PLATO'S *EUTHYPHRO*

An Analysis and Commentary

The *Euthyphro* might well be given to undergraduates to read early in their philosophical training. The arguments are apparently simple, but some of them, as I shall show, lead naturally on to thorny problems of modern philosophy. Another benefit that could be gained from reading the *Euthyphro* is that the reader may learn to be forewarned against some common fallacies and debating tricks in moral disputes.

We may pass rapidly over the pages in which the stage is set for the discussion (2a-3e). Socrates and Euthyphro meet outside the office of the King Archon, where each has to "put in an appearance" respecting a legal action. Socrates tells Euthyphro how he is being prosecuted for impiety. Euthyphro is pained but not surprised; his own speeches in the Ecclesia are ridiculed when he speaks of things divine; no doubt Socrates' well-known divine sign has roused popular prejudice.

With some reluctance, if we may judge by the form of his answers ("I'm prosecuting.—People will think me crazy.—It's an old man; he won't fly away. —It's my own father. —For murder"), Euthyphro tells Socrates what his own cause is. Socrates is naturally astounded: surely then the victim must be some other member of the family, or Euthyphro would never have started the prosecution (3e-4b).

Euthyphro replies that whether the victim belongs to your own family or not does not really matter; what matters is whether the man was wrongfully killed. Then he tells the story. The man who died was a dependent of Euthyphro, a farm labourer on the family estate in Naxos. In a drunken brawl he quarreled with and killed one of the household slaves. Euthyphro's father after having the killer tied up and thrown in a ditch, sent off to ask the authorities in Athens what was to be done—and then put the matter out of his mind. It was no concern of his if the fellow died. Before an

answer came back from the mainland, the prisoner had in fact died from hunger, cold and his bonds. Euthyphro felt he could not sit at his father's fireside and table as if nothing had happened; to the indignation of all his family, he thought himself obliged to prosecute his father; only so could he or his father be made clean of blood-guiltiness. The family protested that in fact the father had not murdered anybody; even if he had, the man was himself a killer and not worth considering; anyhow, it is impious for a son to prosecute his own father. This only shows, says Euthyphro, how little his relatives understood piety and impiety (4b-e).

Since the attitude of Euthyphro's relatives in the matter was likely to be shared by others and since Euthyphro knew that his own religious attitude attracted derision rather than respect, we may suppose Euthyphro to be well aware that his father would not in fact be in any serious legal danger; the prosecution is just a gesture. What sort of gesture? Some commentators call it superstition: even an accidental death—and this is practically the case in hand!—would bring on the man who caused it a contagious defilement, and Euthyphro is going through the proper motions to cleanse this away from the house. Others, just like Euthyphro's relatives, morally condemn him for making such a fuss, especially with his own father involved.

An unprejudiced reading shows that Euthyphro is not represented as merely superstitious about a ritual contamination; what upset Euthyphro was the way his father "was heedless and made little of the man, even if he should die." How far Euthyphro was from making a fuss about nothing comes out in the fact that in quite a number of civilized jurisdictions a man who acted like Euthyphro's father would be held guilty of a serious crime.

Euthyphro is represented as an earnest and simple believer in the old traditional religion of the Hellenes. To him, therefore, the defence of a poor man's case may well have seemed a religious duty: Zeus of the Suppliant was there to hear the cry of the poor man with none to help him, and to punish those who walked in blind pride. Moreover, Euthyphro says, had not Zeus himself punished his own father's wicked deeds?

Euthyphro's genuine belief in the old legend is something Socrates finds it hard to stomach (5e-6c), but he does not try to shake it. Instead, he adopts a line of argument that we find paralleled in

many dialogues. If Euthyphro really knows that his own action is pious, then he must be able to say what is pious; he must not just give examples of pious actions, like his own action or again the punishment of sacrilegious robbery, but say "what kind of thing it is that makes *whatever* is pious to be pious" (5d and 6d).

