

## What is a What-is Question?

Once when I was talking to a senior about possible topics for his essay, he looked around, leaned forward, slid his eyes left and right, dropped his voice, and said "I'm thinking about writing on...Wittgenstein." That was the most dramatic occasion on which I've been made aware of a rumor that seems to circulate among some students that there is a secret, wicked doctrine that is concealed from them by some unknown authority, because to reveal it would be to unmask the fact that Plato has been refuted. For, so the story goes, Wittgenstein refuted Plato.

Now to make the last sentence have any meaning at all, one has to take the name Plato as shorthand for "Plato's theory of forms." And what is that? Our dean once gave a lecture called "Plato's theory of forms," and pointed out that, if the phrase was to refer to anything that could be found in the dialogues, every word in it, except "of," would need to be changed. Let us see what Wittgenstein's famous refutation actually refutes. It consists in arguing that the various things we call games are not all alike. One of them might resemble a second in some characteristics, but have different characteristics in common with a third, with pairs of games overlapping in many different ways, so that some two might have no characteristics in common at all, except for membership in the same extended family. You have your brother's nose, he has your mother's eyes, she has her grandfather's forehead, and so on. You are all Smiths, but "Smith" is not a word with a single meaning. There are people with the Smith chin, others with the piercing Smith gaze, but there is no Smithness, and you would never be tempted to think there was. All there is that belongs to all the Smiths is an array of family resemblances.

Now if Meno had only had the chance to hear talk of family resemblances, as he had heard about effluences, the dialogue that bears his name could have been over in three pages--or could it? How would we decide when we had a list of all the relevant characteristics of all the things called virtues, to be sure there were none common to them all? And why, when Socrates gives two examples of definitions of shape (75B, 76A), does he not list characteristics at all, but set the thing he's defining as a whole in relation to something else? And have you noticed that Socrates never asks a question like "what is a game?" He often refers to a game called draughts, which footnotes tell us is something like checkers, but only as a way of sharpening by contrast the meaning of the thing he is interested in at any time. And in the *Lysis*, in which some friends have been wrestling, he does not use the occasion to ask about wrestling or playing, but about friendship.

There is a memorable occasion in the *Parmenides* when the old philosopher tells the young Socrates that he is not yet completely philosophic (130E), just because he wants to inquire not about dirt but about

the just and the beautiful. By that standard, Socrates at the age of seventy had still not grown up as a philosopher. Plato never stated a theory of forms for Wittgenstein or anyone else to refute, but Socrates often resorted to the hypothesis that there are invisible looks that belong to intelligible things. If we want to understand what he meant, we have to pay some attention to *when* he turned to this hypothesis, how he followed it up, and what he was looking for on such occasions. Wittgenstein and others like him tell us to look to the use of a word, if we want to find its meaning. Socrates uses the word *eidos* only when he has first asked what something is, and he does not ask that question indifferently about anything and everything. We have to ask, what guides the asking of the what-is question?

But where should we begin? You have read dialogues that take aim at virtue, rhetoric, and justice, to mention only the first three on the list. But something odd happens in each of them. The inquiry aimed at virtue seems to concentrate instead on what learning is, the one that asks about rhetoric shifts to a relentless asking of the question, what is the best life?, and the immense dialogue about justice seems to encompass everything in the world, but especially the question of what would be the best possible education. Like our own seminars, the conversations of Socrates never seem to keep to the opening questions, so before we've gotten anywhere with the question of what Socrates chooses to ask about, we already have to worry about why his questions don't seem to stick. Like the statues of Daedalus that Socrates mentions near the end of the *Meno* (97D-E), they seem to get up and run away, though perhaps they do not altogether escape, but try to lead us somewhere.

