33. SOCRATIC DEFINITION: REAL OR NOMINAL?

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ABSTRACT. In Plato's early dialogues, Socrates frequently asks questions of the form "What is X?" seeking definitions of the substitution instances of X (e.g., Justice, Piety, and Courage). In attempting to elucidate Socratic definition, a number of interpreters have invoked a distinction between real and nominal definition (the distinction between the definition of a thing and the definition of a word. In using that distinction, several interpreters have pointed out that, when Socrates asked his "What is X" question (e.g., "What is Justice?"), he was not seeking a nominal definition (a definition of the word 'δικαιοσύνη'), but rather a real definition (a definition of the thing, Justice). My purpose in this paper is to argue that the preceding interpretation of Socratic thought is mistaken, i.e., I shall argue that there is no real/nominal distinction to be found in the Socratic dialogues.

Aristotle tells us that Socrates was the first philosopher to fix his thought on definition (ὁρισμῶν *Metaphysics* 987b1-6). This accords well with Plato's account. In Plato's early dialogues, Socrates frequently asks questions of the form "What is X?" seeking definitions of the substitution instances of X (viz., Justice, Piety, and Courage). In attempting to elucidate Socratic definition, a number of interpreters have drawn a distinction between the definition of a word and the definition of the thing that the word stands for. In using that distinction, those interpreters have pointed out that, when Socrates asked his "What is X?" question (e.g., "What is Justice?"), he was not seeking a definition of the word 'δικαιοσύνη', (what some interpreters have called a 'nominal definition') but rather a definition of the thing or entity, Justice, (what those interpreters have called a 'real definition').[1] My purpose in this paper is to argue that the preceding interpretation of Socratic thought is mistaken, i.e., I shall argue that the "real/nominal" dichotomy does not serve as a useful interpretive tool in explicating the early dialogues of Plato. In addition, I shall urge that the dichotomy is not nearly as clear cut as its advocates have suspected.

In section I, the distinction between the definition of a word and the definition of a thing will be motivated. Evidence will then be pre-

sented showing that several philosophers have drawn and used that distinction in explicating Socrates' views. In section II, I shall explain why I reject the distinction. In section III, I shall argue that the distinction fails as an exegetical tool when applied to the Socratic dialogues. Section IV will integrate the results of sections II and III. In the fifth and final section, I shall briefly discuss Plato's mature views on the relation between language and the world and suggest that those views shed some light on the topic of Socratic definition. The major thesis of the paper is that the distinction between the definition of a word and a thing is of little historical value when applied to the Socratic dialogues. Furthermore, the distinction itself is of questionable philosophical value.

I

In the Introduction to *Scientific Thought*, C.D. Broad defends the view that philosophy is "conceptual analysis."[2] He then anticipates an objection to that view, viz., the objection that analysis of words and concepts is merely verbal and, therefore, trivial. Broad responds to that objection by drawing the distinction between the definition of a word and the definition of the thing that the word stands for. He attempts to save conceptual analysis from the charge of being trivial by pointing out that philosophical analysis is analysis of things, not words.

> When we say that Philosophy tries to clear up the meanings of concepts we do not mean that it is simply concerned to substitute some long phrase for some familiar word. Any analysis, when once it has been made, is naturally *expressed* in words; but so too is any other discovery. When Cantor gave his definition of Continuity, the final result of his work was expressed by saying that you can substitute for the word 'continuous' such and such a verbal phrase. But the essential part of the work was to find out exactly what properties are present in objects when we predicate continuity of them, and what properties are absent when we refuse to predicate continuity. This was evidently not a question of words but of things and their properties.[3]

On the view that Broad endorses, the definition of a word (a verbal or nominal definition) is the report of how people use a word whereas the definition of a thing (a real definition) is the description of the nature or essence of the object in question. In the preceding passage, Broad emphasizes that Cantor was interested in defining the thing, Continuity, and not the word 'continuity'. Therefore, Cantor's definition was not verbal or nominal. Broad uses the distinction between the definition of a word and a thing to save conceptual analysis from the objection that it is nothing more than mere lexicography. Morris Weitz employs a similar strategy in "Analysis and Real Definition."[4]

In attempting to motivate the aforementioned distinction, let me appeal to the following example: Given that the definition of a word or a verbal definition is "a report as to how they [words] are in fact used,"[5] it follows that prior to the time of Dalton, the definition of the word 'water' would not have been 'H_2O'.[6] A report as to the usage of the word 'water' prior to the time of Dalton would read (roughly) as follows: 'Water' $=_{df.}$ 'A colorless, transparent liquid found in rivers and

lakes which people drink and wash with'. The report would not read: 'Water' =$_{df.}$ 'H_2O'. People did not use those two expressions synonymously prior to the time of Dalton because they lacked knowledge of atomic theory. Nevertheless, if our current chemical theory is correct, the definition of the thing or substance, water, would have been 'H_2O' prior to the time of Dalton even though no one knew it was. Therefore, it does seem plausible to distinguish the definition of the word (a report of usage) from the definition of the thing (the characterization of the nature of the object). People may not use the words 'water' and 'H_2O' synonymously even if water is, in fact, H_2O. This example is not merely an example of a technical vs. a non-technical definition. It is also an example of the real/nominal distinction. Water is *really* H_2O. H_2O is the true essence or nature of water. A nominal or verbal definition describes how a certain group uses a word. 'Colorless, drinkable liquid' is a fairly accurate account of the way the word 'water' is ordinarily used, but 'H_2O' is what water really is.

