

Euthyphro, in Plato's Socratic dialogue of that name, a soothsayer and so an expert on the cardinal virtue of piety, what is pleasing to the Gods, is on his way to the law courts to lay charges against his father for murder. Murder in ancient Athens is a religious offense, but so is acting against your family. So it seems that Euthyphro's action is simultaneously both pious and impious

Socrates is impressed. He is on his way to the law courts to answer charges of impiety made against him and thinks this is his lucky day. Surely Euthyphro must be an exceptional authority on piety to be navigating such a difficult moral conundrum. If he can learn the nature of piety from Euthyphro then it will help in his own defense case. So he asks Euthyphro, "what is piety?"

However, any old definition will not do. Euthyphro offers an explanation by example – it is, he says, "what I'm doing now, prosecuting my father for murder". Socrates objects. That fails to be an essential definition - it is not univocal: the action is both pious and impious, it suffers from the compresence of opposites.

Euthyphro tries again. It is, he says, what all the Gods love. But this won't do either and falls in its turn following a complex logical argument. Is the action pious because it is loved by the Gods, or is it loved by the Gods because it is pious?

What goes for tales of ancient Greek Gods also goes for more singular versions of God. Furthermore, it also goes for any other putative authority appealed to as the fount of morality. Is morality "what is pleasing to "the law, to society, to convention, to culture, to the opinion of individuals past, present or future?

Like many of Plato's dialogues, the *Euthyphro* is aporetic. It fails to adequately define piety. But what we learn is that we do not in fact know the nature of our every day concepts that we claim to understand and to practise. What is wrong with the "if your morality comes from God etc" quote is that it is at best superficial. But there is a more serious problem with it – are actions deriving from it moral actions or are they just a matter of obedience (unless of course you define obedience as a moral virtue)?

Perhaps we should be looking at what are the conditions for morality.

Does it for example require free will? The Christians certainly think so, especially since otherwise their God would be responsible for evil. The law tends to agree. Moral responsibility entails choice. Still, that in itself is not sufficient to define morality.

Does it require a lack of personal interest? Does an act fail to be moral if you have non-moral motivations for it? Kant certainly thinks so. Many agree with him, although perhaps not in such a minutely structured way.

Does it require to be absolute, independent of opinion or circumstance? Many agree with this too, although quickly fall into the difficulties of Euthyphro when pressed to explain how we can know.

In the red corner we have the rational precepts of categorical imperative in Kant. In the blue corner we have the rational precepts of the laws of nature in Thomas Hobbes. Somewhere left field we have the fundamental compassion of Schopenhauer. Across the field we have multiple definitions of what it is to be moral all claiming to be "right". How are we to choose, if it is a matter of choice? And, having "chosen", how do we deal with the anomalies that arise in the real world of contingency rather than the ivory tower of theory and expectation? How does Euthyphro choose between two opposing actions both of which could be deemed to be immoral?

What is morality?

A final thought – having determined just what is the nature of morality, the next question is "why, in any case, should I be moral"? Plato raises this question too – both Thrasymachus in the *Republic* and Callicles in the *Gorgias* say that morality is for weak and stupid people and it is injustice perpetrated through the expression of power which rules the world. Empirical evidence for their claim, not least in our own time, is sufficiently available.