This fact, that Socrates' own what-is questions always turn out to be about something else than the thing they were first asked about, is to me the most important and revealing thing about them. We will return to this soon, but first it turns out that the easiest place to begin looking at the what-is question is in a dialogue in which Socrates does not lead the discussion. In that dialogue there is someone else who has a methodical way of proceeding with such questions, and he never lets the original topic run away, but keeps battering at it so directly that it is soon impossible to tell what it is. I am speaking of the *Sophist*, a dialogue in which the Eleatic Stranger learns before our eyes how to ask what something is, not by witnessing or imitating Socrates, but by the reliable method of trial and error. He starts out the dialogue as a disciple of Parmenides, and in the course of it discovers, and displays to us, that Parmenides was wrong about who and what are most truly philosophic.

In the first half of the dialogue he presents the orthodox Parmenidean line, that there is a universal method for getting knowledge, applicable indifferently to any topic, that cares no more about the art of the general than about the art of removing lice (227A-B). Topics of inquiry do not count

for philosophy; logical structures do. Philosophic discipline requires purging ourselves of any motive to care about any one thing more than any other. Once we are pure, disembodied logicians we can begin to learn. Now you may think this is what Socrates himself says in the *Phaedo*, but one shouldn't decide too quickly what it means to say that philosophy is nothing but the practice of dying and being dead (64A). For one thing, in both the *Symposium* and the *Republic*, Socrates likens philosophy to erotic love (210A-D, 474C-475C). But one only needs to take one step back from the *Phaedo* itself to see that even there the questions about philosophy, dying, and being dead are not dispassionate but urgent ones. Socrates rebukes his friends for their grief over his dying (117C-E), but that is only because he wants to harness all that powerful feeling to what he calls keeping the *logos* alive (89B). *Phaedo* reports that those present were never far from laughter or tears, and spent the whole day in the grip of an unaccustomed experience he calls wonder (58E-59A). The philosophic approach of the Eleatic Stranger is too methodical, too patient, too relentless to let wonder or desire get in its way.

The Stranger has a technique for moving from a word to the thing meant by it (218B ff), a universal strategy for capturing what anything is, the method of division. It begins by casting a net, finding some general class of things that the looked-for thing must necessarily belong to. Then, to shift the metaphor, it begins quartering the field, always dividing the class before it in two. Why should there not sometimes be a division into three parts? Because the power of logic is greatest where contradictories are concerned. The two parts of any division must be made in such a way that anything in the world must be found in one or the other of them. Black and white is an inappropriate division of colors, but black and not-black form a pair of classes that include everything there is, not even restricted to colors, since there is no possible middle ground between them into which anything could slip. To locate anything in one side of such a division, it is only necessary to assure oneself that it cannot be in the other side. In practice one might fail to make all divisions exhaustive and mutually exclusive, but it is never a very difficult matter to correct them. The method is as simple as it is universal. And if something is in the original class, and repeatedly narrowed down into smaller and smaller sub-classes, mustn't one eventually reach a class that includes it and nothing else? I think the answer has to be yes: the Stranger's method is infallible. But one only needs to read the dialogue to see that the Stranger's method fails. How can this be? We have just endorsed the law of contradiction, and now we find that something infallible fails. The problem, though, is not a collapse of logic, but a misapplication of it. Doctors can't be expected to make shoes, and logicians are not philosophers. The ancient Eleatic school and the modern analytic one are victims of the same mistake.

The Stranger's method of division is too logical in the sense that it is nothing but logical. It is a mechanical repetition of a logical procedure; point it in a new direction and start it up again, and it will grind on to a new conclusion. Ask it which of the two conclusions one should choose, and it is silent, because it can only get its teeth into contradictory alternatives, but its own products can never contradict one another. The infallibility of the method is its vice, because it will always succeed in telling you what something is, no matter how often it has already given you different answers to the same question. I will remind you what the sophist turned out to be: he was a hunter of the children of the rich, a businessman who trafficked in wisdom as either a manufacturer, traveling merchant, or local retailer, a professional athlete whose sport was debate, and a purifier of souls, who opened the possibility of learning by refuting the mistaken opinion of knowledge. The Stranger calls this result unsound (232A), but it is not mistaken. My summary of the six definitions already shows how to reduce them to four, since the retailer, travelling salesman, and manufacturer differ in only incidental ways, and perhaps we could get them down to three by saying that hunting for customers is subordinate to the purpose of transacting business with them, but now we are stuck. The sophist has to make money out of his teaching, has to be able to win arguments, and has to have an effect on his students that changes the opinions they already had. But what is he really after--money, victory, or the betterment of his students? Tell me please, by logic alone, how to answer that question. In fact I already went outside the bounds of the Stranger's method when I said that the first four definitions could be reduced to one because they all had the same purpose. Ends and means can be distinguished by human beings, but not by means of logic.