The preceding is an attempt to defend the view that there is a legitimate distinction to be drawn between the definition of a word and the definition of a thing. Historians of philosophy have used that distinction to interpret historical figures who did not explicitly draw the distinction themselves.[7] I shall concentrate, in this paper, on the historians who have used the distinction in explicating Socrates' views. For example, in discussing Socratic definition, Crombie states: "What Socrates was seeking was insight into the nature of the thing, rather than agreement about the use of the word."[8] In *Definition*, Robinson states: "When the notion of definition was invented by Socrates and Plato, only 'real definition' was thought of. That is, it was always *res* or things that required definition, never *nomina* or words or concepts."[9] In another book, Robinson discussed the "What is X?" question in some depth. In that discussion, he states that Socrates "is assuming that the form or essence or one in the many is not a word in the mouth, nor a concept in the head, but something existing in the particular Xes independently of man."[10] Gulley succinctly claims: "It is clear that Socrates' search is for real definitions, in the sense we have noted and not for nominal definitions."[11] In a similar vein, Allen insists that Socratic definitions are "real and not nominal."[12] In a chapter on Socratic definition, Santas claims that "it is not a word or expression that Socrates seeks to define or invites the interlocutors to define. Socratic definitions are not, therefore, nominal definitions."[13] (In order to avoid potential confusion, let me point out that when I talk about the real/nominal distinction, I am using it (like Robinson, Allen, and Gulley) to get at the distinction between "words" and "things." In the history of Philosophy, the real/nominal distinction has been used in different ways. For example, Leibniz used it to draw a different distinction. See endnote 1.)

The theme that emerges is the following: Socrates is not interested in giving definitions of Greek words. Instead, he is interested in giving the correct analysis of the things that words stand for. In what follows, I should like to argue against that claim, not on the grounds that Socratic definition is merely verbal, but rather, on the grounds that the real/nominal definition distinction is itself suspicious and is inappropriately applied to Socratic thought.

II

In this section I shall argue that the distinction drawn in section I is poorly drawn. In section I, I concluded that the definition of a word (a report of usage) is very different from the definition of a thing (a description of the nature of an object) because ordinary usage does not always accurately portray the nature of things. For example, usage in the 13th century did not reflect the fact that water is made up of hydrogen and oxygen.

In responding to that example, I should like to say that even though it is true that persons in the 13th century did not have knowledge of chemical theory, it doesn't follow that the appropriate distinction to draw is the distinction between the definition of a word and the definition of a thing. When a scientifically unsophisticated person defines water as 'a colorless, drinkable liquid', and a scientist defines it as 'H_2O', we do not have a definition of a word in the first case and the definition of a thing in the second. We have two different theories about the nature of water: an ordinary, commonsense theory and a scientific theory. The same can be said of Eddington's two tables, viz., that our ordinary common sense theory tells us that a table is solid whereas scientific theory tells us that it "is mostly emptiness. Sparsely scattered in that emptiness are numerous electric charges rushing about with great speed."[14]   We do not in this case have the distinction between the definition of the word 'table' and the thing, table. Rather, we have two different "theoretical definitions",[15] i.e., definitions which are stated within the framework of two different theories.

It may seem that I am stretching the term 'theory' somewhat when I call our commonsense framework a 'theory'. In this, I am in agreement with Feyerabend, who holds that "even everyday languages, like languages of highly theoretical systems, have been introduced in order to give expression to some theory or point of view, and therefore contain a well-developed and sometimes abstract ontology".[16]   It is in this sense of 'theory', i.e., any system which expresses a point of view or way of looking at the world, that I call our commonsense framework a 'theory'.[17]   In short, I am denying that there is a radical distinction between theory and observation. Even in an observation language, we are looking at the world from a certain perspective or point of view. Rorty claims "But there is no way to think about either the world or our purposes except by using our language. . . . It is the impossible attempt to step outside our skins--the traditions, linguistic and other, within which we do our thinking and self-criticism--and compare ourselves with something absolute".[18]   A Connecticut Yankee in Arthur's court will see the world not as the Knights of the Round Table saw it, but as a Connecticut Yankee.[19]   The Connecticut Yankee and the Knights of the Round Table come out of different conceptual frameworks, different systems of thought or different perspectives. I would like, for the purposes of this paper, to say that the Connecticut Yankee and the Knights of the Round Table have slightly different "theories" about the world. In so doing, I am thinking of a theory as nothing more than a conceptual framework or comprehensive system of thought.

