# What Makes Good Things good? The EUthyphro problem

*Euthyphro* is one of the first dialogues written by **Plato (427-347 BCE)**, a famous philosopher who lived in ancient Greece. When the *Euthyphro* begins, Plato’s teacher **Socrates** (the main character in many of Plato’s dialogues) is on his way to his trial for corrupting the youth and denying the gods of state. In one of the world’s most famous miscarriages of justice, Socrates will eventually be found guilty in this trial. Among other things, Socrates claims that a “divine sign” has commanded him to philosophize as he does (no matter how much this annoys others, or what danger it puts Socrates in).

When he arrives at the courthouse, Socrates begins chatting with a young Athenian named **Euthyphro,** who gives the dialogue its name. The reader (and Socrates) quickly learn that Euthyphro identifies with Socrates, at least insofar as he thinks of himself as a bit of an “expert” on ethical or religious matters:

I understand, Socrates. This is because you say that the divine sign keeps coming to you. So he has written this indictment against you as one who makes innovations in religious matters, and he comes to court to slander you, knowing that such things are easily misrepresented to the crowd. The same is true in my case. Whenever I speak of divine matters in [c] the assembly and foretell the future, they laugh me down as if I were crazy; and yet I have foretold nothing that did not happen. Nevertheless, they envy all of us who do this. One need not worry about them, but meet them head on. (3 c-d)

We then find out that Euthyphro is about to bring charges against his father for being “impious.” His father left a murderer tied up in a ditch (while he was waiting for the police to arrive) and the murderer died of exposure in the meantime. Euthyphro’s family and friends strongly discourage Euthyphro from bringing charges, but Euthyphro argues that they are simply ignoring the commands of their religion, which clearly states that children should punish their parents when they do unjust actions (he gives the examples of Zeus killing his father Cronos when Cronos begins eating his children). Euthyphro is presented as a young, highly confident religious zealot, who doesn’t seem terribly worried that most of society disagrees with him (indeed, he seems to think it is a sort of compliment), and isn’t interested in hearing criticism of his actions. Like many of Plato’s characters, he’s supposed to be a somewhat exaggerated version of a certain “type” of person that readers (both ancient and modern) might recognize.

## Why is Socrates So Disagreeable? The Socratic Method

Over the course of the dialogue, Socrates and Euthyphro attempt (and eventually fail) to answer the questions: What is piety? and What is justice? The method that Socrates uses has been called the **Socratic Method,** or **dialectic**. It works in the following manner.

1. We begin by formulating a question of the form ‘What is X?’ (“What is piety?”, “What is love?”, “What is knowledge?”, “What is art?”) The goal of the Socratic Method is to determine the answer to this question.
2. A person proposes a **definition** of the form “X is D.” In order to be a satisfactory definition, it must meet the following criteria:
   * D must be **sufficient** for X. That is, if something is D, it must be *guaranteed* to be X. For example, “being a human being” is sufficient for “being a mammal.” However, it is not necessary,since there are other ways of being a mammal.
   * D must be **necessary** for X. That is, if something is X, it must be *guaranteed* to be D. For example, “being a mammal” is necessary for “being a human," but it is not sufficient, since not all mammals are humans.
   * D must provide an **explanation** for X in terms of something more basic and better understood. For example, suppose that someone asked “What is the number 2?” It would **circular** to say that “the number 2 is what you get when you divide 4 by 2.” It would be uninformative (though not circular) to say that “the number 2 is what you get when you subtract 3 from 5.”
3. Someone (in the Platonic dialogues, it is usually Socrates) tries to show that the proposed definition is either not sufficient, not necessary, or not explanatory by providing **counterexamples**. When this happens, we go back to step 1.
4. If we can’t think of any counterexamples, we can tentatively conclude that we have succeeded. Of course, we can never be *sure* that we have succeeded, since there is always a possibility we have overlooked something.

## **What is Piety? The Socratic Method in Action**

In the Euthyphro, the method is applied to the question ‘What is piety?’ (or, what religious practices are correct?) However, since religion, morality, and the law are all so closely linked (especially at the dialogue is set), the discussion has ramifications that go beyond religious practice, and into the deeper question: “What is the relationship between religion and ethics?” The argument works something like this:

**Euthyphro’s first hypothesis.** “I say that the pious is to do what I am doing now, to prosecute the wrongdoer, be it about murder or temple robbery or anything else, whether the [*e*] wrongdoer is your father or your mother or anyone else; not to prosecute is impious.” (5e)

*In other words:* You want to know what the pious, moral thing to do is? It is doing what I am doing right now—punishing wrongdoers, even when they happen to be your family members!

