

399 BC Meletus accuses Socrates of "impiety" and "corrupting the young" . To the surprise of many who thought that Socrates would "get the message" and flee, Socrates shows up for his trial!

SOCRATES AND MORAL THEORY: ETHICS

Socrates looks for the basis of morality in reasoning and not in the simple repetition of the examples set out in the tales of the gods and goddesses.

On his way to the trial Socrates comes across a young man named, Euthyphro, who is returning from the courthouse. Socrates learns that he is returning from posting charges against someone and so Socrates inquires as to the defendant. He is shocked to learn that the young man has brought charges against his own father! Socrates inquires as to why he is doing this and does he think that he is correct in doing so. The young man informs him that he has charged his father with murder for allowing a servant who killed another servant to die while tied up awaiting for the authorities to arrive to arrest him.

Socrates asks the young man why he thinks it is a good thing to bring charges against his own father. The young man replies that it is the pious thing to do. Socrates asks him if he knows what piety is. Euthyphro responds by saying that he believes that piety is to please the gods. Socrates asks how we know how to do that and Euthyphro responds that to do as the gods do is to please them. He cites passages from the epic tales that describe a god taking actions against his own father and provides this as a justification for doing what he is doing. Socrates presses on with his questions. For Socrates this is a most important matter. Socrates is attempting to learn how one knows what is GOOD. How do you know what the right thing to do would be. It must be GOOD. We all want to do GOOD. We want GOOD answers, GOOD friends, and a GOOD life. So how do you know what is GOOD. Euthyphro thinks he knows what is the GOOD. It is whatever is pleasing to the gods. The gods are the standard for goodness. Now Socrates has a major problem with this approach. There are problems with it. Socrates asks Euthyphro the key questions. Which gods are we to please. Not all the gods agree. The stories report that they war among themselves. So what is pleasing to one may be displeasing to another. There were stories of gods respecting their parents and stories of the gods killing their own parents. Likewise

there were stories of the gods killing their own children, committing murder, lying, raping and every other horrible act.

So what is the basis for the GOOD. Here is the question that set Socrates apart from all others of his day. A question that sets Philosophy apart from religion and a question that Socrates could not answer. He died without an answer. Plato devised an answer but Socrates had not reached that point at his death.

Do we call those acts good because the gods do them or do the gods do them because they are good? Are acts good just because the gods do them and whatever a god does is good just because the god did it? Or, are certain acts good and that is why a god does it?

Euthyphro can't even understand the question and states that he must be going and thus ends the dialogue. Most people of Socrates time could not understand the import of the question. If the gods do what they do because it is good then there would be a standard for goodness, which even the gods would answer to and it would exist apart from the gods to be held over them for the sake of judgment. But for the Greeks there was nothing above the gods. The theory that Euthyphro put forward is called the DIVINE COMMAND THEORY. Many people who believe in a single deity also hold for such a theory. Perhaps you think so too.

Consider : For those who believe in the One God of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic Tradition are the commandments of this God good because God commands them or is there a standard of Goodness which even God must follow? Do all rules come from God? Does everything come from God?

- a) Can God make a square circle?
- b) If God makes a universe with blue in it and with yellow in it can it exist without green in it?
- c) Can God make $2+3=$ something other than 5?

If God were to do something horrible would it make it good because God was doing it, say killing an entire town, killing nearly every living being on earth, including innocent beings, ordering a father to kill his son? These are all in the BIBLE. Are these good things?

Are the laws and rules of the physical universe and mathematics rules that even God must follow? Do they exist above or before God? Where would they exist or come from?

Consider this:

You hear a story about a mother who has killed her own daughter. She claims she heard God order her to do so. This happens! Do you think that yes, she heard God say that and so it was Good for her to kill her daughter or do you think that there is something wrong with that woman? Do you think she may be suffering from a chemical imbalance in her brain or some other ailment but that it can not be true that God told her to do it because God would not do such a thing, because it is wrong, even horrible and God just would not do evil things?

Well when people make judgments about what God would or wouldn't do, make judgments about actions as to whether or not they are "evil" acts they are thinking that there is a standard for goodness by which they will even judge God! Well, where does this standard come from? Where are the rules about what is Good? If they are from God, God can make them and God can change them.

Socrates and many other Greeks were making judgments about the stories of the gods. They knew that certain acts of the gods should be followed and others definitely avoided. Socrates was searching for a basis to affirm the existence of a moral standard or set of rules that even the gods are subject to. This is known as Ethics in Philosophy. Socrates was one of the very first humans to pursue the answer to the question, "What is the GOOD?" using reason alone and not belief.