To return to my discussion of definitions, I should like to say that when we give a definition of something *within the context of a theory*, it is difficult to distinguish a real definition from a nominal definition. Our ordinary, non-scientific definition of water as a 'colorless, drinkable liquid' is both a definition of the word 'water' (i.e., a nominal

definition which reports the usage of the word in our common sense framework or theory) and a definition of the object, water (i.e., a real definition). Similarly, a scientific definition of water as 'H_2O' is both a report of the usage of the word 'water' in the scientific framework or theory and a definition of the object. Earlier, it seemed that the scientific definition of water was a definition of the object, water, whereas the commonsense definition was simply a report of usage or a definition of the word 'water'. We now see that the scientific definition is also a report of usage (within the scientific theory), and the commonsense definition is also a definition of the object.

In an article concerning philosophical definition, Copi characterizes 'theoretical definitions' as definitions which are closely connected to and dependent on theories. Of those definitions he says: "To give a theoretical definition amounts to affirming the correctness of the theory in whose terminology the definition is formulated".[20] To accept a theoretical definition involves already accepting the theory within which the definition is stated. To accept a theory is to accept a certain way of talking about the world. Thus all definitions stated within the context of a theory will be nominal or verbal insofar as they report the usage of the word in that theory. But they will also be "real" insofar as the theory is a theory about the world. Those observations apply equally to scientific theories and commonsense theories. Broad, Weitz, Robinson, Allen, and others said that philosophy ought to (or Socrates did) strive to give definitions of things rather than words. The point of this section is to argue that within the context of a theory (even a commonsense one) it is impossible to separate the two tasks because any theoretical definition, in addition to being a definition of an object, will also, of necessity, be consistent with (or at least dependent on) usage within the theory.[21]

<div align="center">III</div>

In section II, I argued that no useful distinction between the definition of a word and the definition of a thing could be drawn within the context of a theory. When Socrates asked his "What is X?" questions, these questions did not occur in a vacuum, but within the context of the 5th century Greek way of looking at things. A major strategy of the early dialogues is for Socrates to get his interlocutors to reflect upon their own beliefs and concepts in order that they may come to recognize connections and conflicts among their own concepts which they never recognized before. On the first page of his book, Irwin correctly points out: "Socrates and Plato profess to prove their claims by appeal to ordinary beliefs. Socrates assures his interlocutors that what they already believe commits them to accepting the most counter–intuitive of Socratic doctrines".[22] Socrates thinks that his own views, however counter–intuitive they *appear*, follow from ordinary Greek views about morality. It also seems true that ordinary Greek views about morality are inextricably tied to the Greek concepts of justice, courage, and the rest. These concepts are also tied to how the Greeks used the words 'δικαιοσύνη', 'ἀνδρεία', and the rest. Surely, when Socrates defined fear as expectation of future evil (*Laches* 198b), he took himself to be characterizing what fear really is, but it is equally clear that he was depending upon his own concept of fear which could not be at variance with the ordinary way of using the word 'δέος', for if it were at variance, Laches would never have agreed to Socrates' definition! In order

to get his interlocutors' agreement, which Socrates was able to obtain, Socrates must have made claims about justice, piety, and the rest which fit with his interlocutors' reflective intuitions, and these intuitions in turn must have fit with how his interlocutors used the relevant words and actualized the relevant concepts. Socrates' discussions did not take place within a vacuum, but rather within a certain setting, where commonality of culture and language was presupposed.

Let us turn to an example from *Gorgias*. At 469b, Socrates begins his argument for the counter-intuitive thesis that doing wrong is worse than suffering wrong. Polus finds Socrates' view so silly that he says (*Gorgias* 470c): "Why, even a child could prove you wrong". Socrates recognizes that his views appear unconventional and not readily acceptable. He says to Polus concerning their disagreement (472a): "So now, in the present case, nearly everybody, Athenians and foreigners alike, will agree with you, if you want to introduce witnesses against me and the truth of what I say". Socrates then lists Nicias, Aristocrates, and the entire household of Pericles as people who disagree with him. He makes a similar claim in the *Crito* (49b) when he contrasts his view with the "popular one".

Nevertheless, it is clear that Socrates thinks that the disagreement with Polus is more apparent than real. Any Athenian willing to examine carefully his own beliefs would recognize the truth in Socrates' statements. At *Gorgias* 474b, Socrates claims: "For I think that *you and I and all other men* (καὶ ἐμὲ καὶ σὲ καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους ἀνθρώπους) believe that to do wrong is worse than to be wronged and that not to be punished for wrongdoing is worse than to suffer punishment". Thus, in spite of the apparent conflict in views, Socrates believes that all other men, after careful examination, would concur with him. If Socrates' interlocutors would be willing to examine the consequences of their fundamental beliefs and principles, they would recognize that what Socrates says about virtue and justice does, in fact, fit with their reflective intuitions and is in accord with the way they use the concepts of virtue and justice. Socrates is able to convince Crito to give up his view that Socrates ought to escape from prison when Socrates shows Crito that his escaping from prison is inconsistent with a fundamental view that Crito himself holds, viz., the view that (*Crito* 49b) "one ought not even do wrong when one is wronged". In another example, Socrates is able to convince Protagoras to give up his view that wisdom and temperance are different when Socrates shows Protagoras that the virtues' being different is inconsistent with a fundamental dictum that Protagoras himself holds, viz., the dictum that one thing has one contrary (*Protagoras* 333a).