**Why Socrates rejects it:** This isn’t a definition of piety, but just a few *examples* of particular “pious” actions (or at least what the speaker thinks are pious actions). For example, it is certainly the case that *one* way of being pious (or being “moral” or “doing the right thing) is ensuring wrongdoers appropriately punished (or acting as Zeus acted in punishing his father), it is hardly the only way (after all, not all questions about piety involve punishment). In order to make it into a definition, we’d need to specify out which features of Zeus’s action made it pious. The take-away: *When someone asks for a definition, you need to do something more than just give examples or provide a “list.”*

**Euthyphro’s second hypothesis:** “Well then, what is dear to the gods is pious what is not is impious.” (6e-7a)

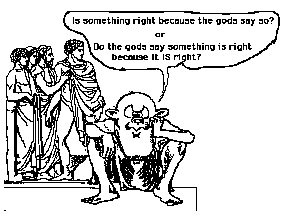
*In other words:* A moral action can be defined as one the gods like or approve of.

**Why Socrates rejects it:** This is miles better than the first try, since it actually offers a definition. However, it still has significant problems. First, the gods of Greek religion disagree about what is good, and the various gods love different things. Second, the very general “rules” that the gods do agree on are too vague to be of any use in formulating *definition* of piety or justice. For example: We can all agree that the gods hate a murderer. But this doesn’t allow us to figure out what counts as murder.

In a somewhat different form, Socrates’ problem applies to monotheistic religions, too, since religious texts are not sufficiently detailed to provide definitive answers to many (and probably most) of genuine moral or legal dilemmas (that is, to resolve moral questions *there isn’t already an obvious answer to*). For example, there doesn’t seem to be anything in the Bible/Koran/Vedas that dictates the specific form a government welfare program should take, describes the conditions under which killing in self-defense is justified, or so on. And, of course, different religions provide different answers to these questions, which makes it difficult or impossible for believers in a *particular* religion to justify the claim that their beliefs are true. While the “Dilemma” (coming up next) is the main focus of the argument, *this* problem has arguably been in motivating a cultural shift away from thinking of ethics (and law)

## The Euthyphro Dilemma: Goodness and God’s Will

*But if the god-loved and the pious were the same, my dear Euthyphro, then if the pious was being loved because it was pious, the god-loved would also be being loved because it was god-loved; and if the [11] god-loved was god-loved because it was being loved by the gods, then the pious would also be pious because it was being loved by the gods. But now you see that they are in opposite cases as being altogether different from each other: the one is such as to be loved because it is being loved, the other is being loved because it is such as to be loved. I’m afraid, Euthyphro, that when you were asked what piety is, you did not wish to make its nature clear to me, but you told me an affect or quality of it, that the pious has the quality of being loved by all the gods, but you have not yet [b] told me what the pious is. Now, if you will, do not hide things from me but tell me again from the beginning what piety is, whether being loved by the gods or having some other quality — we shall not quarrel about that — but be keen to tell me what the pious and the impious are. (10e—11b)*

Let’s suppose ALL of the above problems are solved: there is universal agreement as to the uniquely correct religion, and this religion provides a comprehensive ethical theory guiding all action, and all laws. As it turns out, Socrates argues this *still* wouldn’t justify basing ethical beliefs on religious ones.

**Euthyphro’s third hypothesis:** “Piety is what is beloved by all the gods” (or, for many contemporary religions, “Morally good actions are those that God loves or approves of.”).

**Why Socrates rejects it:** This definition sets up what is known as the **Euthyphro Dilemma,** which is one of the famous arguments in the history of philosophy.

So what happens? Socrates recognizes that Euthyphro claim is ambiguous. It might mean one of two very different sorts of things: “Certain actions are morally good *because* God loves or approves them” OR “God loves and approves of certain actions *because* they are morally good.” Socrates now presents a devastating **dilemma** (philosophers and logicians often call the options presented by a dilemma its “horns”):

* Premise**: Either God loves actions *because* they are good OR actions are good *because* God loves them.** This premise is accepted by nearly all **theists,** or believers in an all-powerful, personal God. This includes most Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and many Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists.
* Premise (Horn 1**): If actions are good because God loves them, then morality is *arbitrary* and there is no reason to *worship* or *trust* God.** Morality is arbitrary because God might decide tomorrow to make murder, lying, promise-breaking, and rape OK. On this horn, “God is good” simply means “God loves God.” God’s “goodness” doesn’t give believers any reason to think that God will keep promises to them, or even cares about humanity at all.
* Premise (Horn 2**): If God loves actions because they are good, then morality is independent of God.** Taking this horn means admitting that God does not control what is morally good or bad. More importantly, it means that theists don’t have any advantage over atheists when it comes to answering the questions “What does it mean to be an ethical person?” or “How do I figure out what is good or bad?”
* CONCLUSION: Either morality is entirely independent of God OR morality is entirely arbitrary (and God isn’t worth worshipping).