We need not here enter upon the vexed questions whether language like the piece I have just translated (6d 10-11) is meant to imply a full-blown theory of Forms, and whether we are to ascribe such a theory to the historical Socrates. Let us rather concentrate on two assumptions Socrates makes: (A) that if you know you are correctly predicating a given term 'T' you must "know what it is to be T," in the sense of being able to give a general criterion for a thing's being T; (B) that it is no use to try and arrive at the meaning of 'T' by giving examples of things that are T. (B) in fact follows from (A). If you can already give a general account of what 'T' means, then you need no examples to arrive at the meaning of 'T'; if on the other hand you lack such a general account, then, by assumption (A), you cannot know that any examples of things that are T are genuine ones, for you do not know when you are predicating 'T' correctly.

The style of mistaken thinking—as I take it to be—that comes from accepting these two assumptions may well be called *the Socratic fallacy*, for its *locus classicus* is the Socratic dialogues. Its influence has, I think, been greater even than that of the theory of Forms; certainly people can fall into it independently of any theory of Forms. I have myself heard a philosopher refuse to allow that a proper name is a word in a sentence unless a "rigorous definition" of 'word' could be produced; again, if someone remarks that machines are certainly not even alive, still less able to think and reason, he may be challenged to define 'alive'. Both these controversial moves are clear examples of the Socratic fallacy; and neither originates from any belief in Forms.

Let us be clear that this *is* a fallacy, and nothing better. It has stimulated philosophical enquiry, but still it is a fallacy. We know heaps of things without being able to define the terms in which we express our knowledge. Formal definitions are only one way of elucidating terms; a set of examples may in a given case be more useful than a formal definition.

We can indeed see in advance why a Socratic dialogue so often

ends in complete failure to elucidate the meaning of a term 'T'. If the parties to a discussion are agreed, broadly speaking, about the application of a term, then they can set out to find a criterion for applying it that shall yield the agreed application. On the other hand, if they are agreed on the criterion for applying the term, then they can see whether this criterion justifies predicating 'T' of a given example. But if there is no initial agreement either on examples of things that certainly are T or on criteria for predicating 'T', then the discussion is bound to be abortive; the parties to it cannot know what they are about—they do not even know whether each of them means the same by saying 'T'. Any profit they gain from the discussion will be *per accidens; per se* the discussion is futile.

How harmful the rejection of examples may be we see from the *Theaetetus*. Theaetetus, asked what knowledge is, gives some instances of knowledge—geometry and shoemaking and the various crafts. Socrates objects that these are only examples, and he wants to know just what knowledge *is*. To give examples, each of which is the knowledge *of* so-and-so, is to miss the point—as though, asked what clay was, one mentioned potter's clay, brickmaker's clay, and so on (146d-147a). But of course any knowledge *is* knowledge *of* so-and-so; and a correct definition would have to run "Knowledge of so-and-so is . . . ," with the "so-and-so" occurring over again in the *definiens*. Moreover, the definition "Knowledge is sense-perception" could have been dismissed at once by looking to Theaetetus' examples of knowledge.

I am sure that imbuing a mind with the Socratic fallacy is quite likely to be morally harmful. Socrates, let us suppose, starts chatting with an ingenuous youth and says he has been puzzled about what injustice is. The youth says "Well, that's easy; swindling is unjust." Socrates asks him what swindling is; no, examples will not do—a formal definition is required. Failing that, we don't know, do we?, what swindling is, or that it is unjust. The dialogue, we may suppose, ends in the usual *aporia*. The ingenuous youth decides that perhaps swindling is not unjust; he turns to ways of villainy, and ends as one of the Thirty Tyrants. After all, a number of Socrates' young men did end that way.

Pressed for a formal definition, then, Euthyphro comes out with this one: "The pious is what is liked by the Gods, the impious

what is not liked" (6d 10). As in English, so in Greek, we must not take the negative word in the second clause for a bare negation: 'not liked', here, = 'disliked'.

