" or says he must go. Sometimes the entire dialogue may be

considered an elenchos; sometimes we analyze the dialogue as though it comprised several elenchi (pronounced "el-en-key"), that's the plural form of elenchos.

Here is another way to consider the structure of an elenchos.

1. Suppose 'p' (the interlocutor's first answer)
2. Statement 'q' (premise #1)
3. Statement 'r' (premise #2)
4. Statement '~p' [$\sim p$ is a conclusion derived from (1), (2) and (3)]
5. Thus, we have p and $\sim p$.

This should look familiar. It's the argument I used before to illustrate a contradiction. Most often, the interlocutor realizes that his first answer, 'p', resulted in a contradiction and he rejects 'p' and starts over completely or modifies p, hoping that the statement will be an appropriate answer.

Next, what is a Socratic question and what makes a good Socratic answer.

2. Socratic definitions, Platonic Forms and the Ideas

2.1 Socratic questions and the search for suitable answers

You know the structure of an elenchos. Now let's take a closer look at its initial component: Socrates' question. Socrates' questions typically have the following form: What is X? (I'll use 'X' as a placeholder for any subject matter) Typically questions are: What is piety? (Euthyphro) What is justice? (The Republic) What is courage? (Laches = "lah-keys" or "lay-keys"). In asking these questions, Socrates is asking for a definition of X. So, when he asks Euthyphro what "pious" is, i.e., what "piety" is, he's asking Euthyphro give the definition of "piety".

2.2. Socratic definitions

A Socratic definition must give a definition or account of X such that it applies to every case, instance, or situation involving X. He is seeking what we call a universal definition of X. An inadequate definition is a definition that does not give an account of X that applies to all things that are X.

Here is an example. Suppose you all are aliens from Mars. Socrates and I are showing you the lovely sights and sounds of San Francisco, and we're standing at the corner of 19th and Holloway. You ask me: "What is a car?" For us, you've just asked for a definition of "car". What if I replied to your question by answering:

Prof. Pam: "Oh, that's easy. A car is that Hummer. A car is this Lexus or that Camry. A car is that Hyundai. A car is this Ferrari.

Socrates: Excuse me!? That's not right. What you're giving are _____ of cars, not a definition of "car".

Fill in the blank. What do you have? Right. "Examples." Even though each of the above is a car, there are others things that are cars that aren't like the things you've named. For instance, all the above have four wheels; some cars have three wheels.

What I've given our space alien friend are examples of cars, I certainly have not defined the universal concept of "car". Typically, the first answer Socrates' interlocutor gives is just this: an example of the thing about which Socrates is asking. This is what Euthyphro does, isn't it? He gives the first answer at 5e. The first definition is at 7a and the second definition appears at 9e. Technically, we can't call Euthyphro's answer at 5e the "first definition" he gives, because he hasn't given a Socratic definition yet.

Note that sometimes Socrates actually gives the definition, but he does so on behalf of the interlocutor. For example, at 9d, Socrates is the one who initially states the next definition; Euthyphro will agree with what Socrates says as being something to which Euthyphro fully believes represents his (Euthyphro's) position.

2.3 Forms and Ideas

In asking the question "What is X?", Socrates is really asking about the universal or common essence that belongs to everything falling under the concept of X. Plato believed that this "essence" was the eternal pattern or model of X. He called these patterns "Ideas" or "Forms". The universal essence of X is the Form or Idea of X. Forms are timeless, perfect, eternal, unchanging things. The Greek for Form or Idea is "eidōs", pronounced "a-Dos" as in "the letter 'A' and the computer operating system 'DOS'". We'll use the words 'Form' or 'Idea' interchangeably.

A car is a car because it "participates" in the Form of Car. [What exactly Plato means by participation, and how this actually works, is a matter of debate.] Even an idea (small 'i') of something you have "in your head", is possible only because of the eternal Idea (capital 'I') of that thing.

As you can see, Form and Idea (capital letters) are technical, philosophical terms. They both are philosophical notions developed by Plato. I caution you not to depend on a "regular" dictionary for the definition of philosophical terms. There are plenty of inexpensive dictionaries of Philosophy in the bookstore you may purchase. You also can utilize the philosophical dictionaries that are online

The two illustrations below illustrate the distinction Plato draws between the Forms and the items that participate in the Forms. These are often called "particulars". Particulars changes; Forms don't. Your car will fall apart, it will rust and break. It can even be changed into something completely different. The Form of Car, however, never, ever changes. It is permanent and eternal.

