Introduction to Philosophy

Topic: The Socratic Method
Reading: The Euthyphro

Part I: A Little Background on Socrates

Although considered one of the wisest men in the history of Western civilization, Socrates never wrote anything down. Fortunately for us, his most famous student, Plato, wrote many, many books on a wide variety of topics, all of which are in the forms of dialogues between different characters with the character of Socrates, his teacher, as the main protagonist. Thus, it becomes somewhat difficult to disentangle which ideas are Plato's own and which were those of his teacher. We do know, however, that at least some of the dialogues (this one included) were pretty historically accurate (they actually happened, not just a narrative or play) since Plato's audience was likely aware of the events surrounding Socrates' trial and would know if Plato was embellishing the events too much.

Part II: The Socratic Method

There's a reason why Socrates never wrote anything down, however, and it all has to do with his particular style of doing philosophy. What has since come to be called “The Socratic Method” (a method of teaching that is still widely popular to this day), Socrates' mode of doing philosophy was all about giving people the intellectual tools to think for themselves and the desire to do so. As such, he almost never gives you the answers to the questions he poses. Rather than passively accepting whatever ideas, theories, or values you've been told to accept, Socrates wants you to think for yourself, and thus can't just give you the answers which would turn him into just one more “authority” that you passively accept without working it out for yourself.

The method itself is a kind of “cross-examination” and operates, in general, in the following way:

Socrates will walk up to a person on the street (young or old, rich or poor, it didn’t matter) and he’d ask an important question, usually something meaningful to the person he’s talking to, and usually about a definition of some important term or idea. For example, he might walk up to a famous judge and ask what the judge considered the definition of “justice” (something a judge ought to have considered at some point, one would assume). The judge will then offer a definition. Socrates will point out the deficiencies of the definition, possibly make a suggestion or two without ever giving away an answer, and the judge would then refine, reform, and improve by offering a second definition. Socrates would applaud the improvement, but still note any remaining deficiencies, and the judge would correct these and offer a third definition. On and on this would go. Sometimes the person he was talking with would figure it out, sometimes not. But no matter what, Socrates was sneakily demonstrating the tools of critical thinking and encouraging independent, creative thought. And even if no concrete definitions were found, at least the individual he was talking to would realize how bad his/her original ideas were, likely just never thought out or passively accepted from some authority figure or another without ever being critically examined. Socrates just wants us to critically examine our beliefs...maybe they're already just fine, maybe they're not, but we'll never know unless someone like Socrates comes along and forces us to confront our beliefs and justify where they came from.

Part III: Why the Socratic Method Works

Socrates did not like passive learning (which is now called “The Banking Method” of education) in which a student would passively accept what he/she was being taught without critical analysis, as if the student’s head were an empty piggy-bank and the teacher/authority figure was simply “depositing” information directly into that passive mind. Instead, the Socratic Method is based on
dialogue which is an interaction and activity of experiential engagement. You have to take an active role in your own education. Psychologically speaking, this almost always results in information being retained in the mind. When we think about other things we learn through our education (learning to drive, learning to play an instrument, learning a foreign language, etc.) all of them are learned better when actively experienced by the student (it’s far harder to learn a new language from a textbook than it would be to, say, go to that foreign country and live there for awhile).

Part IV: The Problem of Authority

Although it sounds all well and good that Socrates would getting people to think critically about the beliefs they’ve previously only passively accepted without question, that’s not what everyone wants to see. Getting people to think for themselves can be seen as a challenge, offense, and danger to any authority in power (whether it’s government, commerce, religion, or whatever else) that wants citizens to simply accept what they’re told by that authority.

From Socrates’ perspective, and those that support him, he was enlightening his fellow citizens, making them smarter, more independent, more capable, and better participants in democracy.

From the perspective of the authorities in charge, he was corrupting the citizens of Athens by getting them to question the beliefs that that authority was dishing out.

Socrates is thus summoned to court on a variety of charges, most serious of which is corrupting the citizens of Athens (a crime which, if he’s found guilty, will lead to his execution).

Part V: Plato’s Euthyphro

This dialogue is the first of a trilogy of sorts, with the Apology and the Crito finishing it up. It all revolves around the court case of Socrates. In this first dialogue, he’s on his way to court, in the Apology, he defends himself in court, and in the Crito we see the aftermath of the events in court.

This particular dialogue is also a splendid example of the Socratic Method in action. We can see its importance to education and politics and begin to see why it keeps getting referenced by Dr. King over and over again in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

Part VI: “Piety”

The main thrust of the dialogue is trying to figure out what “piety” means and whether or not what Euthyphro is planning to do is an example of piety (in other words, whether or not it’s a pious action). In general, “piety” means a kind of “moral goodness,” an “ethical correctness.” So first we need to figure out what piety, itself, actually is (in other words, what is moral goodness?) and, second, we need to figure out whether or not what Euthyphro plans to do is an example of moral goodness.

