**I. The “What is *X*?” Question**

1. Socrates asked a simple kind of question that revolutionized philosophy: “**What is it**?”
2. Usually raised about significant moral or aesthetic qualities (e.g., justice, courage, wisdom, temperance, beauty).
3. Such questions are the central concern of the “Socratic” (early) dialogues of Plato.
4. A so-called “Socratic definition” is an **answer** to a “What is *X*?” question.
5. Socratic definitions are not of words, but of **things**. Socrates does not want to know what the word ‘justice’ means, but what the **nature** of justice itself is.
6. A correct Socratic definition is thus a true description of the essence of the thing to be defined. I.e., definitions can be true or false.

**II. The Importance of Socratic Definitions**

**A. They are objective.**

1. Socrates was opposed to the moral relativism of the Sophists.
2. He believed that there were objective moral standards; that they could be **discovered**; that there were right and wrong answers to moral questions that went beyond mere opinion and popular sentiment.

**B. They are fundamental for knowledge.**

1. Socrates claims that until you know what a thing is, you can’t answer any other questions about it.
2. So any inquiry into any moral question presupposes an answer to the relevant “What is *X*?” question. Not just that there **is** such an answer, but that the inquirer is in possession of it.
3. E.g., in the *Meno* (another early Platonic dialogue), Socrates claims that you cannot answer a question **about** virtue (“Can it be taught?”) until you have answered a more fundamental question: “What **is** it?”
4. In general, he thought that a person’s having knowledge involving a concept, *X*, depends upon his knowing the correct answer to the “What is *X*?” question.

**C. They are fundamental for morality.**

1. He thought that the possibility of morality (moral character, moral behavior) depended on knowledge of definitions.
2. Virtue is knowledge: if you know what is right, you will do what is right. Knowing a Socratic definition is thus (apparently) necessary and sufficient for moral behavior.

**III. The Objectivity of Definitions**

* 1. **Convention vs objectivity or what the nature of a thing is**

The definition of a moral quality is not a matter of what people **think**. You cannot determine what goodness, or justice, or piety, is by conducting a poll.

* Consequently, whether something or someone **has** a given moral quality is also not a matter of mere opinion. Whether an act or a person is good, or just, or pious, for example, is not to be settled by a vote.

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Attempts at defining piety:

1. Piety is what I am doing now: prosecuting my father
   * What is Socrates’ response?
2. What is pleasing to the Gods is pious and what is not pleasing to them is impious.
   * Socrates’ response.
3. Piety is what ***all*** the Gods love and impiety is what all the Gods hate.

* Socrates’ response
  + What question does he ask Euthyphro?
    - Important distinction between a thing loving and being loved

A thing carrying and a thing being carried

A thing seeing and a thing being seen.

What is the point of this distinction?

Do the Gods loving something *cause* the thing to be pious? *Is it their love that confers a state of piousness on the thing?*

Or does the thing being pious cause the Gods to love it and thus, *there is some independent reason the Gods love it that is inherent in the thing?*

* “For the one is of a sort to be loved because it is loved while the other is loved because it is of a sort to be loved. My question Euthyphro, was, What is piety? But it turns out that you have not explained to me the essential character of piety; you have been content to mention an effect which belongs to it—namely, that all the gods love it.” (13)

**The *Euthyphro***

The *Euthyphro* gives us a good example of Socrates’ belief that moral qualities are **real**, not conventional. Euthyphro suggests that piety can be defined as *what the gods all love*(9e). Socrates objects. Even if all the gods agree about which things are pious, that doesn’t tell us what piety is. (Even a poll of the gods is just a lot of opinions.) He gets Euthyphro to admit that it is not because they are loved by the gods that things are pious. Rather, they are loved by the gods **because they are pious**.

So piety cannot be **defined** as *being god-loved*. For if it were to be so defined, since Euthyphro admits that:

the gods love pious things because they are pious

he would also have to accept (substituting ‘god-loved’ for ‘pious’) that the gods love pious things because they are god-loved.

* But this Euthyphro rightly denies. For it would lead to circularity. The gods cannot love things because they love them. That would make their love whimsical and without foundation.
  + If the gods love something because it is pious, then its being pious must be something independent of their loving it - something independent of opinion - something objective.

Another way of putting the point: moral qualities are not like such qualities as *fame* or *popularity*. A thing is popular just because people like it. If you ask them why they like it, they may have their reasons: because it’s bright, or flashy, or durable, or economical, or beautiful, etc. But someone who answers “I like it because it’s popular” is making some kind of mistake. For he seems to have no reason for liking it other than the fact that most other people like it. But what reason do **they** have?

If their reason is the same as his, they may all be making a huge mistake. They all agree with one another in admiring it, but there’s nothing **about** it they admire.  If they have some other reason, then his reason seems to depend on theirs. His liking it because they like it is rationally justifiable only to the extent that their reason for liking it is a good one.

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Modern Problem: Divine Command Theory

“Does God command this particular action because it is morally right, or is it morally right because God commands it?”

It is in answering this question that the divine command theorist encounters a difficulty. A defender of Divine Command Theory might respond that an action is morally right because God commands it.

* However, the implication of this response is that if God commanded that we inflict suffering on others for fun, then doing so would be morally right. We would be obligated to do so, because God commanded it. This is because, on Divine Command Theory, the reason that inflicting such suffering is wrong is that God commands us not to do it. However, if God commanded us to inflict such suffering, doing so would become the morally right thing to do. The problem for this response to Socrates’ question, then, is that God’s commands and therefore the foundations of morality become arbitrary, which then allows for morally reprehensible actions to become morally obligatory.

Most advocates of Divine Command Theory do not want to be stuck with the implication that cruelty could possibly be morally right, nor do they want to accept the implication that the foundations of morality are arbitrary. So, a divine command theorist might avoid this problem of arbitrariness by opting for a different answer to Socrates’ question, and say that for any particular action that God commands, He commands it because it is morally right. By taking this route, the divine command theorist avoids having to accept that inflicting suffering on others for fun could be a morally right action. More generally, she avoids the arbitrariness that plagues any Divine Command Theory which includes the claim that an action is right solely because God commands it. However, two new problems now arise. If God commands a particular action because it is morally right, then ethics no longer depends on God in the way that Divine Command Theorists maintain. God is no longer the author of ethics, but rather a mere recognizer of right and wrong. As such, God no longer serves as the foundation of ethics. Moreover, it now seems that God has become subject to an external moral law, and is no longer sovereign. John Arthur (2005) puts the point this way:

* “If God approves kindness because it is a virtue and hates the Nazis because they were evil, then it seems that God discovers morality rather than inventing it” (20, emphasis added). God is no longer sovereign over the entire universe, but rather is subject to a moral law external to himself.
  + The notion that God is subject to an external moral law is also a problem for theists who hold that in the great chain of being, God is at the top. Here, there is a moral law external to and higher than God, and this is a consequence that many divine command theorists would want to reject. Hence, the advocate of a Divine Command Theory of ethics faces a dilemma: morality either rests on arbitrary foundations, or God is not the source of ethics and is subject to an external moral law, both of which allegedly compromise his supreme moral and metaphysical status.”

(<https://www.iep.utm.edu/divine-c/>)