

THEISTIC ETHICS AND THE EUTHYPHRO

Recent discussions of the *Euthyphro* have concentrated on the logic of the argument employed by Socrates to refute Euthyphro's major definition of piety and have only incidentally attempted to assess the significance of the argument in the larger context of the dialogue.¹ It has however been claimed that the argument ought to be viewed as an attack on theistic or theological ethics generally. As A.E. Taylor explains:

The question is one which has played a prominent part in ethical controversy in later days. It amounts to asking whether acts of piety, or more generally virtuous acts, derive their character of being right from the mere fact of being commanded or are commanded because they are antecedently intrinsically right.²

I wish to argue against this traditional view of the *Euthyphro*: I do not think that the issue under consideration concerns the relation between goodness or rightness and being loved or commanded. There is no justification for extending Euthyphro's definition of "holiness" to account as well for "goodness" and "rightness", Socrates' refutation cannot serve generally to refute a theistic ethic, nor is there any reason to suppose that Plato thought it did. The *Euthyphro* is concerned with the relationship between religious conviction and right conduct, but it is not the opening round in the traditional debate over theistic definitions of "goodness" and "rightness".

I

Socrates sets Euthyphro the task of stating the nature of piety and impiety (τὸ δίκαιον καὶ τὸ ἀνόσιον, 5d7) and what appears to be Euthyphro's most promising answer is given at 9e1: "what all the gods love is holy and on the other hand, what they all hate is unholy."³ Is Euthyphro's definition while explicitly of "piety", implicitly directed toward "goodness" or "rightness"?⁴ It would be, if "holiness" and "goodness" or "rightness" were synonyms or near synonyms in English. But there seems to be a *religious* element in the notions of holiness or piety which is not present in the others, and hence it is difficult to see how a claim for synonymy could succeed, at least as reportive of how these terms are normally understood. One could of course hold that, properly understood, "holiness" and "goodness" or "holiness" and "rightness" were synonyms or at least co-extensive terms, even if this were not generally realized, but this relationship could hardly be assumed as a non-controversial principle of interpretation. Nor, so far as I know, has anyone based his interpretation on this claim. In fact, the ethical import of the discussion might be held to exist even if "holiness" and "goodness" or "rightness" were not synonyms; indeed, some have taken the lesson to be that these terms are not synonyms. If so, then the lesson itself could not owe its existence to their synonymy.

We might however justify the extension of Euthyphro's definition if Plato accepted such an equivalence, or if these terms were synonyms in Greek. But the evidence points in the other direction. On several occasions Plato characterizes an action as 'just and holy' (e.g. *Rep.* 615b8) or as 'neither just nor holy' (*Crat.* 54b8) or as 'neither good nor just nor holy' (*Apo.* 35d1), and a contrast between holiness as obedience to divine law and justice or rightness as obedience to human law is well attested in Greek usage.⁵ In the *Euthyphro* itself, Socrates carefully explains that while all that is holy is just, it is not the case that all that is just is holy: the right or the just (τὸ δίκαιον) is 'wider than' (ἐκτὸ πλεον)

than the holy (τὸ ἅγιον) (12a ff.), and this would seem quite natural on the common view of holiness as 'performance of duties to the gods.' Thus, Plato does not appear to take holiness and justice to be equivalent notions. On the contrary, holy or pious acts are only a "part of the right" and these considerations count against taking Euthyphro's definition as implicitly a proposal for the nature of goodness or rightness.⁶

Holiness is however a virtue and there are several occasions in the dialogues where Plato commits himself to 'the unity of the virtues'. Given the importance of this doctrine in Plato's ethics we might wish to dismiss the account of holiness and justice in the *Euthyphro* as provisional, or unrepresentative of Plato's own view.⁷ But the 'unity thesis' does not imply the co-extensionality of justice and holiness. Even if it is not possible for some *person* to be just without also being holy and wise, etc. (the 'Bi-conditionality thesis' of *Gorgias* 507), it is still possible for some *act* to exemplify one virtue without exemplifying all the others.⁸ Further, we could hold that the form of justice is itself holy and that the form of holiness is itself just (*Protagoras* 331b), and that justice and holiness both require wisdom, without being committed to a coincidence of all just and holy acts. The unity thesis is therefore compatible with the *Euthyphro* account, and it neither requires nor justifies taking Euthyphro's remarks about holiness as intended to be 'essentially' or 'generally' or 'in effect' an account of goodness or rightness.