Part VII: Universal Definition

Since the thrust of the dialogue is trying to figure out whether or not what Euthyphro plans to do is an example of piety, Socrates has to find a universal definition of piety with which to compare Euthyphro’s actions to see if those actions are an example of piety or not. A “universal definition” is a definition that applies to all moral actions, regardless of whether the forum is politics, family life, athletics, science, or whatever. Socrates is looking for one universal definition of piety that is capable of accounting for actions in a wide array of different areas. To take an example, let’s look at some specific cases of impiety (moral badness, as it were, immoral actions, etc.) in a wide variety of forums:
**Alex Rodriguez**: All-Star baseball player, caught using illegal performance enhancing drugs to gain an unfair advantage over the competition.

**Bernie Madoff**: Stock broker, caught defrauding thousands of innocent, everyday people of billions of dollars for his own personal gain.

**George Henry**: Lawyer, caught forging his own fake university diplomas for schools he never attended in order to gain access to an important law-firm and a high-paying job.

Those are three very different areas (finance, athletics, etc.) and different situations. What Socrates is after is what unites them, that is, what do they all have in common? What is the essence of “impiety” (immorality) that is common to all three cases (and, as universal, thus common to all cases, no matter how many you pull out).

So that’s what we’re looking for here.

**Part VIII: Summary of the Dialogue**

In brief, Socrates is on his way to court to defend himself against charges of corrupting the youth of Athens. In other words, he’s being accused to acting impietously towards his fellow citizens.

Right before he goes in he runs into an old friend of his, Euthyphro, who’s on his way to court to prosecute his own father for murder.

Socrates is amazed that Euthyphro would have the apparent courage to do this and wants to know how he can be so sure that what he’s doing is the right, the pious thing, to do. They then engage in the Socratic Method, trying to discover the definition of piety, and testing to see if Euthyphro’s definition is any good.

**Part IX: The Murder**

Euthyphro is prosecuting his own father for murder. As he explains, Euthyphro’s father returned from a trip to his homestead to discover that one of his servant’s murdered one of his slaves. Unsure how to proceed, Euthyphro’s father tied up the murderous servant, threw him in a ditch where he couldn’t get away, and went to see the local magistrate (judge) to see how to proceed legally. However, when Euthyphro’s father returns, he discovers that the servant he threw in a ditch has died from exposure and starvation, making Euthyphro’s own father responsible for that death.

Euthyphro, discovering this, decides his father must be held accountable for his actions (actions that lead to the servant’s death).

**Part X: Is Blood Thicker than Water?**

Euthyphro says that people think he’s “crazy” to prosecute his own father. That most people are angry with him because he should feel solidarity to his family over solidarity to justice:

“Both my father and my relatives are angry that I’m prosecuting my father for murder on behalf of a murderer...for they say, it is impious for a son to prosecute his father for murder. But their ideas of the divine attitude to piety are wrong, Socrates.”

Socrates is very excited by this statement because here he is, himself being prosecuting for impiety, and he just ran into a guy who is so confident that he knows precisely what “piety” means that he’s
willing to use that definition to prosecute his own father on charges of murder! Fabulous! So Socrates asks:

“Tell me then, Euthyphro, what is piety and what is impiety?”

And then the Socratic Method begins, the back and forth, cross-examination, definitions and refining.

Together, they work through six or seven definitions (depending on how you’re counting) but we’re just going to focus on the first three to get a feel for it all.

**Part XI: The First Definition (What I am Doing Now) and Critique**

**The First Definition:** Keeping in mind that whatever this first definition is is the one that Euthyphro is so confident is correct he’s using it to bring up his own father on charges of murder, so this better be really damn good. The first definition is this:

“I say that the pious is to do what I am doing now.”

**Socrates’ Critique of the First Definition:** Socrates is thoroughly unimpressed. He says:

“Bear in mind then that I did not bid you tell me one or two of the many pious actions but that form itself that makes all pious actions pious.”

In other words, Socrates wants a definition of piety, and what Euthyphro gave him was an example. Worse than that: we don’t yet know if what Euthyphro is doing is an example of piety. That’s the whole point of the dialogue!

Euthyphro’s first definition of “piety” (the one he was using to prosecute his father, mind you) was so bad it wasn’t even a definition at all.

**Part XII: The Second Definition (What the Gods Love) and Critique**

**The Second Definition:** Having understood what Socrates is after here, Euthyphro reformulates his thoughts and tries again:

“What is dear to the gods is pious, what is not is impious”

In other words, whatever the gods love is pious, whatever the gods hate is impious.