The next argument Socrates uses has force only *ad hominem;* it explicitly depends on Euthyphro's traditionalist belief that stories about the quarrels of the Gods are literally true. What then, Socrates asks, do *men* quarrel about? For questions of fact—accountancy, measurement, weighing—there are agreed decision procedures. It is precisely questions of fair or unfair, right or wrong, that are undecidable and lead to quarrels. If, then, the Gods do quarrel, presumably they too quarrel about such questions; actions that one God thinks just another thinks unjust, and so they quarrel. Thus one and the same action may be both God-loved, and thus pious, and God-hated, and thus impious. Moreover, if we assume the truth of the traditional stories, different Gods may be expected to view with very different eyes acts like Euthyphro's: the chastisement of parents. Euthyphro's appeal to the example of Zeus is thus neatly turned against him (7b-8b).

This passage is of some historical interest; it may well be the first appearance in Western philosophy of the distinction between factual questions, for which there is a definite and accepted decision procedure, and moral questions, for which there is no such procedure. To my mind, this distinction is none the better for being an old one.

It very often happens that people who have no relevant disagreement about what ought to be done in given circumstances nevertheless quarrel bitterly, even go to law, because they disagree about the facts of the case. And of course they need not be irrationally ignoring some well known decision procedure; there may be no such procedure. The only eye-witnesses of an incident may grievously differ as to what happened, because men's observation and memory are both fallible; there is then no agreed decision procedure to settle the matter once for all. It is mere thoughtlessness when a modern writer tells us that any purely factual premise of moral reasoning must admit of "definite tests (not themselves involving evaluation) for determining its truth or falsity."

So much for the decidability of factual questions; what about the undecidability of moral questions? Socrates just asserts this—or at least wins Euthyphro's assent to it by leading questions. There are

many arguments now used to defend the position by prominent moral philosophers, which I have not space to discuss. We ought in any case to notice that the extent of moral disagreement both within and between civilized societies is often grossly exaggerated. As we may learn from Hobbes, no commonwealth will hold together without a great deal of moral consensus; if everyone made up his own morality by "free decision" and, as in the Book of Judges, every man did that which was right in his own eyes, then society would disintegrate. Between societies, too, there is a great deal of moral consensus, covered by the phrase 'the comity of nations'. Moral disagreements often do lead to enmity and conflict; but people who conclude from this that they *could* not be rationally resolved "argue as ill, as if the savage people of America should deny there were any principle of reason so to build a house as to last as long as the materials, because they never saw any so well built" (*Leviathan*, c. 30).

There is a reason why moral arguments often are inconclusive and lead only to quarrels: namely, people may start a moral disputation when, as regards one of the key terms, they are not initially in agreement *either* on a class of instances to which it applies *or* on criteria for applying it. I remarked just now that in that case disputants are pretty well bound to get at cross purposes. But of course such frustration of the purpose of discussion may come about for any sort of term, not just for an ethical term. In general, people cannot even use a term to express disagreement unless they are agreed on a lot of the judgments they would express with that term; for example, people cannot even disagree about an historical character, because they will not manage to refer to one identifiable person, unless they would agree on a good deal of what to say about him. There is no reason to think things are otherwise for a term 'T' whose meaning is "evaluative"; unless people have a great deal of moral consensus about judging actions to be T, they cannot sensibly use 'T' to express moral disagreement. Recent moral philosophers have devoted far too much attention to moral disagreements and perplexing situations and the alleged freedom to make up a morality for yourself; if instead they had concentrated on moral consensus, we might by now understand the rationale of that a lot better.

We ought not, then, to be impressed by the argument Socrates

presents; it limps on both legs. Factual questions are not necessarily decidable; moral questions have not been shown to be essentially undecidable.