Is it then that Euthyphro's definition of holiness as "what is beloved by all the gods" so resembles theistic definitions of ethical terms that it is not possible to propose or entertain one of these without implicitly being involved with the others? Is such an extension either logically or psychologically unavoidable? No ethical extension of Euthyphro's definition is considered in the *Euthyphro*, and when Plato discusses virtue and justice in other dialogues (i.e. in the *Meno* or in Book I of the *Republic*) no theological ethic is mentioned.⁹ Holiness, and especially 'performance of duties to the gods', is arguably related to the gods' love, or at least some divine attribute, in a way in which goodness at least in ordinary language is not. It is perfectly consistent to accept a theistic account of holiness and a non-theistic one of goodness or rightness, and neither in his depiction of Euthyphro or elsewhere in the dialogues does Plato move from distinctly theological beliefs to necessary ethical corollaries. Socrates and Euthyphro agree that the gods *disagree* about which things are good, right, or noble (7e) and while it would have been natural enough to go on to say that there are some things which all the gods agree to be good (they do say that there are some things that all the gods love) this is never proposed. Elsewhere Plato indicates his belief that God, or the gods, are good and perfectly just (*Theae.* 176b, *Rep.* 391b) that God is the source of all human goods (e.g. the number series, the seasons, our daily food), and that the gods are never the source of evil things (*Epinomis* 977, *Euthyphro* 15, *Rep.* 379c). But we are never told that God or the gods are the source of the goodness in things, or that "goodness" and "rightness" simply mean "being commanded, or loved by God or the gods." Such a conception would probably have been intelligible to Plato's readers,¹⁰ but Plato shows no signs of either being tempted or bothered by such a conception. On the contrary it is the Sophists' view of justice as mere convention, relative to individual men and varying from society to society, that was evidently of concern to Socrates and Plato alike. In spite of his belief in the importance of 'divine services' and his commitment to their place in an ideal society (*Rep.* 427b), Plato locates the origin of just behavior and the essential nature of justice in the healthy balance of reason and desire rather than in the attitudes

and judgements of some set of divine beings. Even if we incorporate the account of the Good in the *Republic*, we can find no more than the thesis that good things acquire their quality of goodness from the Good itself, and not that it derives from the approval or love of some personal being. In short, the fact that Plato proposes and considers a theistic account of holiness may have led some of his readers to a consideration of a theological ethic, but Socrates' and Euthyphro's remarks do not bear this implication, and there is no evidence that Plato himself was led in this direction.

II

Socrates' argument against Euthyphro's major definition begins with a statement of the definition, incorporates a general principle about properties and actions, extracts a major concession from Euthyphro, and concludes with the claim that the definition must be rejected.

- (1) What all the gods love is holy, and, on the other hand, what they all hate is unholy (9e1-3).
- (2) It is not because a thing is beloved that it is loved by those who love it; rather, because they love it, it is beloved (10c 9-11).
- (3) What is holy is loved because it is holy; it is not the case that it is holy because it is loved (10d 6-7).
- (4) What is beloved by the gods is loved by them because it is beloved (11a 1), intended to follow from (1) and (3) and to contradict (2).
- (5) What is holy is holy because it is loved by the gods (11a 3), intended to follow from (1) and (2) and to contradict (3).
- (6) What is beloved by the gods and that which is holy are not identical (10d 12).¹¹

When viewed more generally, the form of the argument is simply (when x and y designate properties, and \emptyset some attitudinal state): if $x = y$, and whatever is x is \emptyset 'd because it is x (and not that it is x because it is \emptyset 'd), and whatever is y is y because it is \emptyset 'd (and not that it is \emptyset 'd because it is y), then what is y will be \emptyset 'd because it is y and what is x will be x because it is \emptyset 'd, which is a contradiction. Hence $x \neq y$.

