



## On the Duality of Socrates' What-is-X Question

John E. Thomas

Volume 30, Number 1, 1974

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1020393ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020393ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Laval théologique et philosophique, Université Laval

### ISSN

0023-9054 (print)

1703-8804 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Thomas, J. E. (1974). On the Duality of Socrates' What-is-X Question. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 30(1), 21–27. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020393ar>

# ON THE DUALITY OF SOCRATES' WHAT-IS-X QUESTION

John E. THOMAS

ACCORDING to Aristotle philosophy begins in wonder. As a companion truth — one could add — philosophical papers begin in puzzlement. This present paper is no exception. In his recent book *Plato's "Euthyphro" and the Earlier Theory of Forms*<sup>1</sup>, Professor R. E. Allen takes issue with Professor Richard Robinson's claim that there is a duality in the What-is-X question.<sup>2</sup>

The clash between Allen and Robinson furnishes the initial puzzle of this paper. According to Robinson, Socrates' What-is-X question can be understood *either* as a request for (1) an identifying mark of X *or* (2) the essence of X. Allen rejects (1) in favour of (2). In the pages that follow an attempt will be made to provide an alternative account of the duality of the What-is-X question to Robinson's. The purpose of this attempt is to preserve what is valid in Robinson's initial insight (Socrates tolerated *other* senses of the question) while siding with Allen's preference for (2). *En route* some difficulties of interpreting *Euthyphro* 6E are encountered and circumvented.

## I

I begin with Professor Robinson's account of the duality in Socrates' What-is-X question to which Professor Allen takes exception.

(1) On the one hand, many passages suggest that all he [Socrates] wants is a mark that shall serve as a pattern by which to judge of any given thing whether it is an X or not. In the *Euthyphro* (6E) he describes his aim in just this way.<sup>3</sup>

(2) In many other passages, however, Socrates' purpose in asking What-is-X? is evidently not, or not merely, to distinguish X from everything else. It is to get at what he calls the essence or form of X...<sup>4</sup>

1. R. E. ALLEN, *Plato's Euthyphro and the Earlier Theory of Forms* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970).

2. R. ROBINSON, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1941).

3. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

The What-is-X question, then, may be understood either (1) as a request for an *identifying mark* of X or (2) as a request for the *essence* of X.

Attentive readers of Robinson will notice that the *Euthyphro* passage is only *one* of a number cited by Robinson in support of his claim. Since it would be agreed that these other passages range from Plato's early middle to late period<sup>5</sup>, they would not be considered crucial to Allen's case given his special interest in the *Euthyphro* and Plato's earlier theory of Forms. Since *Euthyphro* 6E is the bone of contention between Allen and Robinson, I shall concentrate on the problems of interpretation posed by it.

Allen views (1) as performing an *evidential* role, *Euthyphro* 6E is offered by Robinson as evidence for understanding the What-is-X question as a request for an identifying mark.

Allen also credits Robinson with a second "argument" for construing the What-is-X question as a request for an identifying mark. It runs as follows:

(3) It [that Socrates sometimes seeks an identifying mark] is suggested again by a word he often used to describe the process of answering a What-is-X? question, namely *horizein*. For this term, never losing the feel of its original connection with boundary stones, suggests laying down a mark to distinguish a field from the next, without in any way describing the soils or the crops in the field so delimited. And in Plato's dialogues the translations "distinguish" and "determine" are suitable as often or more often than "define".<sup>6</sup>

The relevance of this last passage to *Euthyphro* 6E is unclear. Considered *in abstracto* the *horizein* "argument" fails to buttress Robinson's preference for translating *îdêa* at 6E "identifying mark" rather than "essence". More importantly the term "*horizein*" does not even occur at 6E. True, it does occur later at *Euthyphro* 9D but not in the required sense of "distinguish" or "determine", but rather in the sense of "define". Consequently, I dismiss the *horizein* argument. In fairness to Robinson, however, I should point out that more weight is placed on the relevance of the *horizein* passage to *Euthyphro* 6E by Allen that he (Robinson) ever intended it to bear.

