

Socrates: Philosophical Life

Socrates

The most interesting and influential thinker in the [fifth century](#) was [Socrates](#), whose dedication to careful reasoning transformed the entire enterprise. Since he sought genuine knowledge rather than mere victory over an opponent, Socrates employed the same logical tricks developed by [the Sophists](#) to a new purpose, the pursuit of truth. Thus, his willingness to call everything into question and his determination to accept nothing less than an adequate account of the nature of things make him the first clear exponent of critical philosophy.

Although he was well known during his own time for his conversational skills and public teaching, Socrates wrote nothing, so we are dependent upon his students (especially [Xenophon](#) and [Plato](#)) for any detailed knowledge of his methods and results. The trouble is that Plato was himself a philosopher who often injected his own theories into the dialogues he presented to the world as discussions between Socrates and other famous figures of the day. Nevertheless, it is usually assumed that at least the early dialogues of Plato provide a (fairly) accurate representation of Socrates himself.



Socrates

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Euthyphro: What is Piety?

In the [Εὐθυφρων](#) (*Euthyphro*), for example, [Socrates](#) engaged in a sharply critical conversation with an over-confident young man. Finding Euthyphro perfectly certain of his own ethical rectitude even in the morally ambiguous situation of prosecuting his own father in court, Socrates asks him to define what "piety" ([moral duty](#)) really is. The demand here is for something more than merely a list of which actions are, in fact, pious; instead, Euthyphro is supposed to provide a general [definition](#) that captures the very essence of what piety is. But every answer he offers is subjected to the full force of Socrates's critical thinking, until nothing certain remains.

Specifically, Socrates systematically refutes Euthyphro's suggestion that what makes right actions right is that the gods love (or approve of) them. First, there is the obvious problem that, since questions of right and wrong often generate interminable disputes, the gods are likely to disagree among themselves about moral matters no less often than we do, making some actions both right and wrong. Socrates lets Euthyphro off the hook on this one by agreeing—only for purposes of continuing the discussion—that the gods may be supposed to agree perfectly with each other. (Notice that this problem arises only in a polytheistic culture.)

More significantly, Socrates generates a formal [dilemma](#) from a (deceptively) simple question: "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?" (*Euthyphro* 10 a) Neither alternative can do the work for which Euthyphro intends his definition of piety. If right actions are pious only because the gods love them, then moral rightness is entirely arbitrary, depending only on the whims of the gods. If, on the other hand, the gods love right actions only because they are already right, then there must be some non-divine source of [values](#), which we might come to know independently of their love.

In fact, this dilemma proposes a significant difficulty at the heart of any effort to define morality by reference to an external authority. (Consider, for example, parallel questions with a similar structure: "Do my parents approve of this action because it is right, or is it right because my parents approve of it?" or "Does the College forbid this activity because it is wrong, or is it wrong because the College forbids it?") On the second alternative in each case, actions become right (or wrong) solely because of the authority's approval (or disapproval); its choice, then, has no rational foundation, and it is impossible to attribute laudable moral wisdom to the authority itself. So this horn is clearly unacceptable. But on the first alternative, the authority approves (or disapproves) of certain actions because they are already right (or wrong) independently of it, and whatever rational standard it employs as a [criterion](#) for making this decision must be accessible to us as well as to it. Hence, we are in principle capable of distinguishing right from wrong on our own.

Thus, an application of careful techniques of reasoning results in genuine (if negative) progress in the resolution of a philosophical issue. Socrates's method of insistent questioning at least helps us to eliminate one bad answer to a serious question. At most, it points us toward a significant degree of intellectual independence. The character of Euthyphro, however, seems unaffected by the entire process, leaving the scene at the end of the dialogue no less self-confident than he had been at its outset. The use of Socratic methods, even when they clearly result in a rational victory, may not produce genuine conviction in those to whom they are applied.

Apology: The Examined Life

Because of his political associations with an earlier regime, the Athenian democracy put [Socrates](#)

on trial, charging him with undermining state religion and corrupting young people. The speech he offered in his own defense, as reported in Plato's [Απολογία](#) (*Apology*), provides us with many reminders of the central features of Socrates's approach to philosophy and its relation to practical life.

Ironic Modesty:

Explaining his mission as a philosopher, Socrates reports an oracular message telling him that "No one is wiser than you." (*Apology* 21a) He then proceeds through a series of **ironic** descriptions of his efforts to disprove the oracle by conversing with notable Athenians who must surely be wiser. In each case, however, Socrates concludes that he has a kind of wisdom that each of them lacks: namely, an open awareness of his own ignorance.