Socrates and Plato would use reasoning and commend others to do so in the pursuit of the GOOD life, answers to the question "What is the GOOD?" They moved away from memorizing and repeating as the path to a good life. The stories of the gods had too many contradictions in them and it became too difficult to believe in them. As many must eventually give up a belief in Santa Claus, so too did they need to give up their belief in the gods. But just as a belief in Santa Claus is comforting and brings physical gifts, belief in the gods was comforting for it provided a basis for a moral order. Once belief in the gods was removed, what would the Greeks put in its place? What would serve as the basis for the

social and moral order? Socrates was searching for it at the time of his death. Plato thought he had found it. More on this latter.

THE TRIAL OF SOCRATES - 399 BC

Socrates appears for trial and makes his defense (his Apology).

Questions:

Why was he there? What was it all about? Why did he make the defense that he did? Why did they convict him? Why did they sentence him to death?

If Socrates was such a good person, someone who was pursuing truth and goodness and wisdom, how could it be that he would be executed by fellow citizens?

Socrates is just over 70 years of age at the time he is accused of a crime. He had never before been accused of anything wrong or criminal. He had served as a justice but never been a defendant. He was very well known. He was at least regarded as a great thinker, something of a scientist for his musings on the nature of the universe and as a moralist for all his talk about virtue. Who were his accusers and why did they charge him?

The accuser went to the town hall and presented the charge along with a requested penalty.

Accuser : Meletus

Charge: Impiety-disbelieving in the gods of the Athenians and corrupting the young

Penalty: Death

Meletus would serve as the prosecutor and present his charges at the trial and the evidence against the accused, Socrates. Meletus was a conservative, something of a religious fanatic who had also brought charges against the orator, Andocides.

Lycon, an orator, supported Meletus in bringing the charges. He appears as a member of the group which organized the overthrow of the thirty Tyrants and the creation of the democratic order.

Anytus, the leader of the democratic government, may have been the principle instigator of the charges. He may have invited Meletus to bring the charges. Anytus was concerned with

the ability of the Democracy to survive. In some way Socrates was perceived as a threat to the political order and thus to the leaders of the democratic movement.

When the Democratic Party overthrew the tyrants, the “Thirty”, they needed to bring about a harmony within the polis. They declared an amnesty for any and all crimes that may have been committed during the previous few years that the tyrants had been inducing people into crimes in order to silence their criticisms and gain their support. No one was to mention anything that had occurred or any one’s relation to the thirty tyrants. Now the democratic order did not rest upon the leaders being noble born. It did not rest upon the power of the military. The Athenians had governments run by kings, military commanders and wealthy people. Now they were ruling themselves. Democracy. They rested that form of government on the will of the people and their willingness to accept that whatever the majority wanted would be the correct thing to do. This democracy did not involve the voting of all Athenians. The voting in Athens included only: males, born of Athenian mothers, born free, and born legitimate, no bastards! Those men would vote on all matters and the majority would rule.

Socrates presented a threat to the Democratic Party and form of government. Socrates had for many years been asking questions and he kept asking questions hoping to get the correct, final and truthful answer. He asked a series of questions that were threatening to the political order because they focused directly on the basic principle underlying the democratic rule. The answers to the questions below were the same in 399 BC as they are today. Even today to push this issue would result in someone be criticized for being anti-democratic or anti-American! Socrates would ask questions such as:

Is there any guarantee that whenever a majority of the people votes on something declaring that it is true, that that vote makes it true? The answer was, NO, there is no such guarantee!

Is there any guarantee that whenever a majority of the people votes on something declaring that it is beautiful, that that vote makes it beautiful? The answer was, NO, there is no such guarantee!

Is there any guarantee that whenever a majority of the people vote on something declaring that it is good, that that vote makes it good? The answer was, NO, there is no such guarantee!

Is there any guarantee that whenever a majority of the people votes on something declaring that it is justice, that that vote makes it justice? The answer was, NO, there is no such guarantee!

Now this was a threat to the system of government and Socrates was seen as a danger to the state, a clear and present danger, that needed to be dealt with and removed in a manner that would not injure the state. Socrates questioning was a threat to national security.

What was at stake here was a clash between the way of adventure that had characterized the history of Athens with its open door policy and the way of safety that had characterized the development of the state of Sparta with its rigid discipline and narrow range of variations permitted. Socrates was representing the past of Athens and now in a precarious condition some Athenians wanted to make the state more secure and the questioning of the old man, Socrates, was threatening to the order and security of the people.