**Theists have responded to the Euthyphro problem in two ways:**

**Some choose horn 1: “An action is good *simply* *because* God loves it.” This solution says that there is no nontrivial sense in which God is good or trustworthy. Many famous Protestant Christian theologians (such as John Calvin and Martin Luther, along with most Islamic theologians) have adopted versions of this line. This is known as divine command theory. (“Murder is morally OK if/when God says so. It is OK for God to break promises to humans. And so on.”) This solution emphasizes God’s absolute power and the complete inability of humans to understand or evaluate God’s actions. On this line of reasoning, theists *ought* to obey God’s commands because God is all-powerful, because of God’s service in creating the world/humans, and because of the consequences for disobeying. This solution is, of course, compatible with the ideas that God might be (as a matter of fact) perfectly loving and honest, for example in that matter of a good human parent. However, there is nothing in God’s nature (or in the nature of the universe) that guarantees that this must be so (or that it must remain so). What God requires of humans at a given moment is entirely up to God, and there are no limitations of any type on what God might do from moment to moment.**

**Some choose horn 2: “An action is loved by God *because* it is good.” This horn concedes that God does not directly cause actions to become right or wrong. Some famous theologians (such as the natural law theory defended by the Catholic philosopher Thomas Aquinas) have adopted versions of this response, and have emphasized that God’s *nature* is incompatiblewith doing evil things (“not even God could make murdering innocent people morally OK” or “God’s nature makes it impossible for God to lie, or to break promises.”). These thinkers often begin by arguing that there are plenty of nonsensical things that even God couldn’t do, but which don’t seem to be limitations on God’s power (“even God couldn’t make a stone that even God couldn’t lift” or “even God couldn’t make a four-sided triangle.”). This horn does require that there is a standard of morality outside of God, but it leaves open the possibility that religion is a good *guide* to what is moral. On this line of reasoning, humans *ought* to obey God’s commands because these commands are *reasonable* (even atheists should recognize how reasonable they are!)*,* and reflect what it is morally correct. God still holds a special relationship with goodness, however, since God chose which sort of universe to create and what sorts of creatures to put in it, all the while knowing what sorts of things would be good/bad for these sorts of creatures.**

**Other solutions? Many theists over the past few thousand years have argued that there are ways of “splitting the horns” of the dilemma. To date, however, such attempts have always left critics arguing that such attempts either (a) aren’t really answers to the dilemma at all or (b) end up having to surrender to one horn of the dilemma or the other. In any case, it doesn’t seem that there is any “easy” solution to the dilemma which allows one to “have one’s cake and eat it too”—any solution plausibly involves *sacrificing* something which many people find intuitively valuable about the God they worship.**

## Three Questions About the Euthyphro Dilemma

The Euthyphro Dilemma has been around for thousands of years now and it (and arguments related to it) have probably contributed to the very different way we now conceive of the relationship between morality, religion, and the law. However, many of the issues it raises remain unresolved.

1. Supposing that you are a theist (a person who believes in God) what is more important—that God be all powerful, or that God be all-loving? The Euthyphro problem seems to suggest a choice must be made. Disagreements about this issue have played a major role in many religious arguments, in particular the Protestant Reformation.
2. Plato’s Athens was one of the world’s first “multicultural” cities, in which people would often associate with those of very different religious or cultural backgrounds. The Euthyphro makes it clear that, in such a context, it probably won’t work very well to appeal to one’s own religious beliefs in deciding on laws and policies. If we can’t do this, how *do* we decide on the correct laws and customs?
3. How much role does reason actually play in the “real world” when it comes to religion, morality, and the law? In the *Euthyphro,* Socrates “wins the argument,” but this doesn’t make any difference. Euthyphro simply ignores him, and goes about his business of prosecuting his father for murder. Later, the Athenian jury will sentence Socrates to death, in part because they think he is a “religious innovator.” Does this mean argument and reason are doomed to failure?

## Links: Plato’s Dialogues Online

This lecture is based on the following text: Plato, 2002, *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo.* 2nd ed. Trans. GMA Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing. (currently $9 on Amazon). You can find free, electronic copies of Plato’s dialogues at:

* **The Internet Classics Archive: Works by Plato--** This site has older translations of all of Plato’s works-- <http://classics.mit.edu/Browse/browse-Plato.html>
* ***Reason and Persuasion—***A modern, scholarly translation of *Euthyphro, Meno,* and book 1 of The *Republic,* with lots of notes and explanations for students--<http://www.reasonandpersuasion.com/plato/>