From the standpoint of logic, it has to be purely arbitrary to decide whether the sophist is most properly considered a businessman, an athlete, or a healer of souls. From the standpoint of anyone who might consider entrusting the education of a son or daughter to him, it is the only question that matters. "What is a sophist?" is not answered by a list of characteristics that specify membership in classes. It is only answered when we know which of those characteristics govern the rest, and *make* someone a sophist. How do we decide that? I don't know of any recipe, and I don't see how any answer to the question can be without risk of error. We have crossed over from the safe domain of logic to something called philosophy, and we have done so at exactly the same place that the Eleatic Stranger did. Not only was a swarm of definitions of one thing an unsound result, but the sixth definition of the sophist in particular outraged the Stranger as a human being (231A). It seemed to give the sophist more honor than he deserved. In trusting his own desire to do justice, the Stranger abandons his principle that the method of the *logos* must honor lice-pickers and generals equally.

He understands that abandoning his neutrality means giving up Parmenides as his spiritual father (241D), and that plunges him into the deepest questions about being and not-being. The dialogue seems to tell us that we can't find out what anything is unless we are willing to ask--that means abandon all our present opinions about--what everything is

Let us step back and try to understand what has happened. Does the what-is question ask for a definition of a word? If so, there could not be so much at stake in asking it, and there would be nothing wrong with arbitrarily picking one definition out of many as long as everyone involved in the conversation understood it and agreed to it. But the Stranger made clear from the beginning that the point was not to draw lines around a word but to leave the word behind and find the thing meant. The definition is what makes the *thing* what it is. That in turn means that there must be something else involved with the thing on which we focus the question. We think of a definition as an identity, a group of words that can be substituted for a single word, but in the dialogues of Plato the what-is questions that are asked are always looking beyond the things asked about to their rootedness in the whole of things. What defines virtue? Not any group of words, but the nature of human beings. And what defines the sophist? According to the Stranger, when he has broken loose from Parmenides and is free to be Socratic, it is the nature of being itself, an irreducibly twofold structure that allows for the possibility of images. The Socratic what-is question is always the question about how things are, asked in so radical a way that it permits no ready-made opinions to remain as crutches.

Now it is possible to arrive at this kind of questioning from any starting point, but it is also easy to see why Socrates only asks the what-is question about certain kinds of things. There has to be some issue that matters enough to us to make it worthwhile to call into question all the safe opinions on which we base our lives. Parmenides had it exactly backwards when he told Socrates that philosophy requires a studied indifference to its topics. Philosophy can only be about what matters to us. This also explains a common phenomenon, that the asking of the what-is question makes other people laugh. Martin Heidegger, at the beginning of a book called *What is a Thing?*, suggested that philosophy could be defined as that at which menial servants laugh. The snobbishness of his remark is out of place and obscures his insight. Someone who does not care about the thing in question can't see the point of suspending his prejudices, and he is as likely to be a professor as a servant. But it is even more important that this very laughter wears two faces, for it need not be the smug self-congratulation of the unexamined life, but can also be the spontaneous childlike delight we all take in the sudden appearance of wonder.

