

Plato's *Euthyphro*

Socrates

Plato's dialogues are a fruitful place to study ethics. Those dialogues feature Plato's teacher, Socrates, as a main character. Socrates (469 – 399 BCE) is one of the earliest philosophers in Ancient Greece. Socrates marks an important shift in the history of philosophy. While there were others who practiced philosophy prior to Socrates, none had as great an impact as he did. Not only did he inspire Plato, whose Academy and collected works stands as one of the greatest philosophical achievements ever, he also inspired other schools of philosophy, like the Cynics, Skeptics, Stoics, and Epicureans. Also, whereas philosophers prior to Socrates were primarily interested in explaining the natural world, Socrates was primarily interested in ethics. He thought that the most important question a philosopher or anyone else could spend time thinking about is, "what is the best sort of life to live?" Socrates is also famous because he was a philosophical martyr. In 399 BCE he was tried on the charges of "corrupting the youth" and "teaching that the gods of the city don't exist." While these may seem like strange charges to our modern ears, they reflect the deep commitment that Athenians had to tradition, community education, and the rites and standards established by religion. In effect, these charges amounted to treason, since they implied that Socrates had undermined some of the most important tenants of Athenian society. When Socrates stands trial, instead of appealing to the kindness of the Athenian jurors who would decide his fate, he challenged them. And instead of apologizing for the way his practice of philosophy may have offended the traditional beliefs in society, he was defiant.

Here is a brief excerpt from Plato's account of the trial:

... I speak rather because I am convinced that I never intentionally wronged anyone, although I cannot convince you of that - for we have had a short conversation only; but if there were a law at Athens, such as there is in other cities, that a capital case should not be decided in one day, then I believe that I should have convinced you; but now the time is too short. I cannot in a moment refute great slanders; and, as I am convinced that I never wronged another, I will assuredly not wrong myself. I will not say of myself that I deserve any evil, or propose any penalty. Why should I? Because I am afraid of the penalty of death which Meletus [Socrates' accuser] proposes? When I do not know whether death is a good or an evil, why should I propose a penalty which would certainly be an evil? Shall I say imprisonment? And why should I live in prison, and be the slave of the magistrates of the year - of the Eleven [the elected executives of the city]? Or shall the penalty be a fine, and imprisonment until the fine is paid? There is the same objection. I should have to lie in prison, for money I have none, and I cannot pay. And if I say exile (and this may possibly be the penalty which you will affix), I must indeed be blinded by the love of life if I were to consider that when you, who are my own citizens, cannot endure my discourses and words, and have found them so grievous

and odious that you would fain have done with them, others are likely to endure me. No, indeed, men of Athens, that is not very likely. And what a life should I lead, at my age [he is 70 years old], wandering from city to city, living in ever-changing exile, and always being driven out! For I am quite sure that into whatever place I go, as here so also there, the young men will come to me; and if I drive them away, their elders will drive me out at their desire: and if I let them come, their fathers and friends will drive me out for their sakes.

Someone will say: Yes, Socrates, but cannot you hold your tongue, and then you may go into a foreign city, and no one will interfere with you? Now I have great difficulty in making you understand my answer to this. For if I tell you that this would be a disobedience to a divine command, and therefore that I cannot hold my tongue, you will not believe that I am serious; and if I say again that the greatest good of man is daily to converse about virtue, and all that concerning which you hear me examining myself and others, and that the life which is unexamined is not worth living - that you are still less likely to believe. And yet what I say is true, although a thing of which it is hard for me to persuade you. Moreover, I am not accustomed to think that I deserve any punishment.

As most commentators have noted, Socrates' defense is a defense of his way of life in the face of death, a defense of doing philosophy as what makes life meaningful and therefore worth living.

The Euthyphro Problem

Sadly, Socrates is put to death after his trial. Plato leaves Athens immediately thereafter, fearing for his own life. Only several years later, after the political turmoil has calmed, does Plato return. But he returns with a mission of establishing a school of philosophy that would enshrine the practices of his mentor into the history books forever.

When Plato returned to Athens, he wrote philosophical dialogues exploring key themes and using Socrates as a main character. In the so-called early dialogues, it may be that Plato reconstructed situations that he may have witnessed or heard about during Socrates' lifetime. After all, Socrates was most famous for his arresting and probing conversations with fellow Athenians on ethical topics. This is exactly what we see depicted in Plato's early dialogues. In these early dialogues, Socrates rarely espouses a philosophical position of his own. In fact, he insists on only a few philosophical principles: 1) he demands that any philosophical position be internally consistent, 2) he requires that concepts be defined in such a way that they have an objective, universal nature (what he calls a 'form'), 3) he relies on analogies with everyday experiences and objects to illuminate the nature of more abstract, philosophical concepts, and 4) he believes that it is better to deny beliefs that may be false (and so remain agnostic) than to hold onto those beliefs.

In the *Euthyphro* dialogue, Plato depicts Socrates engaged in a dialogue with a priest, Euthyphro, about the nature of piety. This is an early dialogue that likely represents the sort of conversations that Socrates may have had in real life. Euthyphro claims to know what is pious and what is impious and he uses this knowledge to guide his actions. Euthyphro appeals to a position that is commonly asserted in public discourse and is known as “divine command theory.” Divine Command Theory holds that moral claims are justified by appeal to God’s commandments, typically as transmitted through religious texts and religious practice. In other words, one ought to do as God commands.