Questioning Habit:

The goal of Socratic interrogation, then, is to help individuals to achieve genuine self-knowledge, even if it often turns out to be negative in character. As his cross-examination of Meletus shows, Socrates means to turn the methods of the Sophists inside-out, using logical nit-picking to expose (rather than to create) illusions about reality. If the method rarely succeeds with interlocutors, it can nevertheless be effectively internalized as a **dialectical** mode of reasoning in an effort to understand everything.

Devotion to Truth:

Even after he has been convicted by the jury, Socrates declines to abandon his pursuit of the **truth** in all matters. Refusing to accept exile from Athens or a commitment to silence as his penalty, he maintains that public discussion of the great issues of life and virtue is a necessary part of any valuable human life. "The unexamined life is not worth living." (*Apology* 38a) Socrates would rather die than give up philosophy, and the jury seems happy to grant him that wish.

Dispassionate Reason:

Even when the jury has sentenced him to death, Socrates calmly delivers his final public words, a speculation about what the future holds. Disclaiming any certainty about the fate of a human being after death, he nevertheless expresses a continued confidence in the power of reason, which he has exhibited (while the jury has not). Who really wins will remain unclear.

Plato's dramatic picture of a man willing to face death rather than abandoning his commitment to philosophical inquiry offers up Socrates as a model for all future philosophers. Perhaps few of us are presented with the same stark choice between philosophy and death, but all of us are daily faced with opportunities to decide between convenient conventionality and our devotion to truth and reason. How we choose determines whether we, like Socrates, deserve to call our lives philosophical.

***Crito*: The Individual and the State**

Plato's description of **Socrates**'s final days continued in the [Κριτών](#) (*Crito*). Now in prison

awaiting execution, Socrates displays the same spirit of calm reflection about serious matters that had characterized his life in freedom. Even the patent injustice of his fate at the hands of the Athenian jury produces in Socrates no bitterness or anger. Friends arrive at the jail with a foolproof plan for his escape from Athens to a life of voluntary exile, but Socrates calmly engages them in a rational debate about the moral value of such an action.

Of course Crito and the others know their teacher well, and they come prepared to argue the merits of their plan. Escaping now would permit Socrates to fulfil his personal obligations in life. Moreover, if he does not follow the plan, many people will suppose that his friends did not care enough for him to arrange his escape. Therefore, in order to honor his commitments and preserve the reputation of his friends, Socrates ought to escape from jail.

But Socrates dismisses these considerations as irrelevant to a decision about what action is truly right. What other people will say clearly doesn't matter. As [he had argued](#) in the *Apology*, the only opinion that counts is not that of the majority of people generally, but rather that of the one individual who truly knows. The truth alone deserves to be the basis for decisions about human action, so the only proper approach is to engage in the sort of careful moral reasoning by means of which one may hope to reveal it.

Socrates's argument proceeds from the statement of a perfectly general moral principle to its application in his particular case:

- One ought never to do wrong (even in response to the evil committed by another).
- But it is always wrong to disobey the state.
- Hence, one ought never to disobey the state.

And since avoiding the sentence of death handed down by the Athenian jury would be an action in disobedience the state, it follows Socrates ought not to escape.

The argument is a [valid](#) one, so we are committed to accepting its conclusion if we believe that its premises are true. The general commitment to act rightly is fundamental to a moral life, and it does seem clear that Socrates's escape would be a case of disobedience. But what about the second premise, the claim that it is always wrong for an individual to disobey the state? Surely that deserves further examination. In fact, Socrates pictures the laws of Athens proposing two independent lines of argument in favor of this claim:

First, the state is to us as a parent is to a child, and since it is always wrong for a child to disobey a parent, it follows that it is always wrong to disobey the state. ([Crito 50e](#)) Here we might raise serious doubts about the legitimacy of the [analogy](#) between our parents and the state. Obedience to our parents, after all, is a temporary [obligation](#) that we eventually outgrow by learning to make decisions

for ourselves, while Socrates means to argue that obeying the state is a requirement right up until we die. Here it might be useful to apply the same healthy disrespect for moral authority that [Socrates himself expressed](#) in the *Euthyphro*.

The second argument is that it is always wrong to break an agreement, and since continuing to live voluntarily in a state constitutes an agreement to obey it, it is wrong to disobey that state. (*Crito* 52e) This may be a better argument; only the second premise seems open to question. Explicit agreements to obey some authority are common enough—in a matriculation pledge or a contract of employment, for example—but most of us have not entered into any such agreement with our government. Even if we suppose, as the laws suggest, that the agreement is an implicit one to which we are committed by our decision to remain within their borders, it is not always obvious that our choice of where to live is entirely subject to our individual voluntary control.

Nevertheless, these considerations are serious ones. Socrates himself was entirely convinced that the arguments hold, so he concluded that it would be wrong for him to escape from prison. As always, of course, his actions conformed to the outcome of his reasoning. Socrates chose to honor his commitment to truth and morality even though it cost him his life.

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