Indifference seems to be the only reaction one cannot have to a philosophic question, if one is aware of it at all. And the fear that the

presence of desire will destroy our "objectivity" is misplaced. First of all, in the new landscape opened by the experience of wonder we lose the familiar landmarks by which our desires are ordinarily steered. What we thought we wanted may lose its appeal. Achilles and Priam gaze at each other in wonder, and no longer wish each other dead. Second, the power of wonder takes us beyond vanity, so that selfishness itself can make us give up cherished but worthless opinions. Gorgias and Thrasymachus, two of the vainest humans one could imagine, become absorbed in following the arguments of Socrates and each spends a long time willing not to be the center of attention. And finally, objectivity is static, while desire is dynamic, so if philosophy is an activity in which we can be changed, only desire can set it in motion and keep it in motion. In Plato's portrait of him, the old Parmenides is reluctant to get involved in a philosophic discussion, and compares himself to an old racehorse with no desire to run, and to an old man falling in love, with no desire to feel desire (137A).

Now there is another character in the dialogues who is even less able to move and change than is Parmenides, and whose very name means standing-still or staying-in-place, and this is Meno. Let us look at the *Meno* to see an example of how Socrates asks and answers a what-is question. That's right, I said "answers," and I am not referring to the lame conclusion that virtue comes by divine lot. Socrates himself discounts this result as one in which no trust can be put because it evades the true question about virtue (100B). All the energy of the dialogue is in its first half, before Meno finally and irrevocably digs in his heels (86C-D). It is in that first half of the dialogue that I claim that Socrates in fact answers the question about virtue, not by giving it a genus and specific difference or any such neat package that we can thoughtlessly carry away, but by sketching a first approach to an answer that would carry the inquiry to a new plane if anyone paid enough attention to notice it, and made enough of an effort to follow it up. Of course Meno is not the person to do either of those things, and no one else present steps forward, as often happens in other dialogues. But the dialogue remains alive for us to enter into, and when we have gotten past our first exasperation over the fact that Socrates won't tell us anything, but only ask more and more questions and claim total ignorance, we can begin to notice that he does make some direct assertions.

One of the strongest of these occurs just before the discussion breaks down, and Socrates says he would fight for it in word and deed (86B-C). That is the conviction that inquiring all by itself makes us better and braver people. Doesn't that have to mean that self-directed, philosophic learning is at least one way that at least some virtues are acquired? Now that may seem to be a weaselly, Meno-like claim that fails to tell us what virtue is, but let's look more closely at exactly what Socrates says. He says that by believing one needs to inquire after the things one doesn't know, we are

better, more man-like, and less inert. There are three surprising words here, that probably don't quite match your memory of the passage. Socrates does not say that the belief in question leads us to become better, but that merely believing it, we already *are* better. But in what respects, exactly, are we better? Now all of you know that the topic of the dialogue, virtue or excellence, is *arete*, and that it is related to the words *aner*, man, and *andreios*, manly or brave. But Socrates avoids by a fraction of a millimeter saying that believing in the need to inquire makes us more manly, *andrioterous*; instead, he uses the word *andrikoterous*, more man-like. And finally, the second way that we are better is by being less inert, less *argos*. You may recall that in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus has an old dog named Argos, who recognizes him after his twenty-year absence. If you are like me, you wonder, when you read it, why Odysseus' dog has the name of Agamemnon's city, but it doesn't. *Argos* is a common adjective meaning lazy, a contraction of *a-ergos*, inert.

So while it is surprising that in the mere believing of something we are already better people, these are two very weak sorts of goodness that Socrates gives us credit for. We are less like lumps of rock, and more nearly resemble men. But even this approach to virtue has far-reaching implications. First, what does masculinity have to do with virtue? Just because a connection between them is built into a language, no speaker of the language is compelled to accept it, but to Meno that connection is the whole story. Meno's various efforts to say what virtue is add up to a fairly simple and coherent picture. Virtue in its strongest and most proper sense can belong only to men, and to them only in the prime of life and when not enslaved (71E); these manly fellows have the power to help their friends and hurt their enemies, for what else is human excellence but the ability to rule other people (73C-D)? He later adds that the man of virtue will help himself to gold and silver, as well as to honors and offices, since these are the beautiful things that give delight (77B, 78C-D). But instead of admiring this lovely picture, Socrates keeps raising picky objections. The most persistent one is whether any action can be good without temperance and justice (73A-B, D, 78D), but the first one is whether a woman who acted in the same way would be any less excellent than a man (72D-E). Meno, when compelled to, pays lip service to both of these pieties, but never shows any sign of believing them. But it is equally clear that Socrates is talking about a simply human excellence that has no bias toward the male. His claim is an equal-opportunity insult: none of us knows how to live well. When he says we need to be more man-like he means more like human beings. We are none of us what we are born to be and meant to be.

