2. Socrates and the Sophists

Socrates and the Examined Life

The rest of this chapter will focus on Socrates (469–399 BCE), the central figure in ancient Greek philosophy, and teacher of Plato, who was the teacher of Aristotle. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of Socrates in the philosophical tradition that began in ancient Greece. Skeptic, moralist, teacher and martyr—the figure of Socrates was, already in ancient times, the philosophical hero of the Western tradition.

What kind of teacher was Socrates, and how did he influence his students and friends? Socrates’ method of dialectic or philosophical cross-questioning involved four steps, which we see at work in the Euthyphro:

1. He asks for the definition of a moral concept, e.g. What is piety? justice? success? These were norms or values widely used to characterize a good life, but their meaning was often disputed. Socrates’ interlocutors claim to know what these terms mean. Socrates himself, by contrast, claims not to know their definition.

2. He conducts a critical examination of the definition, offering counterexamples or determining if it is consistent with other beliefs the interlocutor holds. If someone says courage is “standing and fighting when attacked” Socrates might ask if that is not sometimes foolish, or if it was also courageous to dive into a fast-running stream to rescue a child, neither of which are “standing and fighting.”

3. The cross-examination reveals a contradiction in the interlocutor’s beliefs, his refutation (elenchus). Socrates asks for a new definition. The process starts over and crashes again.

4. Finally the conversation stops, ending in perplexity (aporia), and, hopefully, the interlocutor’s acknowledgement that he doesn’t know what he thought he knew, i.e. his knowledge of ignorance. (The acknowledgement does not always happen.)

Socrates’ practice of philosophical conversation is part of his ideal of the examined life, the effort to understand and live one’s life in accordance with what is true, good, and beneficial. Plato describes him in conversation with many of the most famous and notorious figures of his time, including Generals Nicias and Laches (on courage), the politicians Alcibiades (on the good life), Menexenus (on friendship) and Anytus (on virtue), the tyrants Charmides and Critias (on moderation), the Greek traitor Meno (on virtue) and many Sophists, including Protagoras (on virtue and pleasure), Gorgias (rhetoric and justice), Hippias (on beauty), and Thrasymachus (on law and justice).
In the Dialogues, Socrates puts to the test not only his interlocutors’ beliefs, but their self-understanding how they live their lives. As Nicias says in the *Laches:*

“Anyone who enters into conversation with him is liable to be drawn into an argument, and whatever subject he may start, he will be continually carried round and round by him, until at last he finds that he has to give an account (*didonai logon*) both of his present and past life; and when he is once entangled, Socrates will not let him go until he has completely and thoroughly sifted him” (188a).

Plato’s *Euthyphro*

The *Euthyphro* takes place in the city center (agora) of Athens, in front of the King’s Court, where religious crimes were tried. A small crowd gathers to hear the now-famous philosopher, just charged with the crime of impiety, engage Euthyphro (“Straight-head” in Greek) in a dialogue about what piety (*to hosion*) is. We don’t know if this conversation ever actually took place, but it is not hard to imagine that it or something like it did. This brings up an important point: the Platonic Dialogues are all works of literary art. Socrates was a real, historical person, but the character we encounter in the dialogues is Plato’s creation—however much he may be based on the real human being.

The dialogue begins with a prologue to set the scene, the philosophical inquiry itself (*logos*), and a brief epilogue. The prologue reveals Euthyphro to be a man so convinced of his own righteousness that he is willing to bring his own father up on charges of murder, however shocking this was to his relatives. “Little do they know, Socrates, of piety and impiety.” Based on Euthyphro’s claim to wisdom and piety, Socrates sets out to examine him. (Note the Socratic irony, the apparent discordance between word and fact, in his declaration that he will be Euthyphro’s student, if Euthyphro can teach him about piety.)
Socrates examines six definitions offered by Euthyphro:

1. piety is *prosecuting the wrongdoer* (5d)
2a. piety is *what is loved by the gods* (7a)
2b. piety is *what is loved by all the gods* (9e)
3a. piety is *the caretaking (therapeia) of the gods* (13a)
3b. piety is *willingly serving the gods, as servants to masters* (13d)
4. piety is the *knowledge of how to (serve, i.e.) sacrifice and pray* (14c)

In the end, Euthyphro—refuted, bewildered, frustrated: *is it possible he doesn’t know what piety is?*—leaves, claiming another appointment.

Let’s note several things about Socratic inquiry and these definitions:

1. Socrates wants a *real definition*, an objectively valid, universal concept that will (i) cover all examples (the first definition, “prosecuting the wicked” does not satisfy this requirement), and also (ii) identify the essential feature(s) that makes them that kind of thing (thus definition 3 might identify a property of all pious things, being loved by the gods, but that property would not be what makes them pious). This contrasts to a merely *nominal definition* (e.g. the type found in the dictionary). Sophists such as Protagoras would deny that real or universal definitions exist for moral terms; at most, they would say, a verbal or nominal definition exists relative to a given society. Socratic inquiry presupposes real definitions of ethical concepts exist, i.e. the meanings the terms *ought* to have ascribed to them, even if the definitions have not yet been discovered.