Let me now turn to an examination of some of the definitions that Socrates gives in the early dialogues. All of the examples will be examples of successful definitions, successful in the sense that Socrates, at least, seems to accept them as adequate. I shall contend that when we ask of those definitions: "Are they definitions of words or things?", we will be asking bad questions.

At *Meno* 75b, Socrates defines shape (σχῆμα) as "the only thing that always accompanies color". Is the expression 'the only thing that always accompanies color' the definition or meaning of the word 'σχῆμα' or is it the definition of the thing, shape? The question presupposes that it must be one way or the other. Quine indicates his discomfort

with that kind of question when he claims: "I do not know whether the statement 'Everything green is extended' is analytic [or synthetic]".[23] It is not clear whether the claim that all green things are extended is true solely in virtue of the meanings of the words ('green' and 'extended') or is true because of the nature of the real world (true of green and extended things). Similarly, in Socrates' case, it is not clear whether the claim that shape is the only thing that always accompanies color is a truth about the words ('shape' and 'color') or a truth about the real things, shape and color.

We will find a similar difficulty in the more traditional Socratic definitions. At *Laches* 192a-b, he defines quickness (τάχος) as "the power which accomplishes much in a short time". He defines fear (δέος) as "expectation of (future) evil" (*Protagoras* 358d, *Laches* 198b). In the *Protagoras*, he defines courage (ἀνδρεία) as "knowledge of what is and is not to be feared" and cowardice (δειλία) as "ignorance of what is and is not to be feared" (360c-d).

We have seen that Socrates defines fear as the expectation of future evil. Is that definition an account of how 5th century Greeks used the word 'δέος' (an account of the meaning or verbal definition of 'δέος') or an account of what fear really is? As we have seen already, that question is a complex question insofar as it used the word 'or' in its exclusive sense. The person who asks that question expects the person who answers it to choose one of the alternatives but not both. Allen, Crombie, Robinson, and Gulley are all committed to the claim that the alternatives are mutually exclusive since they state that Socratic definitions are definitions of things *and not* definitions of words. But when Socrates tells us that fear is the expectation of future evil, his definition is stated within the context of common sense Greek moral theory. Hence, it must be (roughly) in accordance with the Greek concept of fear and with the way the word 'δέος' was commonly used. If Socrates were not interested in the definition of words or verbal definition, as the preceding interpreters suggest, then it would be entirely a matter of coincidence that he even accurately captured the meanings of 'δέος' or 'ἀνδρεία'. Furthermore, it would be remarkable that he ever got his interlocutors to agree with him.

Before continuing, I should like to address an objection to my position. The objection can be stated in the following way:

> There is a useful distinction between real and nominal definitions when theories conflict or when a new theory tries to unseat an old one. The old theory, since it reports correct usage within that theory, has a conservative defense that it is merely describing prevailing usage. A new theory can attack an old theory by drawing the real/nominal distinction, and claiming that the old theory merely reports usage while the new theory describes the real nature of things. Hence the distinction at issue can have an important use. Moreover, Socrates, I believe, introduces a new moral theory. Indeed, he starts with received opinions, but many early dialogues end with the radical view that virtue is wisdom. This is neither a report of usage nor of received opinion; it is a definition of the real nature of virtue.[24]

This objection can be supported with passages such as the following (*Gorgias* 481b-c, Callicles speaking): "Tell me, Socrates, are we to consider you serious now or jesting? For if you are serious and what you say is true, then surely the life of us mortals must be turned upside down and apparently we are everywhere doing the opposite of what we should".

In response to that objection, I should like to say that, yes, Socrates' definition of virtue is a definition of the real nature of virtue. But Socrates is not defining virtue from an ahistorical standpoint, nor is he introducing a radically new moral theory. Socrates thinks that what his interlocutors already believe commits them to the view that virtue is knowledge. His interlocutors simply don't recognize that commitment. For example, Laches believes that lions are courageous (*Laches* 196e-197a). Nicias, in introducing a Socratic doctrine, shows Laches that there is a distinction between courage and fearlessness (*Laches* 197a-b). Is this Socratic doctrine something new? I think not. Nicias and Socrates are simply getting Laches to recognize something he already "knows". This is what motivates the theory of recollection. Nicias and Socrates are not introducing a new theory; they are simply pointing out the presuppositions and consequences of the views that Laches already holds. Thus it is not surprising that Callicles claims that, if Socrates were correct, our lives would be turned upside down. Socrates' views appear both counter-intuitive and radical. Yet his method of teaching, i.e., the asking of questions in order to draw views "out of" his interlocutors indicates a conviction that the beliefs or views are already "inside" the interlocutors. Socrates says (*Meno* 85c) that the slave boy's opinions were "somewhere in him". Careful introspection and questioning will reveal those views and beliefs. Polus comes to accept something new in the same way that the slave boy in the *Meno* comes to accept something new.

