

David O. M. Charles, ed.
Ancient Theories of Definition.
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As David Charles explains in his introduction, the relevance of ancient theories of definition is profound. Since the Socratic endeavor is taken to be the pursuit of definition, his efforts via Plato and succeeding philosophers to set out the rules for proper definition are in themselves worthy of attention: these are particularly relevant to those studying ancient philosophy. But those who are undertaking a study of definition in critical thinking and logic can only be impressed by how many of the theoretical bases are covered by the ancient thinkers.

The first noteworthy feature of the selection is its breadth: the overall topic is ‘ancient Greek’ theories, but the contributions cover not simply Plato’s Socrates and Plato himself and Aristotle, but also effectively most other dominant schools of ancient Greek thought, including Socrates’ successors (other than Plato and Aristotle), the Stoics, medical men, Neoplatonists, early Platonic and Aristotelian commentators, and Sceptics. Befitting the presentation of these philosophers, the contributors have evidently provided thorough coverage of the primary texts from which their views on definition can be generated, often with matching texts in the original Greek. (One might have asked for a few articles devoted to the views of the pre-Socratics, Sophists or Epicureans, say, which is to take nothing away from the selections that are provided, all of which are distinctive.) Each of these contributions reveals important disputes, which are worthy of attention. The selections are comprehensive of ancient Greek theories of definition, to an extent unmatched by recent anthologies.

Charles and his contributors show how central the theory of definition is for a proper understanding of ancient thought. With its correlatives in theories of essence, explanation, cause and language use, we are led to an enriched understanding of themes which unify otherwise diverse thinkers, and many contributions show the respects in which there is real engagement between later ancient authors with issues raised by Plato, Aristotle or both. For instance, Aristotle’s example of the definition of ‘eclipse’ is referred to by Plotinus (four hundred years later), showing a new way in which, as Dr. Schiaparelli explains, cause and essence are to be related for the sensible as opposed to the intelligible world (472).

In his introduction, Charles lists the three groups of questions one needs to answer to solve the Socratic ‘what is it?’ question:

- (a) What is to be defined: linguistic expressions, concepts, or entities in the

- world? Can all these be defined, or only some? If so, which?
(b) What counts as a good definition? What should be included, what excluded? And why?
(c) Is there only one type of good definition? If there are several, how are they connected? (2)

For each of the contributions in the book, Charles shows how the authors address these questions in reference to ancient sources (17 ff.). (The similarities with Porphyry's tree are enticing.)

A second noteworthy feature of the selections in this volume is their scholarly reliability. The contributions in this anthology are written by a distinguished group of scholars who have well-established reputations for their expertise in ancient philosophy. Articles on Plato are contributed by Lindsay Judson, Vassilis Politis, David Charles, Lesley Brown and Mary Louise Gill concerning the *Euthyphro*, *Phaedo*, *Meno*, *Sophist* and *Statesman*. Each author orients us to a proper prioritization of definition in the texts. Articles about Aristotle's theory of definition are by Kei Chiba, Deborah Modrak, David Charles, and James G. Lennox covering the *Topics*, *Posterior Analytics*, *Metaphysics* and the biological works. Even an internet survey of these authors' work in ancient philosophy shows the influence of each of them. There are many interesting points of comparison and contrast between their interpretations of the texts, especially concerning the presentation of the issues in the *Meno* and the *Posterior Analytics*. Judson's analysis of arguments in the *Euthyphro* shows how subtle the questions of definition can be, in Socrates' analysis of Euthyphro's recommendations concerning 'piety' in the dialogue named after him: there is much more to Socrates' argument about the love of the gods than a casual read would detect.

As if those articles weren't enough of a prize in themselves, Paolo Crivelli, Richard Sorabji, Jane Hood, Annamaria Schiaparelli, and Gail Fine add very satisfying articles on the Post-Aristotelian authors. Whether one is doing a project in comparative philosophy or engaging in textual exegesis, these articles are a goldmine for their fine tuning of the earlier theories, or offering alternatives. Paolo Crivelli defends the centrality of definition theory for the early Stoics, and provides translations from the likes of Diogenes Laertius and other commentators to show the distinct orientation of the Stoic theorists to definition theory (in terms of sayables and stateables). (p. 359ff) Professor Sorabji guides us through the ancient Aristotelian commentators (Alexander of Aphrodisias) and Platonic enthusiasts (Alcinous, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Themistius, Plutarch, Syrianus, Proclus, Hermeias, Philoponus, Simplicius, Olympiodorus and Eustratius, covering 1200 years of scholarship from the third century BCE), showing all their interests in concept formation. Jane Hood focuses on the Aristotelianism of Galen's definitions. Schiaparelli exposes us to the identity of essence and cause in Plotinus' *Enneads*. Professor Fine focuses on Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and *Against the Dogmatists* to show how there is an interesting response to Meno's paradox,

which she calls the ‘paradox of enquiry’ (494). There is a very thorough Index Locorum (527-45) for locating references to their original ancient sources.

The aim of the book is to establish the central status of the theory of definition in the whole of ancient Greek philosophy, to show how indispensable it was for a proper understanding of the issues which the different schools of thought raise. The editor regrets that insufficient attention has been given to this, to be remedied by his efforts and the efforts of his contributors. On this score all are to be applauded. All of the pieces advance our understanding of ancient Greek thought in important ways. College libraries should prize the book; it would also serve as an excellent text for graduate classes in ancient Greek philosophy. For scholars in logic and critical thinking, it would be a great asset to understanding how many contemporary issues have ancient precedents. Indeed if the legend is true that Gilbert Ryle recommended Aristotle’s *Topics* as the one text that every philosopher should read (since it’s a guide to good reasoning and clear understanding, including an understanding of definitions), then Charles’ edition of *Definition in Greek Philosophy* is a worthwhile commentary, for the scope of its coverage and penetration of those topics.

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