Introduction to Plato’s Euthyphro
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In the Meno, Anytus had parted from Socrates with the significant words: ‘That in any city, and particularly in the city of Athens, it is easier to do men harm than to do them good;’ and Socrates was anticipating another opportunity of talking with him. In the Euthyphro, Socrates is awaiting his trial for impiety. But before the trial begins, Plato would like to put the world on their trial, and convince them of ignorance in that very matter touching which Socrates is accused. An incident which may perhaps really have occurred in the family of Euthyphro, a learned Athenian diviner and soothsayer, furnishes the occasion of the discussion.

This Euthyphro and Socrates are represented as meeting in the porch of the King Archon. (Compare Theaet.) Both have legal business in hand. Socrates is defendant in a suit for impiety which Meletus has brought against him (it is remarked by the way that he is not a likely man himself to have brought a suit against another); and Euthyphro too is plaintiff in an action for murder, which he has brought against his own father. The latter has originated in the following manner:—A poor dependant of the family had slain one of their domestic slaves in Naxos. The guilty person was bound and thrown into a ditch by the command of Euthyphro’s father, who sent to the interpreters of religion at Athens to ask what should be done with him. Before the messenger came back the criminal had died from hunger and exposure.

This is the origin of the charge of murder which Euthyphro brings against his father. Socrates is confident that before he could have undertaken the responsibility of such a prosecution, he must have been perfectly informed of the nature of piety and impiety; and as he is going to be tried for impiety himself, he thinks that he cannot do better than learn of Euthyphro (who will be admitted by everybody, including the judges, to be an unimpeachable authority) what piety is, and what is impiety. What then is piety?

Euthyphro, who, in the abundance of his knowledge, is very willing to undertake all the responsibility, replies: That piety is doing as I do, prosecuting your father (if he is guilty) on a charge of murder; doing as the gods do—as Zeus did to Cronos, and Cronos to Uranus.

Socrates has a dislike to these tales of mythology, and he fancies that this dislike of his may be the reason why he is charged with impiety. ‘Are they really true?’ ‘Yes, they are;’ and Euthyphro will gladly tell Socrates some more of them. But Socrates would like first of all to have a more satisfactory answer to the question, ‘What is piety?’ ‘Doing as I do, charging a father with murder,’ may be a single instance of piety, but can hardly be regarded as a general definition.

Euthyphro replies, that ‘Piety is what is dear to the gods, and impiety is what is not dear to them.’ But may there not be differences of opinion, as among men, so also among the gods? Especially, about good and evil, which have no fixed rule; and these are precisely the sort of differences which give rise to quarrels. And therefore what may be dear to one god may not be dear to another, and the same action may be both pious and impious; e.g. your chastisement of your father, Euthyphro, may be dear or pleasing to Zeus (who inflicted a similar chastisement on his own father), but not equally pleasing to Cronos or Uranus (who suffered at the hands of their sons).

Euthyphro answers that there is no difference of opinion, either among gods or men, as to the propriety of punishing a murderer. Yes, rejoins Socrates, when they know him to be
a murderer; but you are assuming the point at issue. If all the circumstances of the case are
considered, are you able to show that your father was guilty of murder, or that all the gods are
agreed in approving of our prosecution of him? And must you not allow that what is hated by
one god may be liked by another? Waiving this last, however, Socrates proposes to amend the
definition, and say that 'what all the gods love is pious, and what they all hate is impious.' To
this Euthyphro agrees.

Socrates proceeds to analyze the new form of the definition. He shows that in other cases
the act precedes the state; e.g. the act of being carried, loved, etc. precedes the state of being
carried, loved, etc., and therefore that which is dear to the gods is dear to the gods because it is
first loved of them, not loved of them because it is dear to them. But the pious or holy is loved
by the gods because it is pious or holy, which is equivalent to saying, that it is loved by them
because it is dear to them. Here then appears to be a contradiction,—Euthyphro has been giving
an attribute or accident of piety only, and not the essence. Euthyphro acknowledges himself that
his explanations seem to walk away or go round in a circle, like the moving figures of Daedalus,
the ancestor of Socrates, who has communicated his art to his descendants.

Socrates, who is desirous of stimulating the indolent intelligence of Euthyphro, raises the
question in another manner: 'Is all the pious just?' 'Yes.' 'Is all the just pious?' 'No.' 'Then
what part of justice is pious?' Euthyphro replies that piety is that part of justice which 'attends'
to the gods, as there is another part of justice which 'attends' to men. But what is the meaning of
'attending' to the gods? The word 'attending,' when applied to dogs, horses, and men, implies
that in some way they are made better. But how do pious or holy acts make the gods any better?
Euthyphro explains that he means by pious acts, acts of service or ministration. Yes; but the
ministrations of the husbandman, the physician, and the builder have an end. To what end do
we serve the gods, and what do we help them to accomplish? Euthyphro replies, that all these
difficult questions cannot be resolved in a short time; and he would rather say simply that piety
is knowing how to please the gods in word and deed, by prayers and sacrifices. In other words,
says Socrates, piety is 'a science of asking and giving'—asking what we want and giving what
they want; in short, a mode of doing business between gods and men. But although they are the
givers of all good, how can we give them any good in return? 'Nay, but we give them honour.'
Then we give them not what is beneficial, but what is pleasing or dear to them; and this is the
point which has been already disproved.

Socrates, although weary of the subterfuges and evasions of Euthyphro, remains unshaken
in his conviction that he must know the nature of piety, or he would never have prosecuted his
old father. He is still hoping that he will condescend to instruct him. But Euthyphro is in a hurry
and cannot stay. And Socrates’ last hope of knowing the nature of piety before he is prosecuted
for impiety has disappeared. As in the Euthydemus the irony is carried on to the end.