It should be noticed that I am oversimplifying the case. It is, of course, false that there is one single Greek view which is consistent with respect to terms like 'δικαιοσύνη' and 'ἀρετή'. Even individual Greeks could not have been expected always to use those words in a consistent manner. Nevertheless, on having an inconsistency pointed out, we will find that certain linguistic/conceptual intuitions are more deeply entrenched than others, and, presumably, the less deeply entrenched ones will be given up when inconsistency is pointed out. To return to the *Laches* example, Laches maintains that lions are courageous. Although this is a common enough claim, I don't think it is a very deeply entrenched one. For, once it is pointed out that there is a distinction between the terms 'courage', 'foolhardiness', and 'fearlessness', we might easily give up the claim that lions are courageous and opt for the claim that they are fearless. But the important thing to notice in this case is that in giving up a certain claim (such as that lions are courageous) we would still be relying on our linguistic/conceptual intuitions. We would not be moving from a nominal definition of courage to a real definition of courage. We would not be replacing an old theory which merely reports usage with a new theory which describes the real nature of things".[25] Instead, we would recognize that a statement that we believed to be a tenet of our old theory (e.g., lions are courageous) is really not a tenet at all. The claim that lions are courageous is at best on the periphery of the theory rather than in the interior.[26] Furthermore, it conflicts with certain beliefs located closer to the center

(e.g., a brave creature must understand the situation he finds himself in).

Distinguishing between well-entrenched views (views located at the center) and less well-entrenched views (views located at the periphery) gives a way to discuss another issue, viz., the descriptive/prescriptive distinction. One may ask: Is Socrates describing or prescribing usage? I will admit that Socrates is not merely describing usage but he is also prescribing usage. But what this comes to is just this: Socrates' prescription is that the interlocutors should reflect deeply on the conceptual underpinnings of their views; they should move from the periphery to the center. Hence he is both describing what he finds at the center and prescribing that his interlocutors adjust their usage so that it remains consistent with what is discovered at the center.

Socrates is, therefore, analyzing the central meaning of certain Greek terms. This analysis is in some ways similar to analysis in contemporary philosophy and therefore leads to similar problems. One such problem is the paradox of analysis.

The paradox of analysis states that, when we analyze a term, we come up with nothing new. The analysis states a bare identity and is trivial.[27] Since we are merely analyzing what is already contained in the analysandum, the analysans contains no new information and hence does not tell us anything that we don't already know. This is what Meno was describing when he presented the paradox of inquiry (*Meno* 80d, e). Meno explains to Socrates that it makes no sense to inquire about something we already know. Plato attempts to answer that challenge by invoking the doctrine of recollection. I think the Socratic answer to this paradox runs as follows: Socrates, like Ryle, might well invoke a distinction between knowing how and knowing that. Many people know how to ride a bicycle but do not have the appropriate knowledge that (i.e., they do not have knowledge of the principles of physics operating which enable them to ride a bicycle). Similarly, many of Socrates' interlocutors know how to use terms like 'justice', 'piety', 'virtue', but they do not have the appropriate knowledge that (i.e., they do not have knowledge of the principles or rules which govern the use of the terms). Just as someone might know how to move the various pieces of a game and be unable to describe or explain the rules of use, one of Socrates' interlocutors might know how to use a bit of language yet be unable to explain the rules governing its use. On this view, there is a sense in which the analysans contains nothing new; it simply states the rules governing the proper use of a term. But, in another epistemological sense, we can learn something through analysis. We can move from the level of knowing how to that of knowing that.

If the preceding account is accurate, it explains how Socrates can rely on some accepted features of ordinary use of key moral terms and still propose a radically new ethical theory. His interlocutors know how, on a superficial level, to use certain moral terms. But, at a deeper level, the rules governing the use of these terms are complex and not always consistent. As I noted earlier, some well-entrenched views are not always consistent with less well-entrenched views. For the person who knows how to do something, acquiring the appropriate knowledge that can be both dependent upon the knowledge how while at the same time new and enlightening. Children, for example, are able to play rule-governed games perfectly well, while they are completely incapable of stat-

ing or explaining the rules.   Similarly, Laches is able to use the term 'courage' perfectly well while unable to explain the rules that govern its use.

Let us conclude this section by looking at one last example of Socrates at his most radical.   At the end of *Lesser Hippias* (376b–c), Socrates endorses the apparently outlandish claim that "He who voluntarily does wrong and disgraceful things, if there be such a man, will be a good man".   Nevertheless, this statement is a consequence of beliefs that lie at the center of Socrates' conceptual scheme (e.g., the techne analogy).[28]   Thus his view is radically new only in the sense that others have not recognized the far-reaching and counter-intuitive consequences of views that they accept.

Thus I think I can admit that Socrates' theory is in some sense new while still endorsing the claim that it is consistent with traditional 5th century Greek views (or, at least, the well-entrenched ones).

