

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' (or 'unholy', 'ungodly'.) However, Euthyphro claims that he must prosecute his father for murder; he claims that the pious thing is, in fact, to prosecute his parent in this case. 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. Similarly, to know what actions are impious we must know the nature of impiety. 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 learning goal for this dialog: Identify and understand 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 "What is X?" Question

Socrates asks a simple question, "what is X?", about moral and aesthetic qualities. In the *Euthyphro*, he asks 'what is piety?', but other dialogs find him asking 'what is justice?', 'what is courage?', 'what is wisdom?', 'what is love?', 'what is beauty?', etc.

A **Socratic definition** is an answer to a "what is X?" question. These definitions are not of words, but of things. S 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.

What would S consider a satisfactory answer to the question 'what is piety'? More generally, what are the criteria that must be satisfied for an answer to a 'what is X' question to qualify as a Socratic definition? S doesn't tell us explicitly. Instead, S ask E to define piety. E offers a candidate, C, as a definition of piety. Then S elicits further claims that seem to entail that C is not, in fact, the definition of piety. S asks E to try again. E offers D as a definition of piety. S elicits further claims that seem to entail that D is not, in fact, the definition of piety. The process repeats. By focusing on how S argues against various candidate definitions of piety, we will identify what he thinks is required of a satisfactory answer.

Failed Answers

1. Prosecuting the wrongdoer regardless of personal relationship to the wrongdoer (5e).
 - This is an *example* of a (kind of) pious action.
 - S didn't ask for just one or two examples of pious actions, but that one form (eidos, idea) in virtue of which all pious actions are pious, so that he can use that form as a model to say of any action whether it is pious.
 - Moral: S thinks an adequate answer must specify that in virtue of which **every** pious action is 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.
 - Moral: S thinks that whatever makes some pious actions pious cannot at the same time make some impious actions impious; if X makes some actions pious, then everything which is X is pious.
3. What is dear to *all* the gods (9e).
 - ...next class...

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.