The goal Allen sets for himself is the elimination of (1) leaving (2) as the only viable sense of the What-is-X question. His strategy consists in launching two counter arguments aimed respectively at (1) and (3) while simultaneously buttressing (2). I shall try to show that Allen's purposes might have been better served had he sought a different sense for the duality of the What-is-X question rather than concentrating on its elimination. The attempt to destroy the duality destroys whatever is valid in Robinson's claim.

## II

In this section, first of all, I shall examine and assess Allen's strategy. This done I shall look more closely at Robinson's interpretation of *Euthyphro* 6E which triggered Allen's negative response.

For the reason given Allen's counter argument to (3) will be by-passed. I simply concentrate on his attempt to undermine (1) and establish (2).

5. With the possible exception of Raeder who dates the *Gorgias* before the *Euthyphro*.

6. ROBINSON, p. 56.

Allen's counter argument to (1) runs as follows:

(4) But he [Socrates] does not describe his aim in just this way. He describes it rather as that of learning *τὴν ἰδέαν τίς ποτέ ἐστιν* of holiness which he expects to use as a standard or *παράδειγμα* for determining what things are holy and what are not — no mention of "mark". An account of that standard, which is holiness itself, must state its *οὐσία*, its nature and reality.<sup>7</sup>

This cryptic rebuttal calls for further elaboration. I take Allen's point to be — if *ποτέ* is taken to qualify *τίς... ἐστιν* rather than *ἰδέα*, the possibility of translating the request as a request for any characteristic whatsoever is eliminated. Instead the locution *τὴν ἰδέαν τίς ποτέ ἐστιν* should be understood to mean "Teach me with respect to the *ἰδέα* [of holiness] whatever in the world it is". The stress is placed on elucidating the *nature* of *ἰδέα* (whatever it is) *not* on offering any characteristic whatsoever. A plea for "any characteristic whatsoever" would have lent support to Robinson's pitch for rendering *ἰδέα* characteristic mark.

In my opinion, Allen's appeal to the occurrence of the term *παράδειγμα* at 6E is *not* a conclusive reason for rendering *ἰδέα* "essence". To be sure in later dialogues Plato refers to the Forms as standards but, lacking other clues, that is not a sufficient reason in itself for anticipating later usage in the present context. The term *παράδειγμα* here is somewhat opaque. Its meaning will be determined once the meaning of other terms is fixed.

I discount also Allen's appeals to adumbrations of "essence" in Aristophanes and Xenophon<sup>8</sup> or to the full blown doctrine in Aristotle.<sup>9</sup> Whether *εἶδος* and *ἰδέα* carry the force of "essence" at *Euthyphro* 6DE is something to be determined by the context of their occurrence not by appeals to their meaning in Plato's predecessors and/or contemporaries.

The upshot of these remarks is to express general sympathy with Allen's approach but to be more selective in sifting the evidence advanced in support of his conclusion. I attach more significance to evidence internal to the *Euthyphro* itself than to the establishment of precedents, anticipations of subsequent usage or even evidence from Plato's other dialogues as helpful as these often are.

There are two pieces of solid evidence internal to the *Euthyphro* in favour of reading *ἰδέα* at 6E as a request for "essence" which must be taken seriously. First, there is the occurrence of the technical vocabulary of the Forms (see *αὐτὸ τὸ εἶδος* at 6D and *τὸ ὅσιον αὐτὸ αὐτῷ* at 5d). What is important about the occurrence of this technical terminology is that it is introduced without definition or explanation. A plausible explanation of this omission is that the terms were already familiar to Plato's readers and would be so understood in the passage under consideration. Even more important is the occurrence of the *οὐσία* — *πάθος* distinction. This distinction certainly presupposes the Forms, and the fact that *Euthyphro*'s second definition of piety is rejected because it so obviously falls in the *πάθος* class of utterances is clear confirmation that Plato's Socrates is after the essence of piety.