Socrates was not accused of crimes because of his association with the thirty young tyrants. Although several of the thirty had known Socrates and had listened to him, he did not encourage or teach them to be tyrants. In fact when they attempted to silence him for his criticisms of them he refused to arrest Leon of Salmis on their orders and he refused to observe their ban against teaching people to speak in public.

So, why was he indicted and why was he found guilty and sentenced to die? There are a number of factors that probably contributed to a sizeable amount of public opinion being set against Socrates.

1. The character with the name of "Socrates" in the play by Aristophanes, the Clouds, was made the object of ridicule. Other playwrights followed Aristophanes' lead (Amipias(422bc) and Eupolis(421bc)). Many had seen the plays who had not experienced Socrates directly. Many would have a false impression due to the "media".

2. Socrates may have been seen as a dangerous intellectual inovator, on the order of Anaxagoras, who had been driven out of Athens.
3. Socrates speculated about the universe. He was practicing the “new science” and was suspected of atheistic tendencies.
4. Socrates did question people in a manner similar to the Sophists. He cross examined many who claimed to have knowledge or wisdom in the hope of gaining what they had. Socrates used the dialectical method of inquiry. He , unfortunately, showed people that many who claimed to know things actually did not. He embarrassed the poets, statesman, and artisans of his day. Many people thought of Socrates as they did the Sophists, although he was not one of them.
5. Socrates was indiscriminate in his associations. He would allow anyone to question him and observe him. He did not care who they were. Over time, foreigners, mathematicians, the young, the Thirty who later became tyrants, Sophists, politicians all would come to speak with Socrates. Many Athenians might have harbored suspicions or distrust of Socrates associates and wonder about Socrates’ true plans or role in their actions.
6. Socrates questioning process was a threat to the democratic ideal, the foundation of the political and social order.

What was really on trial then were the social values to be found in the actions and inquiries of Socrates.

Both Plato and Xenophon report on the trial itself. There is no text indicating that Plato has distorted what occurred at the trial. The prosecutor presented his charges and then Socrates was given his chance to speak. He knew that he had until sundown of that day to present whatever he wanted to present. He has taken an oath, sworn to the gods, to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. He has sworn an oath to accept the verdict of the jury and the penalty imposed by the jury. It is his desire to keep these oaths that will be his undoing. His desire to be faithful to his oaths make him say things that disturb many of the jurors and make him remain in prison to die when he could have left and gone into exile.

Socrates opening points out that it is his duty to speak the truth and it is the duty of the jury to provide for justice. Socrates will speak in his normal manner and he maintains that he is

not a clever speaker (in the fashion of the Sophists). He is not accustomed to dealing with courts, as he has never been a defendant. He attempts to deal with the 2 sets of charges. He fears that the rumors concerning him are more damaging than the charges. He can't deal with them, as he would want because the charges are not made specific. He thinks he is there due to the suspicions surrounding him that he is involved in strange investigations and that he is associated with sophistry. There were no witnesses to support these charges and no evidence to show that Socrates ever charged money for instruction as Sophists did. The god, the oracle at Delphos, has given him his business. When the oracle said, "There is no one wiser than Socrates", he took it to be giving him the charger to seek after wisdom. He began to question all who may have had wisdom in any form only to find that it was not so. His questioning of the statesmen, poets and artisans did find them guilty of pride (hubris) for thinking that they were wise when they were not. This also won Socrates their enmity. Lycon, Anytos and Meletos were representing the orators, craftsmen and poets he had embarrassed. Socrates does not believe that he can deal with all the antagonisms by which he was disliked by so many. He does not believe that he can deal with the prejudices of so many in so short a time allotted. So he turns to the specific charges.

1. Corruption of the young

Socrates questions Meletos concerning this charge. Apparently, Meletos believes that Socrates is the only guilty of this. Socrates make light of that idea. Socrates inquires as to whether or not the alleged corruption is deliberate or accidental and notes that either option leads to a course of action other than to charges and a death penalty.

Meletos could name no individuals that Socrates had corrupted. No one in the court room named a single corrupted child.

2. Impiety

The charge is explained by Meletos to mean that Socrates is an atheist and believes in no gods. Socrates points out that he is not like Anaxagoras who did not believe in the gods. Meletos admits under questioning that Socrates teaches about "spiritual" things and when he does so, Socrates forces Meletos to admit that Socrates must then believe in spirits

if he teaches about spiritual things and that spirits are gods and so Socrates must believe in the gods.

