

Overview

Murder was a religious offense because it entailed 'pollution', which, if not ritually purified, was displeasing to the gods. But a son prosecuting his father would also be seen by many Greeks as 'impious'. What about prosecuting your parent for murder? Euthyphro thinks, in this instance, it is not impious to prosecute your parent. Socrates is unsure. He thinks that knowledge of whether such a prosecution is pious or not would require us to know the nature of piety. Euthyphro agrees and claims that he does, in fact, know the nature of piety. Socrates tests this claim. Euthyphro is found wanting and so his claim to know that prosecuting his father is not impious is undermined. Our interest in this dialog is twofold. First, we will be introduced to a core Socratic claim that to know whether any particular thing, action, person, etc., has some feature X, then we must know the nature of X. Second, we will examine Socrates' views about an adequate answer to a question of the form, 'what is X', i.e., what it is you have to know in order to properly know what X is.

The basic structure of the dialog is as follows:

- 2a–4a: Socrates encounters Euthyphro, who is about to prosecute his (E's) father for murder
- 4a–5d: S claims that only someone with expertise about piety, crucially including knowledge of its nature, should be confident that he were not acting impious in prosecuting a relative
- 5d–15d: E offers various candidates for the definition of piety, all of which S rejects
- 15d–end: S requests to start from the beginning, E refuses, leaves

The "What is X?" Question

Socrates famously asks a simple question, "what is x?", about moral and aesthetic qualities. The *Euthyphro* finds Socrates asking 'what is piety?', but other dialogs find him asking 'what is justice?', 'what is courage?', 'what is wisdom?', 'what is love?', 'what is beauty?'.

A **Socratic definition** is an answer to a "what is x?" question. These definitions are not of words, but of things. Socrates wants to know the nature of piety itself and not just what the word 'piety' means. In a similar way, physicists investigating the nature of matter are not interested in what the word 'matter' means. If they were, they could just consult a dictionary. They are interested in the nature of that stuff in the world, the nature of matter itself. A Socratic definition, then, is a true description of the nature of the thing to be defined. For instance, 'H₂O' is true description of the nature of water and not just our thoughts about water.

Students often resist Socrates at this point. Many will respond that piety, or beauty, or courage, etc., are what they are because of how we think and speak

about them. In other words many are tempted towards *conventionalism*, which says that such things exist and are what they are merely in virtue of how we think and speak about them. If conventionalism is true about, say, beauty, we shouldn't be surprised that different cultures treat different things and people as beautiful. For conventionalism about beauty denies that beauty exists and is what it is independently of how we think and speak about it.

Is conventionalism true? It's a substantive position that requires a substantive argument. For our purposes, we can point out that Socrates does not yet hold any substantive position. He searches for the Socratic definition of piety precisely because he does not know what it is. If, after searching with him, we discover that there is no answer, then we might begin to convince him of conventionalism. But conventionalism cannot be the starting point. Our starting point, reasonably, is simply the question, 'what is piety?'

Socrates' method

- S gets E to offer a candidate, C, as a definition of piety
- S then elicits further claims that seem to entail that C is not, in fact, the definition of piety
- What would S consider a satisfactory answer to the question "what is piety?"?
- S doesn't tell us explicitly. Our job is to extrapolate his view from his rejections of E's various attempts to answer the question.

Failed answers

1. Prosecuting the wrongdoer regardless of personal relationship to the wrongdoer (5e)
 - This is an *example* of a (kind of) pious action, not a specification of that in virtue of which all pious actions are pious
2. What is dear to the gods (7a)
 - If the gods disagree on important ethical matters (as E agrees they do at 6c and 7b–8a), then one and the same thing could be both pious (because dear to some god(s)) and impious (because hated by some other god(s)), but that is impossible
3. What is dear to *all* the gods (9e)
 - This only gives us a quality or affection of piety, it does not tell us what piety is

4. The part of justice concerned with the care of the gods (12e)
 - Care for *X* aims at benefitting *X* or making *X* better; But gods cannot be made better
5. The part of justice concerned with service to the gods (13d)
 - Service aims at some goal (e.g. service to generals aims to help them win wars, service to house builders aims to help them build houses) but E. can't specify what "fine thing" gods achieve such that service could aim to help them achieve that goal
6. Knowledge of how to sacrifice and pray (14d)
 - This definition reduces to [3] and the claim that sacrifices and prayers are dear to all the gods

Preliminary Results

Socrates' rejections of these various proposals shows us that a satisfactory answer to the question 'what is piety?', and more generally to all 'what is *X*?' questions must satisfy certain criteria. *X* is defined as *AB* if and only if:

General: everything which is *X* is also *AB*. If piety is defined as being God loved, then everything which is pious must also be God loved. If, then, sacrificing is pious and praying is pious, then both sacrificing and praying must be God loved.

Univocal: everything which is *AB* is also *X*. If piety is defined as being God loved, then everything which is God loved must also be pious. If, then, killing your enemy in battle is God loved, killing your enemy must also be pious.

Think of these criteria as providing tests for candidate definitions. E proposes definitions of piety. S examines whether those definitions are general and univocal.

Socrates' rejection of [3]

Recall E's third attempt at defining piety. Piety = what is dear to all the gods (10a-11b). Socrates asks, "is the pious loved by the gods because it's pious? Or is it pious because it's loved?" (10a). This is a question about the order of explanation. As an example, assume that there is a strict correlation between the crowing of a rooster and the rising of the sun. Assume that when one happens the other also happens (you need to assume there have been roosters for as long as the sun existed.). Do you think that the sun rises because the rooster crows?

Or does the rooster crow because the sun rises? This is not a trick question. There are many correlations where one correlate explains the other, e.g., death and the cessation of brain activity—which is the cause of the other? How about death and rigor mortis?

“Euthyphro Dilemma”: If certain actions are pious (right, wrong, obligatory, impermissible, etc.) *because* they are dear to the gods (or commanded but God/the gods, etc.), why do the gods love what they love? Either it is [A] *arbitrary* what the gods love, or [B] the gods love what they do for *reasons*. Either way, trouble looms:

- [A] seems absurd. [A] entails that if the gods love rape, murder, etc. then rape, murder, etc. would be pious. This is ridiculous.
- If [B], it is the features of the actions in virtue of which the gods love them that explains why they are pious. The attitude of the gods is not what *explains* or *makes it the case* that they are pious.

Socrates ultimately claims that the fact that a certain action is pious explains why (all) the gods love it, and not the other way round. This is why S says that E has identified (at best) a quality of piety, not the nature of piety. So, here again are the criteria for an adequate answer to a ‘What is X?’ question.

Final Result

X is defined as AB if and only if:

General: everything which is X is also AB. If piety is defined as being God loved, then everything which is pious must also be God loved. If, then, sacrificing is pious and praying is pious, then both sacrificing and praying must be God loved.

Univocal: everything which is AB is also X. If piety is defined as being God loved, then everything which is God loved must also be pious. If, then, killing your enemy is battle is God loved, killing your enemy must also be pious.

Explanatory: every instance of X is so because it has characteristics AB. If piety is defined as being God loved, then a pious act, say, praying to the God, must be pious precisely because it is something loved by the Gods.