

On the Nature of Piety

Is it just for the son to prosecute the father?

Christopher M. Russo – Thursday, July 22, 2021

Plato's *Euthyphro* sets forth a dialogue between Socrates and a self-serious priest on the nature of piety. Outside the court overseeing religious allegations, Euthyphro explains that he is prosecuting his elderly father for the murder of a murderer—a stranger, at that. In turn, Euthyphro is accused by his family of impiety, "For, they say, it is impious for a son to prosecute his father for murder." (*Euthyphro* 4b, Cooper translation). Socrates exclaims, "Good heavens! Certainly, Euthyphro, most men would not know how they could do this and be right" (4b). Euthyphro hubristically affirms his special knowledge of piety: "I should be of no use, Socrates, and Euthyphro would not be superior to the majority of men, if I did not have accurate knowledge of all such things" (5a). In his usual style, Socrates enjoins Euthyphro to teach him.

Despite his name deriving from the words "straight thinking" (εὐθύς φρονέω), Euthyphro's thinking on piety is anything but straight. Socrates seeks a definition of piety that satisfies three conditions. First, the definition must be general, not merely point to specific examples of piety. Second, the definition must exclude the impious, not merely include the pious. Third, the definition must explain the essential nature of piety, not merely state inessential attributes. All of Euthyphro's definitions fail in an instructive fashion.

Euthyphro's first definition: "to prosecute the wrongdoer, be it about murder or temple robbery or anything else, whether the wrongdoer is your father or your mother or anyone else; not to prosecute is impious" (5e). For support, he cites the example of Zeus, "the best and most just of the gods," (6a) who punished his father Kronos for swallowing his siblings. Yet, Socrates notes that this definition fails the first condition (6d-e). It merely gives examples of piety.

Euthyphro's second definition: "what is dear to the gods is pious, what is not is impious," which Socrates refines to "An action or man dear to the gods is pious, but an action or man hated by the gods is impious" (7a). However, Socrates's recalls that poets claim that the gods are "in a state of discord" (7b), as Euthyphro own statements affirm. Socrates argues just as human hatred is ultimately due to disagreements over the just, the beautiful, and the good; must it be for the gods. Therefore, a subject that is dear to some gods and hated by others "would be both pious and impious" (8a). Therefore, this definition fails the second condition because it does not distinguish the pious from the impious.

Euthyphro's third definition attempts to route around the problem of disagreement: "the pious is what all the gods love, and the opposite, what all the gods hate, is the impious" (9e). Socrates's critique of this definition—termed the Euthyphro dilemma—is famous: "Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?" (10a) Socrates argues against the second interpretation as failing to state the essence of piety itself. By analogy, are children love-worthy because they are loved by their parents? That seemingly reverses cause and effect. Socrates similarly argues that the first interpretation fails

to give an adequate definition. It merely states an inessential attribute of the pious as being god-loved, not the essence of piety itself.

Euthyphro's fourth definition follows from Socrates's prompting him to consider justice: "the godly and pious is the part of the just that is concerned with the care of the gods, while that concerned with the care of men is the remaining part of justice" (12e). The pious know how to care for the gods as horse breeders know how to care for horses. But as Socrates clarifies, those horses benefit from care, and that benefit is the aim of the caregiver. What benefit could our care provide the gods? Socrates reminds Euthyphro that the gods look down on such hubris.

Euthyphro clarifies with his fifth definition: "if a man knows how to say and do what is pleasing to the gods at prayer and sacrifice, those are pious actions such as preserve both private houses and public affairs of state. The opposite of these pleasing actions are impious and overturn and destroy everything" (14b). In that way, the pious serve the gods as a slaves serve their masters. But to what ultimate end do we serve the gods? With Socrates's prompting, Euthyphro admits that prayer and sacrifice are pleasing to the gods because they provide them with honor and reverence, which are "of all things most dear to them" (15a). Socrates notes, "So the pious is once again what is dear to the gods" (15b). Alas, the "straight thinker" has traveled in a circle.

Presumably humiliated by the public demonstration of his own ignorance, Euthyphro quickly departs when Socrates asks him to stop hiding his superior knowledge of piety. "Some other time, Socrates, for I am in a hurry now, and it is time for me to go" (15e).

Potential Discussion Questions

1. In defense of his first definition, Euthyphro's cites religion to argue that pious sons may—or must—prosecute their fathers for wrongdoing. As mentioned, Zeus bound his father Kronos for wrongdoing. Kronos also castrated his father for wrongdoing. While those stories may sound ridiculous, the Son does seem to accuse the Father of wrongdoing immediately before death. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46, DRA)

How should we interpret Matthew 27:46? Were Jesus's words pious or impious?

Hint: See Psalm 22 NRSVCE (or Psalm 21 DRA)

2. Socrates's attack on Euthyphro's second definition of piety relies on disagreements between gods. If some gods hold dear X and other gods hate X, then X is both pious and impious. Yet, the persons of the Trinity cannot be divided on what they hold dear, e.g., "Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4, DRA). This ontological view of God is called the doctrine of divine simplicity: God has no parts.

Given divine simplicity, how should Catholics grapple with Euthyphro's second definition?

3. Building on Socrates's attack on Euthyphro's third definition, we might develop our own Euthyphro-type dilemmas. For example, "Is the good only good because it is commanded by God? Or does God command the good because it is good?"

Do Euthyphro-type dilemmas prove that morality is independent of God?

Potential answer: Catholics cut through the dilemma by identifying "the good" as intrinsic to God's essence. Hence, goodness is intrinsically bound up with God's necessary essence, rather than contingent attitudes.

4. The Ten Commandments seem to accord with Socrates's division of justice into two parts: piety, concerning our relationship to God; and the remaining part of justice, concerning our relationship to other humans. Indeed, Jesus summarized the law with two commandments: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind" (Matthew 22:37, DRA) and "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matthew 22:39, DRA).

Is greatest commandment a matter of providing care for God, or His providing care for us?

5. St. Thomas Aquinas explains piety in the following way:

"Man becomes a debtor to other men in various ways, according to their various excellence and the various benefits received from them. On both counts God holds first place.... On the second place... are our parents and our country, that have given us birth and nourishment.... Wherefore just as it belongs to religion to give worship to God, so does it belong to piety, in the second place, to give worship to one's parents and one's country." (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q.101, Art.1)

Does piety impose on us greater duties to our families and kinsfolk than strangers? By prosecuting his own father of the murder of a stranger, was Euthyphro acting impiously?