

## What is the point of the *Euthyphro*?

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This essay will argue that the point of the *Euthyphro* is to show why certain definitions of piety are unsatisfactory and through this to guide the reader towards a Socratic definition of piety. To show this, the problems of the first, second, third and fourth definitions of piety will first be examined. The failures of these definitions show the difficulties in defining piety and in doing so, it will be argued contribute to an understanding of a Socratic definition of piety as they show the problems a Socratic definition must avoid. This will be shown in an examination of a definition of piety constructed through this process which this essay will show takes note and avoid such problems. This essay will begin by examining the problems of Euthyphro's first definition of piety.

Euthyphro's first definition which starts the dialogue shows the reader immediately what some of the problems of definitions are. The first definition consists of an example. Piety is "prosecuting a criminal either for murder or for sacrilegious theft or some other such thing."<sup>1</sup> As Socrates notes this definition is hardly satisfactory. The first problem this definition has is that as an example, it is too specific. On this definition, one could only describe Athenian prosecutors and Euthyphro himself as pious and yet one could think of others who are also deserving of the title such as priests. This definition also does not tell us what piety and impiety really are. As a definition by example, the "single standard" that divides piety and impiety is still unknown.<sup>2</sup> Euthyphro's example may indeed be pious, but it does not give us the criterion by which one could judge other more complex or ambiguous examples. For a

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Euthyphro*, 5d

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 6c

definition through an example to be satisfactory, it must at least give us these and yet Euthyphro's example is relatively unclear. One could say for example, through this definition that prosecuting someone for trespassing is pious as you are prosecuting someone for it, but it does not make sense to say this. Therefore, in a Socratic definition of piety, the clear identification of the criterion is crucial. These difficulties lead to the second definition, one with even greater problems.

In response to Socrates, Euthyphro attempts to define piety a second time which reveals even more problems. The second definition goes as follows, "what is agreeable to the gods is holy and what is not agreeable is unholy."<sup>3</sup> The first problem with this definition is that there are multiple Gods and they quarrel and so they do not always agree on what is 'agreeable'. This is an ad hominem argument dependent on the fact Euthyphro's believes that stories about the Gods are true.<sup>4</sup> Socrates' second objection is more pertinent and rests on drawing a distinction between what is 'divinely approved' and what is 'pious'. Socrates' attempts to prove this with a grammatical distinction between the participle and inflected passive.<sup>5</sup> Socrates is drawing this distinction as the participle introduces the notion of an alteration in something while the inflected introduces the notion of the process which caused such an alteration.<sup>6</sup> Through this, Socrates wishes to show that just because it is 'divinely approved', does not explain why it is 'divinely approved' and therefore pious. Thus, the Gods must have some other reason to denote something as pious instead of simply because they approve it and it is this which Socrates' wants in his definition. This shows that appealing to the Gods directly in a definition of piety is not sufficient as the criterion of piety is still unknown and

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 7a

<sup>4</sup> P. T. Geach, "Plato's Euthyphro: An Analysis and Commentary." In *Plato's Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito: Critical Essays* ed. Rachana Kamtekar (Rowman & Littlefield, Maryland, 2005), 28.

<sup>5</sup> S. Marc Cohen, "Socrates on the Definition of Piety: Euthyphro 10A-11B." In *Plato's Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito: Critical Essays* ed. Rachana Kamtekar (Rowman & Littlefield, Maryland, 2005), 38.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

furthermore shows the dangers of having complete confidence in your knowledge of the God's conduct as it trapped Euthyphro in an ad hominem objection. Due to this, in a Socratic definition, these problems must be avoided. This essay will now go on to consider the problems of Euthyphro's third and fourth definitions.

