A CRITIQUE OF PETER GEACH'S CONCEPTION OF SOCRATIC DEFINITION: ITS IMPLICATIONS ON ETHICAL REASONING

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Abstract: **The goal of this study was to assess the Peter Thomas Geach's observation that Socrates, as depicted in Plato's Euthyphro not only commits what he(Geach) calls Socratic fallacy but also poses logical redundancy and ethical scepticism. With two objectives of assessing the extent of the abortive nature of Socratic definition and analyzing the impact of Socratic Definition on ethical reasoning, the study uses philosophical hermeneutical method to investigate the logic behind Socrates' questioning attitude and the merits of elenchus on serious discussions in ethics. The study infers that Socrates' demand for Formal definitions of concept is within the purview of logic and critical thinking. It is also deduced that questions of ethical nature deserve rigorous thought because they influence people's decisions. As such decisions made out bad thinking lead to bad life, which is a greater evil that straining the mind.**

Keywords: **Socratic definition, Definiendum, Definiens, Aporia.**

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the study:

In his *Plato's Euthyphro :An Analysis and Commentary,* Geach (1966) gives a warning in advance that *Euthyphro* portrays a number of ordinary fallacies and tricks used in moral debates. In Euthyphro (Plato, 1961, 2a- 3e), Socrates and Euthyphro meet outside the court of King Archon, where both of them had to appear for court proceedings in which Socrates is to be prosecuted for impiety while Euthyphro had come to prosecute his father for murder of his slave. According to Geach, Euthyphro's Father did not intend to kill the slave. He wanted to consult the Athenian Authority on what to do with him and in the process of the unintended delay he died of hunger because he had been tied up.

It is impious for a son to prosecute his father according to Euthyphro's relatives. To Euthyphro however this is evidence of how little his relatives knew about Holiness (Plato, 1961, pp. 4b-e) it is not the case that Euthyphro does not know that it is unholy to prosecute his father but he wants to fulfil a cleansing superstitious gesture, to free himself and his family from defilement. He was a firm believer in Hellenistic religion and in the god Zeus. Contention in the argument starts with Socrates uneasiness in Euthyphro's genuine belief in old legends and the story of the gods presented by homer and Hesiod (Ibid 5e-6c). Since it is typical of Socrates not to brush off any argument lightly he decides to engage Euthyphro.

Socrates is of the idea that if Euthyphro is convinced that if his action of prosecuting his father is holy then he surely must know what makes the holy, holy (Plato, 1961, pp. 5d-6d). Socrates and Euthyphro engage in a protracted debate in which examples are presented and counter presented, leading to aporia, a kind of dilemma.

Geach then presents two presumptions which he thinks Socrates commits and which make his way of arguing fallacious.

(A.): That if you know you 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':

(B): That it is no use to try and arrive at the meaning of T by giving examples of things that are T.

Geach goes further to elucidate his concern If you can already give general account of what T means, then you need no examples to arrive at the meaning of T: If on the other hand you lack such a general account, then, by assumption A, you cannot know that any examples of things that are T are genuine ones, for you do not know when you are predicating T correctly (Geach, 1966, p. 39)

These two assumptions (A and B) according to Geach make up what he calls Socratic fallacy. Socratic because their *locus classicus* is in early dialogues of Plato which is believed to portray in a more accurate sense Socrates' ideas.

Geach notes that the effect of *Socratic Fallacy* is higher even than that of Forms. To substantiate his point, he gives example of a case where someone, a philosopher refuses that a proper noun is a word in sentence and so has to be defined whenever used. He asserts that "this is a fallacy and nothing better" because according to him it's possible to know heaps of things without being able to define the terms in which we express our knowledge. As such Formal definitions are only one way of elucidating terms and that a set of examples may in a given case be more useful than a formal definition (Geach, 1966). The danger of Socratic Fallacy, in the understanding of Geach, is that it is abortive. The abortive nature of Socratic dialogue starts when at the beginning the Inquirer and the answerer do not agree on the meaning of and how to use terms. If terms are agreed upon then it would not amount to *aporia* or abortion of argument.

