

Plato's *Euthyphro*: short but interesting

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Plato's *Euthyphro* is one of the earliest and shortest of his dialogues. In this paper, I discuss its principle arguments and show how they raise important issues in logic, ethics and the philosophy of religion. The subject of the dialogue is holiness or piety; the dialogue is an attempt, which seems ultimately to end in failure, to say what τὸ ὅσιον is – the Greek expression is translated as 'the holy' or 'the pious'. In a secular environment such as ours, it may be difficult for our interest to be kindled by such a topic. However, a charge of impiety was a key element in the indictment against Socrates which led to his trial, conviction and execution.

The charge against Socrates provides the dramatic backdrop to the dialogue, the immediate setting for which is the chance meeting of Euthyphro and Socrates outside the office, in Athens, of the magistrate with responsibility for cases involving religious matters. Socrates is surprised to find that Euthyphro is also involved in religious litigation and is in fact prosecuting his own father for the homicide of a slave. Euthyphro is motivated by a pious concern that a religious pollution would contaminate his father's reputation and family should such an offence go unpunished. Socrates, given the charge against him, decides that Euthyphro is just the person to help him understand and rebut the charge. Clearly, Euthyphro must know what piety is in order to bring such a case.

We do not know whether such a discussion took place, or whether Euthyphro even existed; if the discussion did take place, we don't know the extent to which Plato's account is accurate. With regard to the philosophical content of the dialogue, the standard view is that Plato developed his views over a period of time, but that the earlier dialogues may to a greater or lesser extent represent Socrates' own views.

In addition to the question of philosophical content, there is also the question of philosophical method. The typical approach to philosophical problem solving in the earlier dialogues is the method of elenchus; putting a series of questions to a respondent in order to obtain clarification of contentious concepts, exposing inconsistencies and refuting incoherent claims. The aim of this process is not to replace a false belief with one that is true, it is rather to make the respondent realise that what he previously took to be certain may not be in fact be the case; it is to establish a sense of puzzlement that Socrates believes is the pre-condition of achieving knowledge. In distinguishing Socrates' and Plato's respective contributions, Aristotle is the key witness. In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle reports that Socrates was interested in matters of ethics and "was the first to concentrate his attention on definitions", but Plato concluded that "the objects thus defined cannot be any sensible things, but are of some different kind". (*Metaphysics*, 1, VI, 987b.) Aristotle identifies here a distinctly Socratic contribution to philosophy. He does not, however, here or elsewhere as far as I know, attribute the method of elenchus to Socrates; but if this was a feature of Socrates' approach to argument, it may help to explain in part his unpopularity at the time. (Such an approach, if pursued assiduously, is not calculated to endear the person who poses the questions to the object of such an examination.)

Euthyphro, questioned by Socrates, offers in the course of the dialogue three definitions of piety, whose shortcomings Socrates exposes with ease. The most philosophically challenging part of the dialogue comes between the second and third definitions. Before moving to this central argument, it is worthwhile spending some time considering the significance of Socrates' pursuit of definitions, his wish to answer questions of the form 'What is X?' where 'X' is an ethical expression.

When Euthyphro initially offers examples of what it is to act in a pious or holy way, Socrates dismisses this approach. In his view, the question 'What is piety?' cannot be answered by providing a list, even a complete list, of items claimed to be examples of whatever it is under discussion, what it is which enables us to understand that these are examples of X. So he urges Euthyphro "to describe the actual feature that makes all pious actions pious ...a single characteristic". (*Euthyphro* 6d, Tredennick translation, 26). The Greek expressions which are translated here as 'the actual feature' and 'a single

characteristic' are εἶδος and ἰδέα, terms which would later play such an important role in Plato's developed theory of ideas.) Socrates clarifies his request:

... explain to me what this characteristic is in itself, so that by fixing my eyes upon it and using it as a pattern, I may be able to describe any action as pious if it corresponds to the pattern... (Tredennick, 26)

Euthyphro responds by defining the pious as what the gods love. When Socrates points out that the gods love different even inconsistent things, Euthyphro agrees to a modified version put forward by Socrates, the pious is now what all the gods love.

Socrates reminds Euthyphro of his request a little later, admonishing him:

... when I asked you what piety is you were unwilling to disclose its essence to me and merely stated one of its attributes ... but you have not told me what it is that has this attribute. (Tredennick, 33.)

This passage is important in the history of philosophy as it is apparently the first appearance of the distinction between essence, the defining characteristic without which what is under consideration would not be what it is claimed to be, and its non-essential features or properties. Socrates holds the view that we cannot know anything about the latter until we know the former. (Robinson, 53; Geach, 25.) Geach finds something odd here.

