

## Socrates I

PHIL301

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Updated: 2/7/14 1:17 PM

### The *Euthyphro*

- Setting and cast
  - Socrates encounters Euthyphro as both proceed to court. Socrates is to hear whether he will be indicted. Euthyphro is prosecuting his father for murder.
  - Socrates, we think, is faithfully depicted by Plato, in this dialogue. *Euthyphro* is generally regarded as an “early” Platonic dialogue depicting the historical Socrates’ views and methods.
  - Euthyphro himself is (evidently) a “mantis”, a kind of prophet of conservative, traditional religious views. He takes the stories of the *Theogony* as literal truth, for example. See *RAGP*, p. 135, n. 1.
  - Euthyphro takes his task to be one of “piety”, to prosecute a murder which the gods disapprove as unjust. It is unclear whether he is right to do so, given the circumstances: the murdered man is himself a murderer; Euthyphro’s father has captured and bound the murderer, who subsequently dies accidentally, though owing also to the father’s negligence. Is it truly pious to prosecute the father, in this situation?
  - Note the apparent tension between two sets of moral obligations – those to one’s family and other intimates, and a more general, universal set (4b-c).
  - The elements of the drama bring out the role of Socrates as moral gadfly. It is all too common for persons like Euthyphro to act on a presumed knowledge of piety (or justice, etc.), where their actions in fact reflect significant or even profound ignorance.
  - Moral Risk: In this connection, see 4e and 16d, where Socrates expresses the primary moral concern with respect to ignorance: if we do not know the moral truth, we risk committing an injustice. Compare *Apology* 28a, 30d, 36c, 38a, 38e, and esp. 39a; see also *RAGP*, p. 157, n. 10.
- Irony
  - See 2c, 5a, 6c, 9b, 11a, 11d, 12e-13a, 13e, 14c, 15d, 16a, etc.
  - Socrates may be read as purely guileless or savagely ironical.
  - In either case, Euthyphro appears shallow, pompous, and disturbingly oblivious to the risk he runs of a substantial injustice.
  - It is a testament to Plato’s literary skill that Euthyphro and Socrates remain such rich characters.
- Hubris
  - See 4b, 5a, 5e, 6d, 9b, 13e, etc.
  - Euthyphro regularly claims “exact knowledge” of piety, but as regularly is shown to be quite without that knowledge. The contrast between Euthyphro’s claims to knowledge and his ignorance couldn’t be stronger. He comes off as pompous and condescending – just the sort of character, ironically, to excite the gods’ dislike – see again, *RAGP* p. 157, n. 10: the very temple walls at Delphi contain inscriptions indicating the gods’ dislike of hubris.

- Euthyphro also appears in places to be intellectually weak. See e.g., 10a and elsewhere, where he is slow to follow Socrates.
- The Form of Piety
  - Socrates appears to have believed that two things are alike if they share some one thing in common, namely a “form” (*eidos*). For instance, we may think of all triangles as sharing some one quality, “triangularity”, in virtue of which they are all triangles. This view sets the agenda of the elenchus – arriving at an account (*logos*) of the given form.
  - 5c-d: Whatever the pious is, it will be something shared by all pious acts; similarly, the impious share “one single characteristic.” Similarly for the impious, which is the “opposite” of the pious. (Note here the echo of Heraclitus, and the development of dialectical argumentation generally, wherein a thing is conceptually tied to its logical opposite.)
  - 6d-e: Socrates specifically requests “the form” of piety, the “one characteristic” shared by all pious things. Note the implication that a form can *be understood* and is the means by which we *recognize* piety and impiety in the world.
  - 11b: the form of a thing is not merely one of its relational properties (“affections”). I.e., being loved is a way in which a thing can be affected; but that status is not essential to it, ordinarily.
  - Notice too use of the term ‘account’, which translates *logos*, at, e.g., 9d and 15b.
- Logical Technique
  - Socrates is notable for the sophistication of his argumentative skills.
  - *Reductio ad absurdum*: to reduce to absurdity.
    - ♣ An absurdity is, technically, a contradiction, such as ‘Oakes is blond and Oakes is not blond.’ Such statements are “absurd” because they are nonsensical, or in any case cannot be true – or so logic-oriented beings like us believe.
    - ♣ If one can show that one’s opponent’s position entails a contradiction, then one has reduced that position to absurdity. Socrates employs this strategy both in the *Apology* (e.g., 26c-27c) and in the *Euthyphro* (7a-8a).
  - Dilemma: either of two choices is unacceptable.
    - ♣ A dilemma occurs when one is faced with only two alternatives where both are undesirable. (NB: this is the logical significance of the expression, “Damned if you do and damned if you don’t.”) In a logical setting, the ill consequence is falsehood: either way one proceeds with one’s argument, one winds up with a falsehood.
    - ♣ Socrates uses this strategy in both *Apology* (25a-26a) and *Euthyphro* (10a-11a).

#### The *Elenchus* at work in *Euthyphro*

- Definition 1: Piety is prosecuting a wrong-doer. (5d-e)
  - ♣ Note the hubris of “piety is doing what I am doing now” (5d).
  - ♣ Note a measure of Euthyphro’s logical sophistication: he reasons that the common person will contradict him/herself in allowing Zeus to punish his father, Kronos for crimes against his (K’s) sons (and again in allowing Kronos to punish his own father, Ouranos for similar misdeeds), but not in allowing Euthyphro to punish his own father for murder. See *Theogony* lns. 165-187, 456-504, 715-725.
  - ♣ Note, too, the support provided Euthyphro’s position by his appeal to the acts of Zeus, “the best and most just of the gods.” (5e-6a) Socrates, on the other hand, disputes the truth of such stories about the gods. He finds it difficult to

believe that any god is capable of injustice. (6a; cf. books II and III of *Republic*) Moreover, of course, whereas Kronos' behavior was reprehensible, it is not so clear that Euthyphro's father's is.