Geach goes further to explicate the danger of this fallacy in as far as ethics and morality is concerned, He gives the example of Thaetetetus. He says that Rejection of examples could lead to scepticism in moral issues. He says that assuming some young man meets Socrates and asks what justice is and by giving examples followed by Socrates' rejection, the young person ends saying to himself, "after all Injustice is not bad" (Plato, 1961). Geach notes that most of Socrates' student ended up being tyrants due to scepticism aroused in them by Socrates. The contention of Geach is that any knowledge in deed is always knowledge of so and so. Due to the fact Socrates rejects the example given by Euthyphro, he is forced to resort into a different kind of definition "The Holy is what is liked by the Gods, the unholy is that which his not liked by them. And as observed earlier this too ends up into *aporia*. However if is there is an agreement on what terms means and how they are to be used, then from the outset of any argument it would not be a problem to predicate any term whatsoever. For instance in an argument that involves the discussion on whether or not 'corruption is unjust' the interlocutors have to agree on what corruption means and how it is used right from the beginning before the argument gets hot. Socratic aporia is of two kind, that of logic (Aporia, where an arguments ceases unsatisfactorily) and That of Morality (Abortion of 'moral soundness', where an argument leads to scepticism which can lead to immorality).

1.2. Statement of the Problem:

According to Geach Socrates two fold *apori,* namely logical *aporia* and moral aporia, are absurdities that render repugnant the spirit of intellectual intercourse and leads to moral scepticism. The problem however is that Geach may not be appreciative of the aspect of Depth in intellection as one of the Universal Intellectual Standards (Paul, 2012). In regards to moral absurdities, Geach misses out on how deep thinking is directly correlated with immoral behaviour. It is from this *point de vue* that this study examines the effect of Socratic definition on ethical reasoning.

1.3. Objectives of the study:

i. To assess the extent of the abortive nature of Socratic Definition

ii. To analyze the impact of Socratic Definition on ethical reasoning

1.4. Method of study: Philosophical Hermeneutics:

Philosophical Hermeneutics deals with in-depth interpretation of a given assertion based on logic and with the aims of making clarifications and as such eradicating ambiguity, vagueness or fallacies.

2.   ASSESSMENT OF THE ABORTIVE NATURE OF SOCRATIC DEFINITION

2.1. Illustration: Appeal to the concept of 'Corruption'

To illustrate the logic behind Socratic definition, this study shall first of all appeal to a so familiar concept of 'corruption'. The Oxford Dictionary presents three meanings of the term corruption: First that corruption is …" an illegal behaviour especially of people in authority" (political-legal perspective), secondly corruption is the "...act or effect of making somebody change from moral to immoral standards of behaviour" (moral perspective) and lastly it is the form of a word or phrase that has been changed from its original form in some way (linguistic perspective). With these views in mind let us consider argument below:

Socrates: What is corruption?

Lawyer: It is an injustice

Socrates: Are you convinced that corruption is unjust or you say it is unjust because many people say it is unjust?

Lawyer: I am convinced.

Socrates: This means that you know what Corruption is. Don't you?

Lawyer: Yes I do.

Socrates: What then is corruption?

Lawyer: It is illegal behaviour that leads to extortion of the poor by the rich on the basis of favouritism.

Socrates: An extortion of the poor is definitely unjust. But must it be corruption?

Lawyer: *In as far as it is illegal then its corruption.*

Socrates: *So you affirm that if an act x is illegal then it is corrupt*

Lawyer*: Yes Socrates*

Socrates*: And do you that that which is illegal is that which is prohibited by the law?*

Lawyer: Yes I do.

Socrates: Now consider this, if I mistakenly wrote the word 'Holy Day' as 'Holiday.' Would you consider me as doing something illegal?

Lawyer: It isn't illegal. Perhaps grammatically inept

Socrates: Why? **Lawyer***: It is not written in any constitution*

Socrates: And that no one is oppressed when I make such a change.

Lawyer: Yes

Socrates. But that is there some injustice committed to language?

Lawyer: Mmmm. Yes, linguistic injustice ?

Socrates: Then do you admit that there is such a thing as linguistic injustice?

Lawyer: Absolutely.

Socrates: And what is its nature. What characterizes it?