Socrates asks for a definition of a word which adds something to what we may ordinarily already know, that is how to use the word 'X', although we aren't supposed to know in the type of case being considered what X is, what its essence is. As Geach points out, if we can provide a general account of a term, we don't need examples to show its meaning; alternatively, if we lack a general account, we do not know that putative examples of X are in fact genuine, for we do not know that the identification has been made correctly. For Geach Socrates' position is just a fallacy: "We know heaps of things without being able to define the terms in which we express our knowledge." (Geach, 25.) So long as we interpret Socrates' quest as a demand for a unique and unambiguously assignable feature this is a sound argument. And this is indeed what Socrates is concerned with in *Euthyphro* and other earlier dialogues.

Whilst it is clear that we typically use words correctly, we would find it difficult to define some of the expressions we use if pressed to provide a single defining characteristic. That providing the meaning of a word conforms to this paradigm has of course been criticised by Wittgenstein, among others. (*Philosophical Investigations*, part 1, sections 66 and 67.) Taking games as his example, Wittgenstein argued that there is no single feature distinctive of all and only games.

Don't say: "There *must* be something common, or they wouldn't be called 'games' " – but *look and see* whether there is anything that is common to all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that.

And he famously makes use of the concept of "family resemblances" to develop this view. Although, characteristically, Wittgenstein did not generalise the point he seems to be making by way of the examples he has chosen, he has been interpreted to be making an important point in the theory of meaning.

However there are occasions when we may feel uneasy with such an account of what a word might mean, those words precisely which relate to matters of controversy. Suppose someone is accused of, say, racist or sexist conduct, the person accused may ask for the allegation to be made absolutely clear and may not be satisfied with examples of such conduct. The person may respond that his/her action differs in a certain key aspect or aspects from the examples proffered; what is required is an account which would cover the earlier examples and the case in point, the provision of a sufficiently distinctive characteristic in respect of which a certain act or practice can be identified as such.

It may be that Wittgenstein's concept of a criterion could be put to some use here. Instead of the search for an elusive single defining characteristic, what is needed is a necessary and sufficient condition, or set of conditions by reference to which classification can be made. This is less exacting requirement but, if fulfilled, it may be able to illuminate certain contentious areas. Even if Euthyphro is unable to provide Socrates with the type

of definition he seeks, the idea that the pious is what all the gods love may be ultimately a helpful suggestion.

Socrates' response to this modified second definition significantly raises the level of philosophical analysis and provides the focus upon which much recent philosophical discussion has concentrated. He wants to show 'the pious' cannot be defined as 'what is loved by the gods'. The argument he now develops has been variously described as "intricate" (Elwyn-Jones, 15; Hall, 1.), "ingenious" (Brown, 2.), "of some elegance" (Allen, 43) and even "very subtle" (Hoerber, but also "illogical" 102). It has been further criticised as "unclear" (Cohen, 35), "baffling" (ref. needed), but also praised by Flew as "a paradigm of philosophical analysis" (Flew, 28.). I shall present the argument as briefly as possible, show how I think the argument is intended to work and then make a few observations. At first, the ground has to be prepared.

Having agreed that:

... piety is what all the gods love, and ... what all the gods hate is impiety.
(*Euthyphro*, 9d; Tredennick, 31.)

Euthyphro is confronted by the following challenge from Socrates, a challenge which has become known as Euthyphro's Dilemma:

[I]s what is pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved? (*Euthyphro*, 10a; Tredennick, 31.)

Euthyphro admits that he doesn't understand the question, so Socrates offers the following clarification. Consider an object which is carried; it is in these circumstances a carried thing. It becomes a carried thing because it is carried. It isn't the case that the object is carried because it is a carried thing. The act of carrying is in some sense prior to the state of being carried. Socrates offers other examples involving seeing and leading. He generalises the point and draws the inference that it is the same with loving.

[An object of love] is not loved by those who love it because it is an object of love, but it is an object of love because it is loved. (*Euthyphro*, 10c; Tredennick, 32.)

Socrates secures Euthyphro's agreement to the former of the two options that had been put to him, that what is pious is loved by the gods because it is pious (and for no other reason) and not pious because it is loved. Socrates then points out that it is because a thing is loved by the gods that it is an object of love or dear to the gods. On this basis Socrates concludes that what is loved by the gods/dear to the gods is not the same as what is pious; the two are different.