Now I am not claiming to get all this out of one slightly unexpected adjective, but that adjective confirms a theme that is present in most of the dialogues. Socrates is always comparing the virtues to humble arts like

shoemaking. This makes some people climb the walls, as Callicles does (490E-491A, *Gorgias*). Why is Socrates so insistent about this comparison? We come into the world without shoes, as Socrates himself displays, but we are not condemned to go barefoot and vulnerable if someone has taken the trouble to develop the capacity to fit us with shoes. Shoemaking is in us as a possibility, but it takes work and at least a little thought to get it out into the world. I think the meaning of Socrates' constant comparison is this: if we thought even as much about how we ought to live as the shoemaker does about how to protect feet, our lives would be revolutionized. We have to work to become what we are by birth and by right, and it is only in a minority of people who excel the rest of us that we even see what a human being is. And that is the reason for Socrates' faint praise when he says that believing in the possibility of learning already makes us more nearly human. Without that belief we are as inert as rocks, as static as Meno.

Meno does explicitly deny that learning is possible (80D), and he is literally motionless. He repeats in the center of the dialogue the same words he had flung at Socrates at the beginning, as though no conversation had gone on at all. How like some people we all know, Meno is, and how like ourselves. Between his repetitions a spectacular event has taken place, but spectacles no more than arguments have power to move him. If he had been sharp enough to see what Socrates was doing in the slave-boy scene, Meno would have been moved to anger. Socrates dangles in front of Meno a nonsensical concoction about priests, priestesses, and reincarnation, just because that's what it takes to get him interested in anything, which drops out of the dialogue with hardly a trace, but what Socrates shows to Meno is living proof that his slave is a better man than he is. Meno is immune to the insult, but we are meant to look at him and at his slave, and to wonder at the sight of a world turned upside-down. Socrates shows us that the splendid Meno is not as much of a human being as is some nameless piece of property that he owns and orders around. Now I am not claiming that the slave is a model of excellence. All he does is try to understand something, recognize that he doesn't, and try again, and all Socrates claims is that this is a motion away from the inert and toward the human. The understatement is breathtaking, and is typically Socratic. Remember that the two arts Socrates most often praises and recommends as models of the virtues are shoemaking and medicine, and that Socrates himself has no use for either of them. But even that much art would mend our lives.

Let us sum up what this reading of the *Meno* amounts to. It says that virtue is activity that brings out our properly human capacities, that learning either is that activity or inevitably accompanies it, and that merely believing that learning is necessary and possible is the start of the acquisition of virtue. What would Socrates say about this formulation? He has in fact given us a standard to test it by, in his two sample definitions of

shape as the only thing that always turns out to follow along with color, and as that to which a solid reaches, or the determining boundary of a solid (75B, 76A). He tells Meno he would love to hear even that sort of statement of what virtue is, and ours does in fact resemble it. It appears that virtue is the only thing that always turns out to accompany learning, and is that toward which human activity reaches, the determining boundary of human nature. This sort of answer is nothing one can rest with; in fact it is a destroyer of rest, an invigorating answer that won't let us stand still. But it explains why the dialogue that asks what virtue is dwells on what learning is. And it gives us more ammunition to understand Meno himself.

When Meno won't pause even for a second to think about the definitions of shape, Socrates accuses him of *hubris*. Now the root sense of this word applies to a horse that won't accept confinement. Any question Socrates asks, anything definite that needs to be thought about, Meno jumps over like a fence. He will not stay within any determining boundary that would permit learning, and therefore inevitably stays within his ignorance. And twice later (80B, 81E), Socrates calls him *panourgos*, someone who will do anything, in the sense of stop at nothing, a shameless and unscrupulous man. When Meno wants something, he takes the shortest route to it, without stopping to wonder what he does to himself in the process. So he misses the mark of properly bounded human activity on both sides: in doing anything he can do nothing. He is *panourgos* and *argos* at the same time, since he has not begun to think about which desires he ought to satisfy, and has left himself helpless in the one arena in which his boldness and eagerness would have been of some use to him.