Lawyer: Corrupting linguistic laws, corrupting words as you have just done

Socrates: And so Linguistic Corruption is also corruption. Isn't it?

Lawyer: Yes

Socrates: Yet it is not prohibited in our constitutions.

Lawyer: No

Socrates: Because it does not accrue in oppressing the poor or violating human rights.

Lawyer: No

Socrates: Then what really is corruption? You have only given me two examples of corruption Legal Corruption and Linguistic corruption. But you have not yet told me what corruption is.

2.2. Interpretation:

The first observation is that in this argument it is clear that the standing orders for engagement are not set before- hand. This means that the lawyer is hasty for engagement but somewhat negligent in seeking for clarification. The two aspects in any committed and formal intellectual discourse has two interconnected facets, the material facet (engagement itself) and the formal facet (the rubrics of engagement). The lawyer in the above illustration missed out on the formal facet; and the implication is, a construction of a discourse that is founded on a weak premise. And the destiny of such a discourse is a necessary collapse. This would be the case with many other arguments that consider themselves as formal, and worse off in informal arguments. Paul & Elder (2012) enumerate the following the following Socratic standards of reasoning, also known as Universal Intellectual Standards; Clarity, Precision, Depth, Significance, Logic, Breadth, Accuracy and Fairness. The first standard is clarity, without which we can access the form of the argument, and the lawyer missed it. Likewise he missed the material aspect by not posing questions related to Elements of Reasoning (Purpose, Implications, Inferences, Concept, information, Problem, Assumptions, consequences).

Secondly, failure to understand Socratic definition; It is common knowledge among logicians that definitions are not limited. There are definitions of various kinds, and that some definitions are better than others under different contexts. In appropriation of Definitions, Socrates seems to lean on what is to him the best of definitions especially when dealing with ethical and existential issues. He looks into a definition that says something about the essence of the definiendum. Such kind of definition is called Formal definition, otherwise called Essential definition.

Since there are no laboratories to determine issues like Godliness, Courage the best way is to engage the mind in a very critical way. Just like a research scientist uses the strongest of the microscopes to see the details of a cell in the body, so does a philosopher use the strongest logical means to scrutinize the fine elements of concepts like godliness, courage, justice, corruption...In other words a philosopher is one who sees what cannot be seen by mere reasoning. Such is the illustration A above and in Euthyphro. Once this is recognized it would be easy to understand Socrates, it would also be easy to understand his attitude towards definitions and in general, his attitudes towards ethics-oriented arguments.

Thirdly the Correlation between the *Definiendum* and *Definiens* in Socratic definitions is yet another factor that plays a major role in determining whether Socrates is guilty of *Socratic fallacy* (Nyarwath, 2010). Socratic definition lays emphasis on the close relationship between the definiendum and the definiens. These two must of necessity relate and whenever questions arise, it is because Socrates has seen a loose relationship between the two somewhere in the argument

Bervesluis (cited in Prior, 1996) "Members of the classes denoted by the *definiens* and the definiendum must be co-existensive". If this is so then the rejection of a definition, and consequently use examples by Socrates and further questioning is necessitated in the following manner:

Giving examples of a definiendum, that is not covered by the definiens

Let us say in argument where the initial definition of Love is given as a feeling of affection for someone. So that we say; Love (*Definiendum*) is a *Feeling* {$_{Genus}$} of affection for someone $_{\{Differentia\}(Definiens).}$

Socrates then in an attempt to search for certainty of this definition would then TRY To find out an example of the given Definiendum that falls out of the scope of the definiens(feeling of affection for someone). By so doing he points out the weakness of such a definition.

In this case, Socrates would likely give the example, what of someone who has keen interest on physical studies, or tough physical exercises could such a person be said to love studies, and physical exercises? The probability of the respondent answering affirmatively is high, for this is more of a common sense question. Then Socrates is likely to say that, that being the case we wouldn't say that studies is a person. Neither physical exercise. The next most likely question from Socrates would be that studies and physical exercises demand more than feeling ,more than attraction and in many cases one has to go contrary to the opposite feelings (like dislike for the studies at some point) but remains committed. One who remains committed despite not feeling like it ,cannot of course be denied the attribute of love. At the end of it the definition is shown to be inadequate and weak due to the fact that there are examples of the definiendum (love) which are not covered by the definiens (feeling of attraction for someone). In *Laches*, in Plato, 1961, 191d1-e2 there is cases of courage that are courage besides remaining at one's post.