Stated in general form, the argument bears some resemblance to a traditional critique of theistic accounts of goodness or rightness: if what is good (or right) is what God approves (or commands), then either God approves it because it is good or else it is good because God approves it (but not both). If it is not the case that God approves it because it is good, then God's approval is 'morally arbitrary', and we are under no moral obligation to do what God approves of. If God's approval is to have any moral authority, then God must approve of what is good because it is good, and hence what is good must be determined independently of what God approves of. The consequence of this is that while what is good may co-incidentally be what God approves of, his approval cannot be the basis for its goodness, nor can "good" mean "what is approved of by God."¹²

If the *Euthyphro* bears some implication for ethical theory, especially for theistic ethics, it will somehow have to emerge from the resemblance of these two arguments. Whether Plato had any such general intention, as a matter of logic, the first argument provides no support for the conclusion of the second. Indeed the first argument is insufficient even for its own conclusion: all Socrates shows (assuming his 'principle of consequent properties' and Euthyphro's concession) is that (1)-(3) generate one or more contradictions, hence some one of them must be rejected. Euthyphro (as Plato portrays him) fails to see that he

has other options open to him, and Socrates' argument is depicted as decisive, even though it is fallacious. This feature of Socrates' argument contrasts sharply with the logic of the second (theistic) argument: there, reasons are supplied for holding the view that God must approve what is good because it is good, and what was an unfortunate and gratuitous admission on Euthyphro's part is paralleled by a necessary consequence in the second argument.

Yet some commentators have thought that Euthyphro's concession is necessary, and that Plato thought it so, and if either of these were true the parallel between the two arguments would be strengthened. Must Euthyphro concede that the gods love what is pious because it is pious?

Marc Cohen argues as follows:

If the gods do have reasons for loving what is pious, it is to these reasons that we should look in trying to define 'pious'. If the gods have a reason for loving pious acts it is that these acts have, or are thought by the gods to have, certain features. It is these features, then, that should serve to define piety.¹³

If Plato believed this, then he might also have believed that piety must be viewed as that which, when present in a thing, inspires the gods' love. But there are two sticking points. It would be odd for Plato to indict Euthyphro's religious dogmatism, and at the same time assume, in order to reject a certain conception of holiness, some arbitrary thesis about the behavior and attitudes of the gods. Second, the argument rests on a principle which is not so obviously true that Plato must have seen it. In fact, although Plato may have held it anyway, the principle is mistaken. Even if we assume that the gods' love is rational, and that their reasons for loving stem from some features which their beloved objects possess, it would not follow that "holiness" would of necessity be defined in relation to those features.¹⁴ If we substituted "beloved" or "cherished" for "pious" in Cohen's argument, we would generate the obviously false conclusion that these must be defined in relation to those attributes which inspire the gods' love. In short, the grounds which Cohen cites are simply insufficient for delimiting the possible attributes which are relevant for explicating the meaning of "holiness". Yet in the absence of some rationale of this sort, it is difficult to see how Euthyphro can be forced to make his concession.

This divergence between these two arguments reveals the major obstacle to viewing the *Euthyphro* argument as a proto-critique of a theistic ethic: the *Euthyphro* account lacks any parallel for the premisses in the theistic version which necessitate the antecedent nature of goodness or rightness. *At most, the schema of the Euthyphro argument points up the difficulties generated by the inconsistent defense of a definition; it does not reveal an inherent flaw in any theistic or any voluntaristic definition.*

There is an additional impediment to attributing to Plato any broader purpose: in so doing we risk being doubly anachronistic. Not only are we comparing Plato's critique with an issue of later times which seems not to have interested or concerned Plato in any of the dialogues, but our reason for doing so draws upon techniques of logical analysis which were wholly unknown to him. We may find it profitable to speak of argument schemas, of general logical form, substituted for variables, but these notions have a degree of abstractness and generality which are absent from Plato's own method of analysis. A clear example of this is the struggle seen in the *Euthyphro* to demonstrate what later logicians were to dub the inconvertibility of universal affirmative or 'A' propositions simply by the examples of number

and odd, reverence and fear, etc. at 12a ff.

Yet even if Plato's approach lacks the level of generality which the techniques of logical analysis provide, it would still be possible for Plato to have had some awareness of other uses which the argument might serve. He *might* have seen that it could be employed against proposed definitions of other terms, but there are a number of terms for which this might be thought possible ("faithful", "dutiful", "obedient", "blessed", "fortunate", or even "happy" or "blessed"). Since the general argument form can tell us nothing about the various possible applications, the issue then devolves to whether the context of the specific version in the *Euthyphro* points to a wider intended use. I have argued that Plato's use and account of *δουλος* and *δούκαλος* in the *Euthyphro* count against this, as does the fact that neither in his remarks elsewhere about the gods or in his ethical discussion does Plato show any interest in the relation between goodness or rightness and divine love or authority.