The dialogue is so far from failing to say what virtue is, that it says it in a strong positive statement of conviction by Socrates, in the negative example of Meno, the tiny beginner's example of his slave, and, we have to add, the ever-present positive example of Socrates himself. But none of these are explicit statements. Why is the dialogue so indirect, inexplicit, and tantalizing? The fact that it is never straightforwardly explicit means that we readers have to do all the work, though Plato has handed us all the necessary tools. In the case of this dialogue, we will only see what it says virtue is if we begin enact it ourselves, to learn it without being instructed. I said earlier that the what-is question is never about a word. To anyone who has experienced such a question, the suggestion that it asks how a word is used is simply childish. We looked at one side of the what-is question when we saw that it asks how a thing is defined, how it fits in with all that is. But it is equally true that the very asking of such a question begins to define us, to shape us and work us into new beings, launched into learning.

But we seem not to have said anything about the *eidos* of virtue. At Meno's first attempt to speak about virtue, Socrates told him to keep an eye on some one look that's the same in all virtues, however many and various

they might be. We have gotten as far as to say that virtue always has the look of learning, and to see that learning itself does not look like Meno's ability to quote from teachers and poets, but does look like his slave's honest puzzlement and at the same time like Socrates' energetic questioning. But this is far from being able to see what makes all virtue what it is. We are about as far along that road as the slave-boy is in geometry. Socrates describes that condition as being on the borderline between knowledge and opinion, in just the way we are at the moment we are awakened out of a dream (85C). The slave, and we, could easily go back to sleep. In the *Republic* especially, Socrates keeps cautioning that philosophy is a long road and hard work (435D, 504B-D, 515E). The dialogues as a whole are only concerned with its first step, the transition from sleep to waking, and they do have the amazing power to set us in motion, but where we go after that is up to us.

But we can sketch out some directions we might choose to take. For example, how should we think of the relation between a broader form such as virtue and a narrower one such as justice? This probably sounds like a silly question. Virtue is obviously a genus of which justice is one species; broad classes contain all sorts of smaller sub-classes. But it is not a good idea to be hasty in matters of this sort, and what seems obvious here is not at all necessary. The idea of classes is one of the ways that logic can trivialize philosophy. It is precisely the mistake of the Eleatic Stranger to think that what is looked for by the what-is question can be trapped in classes without being understood. The sophist does belong to the class of hunters, and to that of salesmen, and to that of athletes, and so on, but that is just the trouble. Every characteristic he has assigns him to some class, and every one of them says something about him, but that doesn't mean we can assume that they say what he is. Some of those classes he belongs to are merely parts of what he is as a sophist, and others are incidental to what he primarily is.

But suppose we found some characteristic or cluster of them that was both necessary and sufficient to his being a sophist. Because of its necessity, every sophist would have to be in that class, and because of its sufficiency, everything in that class would have to be a sophist. You will be surprised to hear that this is not good enough either. It would give us a test by which we could unfailingly identify sophists, but it still might not reveal what they are. How is that possible? Think of any proposition in Euclid about triangles, the more obscure the better. I choose I.20, but any one will do. In any triangle, two sides taken together in any manner are greater than the remaining one. Now because this is a proven proposition, it is necessary, and if its steps are reversible, which I think they are, it is also sufficient to determine a triangle. So as a good logician, I define triangle as that of which two sides taken together in any manner are greater than the remaining one.

This is an infallible marker for a class that contains all triangles and only triangles, yet it completely misses the point of defining something, which is to reveal what it is.