The other twist of Socrates' logic is presenting examples which are encompassed in the definiens but which is not part of definiendum. Taking the definition *'a cow (definiendum) is a four legged* $_{(specific\ difference)}$ *animal {$_{genus}$}(definiens).*

Then Socrates cites a goat, sheep, camel due to the fact that all these are animals and are four legged. We realize that indeed the definiens rhymes with the examples given. But in real fact a goat is not a cow, neither is a camel nor is it the case with a sheep. These examples point to weakness on the definition's definiens. In 191E1-3 Socrates gives an example that rhymes with definiens but is not a case of definiendum that if indeed courage is wise endurance then whoever endures in spending money wisely is courageous

Last, is the uncovering of the cases of the definiendum which have the opposite property from that expressed by definiens.

Let us look at the example;   Terence is the Conqueror of ignorance. In this definition, A Terence is the Definiendum and 'Conqueror of ignorance' is the definiens. We would roughly assume that the opposite property of the definiens is sympathiser of ignorance. But according to the definition, if it is taken dogmatically, it would be impossible for Terence to be a sympathiser of ignorance. Sympathiser in this context would refer to one who supports as opposed to one who has the feeling of sympathy. So a sympathiser of ignorance is one who supports it.

Socrates would then look out if indeed this is the right definition of Terence by making sure that there is no or there has never been occasions when Terence sympathised with the opposite property of the definiens...that is a conqueror of ignorance.

3.   ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

3.1. Geach's proposition: Abnormal ethical premise for Socratic definition:

Observation is made by Geach that the distinction between Factual Questions and Moral Questions is that while Factual questions have *decision procedure*; Moral questions have no such decision procedures. This would imply that it is easier and clearer to arrive at an answer to a factual question than it is to moral questions. By extension we say it is easier to know the answer to the question "How many letters are there in the word *Corruption?"* The Decision procedure here is counting the letters that form the word *Corruption?".* It is more difficult however to answer the question "What is '*Corruption*?"…there is no pre-established and standard procedure of answering the question. One person may start by giving formal definition, another one by giving ostensive definition, another one will project his experience of what holiness is in his society…So that at the end of the day we have more than one answer.

Consequently it is inevitable to rule out possibility of quarrels among the respondents, and disagreements in explanations of Moral principles which, which by default differ from society to society and in many cases from person to person. At the same time, it cannot be ruled out that there exist at least some moral consensus in many societies.

Socrates' attempt is to come up with a solution to a moral dispute by means of asking questions. The problem is that Socrates' Secondary questions (SQ) stress on the disagreements than they do on consensus. This, as observed earlier by Geach can lead into sharp quarrels or into scepticism and moral lapse.

On the analysis of Euthyphro's response as to whether the Greek gods will or will not agree on homicide, Socrates appeals to Ad Hominem against Euthyphro because that is the belief at the heart of Euthyphro's belief. Socrates puts it that if the stories about the Greek Gods are true then they will give opposite opinions on differing opinions on the case of homicide. To this, notes Geach that Euthyphro fails to reply but he insists that on the case of homicide all Gods would agree.[1] But then Socrates' question on which case of homicide….which is the starting point of the disagreement between Socrates and Euthyphro.

According to Geach, this passage portrays an example in which a man of moral principles is likely to be led astray by someone who knows what he is doing. *What killing is wrongful*? Such case implies that there is something hidden by the inquirer that needs to be brought forth into the open light but Socrates does not do so. Geach asserts 'Socrates has no intention of doing any such thing, Instead he appeals to popular prejudice" (Prior, 1996)

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[1] Geach point here is false accusation because even euthyphro himself said that Cronos castrated his to father to death ,meaning most probably that according to cronos homicide is justifiable

3.2. An anti thesis|: Appeal to meta-ethics:

'There is no pre-established and standard procedure of answering Ethical questions'

This point *de vue* is erroneous , for the following reasons;

First, because there are several standards, albeit those that are followed by different sets of people even if they may not be accurate but still serve the purpose . Such would include appeal to authority, appeal to traditions, and appeal to customs (Odhiambo, 2009). But because they nonetheless lead to moral confusion the ultimate standard is reason because ethical valuation is *supervenient* and as such what is right in one place and time cannot be wrong at another place and time. This is only possible if reason is applied in the most rigorous manner possible, as indeed Euthphro's Socrates attempts to and which Geach finds a problem with.