There is then, in my view, a kind of insularity in Plato's discussion of the nature of holiness: proposing and rejecting alternative definitions of *ἁγιότης* is not an exercise in ethical theory and the considerations raised against Euthyphro's definition do not carry larger ethical implications. The same cannot be said of the larger context of Socrates' refutation, for while the debate may not be linked with the problems of a theistic ethic, it is certainly linked with an unethical theist, Euthyphro himself. As R.E. Allen puts it, the lesson of Socrates' questioning is that Euthyphro "is ignorant of things in which he thought himself wise" (p. 64), and wisdom (or the lack of it) is held in the *Euthyphro* and elsewhere to be of paramount ethical importance.

The *Euthyphro* may not tell us the exact nature of holiness,¹⁵ but it has become clear that Euthyphro so little understands the nature of holiness on his own definition that he immediately gives his position away by speaking of holiness as if it were a property which a thing could possess prior to the gods loving it. And yet Euthyphro is depicted as well informed about the traditional stories about the gods (5e-6d). The failure of the 'theological expert' points to a broader consequence of a general scepticism with respect to divine attributes and operations.¹⁶

Nor is Euthyphro unique in his practice of acting on the basis of religious conviction, or under the guidance of religious beliefs. At the outset of the dialogue we are told of three distinct cases: Meletus' prosecution of Socrates on the charge of impiety (3b); Euthyphro's prosecution of his own father for murder (since it would be a 'pollution' on Euthyphro not to do so) (4c); and the inaction of Euthyphro's father, allowing the slave to lie exposed to the elements, until someone had learned from the seer at Athens what ought to be done (4c). In each case, actions of importance are being undertaken on religious grounds and in the absence of exact religious knowledge. Socrates' judgment on the moral issue is explicit: not everyone who acts as Euthyphro does is doing what is right (*ὀρθῶς*) but only one who is very far advanced in wisdom (4a10-b2). Socrates' arguments (including the reply to Euthyphro's third definition) expose Euthyphro's ignorance and with it the immorality of his action.¹⁷ Hence while there is no criticism of a theological ethic either intended by Plato or implied by his account, there is a clear restriction being placed on the conditions under which action inspired by religious conviction becomes morally permissible. While this question has perhaps received less discussion than the relation between what is good and what God loves, it is one which is important enough in its own right to

fully merit Plato's attention.*

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* I am indebted to Norman Dahl, Raymond Martin, and Mary Varney for their comments on an earlier version of this paper, and to the University of Maryland Research Board for financial support during the summer when this paper was completed.

Notes:

1. For references to earlier papers, and a detailed account of the argument, see S. Marc Cohen, "Socrates on the Definition of Piety: *Euthyphro* 10A-11B", *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. IX, No. 1 (1971). Cohen's paper contains one of the few attempts to argue for an ethical implication of these passages.
2. *Plato*, p. 151. Similar accounts are given by R.E. Allen: "a motif in ... the theme of theological voluntarism, the view that whatever is good is good because God wills it ...", *Plato's Euthyphro and the Earlier Theory of Forms*; Paul Shorey: "the essential meaning is the autonomy of ethics", *What Plato Said*, p. 29; G.M.A. Grube: "[Euthyphro] has suggested a definition of the right", *Plato's Thought*, p. 152. See also Hoerber, "Plato's *Euthyphro* 10a-11b", *Phronesis*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1958), p. 102, 104. A similar assessment appears in Frankena's introductory ethics text: "In the *Euthyphro*, for example, he [Socrates] argues, in effect, that 'right' does not mean 'commanded by the gods'." *Ethics*, p. 3.
3. Unless noted to the contrary, the English translation is that of H.N. Fowler.
4. As is evidently the view of Grube, Allen, Hoerber, and Frankena.
5. Cf. Iiddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, for ὁσος. The *Gorgias* marks off what is just from what is pious or holy by distinguishing those acts which 'are fitting to men' from those which are 'fitting to the gods'; a man who does both sorts will be both just and pious (507b). Additional examples can be found in the *Budé Platon Lexique*(II), p. 390.
6. A comprehensive account can be found in A.W.H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1960). While εὐσεβής and ὁσος have a well-established moral use in the fifth century (p. 133) they are not limited to this role, and the central religious notions of pollution and service to the gods (by means of a barter relation) need involve neither morality nor responsibility (p. 90-91, 138). While the distinction between moral and non-moral is notoriously difficult to draw, there are *prima facie* reasons for attempting to distinguish those acts which are both moral and religious duties (loving one's neighbor, refraining from murder, etc.), from those which are religious but not distinctly moral (attendance at divine services, 'tithing', prayer, taking communion, etc.).
7. Cf. *Protagoras*, 329ff.; *Phaedo*, 69a-b; *Laws* 696b ff. It is on this basis that Taylor explains the failure of the dialogue: because goodness is a unity, it is not possible for a man to be just without being holy and vice versa, hence Socrates cannot accept the 'fantastic' position of Euthyphro who attempts to 'divorce religion from morality'. This interpretation overlooks the fact that it is Socrates who carefully explains the distinction to Euthyphro, and it rests upon the mistaken assumption that to claim a non-coincidence of justice and holiness is tantamount to denying that moral considerations apply to religious matters.
8. Gregory Vlastos makes the following comment on the implications of the 'unity thesis': "One might be tempted to say that Socrates' own theory would require that every virtuous action must display all five virtues. But this is never said in the dialogues, and it is not implied by Socrates' doctrine that having any virtue implies having all the virtues ..", "The Unity of the Virtues in the *Protagoras*", *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. XXV, No. 3 (march, 1972), p. 423.
9. The closest he comes is the *Meno* contention that virtue based on true opinion, because it succeeds without knowing how, must be a gift of the gods (99-100).