Euthyphro has not followed the argument, so Socrates has to spell it out for him

But if what is god-beloved were identical with what is pious, my dear Euthyphro, then if what is pious were loved because it is pious, what is god-beloved would be loved because it is god-beloved; and if what is god-beloved were god-beloved because it is loved by the gods, then what is pious would be pious because it is loved by them. ... they are entirely different from each other. The one is lovable because it is loved, and the other is loved because it is loved. (*Euthyphro*, 10e – 11a; Tredennick, 33.)¹

Basically, it is claimed that the argument shows that whereas what the gods love is (in a state of being) loved because it is loved, what is pious is not pious because the gods love it. So the expressions 'loved by the gods' and 'what is pious' are not "logically parallel" (Elwyn-Jones, 101). However, Euthyphro cannot cope with this argument, even though the argument is easier to express more clearly in the original Greek where different words are used to refer to, for example, an object which is carried for which the passive participle is used, and the corresponding passive indicative, something is carried.

I give below how I think Plato intended this argument to achieve the desired outcome.

¹ Cf. Allen's translation (42 -43) of the last sentence here, which with parenthetical guidance seems much clearer: 'For the one (what is dear to the gods) is of the sort to be loved *because* it is loved; the other (the holy), because it is of the sort to be loved, *therefore* it is loved.'

Plato's argument that 'pious' does not mean the same as 'loved by the gods'

It has been agreed:

- A. It isn't the case that the pious is pious because it loved by the gods.
- B. A thing is not loved by those who love it because it is in a state of being loved; it is in a state of being loved because someone loves it.
- C. 'What is dear to the gods' is the same as 'what is loved by the gods'. (A terminological variation introduced by Socrates in the course of the dialogue.)

Then, if:

- 1. What is pious is loved because it is what is pious; (not pious because it is loved) and
- 2. What is dear to the gods is the defining feature of what is pious;

Then, if:

- 3. What is dear to the gods is loved because it is dear to the gods (Substitution of 'what is pious' in 1. by 'what is dear to the gods' in accordance with 2.); and
- 4. (=3)What is dear to the gods is what is dear to the gods because it is loved;

Then:

- 5. What is pious is pious because it is loved by the gods (Substitution of 'dear to the gods' in 4. by 'pious', again in accordance with 2.).

But 5 is inconsistent with 1. So what step in the argument needs to be rejected? 1 cannot be rejected; it has been jointly agreed. The move from 1 to 3 cannot be rejected, because it only involves the substitution of terms with the same meaning. The move from 4 to 5 must be retained on the same ground. 4 is merely a restatement of 3. The only remaining item is 2. We are obliged to reject the equivalence of 'what is dear to the gods' and 'what is pious'.

Is this argument valid? Scholarly opinion is not unanimous. Brown offers a "formally valid" reconstruction of the argument (Brown, 5); others are critical to varying degrees. It

can be seen however that the argument depends firstly on relevant equivalences and then on the use of substitution to carry the argument forward.

The legitimacy of the substitutability of terms with the same meaning *salva veritate*, that is retaining the truth value of the original statement when one of the terms is replaced by the other, is a difficult area of philosophical logic and revolves around a distinction between what terms refer to, their denotation, and what the terms actually mean in a narrower sense, their connotation. For example, the expressions “creature with a heart” and “creature with a kidney” refer to the same creatures, but they are not identical in meaning. The mutual substitutability of suitably semantically similar expressions is defended by some logicians on the ground that it is intuitively obvious or provable, or both. After all, what is true or false of something cannot be altered just because we change the way we refer to it. Others contend that the principle cannot be true by virtue of obvious counter-examples, typically those involving psychological sentential frameworks of the form ‘ $x \phi$ s that p ’, where ‘ ϕ ’ is a psychological verb such as ‘knows’, ‘believes’, ‘hopes’ etc. For instance:

Peter believes that Cicero denounced Catiline .

But Cicero is the same person as Tully .

We cannot infer from this that:

Peter believes that Tully denounced Catiline.

For Peter may not know Cicero is the same person as Tully; he may even believe that Cicero and Tully are different people.

Even if ‘what is pious’ and ‘what is loved by the gods’ (or ‘what is dear to the gods’) refer to the same states of mind, objects or procedures, it is surely clear that these expressions are not identical in meaning.

In addition, it is arguable that the contexts provided for substitution are themselves ambivalent. Geach provides a pair of examples of particular relevance to this discussion (Geach, 29):

I hit him because he was the man who had just hit me.

I hit him because he was my father.

(The man who hit him was his father, but that wasn't reason for hitting him back.) Consider again the original options: is what is pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods? Geach's examples show that 'because' can behave like 'believes'. But, in any case, Cohen has argued (Cohen, 37 – 41) that the first and second occurrences of 'because' in the original options do not bear the same meaning. He argues that the first option offers a reason why the gods love the pious, it is pious. The second option, according to Cohen, offers a logically sufficient condition for identifying something as pious. *We* can tell that it is pious because the gods love it. It may give us a reason, but it is not the gods' reason. The original choice offered to Euthyphro does not therefore offer a choice of genuine options.