Plato believes that there is a tremendous difference between the two realms: the realm of the Forms and the realm of "appearance", as he called it. Why "appearance"? Well, what we see on 19th and Holloway are not real cars, in Plato's view; they are only "imitation" cars. There is only one real car and that's the Form of Car. You will learn a lot more about the Forms later. But for now, keep the following distinctions in mind.

FORMS

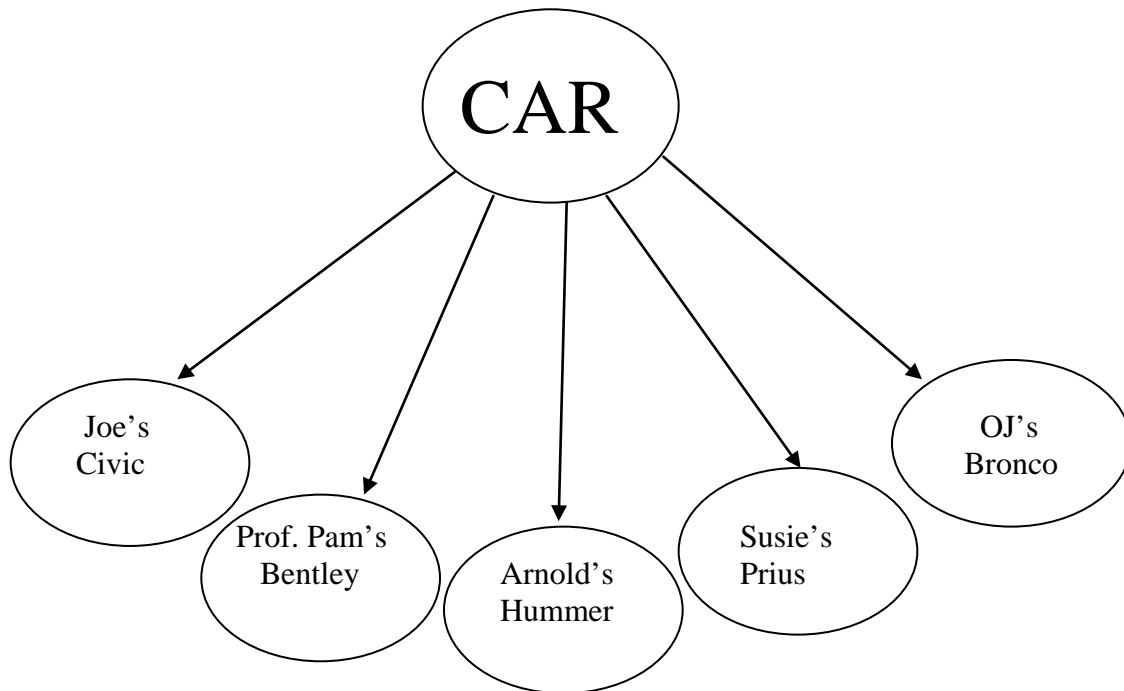
The Forms (Ideas) belong to the realm of unchanging, eternal things.

They are the models from which everything else is patterned.

PARTICULARS

The things belonging to phenomena, the things we touch, see, hear, etc., are particular instances or “copies” of the Forms. They belong to the realm of appearances.

So, we have the Form of CAR and instances of cars. You might want to visualize it this way.



The big "CAR" up there is the Form of Car. Those little circles represent instances or examples of cars. Each car participates in the Form of Car, but they are not the "essence of Car". Thus, by simply stating these: Bronco, Hummer, Civic, Prius -- I have not given anything close to the defining the "essence" of "CAR" that our space alien friend needs to know.

Summary

In this lecture you learned what are the basic elements of an argument, and what the principle of non-contradiction is. You also learned that Socrates performs an elenchos when he examines his interlocutors. You learned what are the six main stages of an elenchos. You discovered what sort of question it is that Socrates asks, as well as what sort of answer he expects from his interlocutor. Last, in this lecture you also learned a bit about Plato's Forms or Ideas, and began to see the role they play in a Socratic elenchos.

Next time, we will take a closer look at some of the arguments that arise in the Euthyphro. We also will take a philosophical look at the big "M" word: Morality.