10. Cf. W.K.C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods*, p. 123: "In Homer the will of a great man is his law. He does not so much do things because they are right. Rather, since he is an irresponsible aristocrat, they are right because he does them." Guthrie takes the *Euthyphro* account to represent a transitional stage between the older conception of δίκη as custom or habit (and hence the customs of the gods as the highest standards of what is fitting) and that of δίκη as a genuine moral notion. The accuracy of the evolutionary thesis would not of itself show the position of the *Euthyphro* on this spectrum, and given that it is ὁσος and not δίκαιος that is under discussion, and that Plato separates off considerations of justice from those of holiness, it is difficult to see how the *Euthyphro* is a stage in the evolution of δίκη at all.
11. This is a schematic and abbreviated rendering of the argument from 9e 1 onward. I have omitted mention of the ἐπαγωγή from being carried - carrying, being led, leading, being seen, seeing, etc. which is offered in support of premiss (2).
12. Cf. A.C. Ewing, *Ethics*, pp. 100-101, and Taylor, *op. cit.*
13. *Ibid*, p. 13. Cohen's assessment of the moral for ethical theory is an extension of this: "if one's normative ethics are authoritarian, and one's authorities are rational and use their rationality in forming moral judgments, then one's meta-ethics cannot also be authoritarian" (p. 2). Whether it is correct to call this a 'generalization' of the conclusion of Socrates' argument (rather than a specific application in a different context), my thesis is that Cohen's argument fails to show that holiness must be viewed as an antecedent property and the basis for the gods' love.
14. The 'rationality' of the gods (whatever that would consist in) is not a feature of the *Euthyphro* account. It is said that the gods love what they consider good and right and hate the opposite, but this would make goodness and rightness antecedent properties, not holiness and unholiness.
15. A number of commentators have thought that the most promising account of holiness, which *Euthyphro* mishandles, is that of 'service to the gods: performing appropriate services for them and receiving in return favors from them'. A full account can be found in Rabinowitz, *Phronesis*, Vol. 3 No. 2 (1958), pp. 108-120.
16. *Rep.* 427 ff. echoes the *Euthyphro* account: "For of such matters we neither know anything nor in the founding of our city if we are wise shall we entrust them to any other or make use of any other interpreter than the god of our fathers. For this god is surely in such matters for all mankind the interpreter of the religion of their fathers.." *Euthyphro* is a clear example of an auxiliary interpreter. Brandt is thus half right when he takes the lesson of the dialogue to be that a person who holds a 'supernaturalist ethic' is reduced to scepticism in ethics (R.B. Brandt, *Ethical Theory*, p. 78). The scepticism is however not specifically ethical, but directed toward religious knowledge in general.
17. This is clearly a normative rather than meta-ethical judgment, and it is logically unconnected with a theistic ethic. A man who wishes to make knowledge a pre-condition for the moral acceptability of action based on religious belief is not committed to a theistic account of the justification of moral judgments or the meaning of ethical terms, nor is he precluded from it (e.g. the gods might themselves condemn the reckless religious zealot).