

## Lecture: Plato's *Euthyphro*

*Euthyphro* is in the dialog form, a form of philosophical writing invented by Plato. The *Apology* wasn't really in dialog form, though there were moments of dialog between Socrates and his prosecutor.

The *Euthyphro* is a classic example of **Socratic Method**. Socratic Method is the investigation and improvement of something by asking questions about it, getting an account of our beliefs and then criticizing them.

Socrates questions the ethical intuitions of Euthyphro. He draws out Euthyphro's intuitions about righteousness and then criticizes it. This is an illustration of what Socrates said he does in the *Apology* – question people when they say that they know what they're talking about.

Socrates believes that we can and must figure out our ethical opinions for ourselves. Appeals to authority are not legitimate; we should use reason to arrive at our beliefs.

The Socratic Method works well for discussing this issue because there is an underlying problem with the concept of righteousness.

At the beginning of the dialog, Euthyphro asks if Socrates is being prosecuting because he talks about the “divine voice” Socrates hears that tells him what the right thing to do is. This is plausible. This part of Socrates' belief is an example of his commitment to ethical autonomy, to figuring out for yourself what is right and wrong, true and false.

The topic of the dialog is righteousness. The Greek word is *hosion*, which means duty in both an ethical and a religious sense. The *Euthyphro* discusses the connection between god and ethics.

Greeks used their gods as the background for their morality, just as Christians, Jews, and Muslims do today.

This debate is relevant in the modern world. We talk about actions being “sinful” today, in an ethical-religious sense. It is used to describe wrong actions, but has an extra religious connotation. *Hosion* is the exact opposite – it is a term used to describe something good that god requires of you.

In the Greek New Testament, the word “sin” just means mistake, and doesn't have a religious connotation. It does today because of its use in the New Testament and in Christian culture since that time. “Righteous” is similar.

Almost all cultures have ethical terms that connote the approval or disapproval of god; thus it is likely that there is a deep human intuition that morality is tied up with god.

In Greek culture, killing your parents is not *hosion*, but is *anosion*, or sinful. Respecting a guest is *hosion*, a duty you owe the gods.

Socrates wants Euthyphro to define *hosion*.

This is a classic Socratic project: try to find out what it is that makes all righteous actions righteous and all sinful actions sinful. He doesn't want examples, but whatever feature of those examples it is that makes them right or wrong.

Finding an exact definition of *hosion* is important for Socrates because he believes that you can't practice the ethical concept if you don't know what it is and aren't able to define it. This is known as the Socratic Fallacy, because it's not true.

Socrates believes that one needs to do philosophy in order to become a better person, because in order to be ethical you have to be able to articulate ethical concepts, otherwise you don't know them. There is some truth to this, because we don't want to let other people make our ethical decisions for us. After all, they may be wrong.

Socrates is probably wrong, however, because it's probably not the case that you need to be able to define a virtue in order to have it.

For example, what is the definition of a clock? Something that measures time. Is a sundial a clock? A sundial measures time. We can't really define it, but we know it when we see it. Our ethical intuitions are probably similar; we can't articulate what they are, but we still know them. We can be good at identifying righteous actions without being good at articulating them, just as we can identify a clock without being able to define it. Socrates' project, then, might be the wrong track, and might be impossible. While there is use in questioning things, as Socrates does, he may not have enough respect for the intuitions and ethical abilities of most people.

In defense of the Socratic Method, it can be really useful to be able to define something when you are confronted by particularly hard and unclear cases, like the one Euthyphro finds himself in.

Euthyphro is prosecuting his father for murder. This is quite the conundrum: you shouldn't mistreat your father, on the one hand, but on the other, it seems morally correct if your father is a murderer. This is a **conflict of duties**. This is why Socrates thinks ethics should be a science and why we should have precise definitions of moral concepts.

Plato reveals his conservatism in his disapproval of Euthyphro prosecuting his father. Conservatives tend to think that family ties outweigh justice; liberals often think that civic ties, which go along with a commitment to justice, are more important.

Euthyphro offers three definitions of righteousness:

1. *Prosecuting anyone guilty of a crime is righteous, letting a criminal go free is sinful.* Euthyphro actually gives an example, not a definition. This is something that Plato has his characters do often, especially when they make their first attempt at definition. It is also something that most of us do when asked to identify a virtue. It's not a bad method of imparting ethical concepts, but it's not what Socrates asked for. Euthyphro says that Zeus does this, and thus that it is righteous. Such an appeal to authority, though, doesn't appeal to Socrates, who wants to question all received opinions.
2. *Righteousness is anything that the gods love; sin is anything the gods hate.* This definition doesn't work for Socrates. He gets Euthyphro to admit that gods have different opinions about things. What do they disagree about? Ethical things! So how can we say that something is god-loved?

There is a modern version of this. Some people claim that what is right is whatever god wants. There are many problems with this. Which god: Christian, Muslim, or Jewish? Each one has different rules and ideas about what's right. How do we know what god wants? How do we know god doesn't want us to steal or murder? Because those things are wrong! That means we get ethical ideas *before* we get knowledge about god's desires. We all instinctively evaluate god's morals; therefore our ethical sense doesn't come from god, because we have ethical intuitions already with which we measure god's rules. Socrates drives Euthyphro to admit that he thinks the gods want what he, Euthyphro, wants; the ethical ideas are really coming from him, not the gods.

3. *Righteousness is anything that ALL the gods love; sin is anything ALL the gods hate.* In reply to this, Socrates asks, is something righteous because the gods love it, or do the gods love it because it's righteous.
  - A. *The gods love what is righteous because it is righteous.* Righteousness is independent of god, giving god a lesser role. God isn't necessary on this view. He doesn't make something right, he merely has perfect judgment about what is really right or wrong. But we still have the same problem as before: we can't know what god wants us to do, and still have to fall back on our own judgment.

Or

- B. *Righteous things are righteous because the gods love them.* Again, we have the problem of figuring out how we know that god loves certain things, and have to rely on human judgment. Also, Zeus was said to have done many horrible things, such as raping women. But that is obviously wrong.

We can apply the Socratic Method to the Ten Commandments. Take *Thou shalt not kill*. No one would apply that (B) applies here – we wouldn't say that killing isn't wrong if god hadn't told us not to kill each other; we say it's wrong, even if god had never communicated this to us. Applying (A), we need to think of reasons why god made certain behavior (like killing people) unacceptable. But try to think of a reason why god would want us to abstain from killing that is not a reason why *humans* want us to abstain from killing each other. It's really hard, if not impossible.

It seems that no matter what, human judgment is what determines righteousness. If that's the case, why should you accept the opinions of someone else, like Moses or Paul, over anyone else? Socrates would likely say that it's better to think for yourself than it is to obey and believe authority.

Euthyphro ultimately admits that he doesn't know the answer to Socrates' original question. No answer was reached in the dialog, but at least Euthyphro knows that he doesn't know the answer, whereas before he thought he did.