In order to think about anything worthwhile, we have to abandon the picture of classes nested within classes, and both Plato and Aristotle in fact did that. Plato really did have a theory of forms, but it is nothing like what is meant by virtually everyone who uses that phrase nowadays. The thing that Wittgenstein is said to have refuted, Plato had already refuted, in a more complex way. Plato's own theory arose out of difficulties like the one I mentioned a moment ago: how should we think of the relation between virtue and virtues? In the *Protagoras*, Socrates asks whether justice, moderation, and so on are not instances of virtue but parts of one whole, as the mouth, nose, eyes, and ears are parts of one face (329D). And this is a common theme in the dialogues, as Socrates always seems to force people, against common sense, to conclude that courage or justice or temperance is impossible in isolation from the rest, and from wisdom. They are as different from one another as eyes are from a mouth, and putting them together does not blend them into a homogeneous mixture. Why then shouldn't someone be brave while being unjust, intemperate, and stupid? But if Socrates' suggestion is tempting to you at all—if you suspect that real bravery is possible only in someone who is just and temperate and wise—then you have a tough problem on your hands. It used to be called the problem of the one and the many. Aristotle reports that Plato solved it by postulating that each form is put together in the way a number is (*Metaphysics* 987b 21-2). Four is not something that belongs to each of its units, but only to all of them together. But the forms are not mathematical numbers, with identical units, but are complexes of other forms, each distinct from the rest, but impossible outside the complex. That means we can't simply add up wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice, because none of them is anything at all in isolation from the rest. Wherever courage, say, is found, virtue as a whole is already in play. But we can't get at virtue itself, apart from the virtues, because it is nothing but the being-together of them all.

We know about this theory of Plato's only because Aristotle tells us about it, and because that permits a kind of hindsight to be applied to a few very obscure passages in the dialogues. Jacob Klein and Robert Williamson have been inspired to make partial reconstructions of it. I mention it only to show that the technical and laborious side of philosophy is as much a field for imagination and wonder as is the beginning of philosophy, when the what-is question first takes hold. And I can report on yet another road one might take in the same pursuit. Aristotle follows his teacher's lead in many more respects than is usually seen, but in this one he charts a new course. It begins with the observation that we call something medical, for example,

in a variety of ways. (*Metaphysics*, Bk.IV, ch. 2) There is a medical knife, a medical book, a medical degree, a medical procedure, and a medical person. Only in the last case is the word used in its primary sense, as indicating the presence of a certain kind of knowledge and skill. The knife is an instrument of that skill, the book one of the causes of it, the degree a sign of it, and the procedure an act or effect of it. Whenever something other than a human being is called medical, it is meant in a derivative sense that points to the primary one. This structure of meaning operates everywhere, and again, Aristotle is not interested in the way words are used, except as a pointer to the causal structure of the world. And yet again, it is not the structure of species within genus within higher and higher general classes that reveals anything about the world, but a more complex and intimate pattern that could never be found by logic alone.

For example, in the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle asks a question he says was asked in ancient times and must always be asked and struggled with (1028b 2-4), what is being? By the end of the seventh book of that work, he has determined that being is meant in its primary and proper sense only of animals, plants, and the cosmos as a whole. They are the only things that *are* in their own right, and everything else is in some way derivative from them. Now this goes far beyond anything present in linguistic usage. Language doesn't even know that it is saying "being" in more than one way, but misleads us by appearing to collapse them all into one. Aristotle is correcting the language by discovering complexity where it suggests simplicity. His thinking is moving entirely among the things at which language points, and points in an inadequate way. But it is a much greater step to single out active, organized, self-maintaining wholes as the only things in our experience that display being as such. Language claims that title equally and indifferently for tables, rocks, flowers, wood, bones, and all sorts of other things that Aristotle thinks are only beings of the second rank, beings-by-courtesy, derived from and dependent on those few things that are always at-work-staying-the-same. But what if the true beings themselves have sources and causes? If they do, then the same pattern continues, and even the primary beings in our experience are derivative beings in the true order of things. This is exactly what Aristotle concludes, as he follows the causal order upward to forms, and then to the being-at-work of forms, and finally to the divine intellect. Being is not the class that includes everything indifferently, but the activity that proceeds from one source to the organized whole of all things. Beings belong to a complex pattern that points to the highest being.

