

The Euthyphro Problem

In Plato's dialogue "Euthyphro", "Socrates" is sitting outside a courtroom waiting his turn to go in and plead for his life when he meets his friend "Euthyphro", who is there accusing his father of murdering a servant. Naturally, given the kind of person he is, Socrates starts pestering Euthyphro with annoying questions. Socrates wants to pick Euthyphro's mind in the area in which he is held to be an expert: religion and morality. Socrates keeps at him about why something is considered "pious": what makes something beloved of the gods? As the dialogue unfolds, Socrates (Plato) asks this very thorny question:

Soc. [10a] The point which I should first wish to understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods.

To paraphrase this problem, Socrates is pointing out the paradox: "Does God tell us to do something because it is morally right", or "Is it morally right because God tells us to do it?". If it's the first part of the statement, then God is not supreme, but is subject to a higher law. If it's the latter part, then moral values are an act of will of God and subject to change if God so willed it.

For example, using the Ten Commandments in the Bible, is God telling us how to behave because it's right to behave that way, or, is God telling us what to do simply because God has decided that's how we should behave? Did God create moral values or simply recognize them? Could God decide tomorrow to change the Commandments, making some acts previously wrong (eg—lying, adultery) now right? If yes, then the Commandments are acts of will, arbitrary, and subjective. If not, then God is not supremely powerful and there must be something more powerful than the Supreme Being.

This problem is a poser. It works to both affirm and destroy the Divine Command Theory.



Socrates teaching. Note the despair on the man in the background. Is he thinking, "Why doesn't Socrates ever stop asking questions?"

You can read the full text of "Euthyphro" at: <http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Euthyphro>