<div align="center">IV</div>

I shall now integrate the results of the last two sections.   The interpreters that I have mentioned maintain that there is a useful, important, non-artificial distinction to be drawn between the definition of the word 'fear' and of the thing, fear.   If there were such a distinction, then it would be possible for the two definitions to be at variance.   Unfortunately, this account leads to the following difficulty: There is no obvious method by which one could define fear independently of or without paying attention to the usage of the word 'fear' in the theory within which the person is operating.   Austin points out that "ordinary language has no claim to be the last word. . . . Only remember, it *is* the *first* word".[29]   If one were to try to define fear independently of ordinary language or one's commonsense framework, what would one look to?   Where would one begin?   At this point, the doctrine of the "mental eye" somehow "having a look at" fear (or Fear) is standardly advanced, because that doctrine affords the possibility of stepping outside one's conceptual scheme and having "direct, immediate acquaintance" with universals.[30]   But a mental eye operating independently of language cannot possibly achieve knowledge.[31]   For knowledge involves not only the sensing of an object but the recognizing of that object.   And recognition involves the use of concepts (linguistic objects).[32]   Furthermore, even if the mental eye theory could be salvaged, there is no evidence that Socrates held the mental eye theory.   And, finally, even if there were a method for defining fear independently of paying attention to how the word is used, there would be no way to connect the two fears. For, if the definition of the thing, fear, were at variance with the use of the word 'fear', how would we know that the thing we had defined is fear rather than courage or cowardice or anything else?   In other words, if I were to "see" and define the real thing, fear, and my definition did not accord with ordinary usage, it would be perfectly legitimate for you to claim that whatever I "saw" and defined is not what we *call* fear, but something else, and we are not interested in what I "saw" but rather in that thing we call fear.

In concluding this section, I would like to consider an argument put forth by Quine.   In a discussion about scientific entities he claims:

> One tends to imagine that when someone propounds a theory
> concerning some sort of objects, our understanding of what
> he is saying will have two phases: first we must under-
> stand what the objects are, and second we must understand
> what the theory says about them.   In the case of molecules
> two such phases are somewhat separable, thanks to the
> moderately good analogies which implement the first phase;
> yet much of our understanding of 'what the objects are'
> awaits the second phase.   In the case of the wavicles there
> is virtually no significant separation; our coming to under-
> stand what the objects are is for the most part just our
> mastery of what the theory says about them.   We do not
> learn first what to talk about and then what to say about
> it.[33]

Although Quine is discussing scientific entities and scientific the-
ories, I think his point can be expanded to encompass moral entities and
moral theories.   In other words, if we were to substitute 'virtue' for
'wavicle' in that passage, we would get something like the following:

> In the case of virtue there is virtually no significant sepa-
> ration; our coming to understand what virtue is is for the
> most part just our mastery of what our (common, traditional)
> moral theory says about it.   We do not learn first what to
> talk about and then what to say about it.

Knowing what virtue is independently of our common, traditional moral
theory is as mysterious as knowing what a wavicle is independently of
our contemporary scientific theory.   Furthermore, our common moral the-
ory is inextricably tied to our moral language or moral talk.   So the
idea of giving a definition of a moral entity independently of the usage
of the moral term appears to be an impossible task.

Let me summarize for a moment.   Some philosophers maintain that
there is a useful and important distinction to be drawn between the
definition of a word and a thing.   My view is rather the following: The
activity of giving a Socratic definition is not the activity of closing
one's eyes to the real world while generating analytic truths about
words, i.e., the giving of purely verbal definitions.   Nor is it the activi-
ty of staring at the real world and discovering truths about it while ig-
noring one's concepts and the way words are used.   Surely it involves
both, and there is no easy place to draw a line and say this is a claim
about the real world, and this is a claim about language.   Thus the im-
portant distinction alluded to is one I find not very useful.

Furthermore, some philosophers maintain that Socratic definitions
are not verbal.   I have tried to argue, on the contrary, that by de-
pending upon the agreement of his interlocutors, Socrates worked within
the framework of the Greek language.   And, when we look at Socratic
definitions, we see that they do not diverge drastically from ordinary
Greek usage or at least from well-entrenched usage.

Thus it is not profitable to use the distinction between the defini-
tion of a word and a thing for either philosophical or exegetical purpos-
es.   Definitions of things are usually stated within the context of a the-
ory and therefore are dependent upon the way the word for a thing is

used in that theory.   This true of scientific theories and commonsense theories.   And it was true in the time of Socrates.

V

I should like to conclude with a bit of speculation as to how we ought to see Socratic definitions.   This speculation is based on evidence contained in later Platonic texts.   Before doing that, however, I would like to address one objection to my paper.   Someone may object to my position by pointing out that I have not been fair to the interpreters I have been criticizing.[34]   Although those interpreters say that Socratic definitions are real and not nominal, they may be charitably interpreted as saying that Socratic definitions are real and not *merely* nominal.   But my response to that kind of criticism is the following: To read the preceding interpreters as saying that "Socratic definition is not merely verbal or nominal" would not be a charitable reading, but a misreading. The whole point of drawing the distinction between the definition of a word and that definition of a thing has been to make clear that there are two different kinds of inquiry, viz., meaning (or conceptual) analysis and inquiry into the nature of the real world.   These two activities are very different, and Socrates was engaged only in the latter.   My own view, on the contrary, is that the two kinds of inquiry cannot easily be separated.