7. ALLEN, p. 77.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

One final word about παράδειγμα. Once the occurrence of the technical vocabulary of the Forms has been acknowledged and re-inforced by the occurrence of the οὐσία – πάθος distinction it [παράδειγμα] can be seen to belong to a family of terms, a decision about the meaning of one of which is inevitably influenced by the choice of meaning for the others.

But if things are as clear as I have just made out, it is difficult to explain what could have led Robinson to interpret Socrates' request at 6E as a request for an identifying mark of X? He nowhere argues for the position. Since, however, such a position has been argued for elsewhere, we shall pause to examine it. This digression will serve to illustrate the plausibility of the view Robinson advances.

A view similar to Robinson's interpretation of ἰδέα at *Euthyphro* 6E was advanced earlier by Lutoslawski. Unlike Robinson, however, Lutoslawski sought (and found) a precedent in earlier Greek literature for rendering ἰδέα and εἶδος "characteristic mark" rather than "essence". I quote Lutoslawski *in extenso*:

Enumeration of examples is shown to be insufficient to give such permanence to a notion (6D: οὐχ ἔν τι ἡ δύο τῶν πολλῶν δσίων, ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνο αὐτὸ τὸ εἶδος, καὶ πάντα τὰ ὅσια ὅσα ἐστίν) and the characteristic mark is sought for.

This characteristic mark is here named εἶδος, in the sense in which Thucydides used this word when he spoke of an εἶδος νόσου (Thucyd. 2, 50)... In the *Euthyphro* as in the *Charmides* they both [εἶδος and ἰδέα] occur, ἰδέα in the meaning of form, property or characteristic mark (6E: μιᾷ ἰδέᾳ τὰ τε ἀνόσια εἶναι), but not in the later meaning of a metaphysical entity.<sup>10</sup>

Lutoslawski then acknowledges the difficulty posed by the occurrences of the term παράδειγμα at *Euthyphro* 6E. The occurrence of this term suggests the "eternal forms or paradigmatic ideas". We are reassured, however, that in *Euthyphro* 6E

... Plato only speaks of using the characteristic of holiness as a standard for distinguishing holy actions from sinful deeds. Such a use of the word παράδειγμα does not essentially differ from that of Thucydides and the early orators.<sup>11</sup>

So we are led to understand that in Thucydides' phrase "εἶδος νόσου", εἶδος can be translated "characteristic" or "characteristic mark". A more literal rendering would be "symptom" (in this case, of the plague).

To illustrate the difficulty in settling matters by appeals to precedents, it is interesting to note that in the same passage A. E. Taylor renders εἶδος in εἶδος νόσου as "real essence".<sup>12</sup> On closer scrutiny Lutoslawski's rendition of εἶδος νόσου strikes me as being more accurate, unless one could make a case for the "violence" (χαλεπωτέρως) of the attack being *constitutive* of its nature. But even if Lutoslawski is correct about the Thucydides passage, it is still debatable whether this sense properly fits the context of *Euthyphro* 6E. It was precisely this indecisiveness which prompted me to downgrade earlier, Allen's attempt to discover adumbrations of Platonic essence in Aristophanes and Xenophon. Since I decried the value of such appeals in considering Allen's position, I cannot consistently now invest them with worth.

10. W. LUTOSLAWSKI, *The Origin and Growth of Plato's Logic* (London: Longmans Green, 1897), p. 199.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

12. A. E. TAYLOR, *Varia Socratica* (Oxford: James Parker, 1911), p. 187.

In passing, it is also interesting to note Lutoslawski's treatment of παράδειγμα. Just as Allen tended to anticipate later Platonic usage assimilating the sense of παράδειγμα to it, so Lutoslawski succumbs to the opposite temptation; he assimilates the meaning of παράδειγμα to earlier usage giving it a more neutral rendition. In both cases the sense is determined antecedently to the corroborative evidence. As a procedural ploy, the positing of senses to determine whether the context will accommodate such conjectures is unobjectionable. What is disturbing in this case is that Allen and Robinson, Lutoslawski and Taylor come to different conclusions. Hence my preference for assigning greater weight to the internal evidence of the *Euthyphro* than to precedents or anticipations.