The operations of reason and the nature of values are an evidence of the existence of the universals (Jacquette, 2002).

3.3. Whether by Emphasizing Universal definition Socrates is against illustrative definitions:

3.3.1. Socratic final cause for use of examples:

It is not the case that Socrates has problem with examples, neither is it the case that Socrates holds that F can never be reached by means of examples. There appears to be something more profound in Socrates' attitude. It is self evident that according to Socrates examples are relevant and play an epistemological role in the state of knowing and in definition. However he seems to be seeking something beyond, something that transcends examples, something more subtle, a deeper level of defining, that which is deeper than ostensive definition. Something deeper does not mean that that which it is deeper than, is not relevant or is nothing: It simply means that some things are higher than others in the hierarchy of quality....Such that Formal definitions are higher than ostensive definitions in the hierarchy of definitions.

Socrates' use of examples is aimed at searching for the *eidos* (Prior, 1996, p. 215), an effort of trying to find that which is common in all examples. He searches for F-ness in all things that are F. The common ground, the basis, the universal that pervades all Fs .J Bervesluis asks how could Socrates deny the use of examples if his aim was grasp the F ness common to all Fs?

3.4. Demonstrating that the definiens entails a moral judgment that is patently false.

It is very easy to be a victim of warped ethical definitions masquerading as formal definitions. Consider the following example: This can be illustrated by the example; *A patriot is a person who kills those who disagrees with his country's policies*. The definition entails a moral judgement that is patently false. It is immoral to kill those who disagree with us or with our policies, It is natural law, life is the essence of human being and behaving in a way that suggests that you can destroy human essence is being. This implies that moral reasoning is not just formal but also material, as such material logic applies as well.

Logically speaking in any argument where there is no compatibility between definition and examples intelligibility is violated. Otherwise, a formal definition of a concept F must be compatible with its ostensive definition, and soundness and cogency of its logic. In Bervesluis' words:

"Deny this compatibility requirements and Socrates' elenctic use of examples and counterexamples loses not only cogency but all intelligibility." (cited in Prior, 1996, p. 215) It would be absurd, without going far if someone asked another one in the contemporary set up " What is love?" and then a definition is given as "affectionate feeling for" then give examples Hatred, malice, slandering others..."

Ergo Socrates has cannot be said to be having a systematic, and predetermined way or rejecting examples and that he does not reject examples just for the sake of rejecting or malicious refusal of an argument. We then see a mind that searches for deeper and more sublime truths.

4. CONCLUSION

This is not the case at all. Socrates indeed rejects examples in some cases. But it is very important that Socrates' rejection of examples is not a blanket one, it is contextually based; this is to show that his rejection of examples is provoked by and dependent on a particular context. One of the key contexts that provoke Socrates' rejection of examples is when he poses the 'What is F Question' which to him is a stricter question that requires a more accurate answer and not mere accidentals

without which such type of communication is to remain a shallow one. What is F Question requires the highest form of definition, than ostensive is preferable, and if formal definition is difficult to be arrived at then use of examples can be used as a means but not as an end. That is why even when Socrates rejects examples he is often more willing to accept it not as definition but as an indicator. An example to avoid the confusion between instances of F and F itself. It would be fallacious as a result to conclude here that the elenchus rejects use of examples, and so will it be fallacious to conclude that Socrates denies his interlocutor the use of examples, it just speaks out the gravity of the question at hand, especially when it's a moral questions. Ergo, what is referred to redundant logic and absurd ethics, as asserted by Geach, in reference to Socratic definition can be considered a bit vague, ambiguous and inadmissible.

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