The Euthyphro is manifestly designed to contrast the real nature of piety and impiety with the
popular conceptions of them. But when the popular conceptions of them have been overthrown,
Socrates does not offer any definition of his own: as in the Laches and Lysis, he prepares the
way for an answer to the question which he has raised; but true to his own character, refuses to
answer himself.

Euthyphro is a religionist, and is elsewhere spoken of, if he be the same person, as the author
of a philosophy of names, by whose ‘prancing steeds’ Socrates in the Cratylus is carried away.
He has the conceit and self-confidence of a Sophist; no doubt that he is right in prosecuting
his father has ever entered into his mind. Like a Sophist too, he is incapable either of framing
a general definition or of following the course of an argument. His wrong-headedness, one-
sidedness, narrowness, positiveness, are characteristic of his priestly office. His failure
to apprehend an argument may be compared to a similar defect which is observable in the
rhapsode Ion. But he is not a bad man, and he is friendly to Socrates, whose familiar sign he
recognizes with interest. Though unable to follow him he is very willing to be led by him, and
eagerly catches at any suggestion which saves him from the trouble of thinking. Moreover he is
the enemy of Meletus, who, as he says, is availing himself of the popular dislike to innovations
in religion in order to injure Socrates; at the same time he is amusingly confident that he has

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weapons in his own armoury which would be more than a match for him. He is quite sincere in
his prosecution of his father, who has accidentally been guilty of homicide, and is not wholly
free from blame. To purge away the crime appears to him in the light of a duty, whoever may
be the criminal.

Thus begins the contrast between the religion of the letter, or of the narrow and unenlightened
conscience, and the higher notion of religion which Socrates vainly endeavours to elicit from
him. ‘Piety is doing as I do’ is the idea of religion which first occurs to him, and to many others
who do not say what they think with equal frankness. For men are not easily persuaded that
any other religion is better than their own; or that other nations, e.g. the Greeks in the time of
Socrates, were equally serious in their religious beliefs and difficulties. The chief difference
between us and them is, that they were slowly learning what we are in process of forgetting.

Greek mythology hardly admitted of the distinction between accidental homicide and murder:
that the pollution of blood was the same in both cases is also the feeling of the Athenian diviner.
He had not as yet learned the lesson, which philosophy was teaching, that Homer and Hesiod,
if not banished from the state, or whipped out of the assembly, as Heracleitus more rudely
proposed, at any rate were not to be appealed to as authorities in religion; and he is ready to
defend his conduct by the examples of the gods. These are the very tales which Socrates cannot
abide; and his dislike of them, as he suspects, has branded him with the reputation of impiety.
Here is one answer to the question, ‘Why Socrates was put to death,’ suggested by the way.
Another is conveyed in the words, ‘The Athenians do not care about any man being thought
wise until he begins to make other men wise; and then for some reason or other they are angry;’
which may be said to be the rule of popular toleration in most other countries, and not at Athens
only. In the course of the argument Socrates remarks that the controversial nature of morals and
religion arises out of the difficulty of verifying them. There is no measure or standard to which
they can be referred.

The next definition, ‘Piety is that which is loved of the gods,’ is shipwrecked on a refined
distinction between the state and the act, corresponding respectively to the adjective (philon)
and the participle (philoumenon), or rather perhaps to the participle and the verb (philoumenon
and phileitai). The act is prior to the state (as in Aristotle the energeia precedes the dunamis);
and the state of being loved is preceded by the act of being loved. But piety or holiness is
preceded by the act of being pious, not by the act of being loved; and therefore piety and the
state of being loved are different. Through such subtleties of dialectic Socrates is working his
way into a deeper region of thought and feeling. He means to say that the words ‘loved of the
gods’ express an attribute only, and not the essence of piety.

Then follows the third and last definition, ‘Piety is a part of justice.’ Thus far Socrates has
proceeded in placing religion on a moral foundation. He is seeking to realize the harmony
of religion and morality, which the great poets Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Pindar had
unconsciously anticipated, and which is the universal want of all men. To this the soothsayer
adds the ceremonial element, ‘attending upon the gods.’ When further interrogated by Socrates
as to the nature of this ‘attention to the gods,’ he replies, that piety is an affair of business, a
science of giving and asking, and the like. Socrates points out the anthropomorphism of these
notions, (compare Symp.; Republic; Politicus.) But when we expect him to go on and show
that the true service of the gods is the service of the spirit and the co-operation with them in all
things true and good, he stops short; this was a lesson which the soothsayer could not have been
made to understand, and which every one must learn for himself.

There seem to be altogether three aims or interests in this little Dialogue: (1) the dialectical
development of the idea of piety; (2) the antithesis of true and false religion, which is carried to
a certain extent only; (3) the defence of Socrates.

The subtle connection with the Apology and the Crito; the holding back of the conclusion,
as in the Charmides, Lysis, Laches, Protagoras, and other Dialogues; the deep insight into the
religious world; the dramatic power and play of the two characters; the inimitable irony, are
reasons for believing that the Euthyphro is a genuine Platonic writing. The spirit in which the
popular representations of mythology are denounced recalls Republic II. The virtue of piety has
been already mentioned as one of five in the Protagoras, but is not reckoned among the four cardinal virtues of Republic IV. The figure of Daedalus has occurred in the Meno; that of Proteus in the Euthydemus and Io. The kingly science has already appeared in the Euthydemus, and will reappear in the Republic and Statesman. But neither from these nor any other indications of similarity or difference, and still less from arguments respecting the suitableness of this little work to aid Socrates at the time of his trial or the reverse, can any evidence of the date be obtained.