

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2004
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I. Euthyphro's first definition of piety

Piety =df prosecuting wrongdoers, 5d-e.
(The phrase '=df' means 'is defined by'.)
This is not a definition, but an example.
We want a tool to determine whether an action or person is pious.

A definition will have to work in both directions.
That is, if A =df B, then everything that is A is B, and everything that is B is A.
For example, bachelor =df unmarried man.
So, all bachelors are unmarried men and all unmarried men are bachelors.

It may be that all prosecuting wrongdoers is pious, but it is clearly not the case that all piety is prosecuting wrongdoers.
So, the first definition does not work, for this formal reason.

II. Euthyphro's second definition of piety

Piety =df that which is dear to the gods, 7a.
Impiety =df that which is not dear to the gods.
This doesn't have the formal problem of the first definition.

There is an access problem.
In order to know if something is pious, we can ask the gods.
Unfortunately, we may not be able to talk with them.
This problem arises more seriously if we adopt the same question within a contemporary, monotheistic framework.
Put the access problem aside.

There is a further problem, arising from Euthyphro's polytheism.
The gods sometimes disagree.
Take any action on which the gods are divided.
Some gods love it, so it is pious.
Other gods don't love it, so it is impious.
So, Socrates says, this definition makes an action both pious and impious.
Euthyphro responds by saying that acts on which the gods disagree are neither pious nor impious.
Still, his act is pleasing to all the gods.
This leads to a third definition.

III. Euthyphro's third definition of piety

Piety =df that which is loved by all the gods.
Impiety =df that which is hated by all the gods.

IV. The Big Question

Which came first?

That is, is the pious pious because it is loved by the gods, or is it loved by the gods because it is pious, 10a.

This question is one of the most famous (and difficult) in all of philosophy.

Consider a particular instance, murder.

Murder is impious.

The gods hate murder.

Which causes the other?

Note that this question holds for one god, too.

The same question holds for morality, as well as piety.

We can rewrite it:

Murder is wrong.

God hates murder.

But does God hate murder because it is wrong?

Or is murder wrong because God hates it?

We call the second answer, that murder is wrong because God hates it 'voluntarism', or 'Divine Command Theory'.

Ethics, then, becomes a part of religion.

We should look to God for morality.

Voluntarism takes the omnipotence of God seriously.

God freely chooses the rights and wrongs.

This means that God could change his mind, and make murder morally acceptable.

This is uncomfortable.

It seems that there should be a reason to choose certain acts as good and others as bad.

Voluntarism makes the choice arbitrary.

The position that there are reasons for choosing the rights and wrongs is called 'natural law'.

Natural law puts a limit on God's power, since the choice of rights and wrongs is constrained.

It also means that there's ethical work to be done outside of religion.

In the original case, of piety, Socrates takes the position which correlates to natural law, as opposed to divine command theory, 10d.

The gods are constrained by the forms, just as we are.

V. Back to the question of how to define piety

The pious can not be defined as that which is loved by gods.

The pious has the property of being loved by the gods because it is pious.

But the loved by the gods has the property of being loved by the gods just by definition, 10e-11b.

We still need a reason for something to be pious.

Socrates and Euthyphro agree that piety is some part of justice, as shame is some part of fear.

They try 'care of the gods', but we can't improve the gods.

They try 'service to the gods', but this becomes gifts, which becomes what is held dear to the gods.

They've run in circles.

Euthyphro runs away.

VI. The 'Apology'

'Apology' is a transliteration of the Greek, not a translation.

The dialogue is his defense at his trial.

Socrates is accused of corrupting the youth, and of teaching new gods.

Here we see Socrates at his least charming.

We can understand why he irked the Athenians.

We've already seen how he treated Euthyphro.

Socrates' mother had been a midwife, and this is a recurring theme.

He sees himself as a midwife for ideas.

He also sees himself as a gadfly, 30e.

The oracle at Delphi had pronounced that he was the wisest man in Greece, 21a-e.

After sacrifice, a priestess of Apollo would answer in the name of the god, in a sort of riddle.

(Perhaps some sort of intoxicating cave air facilitated this talk.)

The oracle said that no man was wiser than Socrates.

This puzzled him, he says, since he knows that he knows nothing.

He tried to refute the oracle, but discovered that people who were reputedly intelligent actually did not know anything.

But they thought they knew something.

Knowing that one doesn't know anything is wiser than not knowing anything and not knowing that one doesn't know.

So, he set about showing Athenians that they don't know what they think they know.

He talks about this sort of embarrassing of other Athenians, 33b.

He had walked out of the council at the trial following the Battle of Arginusae, 32b.

This had been a big victory, and the Athenians were out for blood of the generals who had left Athenian soldiers to die.

Socrates badgers Meletus on the stand: 24c-28a, trying to catch him in contradiction.

Consider especially his poor arguments that he wouldn't corrupt the youth at 25c-26a.

Socrates tells the assembly that they can not harm him, 30c-d.

For, a lesser man can not harm a better one.

Athens was a great power, both as a military power and as merchants, having defeated the Persians.

Socrates represents himself as above them, condescending, doing more important work, 31a-32a.

He listens to a voice in his head.

When it comes time for a punishment, he offers maintenance in the Prytaneum, 36d.

Athens may have been a democracy, but it was a democracy of wealthy men, who owned slaves, and women.

These were powerful people, who likely thought much of themselves, and Socrates had angered them.