Many people locate the source of their moral beliefs in religion and faith. There is good reason for this. After all, religious institutions have been traditional sources of moral teaching. And, especially in the United States, there is a cultural tendency to identify morality with a particular Judeo-Christian set of commandments.

However, from what we have already learned about morality, we should recognize that there is a difference between the historical fact about where we acquired or learned our moral beliefs and the reality of unreality of our moral beliefs. Just because someone learned right from wrong from their parents or religious institution doesn't mean that this is the basis of moral beliefs. After all, I learned how to swim from my swimming instructor. But my swimming instructor didn't invent swimming.

So, we should ask the question of whether or not God provides an adequate ground for the existence of moral beliefs. That is, does morality derive its nature and reality from God's commands?

Euthyphro thinks it does. In the reading below, Euthyphro claims, “Yes, I should say that what all the gods love is pious and holy, and the opposite which they all hate, impious.”

If we simply restate Euthyphro's definition to apply to morality more generally, we can see how Socrates' argument reveals a fundamental problem for the Divine Command Theory. Consider the following definition of morality: "Morality requires that we do whatever God commands us to do and we must not do whatever God commands us not to do." This leaves open a number of other possibly ethical actions: there may be actions that are permissible but not required or actions that optional, but not prohibited. Nevertheless, this theory places some clear parameters on moral actions.

However, as Socrates will show in the dialogue, this moral theory is open to a fundamental problem.

Here is the basic shape of the argument:

- P1 Either actions are morally required because God commands them or God commands those actions because they are morally required.
 - P2 If actions are morally required because God commands them, then moral obligations are arbitrary.
 - P3 If God commands actions because they are morally required, then moral obligation is independent of God's commands.
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So, either moral obligations are arbitrary or they are independent of God's commands.

This is a dilemma (which is a technical name for a type of valid argument). The first three premises seem pretty clearly true, so it looks like the argument is also sound (that is, the conclusion must also be true). So, where does this leave the divine command theorist? If one holds the view of Divine Command Theory, then they are faced either with the prospect that moral obligations are arbitrary or they are independent of God's commands. That is, either morality is based on the whims of God's will or morality is not dependent on God at all. The second of these two options seems contradictory to the very idea of Divine Command Theory. So, perhaps it is better to accept the first option.

Suppose that moral obligations are arbitrarily determined by God: whatever God says is morally required is morally required. Does that sound right? Well, perhaps. One problem is that this makes Divine Command Theory sound a lot like relativism. After all, it sounds like morality is relative to a certain persons' preferences. It's just that this person is God. Maybe there is no problem with that. After all, if you are a religious person, then you likely trust God and think that God is good and just. But what happens if God is not good and just? After all, aren't there religions that appear to require terrible actions of its believers, like child sacrifice, the execution of adulterers, or the eternal torture and suffering of non-believers. If God's commands dictate morality, then it may be the case that it is a moral requirement for us to kill infants or execute adulterers. But this just sounds wrong, doesn't it?

Natural Law Theory

One way to resolve the dilemma posed in the Euthyphro argument is to try to conceive of God's commands in a different light. Instead of thinking of God's commands as arbitrary determinations that include some morally questionable actions advocated in religious texts, perhaps we should think of these texts as an interpretation and approximation of some moral laws that are written into the nature of the universe, just like physical laws. The idea here would be that divine commands are part of the fabric of the universe in the way that gravity or electricity are.

This view is known as "Natural Law Theory." The view is that moral claims are embedded in nature in the form of laws that govern how we should act in a way that is analogous to the way that gravity governs how heavy bodies act. It is important to see how this view resolves the Euthyphro dilemma posed above. Natural Law Theory takes the dilemma posed by Euthyphro and claims that neither alternative is problematic. Assume that moral obligations derive from God's commands. Well, this is no different than the way that the existence of matter, electricity, or gravity derives from God's commands at the beginning of the universe. All of these things came into existence as a part of God's creation; they are all a result of God's commands. Assume that God only commands what is morally required, meaning that moral requirements can be discovered independently of God's commands. Again, there is no problem, the Natural Law Theorist says, because one could discover God's commands just by understanding the nature of morality. The justifications for moral requirements are perfectly consistent with God's commands.

This view became prominent with St. Thomas Aquinas and the modern philosophers John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It offered a way of uniting theology with a rational account of the natural world. Also, it provided a naturalist foundation for ethics, in the sense that it embedded ethics in natural laws (of course, these thinkers accept that these laws come from a supernatural creator, which would not be something contemporary naturalism would accept). The view becomes foundational for modern political theory as well. Consider, for instance, the phrase from the Declaration of Independence, "all men are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. The idea that the notion of rights could be grounded in the act of creation is a direct consequence of the influence of Natural Law Theory

Despite its many attractions, and the improvements made over Divine Command Theory, Natural Law Theory suffers from some potentially serious problems. First, it requires the belief in a supernatural creator. This is no small matter, as the existence of God is highly controversial and the very idea that we should turn to a supernatural source for something like ethics when there are other alternative natural sources of ethical beliefs makes the view unappealing to many. Second, we face the problem of determining exactly which laws are the correct ones for morality. How should we determine the natural laws? We have already ruled out that they could be discovered through experiment or observation (as other natural laws are discovered). And given the variety of religious customs and ethical viewpoints, it seems difficult to decide which theory of morality is the true natural law theory.

In any case, the *Euthyphro* raises some very interesting questions while also providing a fascinating depiction of one of the earliest and most influential philosophers, Socrates.