Had Socrates concluded his defense at this point, he might have been acquitted, as the jury was most likely laughing at the prosecutor. But Socrates did not stop there. Under oath to tell the whole truth, Socrates proceeded to inform the jury as to the real reasons he believed he was charged with crimes. He informed Meletos and the Jury that Meletos and his conspirators did not know his true charge to place against him. They could not even bring up his loose association with some of the thirty tyrants due to the amnesty. Socrates knows why he is disliked by so many and now begins to make a defense of the type of life he has lived. He has only to consider whether one does right or wrong. The god has posted him to be a philosopher to test himself and others. He does not fear death. It is unknown. He fears disobeying god, this is definitely bad. He is not afraid to speak the truth as so many others are. He will act as the god has posted him to act. He will always be a philosopher, a seeker after wisdom. He will do this and obey god rather than the mob. He will always question others concerning truth and virtues and persuade them to care for their soul and their virtue rather than for fame or money or power. He has acted always according to what he thought to be right. If he considered doing otherwise, an inner voice (Daemon) would speak to him to warn him away from doing wrong. He has done so and shall continue to do so in his private and public life. In public he has never done wrong. He never took money and his finances show it. In public he refused the demand of the mob for a trial of ten generals together and instead insisted on separate trials. He refused the tyrants order to arrest Leon of Salamis. He does not believe that he has done wrong anywhere. He does not believe that he corrupted anyone.

Socrates informs the jury that he is asking for justice and not mercy or charity. He would not resort to appeals for mercy as many others had done before him. He would not bring his wife and small children out to remind them of his family obligations. These appeals make Athens look ridiculous in the eyes of others. This encourages the jurors to disrespect their oaths to provide for justice. These are oaths they swore to the gods as jurors.

Socrates is found guilty. 281 to 219!

At this point the prosecutor was to present a penalty and the defendant could either accept it or he would offer an alternative and defend it. Meletos asks for death. Socrates' friends are

horrified. They encourage him to propose an alternative. Socrates speaks aloud wondering what is the punishment befitting his crime. As he does not believe that he hasn't committed a crime, how can he propose a punishment? Socrates states that it would appear that his "true" crime was not having the sense to live an idle life: neglecting his own household affairs, not making money, not pursuing military appointments and for believing himself too honest to involve himself in tawdry business affairs and political plots as so many others had done. For that "Crime" he thinks the fitting punishment should be free room and board for he, his wife and children in the town hall for the rest of their lives! He could not recommend anything that was negative as a consequence of leading a good life. Many of the jurors become incensed over this offering. Socrates' friends on the jury encourage him to propose another penalty. Socrates considers alternatives. Death is not that upsetting since Socrates does not know for sure what that is, prison, fines and exile are considered. Exile is not acceptable since Socrates would be labeled as a criminal and wherever he went he would not be able to follow the instruction of the god for he would not be allowed to speak with others and continue his pursuit of wisdom. Socrates reconsiders a fine but he has no money. His friends take up a collection and he offers to pay that amount as a penalty for his crimes. **The jury votes and he is sentenced to die by a larger vote than found him guilty. 360-140!.** That meant that there were men on the jury who voted that he was not guilty and then voted to put him to death anyway! The old man had offended them with his brazen stance affirming his virtue over their practices.

Socrates now chastises the jurors who are putting him to death, pointing out that their deed will allow non-Athenians to criticize them. They will call Socrates wise and Athens foolish. He is an old man and they could not wait for him to die. They needed to go out of their way to kill him. Socrates spoke to his friends and encouraged them not to feel so badly for him. He was not afraid of death but of wickedness. He is confident that the result has been a good one since that inner voice or daemon had not spoken to him and warned him away from attending the trials and speaking as he did. He says it is far harder to outrun wickedness than death. Death comes to us all but wickedness is what we should be concerned with and avoid. We can't avoid death. Death was either a dreamless sleep or a journey to another place. If it was a dreamless sleep, Socrates thought that it would not be bad at all. If it were a journey to another place where the gods and goddesses and heroes

were he would be happy to be with them and question them and learn the answers that had eluded him.

Socrates was convinced that no harm can come to a good man either living or dead!

He was taken away to prison to await his execution. In prison he is invited to flee and live in exile but refuses to do so!

Let's move into that matter and discussion in the next section.