The remainder of the dialogue, though not without interest, can be passed over quickly. It involves a further attempt to define the pious, which Socrates deals with easily. Some commentators have found here an incipient attempt to place piety in a larger context involving justice to gods and men, a foreshadowing, it is said, of the position Plato later developed in *The Republic*. Euthyphro, somewhat baffled, returns to his contention that the pious is what is loved by the gods. Socrates suggests that they need to start all over again, but Euthyphro makes his excuses and leaves.

At the end the dialogue the discussion seems to have gone round in a circle, without much progress having been made. The question was about defining pious or impious conduct and Euthyphro's dilemma is stated in relation to the gods and popular theology of Plato's time. However, the question as it is posed is independent of whether we believe in gods or God, it is a problem concerning how the ethical expressions which we use can be defined.

The problem may be expressed in terms of what has become known in philosophy as the naturalistic fallacy. This fallacy is, allegedly, committed by those who try to define

ethical terms, 'good', 'right', 'bad', 'wrong' and so on, in terms of some other attribute or combination of attributes which are always present, and whose presence can be determined by an empirical or natural procedure, when whatever it is that is under consideration, an attitude of mind, action or practice, is deemed to be good or right etc. Taking 'good' as the key ethical expression, it is said that this attribute or combination of attributes is identical with the good. Examples of such attributes are what is conducive to pleasure or conducive to the survival of the species.

Earlier the distinction between the denotation and connotation of an expression was mentioned; it was seen that two expressions may refer to, designate, the same object or objects, but do not mean the same. Reference was also made to the view that if two expressions have the same connotation they should be mutually substitutable without a change in truth value of the statements in which they occur. So, if 'good' means 'conducive to pleasure', the statement: 'What is good is what is conducive to pleasure', which purports to be informative, reduces to the statement that what is good is good, or what is conducive to pleasure is conducive to pleasure, which do not convey any information. Conversely, if this statement - What is good is what is conducive to pleasure. - is intended to be significant, it is no longer certain in the way that those who assert this claim that it is. As Prior puts it (7):

What these people would plainly like to hold is that goodness is both identical with pleasantness and not identical with it; and, of course, it cannot be done. They want to regard 'What is pleasant is good' as a significant assertion; and it can only be so if the pleasantness of what is pleasant is one thing, and its goodness another.

In this case the identification expressed can always be disputed, and equally so with any other similar statement claiming to provide the essence of what is good.

The problem was of some concern to mediaeval theologians for whom it assumed the form: Is that which is good, good because God commands it, or does God command it because it is good? If the former alternative is preferred then there is no independent standard of morality; in this case there is nothing to which we can appeal when there are

different claims about what God commands. If the latter alternative is chosen then morality is independent of God's will and is or should be intellectually accessible; in this case we should not be in need of God's commandments to guide us. Thus formulated it is also vulnerable to the queries about significance that have been identified above. As Locke noted in his *Essay* (I. iii. 18, quoted in Prior, 97).

If virtue be taken for actions conformable to God's will ... then this proposition, "That virtue is the best worship of God", will be most true and most certain, but of very little use in human life, since it will amount to no more than this, viz. "That God is pleased with the doing of what he commands", which a man may know to be certainly true, without knowing what is that God doth command

The way out of this dilemma for theists is to claim that it is impossible to conceive of any conceptual distinction between what God wills and the goodness of what he wills; we can and should rely upon what God commands. Those of a different theological disposition will not be reassured by this argument.

These considerations strongly suggest that 'good' in its ethical sense is indefinable; but this may not be such a strange outcome as it first appears. After all, a definition depends upon other words which have an established meaning. But the words which seem appropriate here, terms of moral approval, or otherwise, are those whose application is to be ultimately justified by reference to the good. Bentham, quoted by Prior (104), is quite explicit about this. (The quotations within the following quotation are from Bentham's *Principles of Morals and Legislation*. I, x and I ii) Prior writes that Bentham treats ...

... 'the principle of utility' – that is, 'that principle which approves or disapproves of any action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have ... to promote or oppose happiness' – not as a mere definition, but as the self-evident premiss of all true and significant moral propositions. 'Is it susceptible of direct proof? it should seem not: for that which is used to prove everything else, cannot itself be proved'

Finally, the title of my paper refers to the brevity of Plato's *Euthyphro*, Geach at the start of his paper on this dialogue says (23): 'The arguments are apparently simple,

but some of them ... lead naturally on to thorny problems of modern philosophy'; I hope that I have shown that these problems are not only thorny but of interest too.

11/12/11.

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