**Socrates’ Critique of the Second Definition:** Socrates is happier with this one, not because it’s any good, but at least now it’s a definition and a universal one, at that. Here Euthyphro gives us a definition that applies to any action in any arena of life: if you do something in your family life or in finance or in medicine or in school or whatever else, if what you did is pleasing to the gods or not will determine whether its pious. A universal definition at last! As Socrates says:

“Splendid, Euthyphro! You’ve now answered the way I wanted. Whether your answer is true I do not yet know, but you will obviously show me that what you say is true.”

So, in classic Socratic Method form, we see an improvement, but still a deficiency. Socrates points out that “the gods are in a state of discord, they are at odds with one another.”

For example: Zeus, Ares, and Athena could all love what Euthyphro is doing, but Hera, Hades, and Poseidon could hate it. Thus, as Socrates says, “according to your argument, my good Euthyphro, different gods consider different things to be just, beautiful, ugly, good, and bad...thus the same
things then are loved by the gods and hated by the gods, and would be both god-loved and god-hated” at the same time; a logical impossibility.

**Part XIII: The Third Definition (What All the Gods Love) and Critique**

**The Third Definition:** Euthyphro reformulates again to fix this latest problem, thus improving it further still: “the pious is what all the gods love, and the opposite, what all the gods hate, is the impious.”

In other words, on the rare occasions when the gods do agree, we can know, with certainty, that the actions they love are pious and the actions they hate are impious. That certainly fixes the problem, but raises a new one...

**Socrates’ Critique of the Third Definition:** In one of the most famous lines in philosophy, quoting in everyone from St. Augustine to King to Jay-Z, Socrates asks: “is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?”

In other words, Socrates is worried that just because the gods happen to all love something is no reason to assume that what they love is actually good. To translate this into a more modern idiom: just because the authority (government, big business, religion, or whatever else) says something is morally good, that’s not what makes it good.

For example: let’s say President Obama came up to me and said, “Clancy, it is morally awful to murder someone for no reason at all.” Now, that might be good advice, that might even be morally right, but it’s not morally right only because Obama said so. It’s morally right and Obama said so. See the important difference there?

It’s this subtle but incredibly important distinction that became so important to so many scholars and activists (including, yes, King and Jay-Z). We can look at the difference between Euthyphro’s position and Socrates’ position this way:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Euthyphro</th>
<th>Socrates’ Suggestion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What the Authority Loves</td>
<td>The Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Good</td>
<td>What the Authority Loves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Socrates is not giving us an answer, we still don’t know what “Piety” or “the Good” is, he’s just saying that whatever it is, it ain’t what it is because the Authority loves it. Ideally, the Authority ought to love what is good.

To see why this is so important, let’s think about what happens when an authority happens to love something: they create laws to reflect the values that they love, right? Thus, for Euthyphro:

- **Authority Loves Some Action X**
  - Action X is therefore morally good

  **Since Action X is morally good, the Authority creates Law Y to enforce Action X**
  - Since Law Y reflects the morally good Action X, Law Y is itself morally good

The problem can be readily seen if we plug in some practical examples:

- **The American Government of 1820 condones slavery**
Slavery is therefore morally good.

Since slavery is morally good, the Authority creates statutes in support of slavery.

- Since the slavery statutes reflect the morally good activity of owning slaves, the statutes themselves are therefore morally good.

This is clearly not the case. But if Euthyphro is right, the highest authority in the land is the authority that loves X and creates law Y, so in order to discover what is morally good, all one has to do is see what the laws say to do. But, as we know, not all laws are morally good. And if a law is not morally good (if it’s impious), that means that what the authority loves is likewise not always morally good. Thus, in sum, appeal to authority alone is no guarantee of piety.

Instead, Socrates wants us to seek a higher moral template than that of authority: the Good, the Pious, universal; that which transcends any government, any authority, to which the authority ought to be beholden to.

For Socrates:

We discover the universal moral principle that human quality is pious.

- The authority should then accept this principle and love human equality.

Since slavery does not promote human equality, the Authority creates statutes outlawing slavery.

- Since laws outlawing slavery support the universal ethical principle of human equality, these laws are therefore morally good (pious).

King will take it a step further and note that we can use Socrates’ insights here to condemn laws that already exist which are impious:

- We discover the universal moral principle that human quality is pious.

The American Government of 1820 condones slavery.

- Slavery is considered morally good by the authority, and laws are created promoting it.

- Laws exist that promote slavery.

For Euthyphro, the highest we can go is the authority, here, the American Government. Without that universal principle beyond it, we have no clear recourse on how to change the laws promoting slavery. But as Socrates and King point out, there is a higher moral principle, and we can use that to demonstrate how the authority simply “loves” and promotes something morally impious. Thus, everything that follows from the authority’s love is null-and-void, including the laws which are deemed immoral. We now have a way, a theory, and a method, to not only critique the laws of the authority (when they’re impious/immoral) we have a reason and moral duty to do so (because what the authority loves, and the laws it promotes, fail to reflect the universal moral laws).