But Robinson's failure to back up his rendition of ἰδέα as "identifying mark" at *Euthyphro* 6E is not the only weakness in the position he advances. His account becomes extremely confusing when other claims he makes are placed alongside (1) and (2) cited in Section I of this paper.

What does one do with lapses into talk about "'What-is-X' in Socrates' sense" or with claims like "The explanations which Socrates gives of his question provide a context for determining this vague form to mean a search for essence as above described."<sup>13</sup> Well, which is it? Does Socrates speak one way at one time another way at other times? Is there a duality in the What-is-X question? Or will examination of the context of the question invariably confirm it to be a request for the essence of X and never a request for an identifying mark. Is the "Socratic sense" of the What-is-X question a request for the essence of X?

Nor does the puzzlement end there, for, towards the end of Robinson's chapter on the What-is-X question the reader discovers the demand for an identifying mark classified as a non-Socratic sense of What-is-X — a classification which runs counter to Robinson's initial distinction as exemplified in (1) and (2):

Whenever a difficulty arises, we interpret the question in some other way to avoid it. For example, if the conception of essence becomes momentarily embarrassing, we take What-is-X? as merely a request for identification. Such evasion is always possible because there are several other, non-Socratic senses in which What-is-X? is always a proper question. One of these is "What does the word X mean?", the request for verbal definition. Another is, "Give me a unique designation of X", the request for a mark of identification. A third seems to be, "Make some true statement about X", for What-is-X? is sometimes as vague as that.<sup>14</sup>

Robinson cannot have it both ways, claiming:

- (i) *both* that there is a genuine duality in the What is X question *and* that contextual clues reveal that question to be a request for the essence of X.
- (ii) *both* "all he [Socrates] wants is a mark [of identification]" *and* the request for a mark of identification is non-Socratic.

Which of the conjuncts will Robinson drop? Picking up clues from the fifth chapter of *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, within the scope of a few pages one divines that the What-is-

13. ROBINSON, p. 61.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 62.



X question as a request for an identifying mark is being totally eclipsed by a preference for treating it as a petition for the essence of X.

### III

The previous section left us with Robinson's account in a muddle, though with evidence internal to the *Euthyphro* tipping the balances in favour of Allen's interpretation of *Euthyphro* 6E. The most tempting short-cut to the resolution of the conflict between Allen and Robinson would be a resolution in Allen's favour by dropping the What-is-X question as a demand for an identifying mark. This solution must be resisted for the following reasons. Such a move would be tantamount to a capitulation on Robinson's part on the duality of the What-is-X question which capitulation would involve the sacrifice of any benefits accruing to the duality. It is not clear from the context of *Euthyphro* 6E that Socrates' request is to be understood as an *unqualified* demand for the essence of X. If it were, how does one account for Socrates' expression of satisfaction with Euthyphro's second definition of "piety", a definition rejected by Socrates later? While Robinson does not mention this point, it is clearly a problem if we understand the What-is-X question as a demand for the essence of X. As I see it Robinson's translation of *ἰδέα* at 6E is born of a conviction that in Socrates' request there is a plea for something less than essence. Minus backing, however, this conviction is difficult to sustain. Socrates' expression of satisfaction with Euthyphro's answer could be construed as such backing for Robinson's position. It will, as we shall see, be subject to certain qualifications but Robinson's initial instinct about *ἰδέα* at 6E is sound even if his account of the duality of the What-is-X question is faulty. Unless one takes Socrates' expression of satisfaction as ironic (with all that implies for Socrates' character), then some other way of resolving the muddle in Robinson's presentation and of achieving a *rapprochement* between his account and Allen's must be undertaken. Given these parameters, what is required is a sense for the What-is-X question that will (a) preserve its duality and (b) allow us to treat Socrates' expression of satisfaction with Euthyphro's second definition as non-ironic, even if not without reservations.

