

Kriton/Euthyfron/Laches/Den mindre Hippias

Platon

February 26–27, 2016

This is a collection of four dialogues of Plato, in each of which Socrates plays the main lead, conducting his famous Socratic exchanges, teasing out the truth, through a sequence of carefully phrased questions, in the manner of a cross-examination. Socrates is a committed anti-sophist, still in his approach he comes very close to sophistic reasoning, setting up spurious analogies, engaging in literal deductive argumentation, as if it was a matter of mathematics. But of course one of the defining attributes of Plato is his irony, meaning that he is pulling the legs of his readers and listeners, and those who do not see through his ruse deserve to be fooled.

The first one of Kriton, takes place at the very end of Socrates life. He is about to be put to death after having found guilty on the charge of corrupting the youth, an accusation which has been brought to the attention of the court, through an enemy. Kriton visits him in confinement and pleads with him to flee. He owes it, if not to the prolongation of his own life (and Socrates argues that he is anyway an old man and thus should think of his death with equanimity) but to his sons, whose education he cannot neglect. But Socrates stands firm. He may know that fleeing would be easy, after all the authorities would probably prefer him to leave, although for obvious reasons unable to take any definitive actions to that end. But he also knows that fleeing would bring disgrace upon him, that he would not be able to live on in Athens, but would have to seek out some minor town in the country, and thus he would be forced to bring his sons with him, much to their own detriment, apart from being the sons of a disgraced. As it will turn out, he will have many friends who can take better care of them, than he would be able to do himself. Furthermore the refusal to flee is one of principle. The benefits a state bestows on its citizens is based on a social contract, in which the courts play an important role. It is then paramount that a citizen, who has already greatly benefitted from the blessings of a state, keeps his side of the bargain, even if it in individual cases a verdict of a court may not be correct. The principle trumps the individual case.

In the second one of Euthyfron we get the impression that Socrates is about to be dragged to court. He meets the eponymous character, who reveals to him that he is also going to court, having brought his own father to trial for manslaughter. Everybody is aghast, his father had done nothing worse than taking care of a laborer who has killed one of the slave, by binding him by hands and feet and ditching him into a ditch, giving him no attention while waiting for further instructions from the court, by which time it arrived, it turns out that the man has died from hunger and exposure. Clearly the man is taking a very principled, not to say literal view of the laws. And the fact that it concerns his own father, only heightens the virtue by ignoring such extenuating circumstances as close kinship. The discussion turns upon the question of what is good, or literally god-given. Do the gods do good things because they are good, or are things good because the gods do them? Euthyfron quickly gets embroiled in an argument in which he elucidates the

relations between God and Man by the latter giving gifts to the God as well as asking favors. Socrates asks whether Man is actually engaged in trade with the Gods, and if so, what is in it for the Gods? A question Euthyfron is unable to answer. Furthermore Socrates evicts from his interlocutor an admission that the Gods are not of the same mind of what is good or not. In the most memorable passage Socrates points out when there is a question of what set has the most elements or what is longest and shortest there will be no strife. One simply counts the elements or measures the stick or whatever and everybody concedes the result. But when it comes to what is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, just or unjust, right or wrong in general, there is no longer this access to an impartial judgement, and if the Gods fight among themselves, it must be exactly those types of matters on which they cannot reach an agreement.

In Laches it is a question of giving advice to father how to educate his sons, so the may be virtuous and successful. In particular if they are going to learn fencing in armor. One of the advisors recommends it, while another finds the skill useless, and Socrates is called in to tip the balance. Socrates starts out by pointing out that advice should not be based on a plurality of opinions, but one should only ask those who know what they are talking about and ignore the rest. It then turns on a discussion on virtue, especially what is meant by courage, and whether courage can be separated from reason. Would not courage couple with reason, i.e. knowing what is dangerous or not be preferable to blind courage. Can a man or child who is unaware of the dangers be classified as courageous at all, or is it just not a case of ignorance. When there is no fear there is no courage. And furthermore you only fear in anticipation, never retroactively.

Finally in the last dialogue, Socrates meets a sophist - Hippias - who is very proud of his skills. Socrates feigns admiration, yet cannot resist asking probing questions, not to trick but to learn. The bone of contention is whether Achilles is a better man than Ulysses. Hippias claims that he is, or at least that Homer considers him as such. Socrates remarks initially that Homer should be left out of the picture, after all he is dead and we cannot ask him what he thinks. The basis for this judgement is that Achilles is presented as straightforward and sincere, speaking his mind, and never descending to deceit and lies, as does Ulysses. Socrates begs to differ. His plan of attack is to concentrate on the issue of whether it is worse to lie intentionally or haplessly. Hippias holds the former. Socrates points out that in order to lie intentionally you need to know a lot and be able to keep the lie from the truth separate in your mind. This requires intelligence. He then asks who is the better runner the one who runs slowly deliberately or the one who cannot do better. The former, Hippias responds without hesitation. Socrates presents a whole slew of similar cases, and in particular asks what eyes he would prefer to be given. Those which intentionally sees worse or the ones who cannot help? Clearly if given the choice the former would be preferable Hippias concedes. Thus capability has an intrinsic value Socrates concludes, and the one who lies with deliberation clearly is far more capable than the one who haplessly does so. The argument may appear a bit sophistic, but recall Plato is the master of irony. And besides, Socrates triumphantly concludes, it is not true that Achilles does not lie, he only pretends to not doing so, and in the process fooling Ulysses himself. I guess with the logic of Socrates argument, Achilles, as being the most capable, should be considered superior after all, but not for the reasons that Hippias lauds.

February 27, 2016 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se