My major criticism of using the distinction between the definition of a word and the definition of a thing in interpreting Socrates is the following: A verbal definition tells us how people use words.   A real definition describes the nature of a thing.   If we want to answer the question, "What does the word 'justice' mean?", we will pay attention to how people use the word 'justice'.   If we want to answer the question, "What is justice?", we will pay attention to the nature of the thing, justice.   But how are we to do that?   In particular, how are we to do it without paying attention to how people use the word 'justice'?   It's not as if Socrates said to his interlocutors: "Don't pay attention to your concept of justice.   Don't pay attention to what people have called 'justice'.   Just look and see what justice-in-itself is and describe it to me".   But, of course, nor did Socrates ask his interlocutors only or merely to look at words.   Rather, and this is the speculative part, Socrates asked his interlocutors to "look at" the realities using words or names as the tools by means of which they could be aware of the realities.   At *Cratylus* 388a, Socrates claims that a name (ὄνομα) is an instrument or tool (ὄργανον).   At 388b-c, Socrates specifies the function of that tool.   The two principal functions of a name are to divide reality (διακριτικὸν τῆς οὐσίας) and to teach.   One view that emerges from the *Cratylus* (I have argued for this elsewhere[35]) is that the name is the instrument or tool used in dividing reality.   Given Plato's account of instruments and functions (ἔργα, *Republic* 352e-354) we can say that "in the strong sense, then, the function of a thing is that which only it can do; that is, the thing is a necessary condition for doing something, is the necessary instrument for performing a certain action . . ."[36] Furthermore, as Plato makes clear at *Theaetetus* 184c-d,[37] the eyes are the tools by means of which we see.   In other words, without the eyes we could not see.   Similarly, since the name is the tool by means of which we divide reality (*Cratylus* 388b-c), it would follow that without the name we could not divide reality.   The name is a necessary instrument for dividing or cutting up the world.   At this point, to ask

whether a definition is a definition of a name (or word) or a definition of a thing is to attempt to draw a line where one cannot be drawn. There can be no seeing of colors without the eyes. Similarly, there can be no categorizing, dividing, or conceptualizing without names (or words). Thus our awareness of the entity, justice, is mediated by our names and concepts in the way that our awareness of color is mediated by the eyes. We could have no awareness of visual entities without the eyes. We could have no awareness of intelligible entities without names or words. Hence, to ask for a real definition which is not a nominal or verbal definition is to ask for an account of the essence of an object which is independent of one's concepts and language. And it is impossible to do this--not because without a language we could not put this account into words, but rather because, without words and concepts, there could be no conceptualizing in the first place, and hence the notion of giving an account at all would be senseless.[38] Thus, on my version of later Plato, it would make no sense to draw a distinction between the definition of a word and the definition of a thing. Furthermore, since there is no positive evidence that Socrates did draw such a distinction, it appears anachronistic to use it in making sense of the early dialogues.[39]

ENDNOTES

[1] According to R.E. Allen, a real definition is an "analysis of essence" whereas a nominal definition is a "stipulation as to how words shall be used or a report as to how they are in fact used". See his "Plato's Earlier Theory of Forms," in *Socrates*, ed. G. Vlastos (Garden City, 1971), 327. In a similar vein Hempel states that a nominal definition is a "stipulation determining the meaning of some expression" but a real definition is a "statement of the 'essential nature' or the 'essential attributes' of some entity". Hempel's chapter on definition is one of the best. See his *Fundamentals of Concept Formulation in Empirical Science* (Chicago, 1952), p. 6. Others who characterize the real/nominal distinction in that way include: R. Robinson, *Definition* (Oxford, 1954), p. 16; J. Carney and R. Scheer, *Fundamentals of Logic*, Third Edition (New York, 1980), 127-28; . Dewey and A.F. Bentley, "Definition," *Journal of Philosophy* 44 (1947), p. 289; J.K. Ryan, "Problem of Definition," *Proceedings of the Catholic Philosophical Association* 17 (1941), p. 90. In this paper, I have, for the most part, refrained from using the label, 'the real/nominal definition distinction' because there have been several different distinctions throughout the history of philosophy that are called 'the real/nominal distinction'. One famous example is that of Leibniz. On his view, a real definition "shows clearly that the thing is possible" whereas that is not the case in a nominal definition. See *Thoughts on Knowledge Truth and Ideas* in *The Philosophical Works of Leibniz*, ed. G.M. Duncan (1890), p. 30.

[2] C.D. Broad, *Scientific Thought* (reprinted, New York, 1969), p. 16.

[3] *Ibid.*, 17.