2. The examination of piety as “*what the gods love*” leaves open the possibility that different gods might love and hate different things, i.e. the same thing might be both P and not-P, pious and impious. Socrates rejects this definition, on the grounds that it cannot serve as a clear guide to conduct.

The modified second definition of piety as “*what all the gods love*” leads Socrates to question (a) whether something is pious because it is loved by all the gods (has its property because of their attitude), or (b) is loved by all the gods because it is pious (has a characteristic which leads them to have that attitude).

This discussion introduces the *Euthyphro dilemma*, which poses an important theological problem that was discussed extensively in medieval philosophy (where the paradigm of religion was monotheism, not polytheism). *Theological voluntarists* say x is right because God wills it, *theological rationalists* God wills it because it is right. Is there a way to resolve the question which group is correct, assuming the Jewish, Christian or Islamic conception of God?
3. The third definitions are prompted by Socrates’ comparison of fear and reverence to justice and piety. Fear of the gods, he says, is the inclusive quality, while respect or reverence for the gods is part of fear of them. Euthyphro picks up on this suggestion, suggesting piety is “the [part of justice having to do with] caretaking (therapeia) of the gods,” while the part having to do with our obligations to men is the meaning of justice in its more restricted and specific sense. But in other forms of caretaking, Socrates notes, the object is improved (e.g. the caretaking of dogs or horses or gardens), which Euthyphro admits cannot be true of our relation to the gods, as they are ‘divine’. (Is this conception of the gods consistent with his other conception, of them fighting with one another?)

The modified third definition is “seeking to serve the gods,” human servant to Divine Master; and Socrates shortly afterward suggests he finds this definition perhaps close to the true answer. (In fact, he will draw on this conception in his self-portrait in the Apology, where he presents himself as a ‘pious’ servant of the God of Truth.) But here, Socrates points out that to serve the gods, we must know the goals they have, the good they want their servants to bring out in their lives on earth. What is that? Euthyphro’s answer is vague: “Many fine things.”

4. The fourth definition is “knowing how to [serve the gods in] pray and sacrifice,” i.e. knowing how to do the rituals. S: “Why do we do these things?” E: “To honor and please the gods.” S: “Why do that?” E: “They love it.” S: “So piety is what is loved by the gods?” E: “Right.” S: “Didn’t we learn it couldn’t be this?” E: “I have an appointment now.” This goes back to the earlier definition, suggesting it is the one dearest to Euthyphro, after all. But a better understanding of what people should pray to obtain, and seek to give back, inspired by of a true conception of the divine, might offer a more powerful understanding of true piety.

In the end, Euthyphro’s image of the man-god relationship seems to be little more than exchanging favors: making sacrifice to the gods, their gifts in return. But this contradicts Euthyphro’s stated belief at 13c that the Gods are supreme, i.e. that there is nothing mere mortals could do to benefit them. This suggests that Euthyphro’s underlying conception both of the gods (their conflict with one another vs. their ‘perfection’) and of religious service (doing something ‘for’ them vs. them being ‘perfect’ in their own)—and that of ancient Greek religion in general—lack consistency.

The abrupt end of the dialogue invites questions: Has Euthyphro learned anything in his conversation with Socrates? Should he have, and if you think he did not, why do you suppose he didn’t? What might prevent a person from learning from Socrates, even if Socrates is completely fair in evaluating and criticizing his opinions and arguments?
The Euthyphro Dilemma

Medieval theologians were fascinated by the *Euthyphro*, because they realized it posed a dilemma concerning God and morality: (a) Is it right because God wills it, or (b) does God will it because it is right?

These questions are both *theological* (about God), and *meta-ethical* (about what makes or justifies something as right): (a) is the meta-ethical theory that X is right if and only if God wills it, the Divine Command theory; (b) fits rather to a meta-ethical theory which locates rightness in the act or agent, deontological (it fulfills an absolute duty), consequentialist (it leads to greater good for all affected) or eudaimonist (it contributes to long-lasting happiness).

The questions are also about the nature of God:

- *Theological voluntarists* claimed the answer had to be (a) because God is all-powerful, not like a human being, who acts under a moral law above him. If God says X is right, that makes X right; it is right because it conforms to His will.

- *Theological rationalists* claimed it had be (b): if it was right because He willed it, God could make anything right or change right from moment to moment (which was absurd). The truth was that if God said something was right, it had to be right because God knew what was right and therefore commanded it.

The Euthyphro Dilemma therefore poses a profound question. Which theory of the relation of God to morality do you endorse, and why?