Now this pattern of one primary meaning that governs the rest is found everywhere in Aristotle's writings, but even it does not serve as a method of inquiry for him. When he asks, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, what is the good?, he seems to conclude that the various goods are not linked by

derivation from one primary good, but are all the same by analogy. (1096b 27-30) That means that the human good has to be a separate topic of inquiry, not found by derivation from a higher good. Thomas Aquinas, incidentally, uses the word "analogy" to refer to the other pattern of meanings derived from one primary instance, but for Aristotle it makes a great difference which of the two patterns is at work. For example, when we speak of a healthy diet, we mean one that contributes to the health of an animal; it is not the diet but the animal that can be healthy in the primary and governing sense. But suppose we speak of a healthy society? Do we mean one in which the people are physically fit and free of disease, or one in which the people co-operate in a way analogous to the parts of a healthy animal body? The former would be a case of meaning by derivation, the latter one of meaning by analogy. Aristotle's inquiries are guided by the things for which they are looking, and do not seek to fit those things into ready-made patterns of any kind.

In fact, in the *Physics* there is yet a third and most surprising structure, that has only recently begun to become evident to me. Aristotle asks what motion is, and gives an answer that applies to four kinds: change of being, qualitative change, quantitative change, and change of place. The definition seems to apply most directly to the first two kinds, but the *Physics* is organized around a progressive narrowing down of all change to change of place, as the primary motion. The number of kinds of motions is reduced in stages from four to three to two to one. But the primary motion involves the least change, while the primary change is the one that turns out to be least properly called a motion. Change and motion name the same four kinds of action in two opposite ways, so that the upward scale of motions is the downward scale of changes, with birth and death at one end and change of place at the other. This in turn reflects the twofold nature of nature, as life and cosmos, in which Aristotle permits both sides to be primary at the same time. One recent book about the *Physics* claims that the early definition of motion is discarded when the later books are reached, but in fact that understanding of change in terms of potency and being-at-work remains dominant, even while the motion that displays it least is being found to be the primary motion. In the eighth chapter of the last book of the *Physics*, there is a final demonstration of what is wrong with Zeno's paradoxes, that brings the definition of motion to the forefront, and shows that all motion must be understood as change, even at the limit of mere change of place, and that all change must be rooted in the potency that goes with the nature of some being. The meaning of motion, and its relation to change, are imbedded in the way this world is organized. To get the structure of meaning straight is to come into sight of the way things are. In this case that produces a paradox beyond any that Zeno imagined, a

structure in which two things are simultaneously prior to and derivative from one another.

So what is a game? Perhaps there is some common element present in everything we call a game. Perhaps there is not, and they only share a set of family resemblances. I can't work up enough interest in the topic to form an opinion about it. All I can say is that, as far as my own experience goes, there is no what-is question there at all. But what is virtue, or motion, or the good, or being itself? Reading Plato and Aristotle has made it obvious to me that these are questions I have a stake in pursuing, and has drawn me into the pursuit. The briefest of sketches have shown us four different structures by which the one thing asked about might be related to the many things called by its name, none of which is as crude as either of the two alternatives about games. To recapitulate them: the one thing in question might be composed of the very things that are derived from it; it might be the primary instance to which all the others point; it might be an internal relation, present in the many things by way of analogy; and it might be part of a bi-polar relationship, in which it and something akin to it jointly govern a group of things that bear both of their names. Aristotle's inquiries along the path of the what-is question are so diverse, and the theory he attributes to Plato is so unexpected, that we are in no danger of becoming Platonists or Aristotelians. Even if we wanted to, where is the method to follow, or the procedure to imitate? Philosophy of a Platonic or Aristotelian kind is nothing but activity stimulated by the what-is question, opened and reopened in wonder, led by desire, full of hard work but more enlivening than tiring, offering not doctrines and dogmas but wide-open possibilities, as broad as the human capacities we are so likely to leave unused and inert.