These conditions can be met by distinguishing between (i) the sense in which Socrates *asks* the What-is-X question and (ii) the senses in which Socrates' respondents *understand* the question and which Plato's Socrates *allows* in order to get the conversation moving again along profitable, if not ultimately acceptable, lines.<sup>15</sup> The qualification "and which Socrates *allows*" is crucial, for his permission insures that the "other meanings" of the What-is-X question are in a sense Socratic. Socratic in the sense that they permitted by him to enable the disputants to make fresh headway with the conversation; non-Socratic in the sense that they are not what Socrates is really after.

To be sure, the distinction just drawn will be challenged on the grounds that the

15. A parallel case of Socrates' relaxation of the rigorous sense What-is-X question occurs at *Meno* 86D. There he permits a shift from "What is virtue?" (a request for the essence of virtue) to "Is virtue teachable?" (a secondary question).

bulk of the answers given to the What-is-X question by Socrates' respondents constitute misunderstandings. This is not, however, a serious drawback. After all, it is Plato who writes the dialogues, with the result that the misunderstandings are misunderstandings *a consilio*. They perform a heuristic function calculated to produce an awareness, in Socrates' respondents, of the *cul-de-sac* to which their answers lead. Indirectly they also contribute negatively to the discussion by flagging such dead-ends to inquiry.

Let us look more closely at the application of distinction just introduced to *Euthyphro* 6E. When Socrates requests "Teach me with respect to the *idēia* [of piety] whatever it is" ... Euthyphro replies "Whatever is dear to the gods is pious". Any interpretation which takes seriously Socrates' expression of satisfaction with the answer will have to account for Socrates' ultimate rejection of it (11a) because it falls into the *παῖθος* class of utterances, which fact would have been sufficient to disqualify it from the outset. If one regards Socrates' request as a genuine request for the essence of X and takes seriously his expression of satisfaction with an answer that fails to give the essence of X, then a plausible explanation of that expression of satisfaction consists in the role played by the answer given in furthering the discussion. If one looks closely at the context of the second definition of "piety" in the *Euthyphro* then it will be seen to be clearly an advance over the first. Euthyphro's first response to "What is piety" is "Piety is what I am doing". By contrast with the egocentricity implied in ostensive definitions of this kind, *what-is-dear-to-the-gods* constitutes a notable advance in generality. Epistemological difficulties aside, if one could have access to the sentiments of the gods, a sentiment of approval would provide a reliable, if not infallible clue, to the nature of certain actions. But while the answer makes an advance in the direction of generality, it fails to meet a second test, namely, it fails to specify a property *intrinsic* to piety. In Taylor's words "Thus the formula does not tell us what the character on the ground of which the gods approve of a certain act *is* (its *οὐσίαν*) but only something which happens to these acts, namely, that the gods approve them; it tells us an affection (*παῖθος*) of the 'religious', not its *quiddity*" ...<sup>16</sup>

The advantages of the view advanced here are as follows. First, the preference for translating *idēia* "essence" is tied closely to evidence internal to the *Euthyphro*. This constitutes a difference in the assessment of the evidence relevant to Allen's conclusion. Next, the distinction introduced in this section provides a sense of "duality" which does justice to a treatment of the What-is-X question as a request for essence while preserving other meanings (*contra* Robinson) as Socratic in the sense of being allowed by Socrates to further the argument. Finally, the view advanced here allows us to take Socrates' expression of satisfaction with Euthyphro's second definition of "piety" as genuine even if qualified.

I conclude by agreeing with Robinson that there is indeed a duality in the What-is-X question, one which, if the distinction advanced here is sound, is consistent with Allen's insistence that the What-is-X question is a demand for the essence of X.

16. A. E. TAYLOR, *Plato the Man and His Work* (London: Methuen, 1926), p. 152.