The third and fourth definitions are linked and so will be dealt with together and their problems serve to guide us towards a Socratic definition. By the time of the third definition, Euthyphro and Socrates have agreed that piety is a part of justice and so are now looking for the part of justice which is holy. Euthyphro defines this as the part of justice "concerned with looking after the Gods."<sup>7</sup> The problems of this definition turn on the question of what 'looking after' here means. This is because Gods as perfect beings cannot be improved. Euthyphro answers by saying that we look after the Gods as a slave looks after their master.<sup>8</sup> When a slave serves their master, there is generally an end to which they work towards. Due to this, Socrates asks him about the end to which humans work towards for the Gods as answering this completes the definition. Euthyphro refuses to answer this question which leaves the definition unfinished with only the end needing to be defined. Instead, Euthyphro moves to another definition, piety now is knowing "how to say things gratifying to the gods in prayer and in sacrifice."<sup>9</sup> This is the worst attempt as piety now appears to simply be knowledge of how to bargain with the Gods as sacrifices are a form of donation. Euthyphro even calls it a "trading-skill."<sup>10</sup> If piety now consists of transactional acts than the Gods presumably benefit. Yet the Gods are perfect beings and so, how could they? This problem is why definitions of piety directed at actions towards the Gods are problematic in the *Euthyphro* as they suggest the idea of improvement. In the fourth, it is at its most problematic

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<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Euthyphro*, 12e

<sup>8</sup> Geach, "Plato's Euthyphro" 33.

<sup>9</sup> Plato, *Euthyphro*, 14a

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 14e

as since the Gods cannot be improved, the transaction is one-sided. Euthyphro attempts to overcome this problem by saying that the Gods get “gratification”.<sup>11</sup> Euthyphro thus reverts to the second definition that piety is what is approved by the Gods. This leaves the dialogue back where it started, and it ends with no definition of piety. However, in its failure, it has shown the difficulties of defining piety and given an unfinished definition in the third one, considering this, it is possible to construct a Socratic definition of piety from the dialogue.

Earlier, this essay defined part of the point of Euthyphro as guiding us towards a Socratic definition of piety even through its failure to reach one, to show this, the essay must now turn to the arguments of the constructivists who attempt to reach it. Some academics argue that Euthyphro took a wrong turn just before reaching a definition of piety acceptable to Socrates which occurs when he says piety is simply knowledge of prayers and sacrifice.<sup>12</sup> Socrates himself even remarks to Euthyphro that he has “turned aside when you were on the point of giving the answer.”<sup>13</sup> Some academics known as Constructivists attempt then to do what Euthyphro was unable to do in the dialogue. Due to the fragmentary nature of the Constructivists, this paragraph will focus on McPherran’s account. The definition of piety that McPherran attributes to Socrates is “piety is that part of justice which is a service of men to the gods, assisting the gods in their work, a work which produces some good result.”<sup>14</sup> This definition is essentially a modified version of the third with the end defined. As a definition it avoids several of the problems of Euthyphro’s. It avoids implying that the completely self-sufficient Gods are improved by our actions through saying ‘assisting’ instead of ‘looking after’ which was a problem faced by the third and fourth. The definition also answers Socrates’ demand for a criterion to judge pious actions by unlike an example

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 15a-15b

<sup>12</sup> C. C. W. Taylor. “The End of The Euthyphro.”, *Phronesis* 2 (1982): 112.

<sup>13</sup> Plato. *Euthyphro*, 14c

<sup>14</sup> Mark L. McPherran, “Socratic Piety in the *Euthyphro*.”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 23, No.3 (1985): 289.

which was why the first definition was discarded. It also avoids the idea that we can have absolute knowledge of the God's conduct in keeping the work of the Gods undefined. This sceptical formula would be acceptable to Socrates since he admits in the *Euthyphro* that he knows nothing about the Gods and expresses disbelief about the way people talk about the Gods with confidence in their knowledge.<sup>15</sup> It is also judicious not to claim to possess such knowledge since Euthyphro tries and fails to define piety because of his belief that he has it. This is especially true in the second definition where Euthyphro's confidence in such knowledge traps him in an ad hominem objection. Therefore, the Socratic definition in remaining sceptical of such claims to divine knowledge escapes the mistakes that Euthyphro made in his claims to have "accurate knowledge of all such things."<sup>16</sup> Knowledge which from his failure to define piety in the dialogue, it is clear he does not actually have and perhaps no one has.

To conclude the point of the *Euthyphro* is contained in showing why certain definitions of piety fail and in doing so guide us towards a positive definition of piety. This dialogue then warns us about giving definitions of piety that claim definitive knowledge of the God's role in the world which is why Euthyphro failed and offers a positive definition which does not claim to possess such definitive knowledge.

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<sup>15</sup> Plato, *Euthyphro*, 6b

<sup>16</sup> Plato, *Euthyphro*, 5a

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