[4] M. Weitz, "Analysis and Real Definition," *Philosophical Studies* 1 (1950), 1-8.

[5] Allen, *op. cit.*, 327.

[6] In this section, I am indebted to Terry Penner, "The Unity of Virtue," *Philosophical Review* 82 (1973), 41.   For a somewhat different analysis, see H. Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" in his *Mind, Language and Reality* (Cambridge, 1975), 215-72.

[7] For example, Morris Weitz draws the distinction in his discussion of Hume.   Weitz, *op. cit.*, 5-6.

[8] I.M. Crombie, *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines* (London, 1963), vol. I, p. 38.

[9] Robinson, *op. cit.*, 7-8.

[10] R. Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic* (Oxford, 1953), 57.

[11] N. Gulley, *The Philosophy of Socrates* (London, 1968), 12.

[12] Allen, *op. cit.*, 327.

[13] G. Santas, *Socrates* (London, 1979), 106.

[14] A.S. Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World* (New York, 1929), pp. ix-xii.

[15] I am relying somewhat on I. Copi's account of theoretical definition in "Analytical Philosophy and Analytical Propositions," *Philosophical Studies* 4 (1953), 87-93.   For response to his paper, see M. Scriven, "Definitions in Analytical Philosophy," *Philosophical Studies* 5 (1954), 36-40, and P. Carmichael, "Professor Copi Concerning Analysis," *Philosophical Studies* 5 (1954), 73-4.

[16] P.K. Feyerabend, "Explanations, Reduction, and Empiricism," in H. Feigl and G. Maxwell, eds., *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. III (Minneapolis, 1962), p. 76.

[17] Wilfrid Sellars distinguishes between the "manifest image" and the "scientific image" of man-in-the-world.   The scientific image differs from the manifest image in that only in the former is there any talk of postulated, unobservable entities.   Nevertheless, Sellars characterizes each image as a "picture", "conception", or "framework".   In the sense of the word 'theory' that I am using, I will call the images two different 'theories' or points of view.   See W. Sellars, "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man," in his *Science, Perception and Reality* (London, 1963), pp. 1-40.

[18] Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, 1982), p. xix.

[19] Taken from Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Evanston, 1969), p. 190.

[20] Copi, *op. cit.*, 89.

[21] Even a precising definition is dependent upon usage within a theory.

[22] T. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford, 1977), p. 1.

[23] W.V.O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in his *From a Logical Point of View* (New York, 1953), p. 32.

[24] Several colleagues have voiced this type of criticism to me.

[25] See fn. 22.

[26] This terminology is taken from Quine, *op. cit.*, 42-3.

[27] Taken from Rudolf Carnap, *Meaning and Necessity* (Chicago, 1947), p. 63.

[28] For a defense of this see Terry Penner, "Socrates on Virtue and Motivation," in *Exegesis and Argument*, ed. E.N. Lee *et al* (New York, 1970), 133-51.

[29] J.L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," in his *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford, 1970), 185.

[30] Several interpreters of Plato insist that knowledge of the Forms for Plato is an act of direct, immediate acquaintance with the Forms. W.G. Runciman claims that knowledge for Plato is "knowledge by acquaintance". Sir David Ross says the relation is "direct and immediate". Richard S. Bluck calls it "direct acquaintance". Harold F. Cherniss emphasizes the directness of the relation. And M.T. Thornton argues that in the *Cratylus*, knowledge by acquaintance is, for Plato, superior to knowledge by description. See Runciman, *Plato's Later Epistemology* (Cambridge, 1962), 12, 15; Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas* (Oxford, 1951), 25; Bluck, "Logos and Forms in Plato," *Mind* 65 (1965), 527; Cherniss, "The Philosophical Economy of the Theory of Ideas" in *Plato I*, ed. G. Vlastos (Garden City, 1971), 23; and Thornton, Knowledge and Flux in Plato's *Cratylus*," *Dialogue* VIII (1970, 581.

[31] J.C.B. Gosling and G. Fine both argue that the mental eye theory and the acquaintance model fail both as accounts of knowledge and as interpretations of Plato's theory of knowledge. See Gosling, *Plato* (London, 1973), 120-39; and Fine, "Knowledge and *Logos* in the *Theaetetus*," *Philosophical Review* 88 (1978), 366-97.

[32] On this point see W. Sellars. He claims, "Now concepts, as I see it, are linguistic objects in the sense in which the various pieces involved in the game of chess (e.g., the pawn) are chess objects". See his paper, "The Paradox of Analysis: A Neo-Fregean Approach," in his *Philosophical Perspectives* (Springfield, 1959), 301.

[33] Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, 1960), p. 16.

[34] Jim Read pointed this out to me.

[35] Jeffrey Gold, "The Ambiguity of 'Name' in Plato's *Cratylus*," *Philosophical Studies* 34 (1978), 223-51.

[36] Georgias Anagnostopoulos, "Plato's *Cratylus*: The Two Theories of the Correctness of Names," *Review of Metaphysics* 25 (1972), p. 705.