- ♣ Socrates' elenctic destruction of this formulation: failure to distinguish species from genus (instance from kind).
  - Socrates asks Euthyphro for the form of piety ("one single characteristic;" 5c-d).
  - Euthyphro responds with an instance of piety ("what I'm doing now;" 5d).
  - So, Euthyphro has supplied only "one or two of the many pieties" and not "the form itself by virtue of which all pieties are pious" (6d).
- ♣ To confuse a form with its instance is to fail to recognize clearly the distinction between the general and the particular. The capacity to recognize and manipulate the abstract, general form is a hallmark of intelligence.
- Definition 2: Piety is what is dear to, beloved by the gods; impiety is what is disliked by the gods. (7a)
  - ♣ This definition is "the sort of answer" that Socrates desires, namely, the specification of a central form, *eidōs*.
  - ♣ Elenctic destruction of definition 2: this account entails that the same things are both pious and impious. (*Reductio ad absurdum*)
    1. Piety is what is beloved by the gods; impiety is what is hated by the gods. (Euthyphro's claim)
    2. Piety and impiety are opposites. (7a)
    3. The gods sometimes oppose one another. (7b)
    4. Such opposition is over moral and aesthetic matters. (7c-d)
    5. Hence, different gods judge different things good/bad, beautiful/ugly, etc. (7e)
    6. The beautiful and good are liked; the ugly and bad are hated. (7e)
    7. Hence (since the gods dis/like different things), the same one thing will be both pious and impious. (8a)
  - ♣ One and the same thing cannot both have and lack a given property, so since the definition entails such a contradiction, it cannot be correct. This is a hallmark of logic.
- Definition 3: Piety is what is loved by all gods; impiety is what is hated by all gods. (9d)
  - ♣ I.e., piety  $is_d$  being beloved by all of the gods; impiety  $is_d$  being hated by all of the gods.
  - ♣ This gives us **the Euthyphro Question**: "Is the pious loved by all of the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by all of the gods?" (10a)
  - ♣ Elenctic destruction of definition 3: this definition creates a *dilemma*. The dilemma is constructed on the meaning of 'Piety is what is loved by all the gods.'
    1. The pious  $is_d$  what is loved by all the gods ("god-loved"). (9e)
 What can this mean? It means:
    2. Either [a] the gods love  $x$  because  $x$  is pious, or [b]  $x$  is pious because  $x$  is loved by the gods. (10a)

3. The property of being god-loved (loved by the gods) is an *external* or *extrinsic property*.<sup>1</sup> (10c)
4. Piety is not an external property, but an *internal* or *intrinsic* property.<sup>2</sup> (10d)

Hence,

5. It is not the case that [2b] *x* is pious because *x* is loved by the gods. (10d)

Hence,

6. It is not the case that [1] the pious is<sub>d</sub> what is loved by all the gods (“god-loved”). (10d)

Socrates then repeats the above reasoning, in this form, beginning with a restatement of claim [2a]:

7. The gods love *x* because *x* is pious. (10e)

Then he restates claim [3]:

8. *x* is god-loved because the gods love *x*, and it is not the case that the gods love *x* because *x* is god-loved. (10d)

Hence,

9. If being god-loved is the same thing as piety (which is Euthyphro’s definition; see [1]), then [i] if *x* is loved because *x* is pious, then the gods love *x* because *x* is god-loved (which makes no sense); and [ii] if [i], then *x* is pious because *x* is god-loved. (10e-11a)

But, this is false, as stated in [8]. (11a)

Hence,

10. It is not the case that [1]. (11a)

♣ I.e., at best, Euthyphro has again simply told us a feature of the pious – namely, that it is loved by the gods, a mere predication of piety – not what piety consists in, its definition.

- Definition 4: Piety is the part of justice concerned with “tending to” the gods (the rest of justice concerns care of other humans). (12e)

♣ Elenctic Destruction: ultimately, this leads back to the claim that piety is what is loved by the gods.

1. Tending to something aims at the benefit of that thing. (13b)
2. In the case of piety, then, the aim will be the improvement of the gods. (13c)
3. But humans cannot make the gods better. (13c)
4. So Euthyphro does not mean tending to in this sense. (A sub-destruction; 13c)
5. Tending to something is a kind of service to some end: it involves knowledge of how to produce some end. (A re-formulation; 13d)
6. In the case of piety, the end is “many fine things.” (Euthyphro clearly doesn’t know what to say; 13e)
7. I.e., piety is knowledge of how properly to sacrifice and pray to the gods. (14b-c)
8. Sacrifice is a form of gift-giving and prayer is a form of begging. (14c)

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<sup>1</sup> An extrinsic property is a property a thing has owing to the existence or action of another thing. E.g., being carried, to use Socrates’ example, or being northwest of Lancaster.

<sup>2</sup> An intrinsic property is a property a thing has independently of the existence or action of other things. E.g., being spherical.

9. So, piety is knowledge of how to give to and beg from the gods.  
(Clearly, this is stated so as to make Euthyphro look foolish; 4c)
  10. In particular, piety is giving the gods honor, reverence, and gratitude.  
(15a)
  11. Honor, reverence, and gratitude are beloved by the gods. (15b)
  12. Hence, piety is doing what is beloved by the gods. (I.e., Euthyphro is  
back to an earlier, failed definition; 15b-c)
- ♣ We are to understand, by the end of this exchange, that Euthyphro has no clue as to what is the form of piety, though he is able to identify some acts as pious and some as impious.