All the same, weak as his position is on this abstract issue, Socrates has a strong case *ad hominem* against Euthyphro; if Greek stories were literally true, as Euthyphro believes, then it would be all too likely that the Gods would take opposite sides about Euthyphro's action. Euthyphro does not attempt to defend himself on this, his really weak point; and Socrates does not press the attack further home.

Euthyphro protests, however, that all the Gods will agree that wrongful homicide must be punished. Socrates makes short work of this: everybody, God or man, will agree that homicide is to be punished if it is wrongful; but when is it wrongful? That is just where disagreements arise (7b-e).

This short passage of the dialogue illustrates a trap into which an unwary man of decent principles may fall when arguing with an adversary who knows his business. Euthyphro says that *wrongful* killing is odious to God and man; and Socrates gets him in one move by saying: What killing is wrongful? In our time, we should more likely have A saying that the act he protests against is wrong because it is murder; his adversary B will then extract from him an admission that murder—unless the word is a legal term of art—is just wrongful killing; so that A has said no more than that the act is wrong because it is wrong. This move by Socrates, or by a contemporary B, is merely eristic; worthwhile discussion can only start if that feature of the act which Euthyphro, or A, really is objecting to is brought out into the open and carefully considered.

Socrates has no intention of doing any such thing. Instead (9a-b) he appeals to popular prejudices. Has a man been wrongfully killed when he is a *serf*, who killed somebody's slave, was tied up by the slave's master, and "happened to die first" before the master could ask the authorities what to do with him? Ought a son to prosecute his own father over such a man? Will all the Gods agree that the killing is wrongful and the prosecution righteous?

Euthyphro says he could make it plain that his cause is just, if only the judge would hear his reasons; "I suppose you find me slower of understanding," says Socrates—and does not ask what Euthyphro's reasons may be. Instead, he says in effect: "I *give* you

that *all* the Gods hate what your father did; I waive the point about one God's hating what another God loves; if you like, say that the pious is what *all* the Gods love and the impious is what *all* the Gods hate, so as to be sure that the same act is not both pious and impious. Even so, will your account of piety and impiety stand?" (9c-e).

The next stage of the dialogue (10a-11b) purports to refute the thesis that *pious* is the same as *loved by the Gods,* regardless of whether "the Gods" means 'all the Gods' or 'some Gods'. The general scheme of the argument is plain. Euthyphro is got to agree that the following pair of propositions is true:

(1) What is pious is loved by the Gods because it is pious

(2) What is God-loved is God-loved because it is loved by the Gods

and the following pair false:

(3) What is God-loved is loved by the Gods because it is God-loved

(4) What is pious is pious because it is loved by the Gods.

Now we get (3) from (1) by putting 'God-loved' instead of 'pious', and (4) from (2) by the reverse substitution; so (3) and (4) ought both to be true if *God-loved* and *pious* were the same; "but in fact it is quite the opposite," so *God-loved* and *pious* cannot be the same.

The principle underlying the argument appears to be the Leibnizian principle that two expressions for the same thing must be mutually replaceable *salva veritate*—so that a change from truth to falsehood upon such replacement must mean that we have not two expressions for the same thing. Of course it would be anachronistic to see here a formulation of the Leibnizian principle; but it is not anachronistic to discern a *use* of the principle; any more than it is anachronistic to call an argument a syllogism in *Barbara* when it antedates even Aristotle, let alone Peter of Spain. Though some forms of argument have been invented by logicians, many existed before there was any science of logic; and this is no bar to logical classification of them *ex post facto.*

The validity of arguments using Leibniz's principle is one of the most thorny points in recent philosophical discussion. It is well known both that such arguments are liable to break down in contexts that are not securely extensional, and that propositions

formed with 'because' give us non-extensional contexts. Indeed, the following pair of expressions, as used by a man X on a given occasion, need not be propositions agreeing in truth-value:

(5) I hit him because he was the man who had just hit me

(6) I hit him because he was my father

even if the term 'father of X' were coextensive with the term 'man who had just hit X (on the occasion in question)'. So the truth of (1) and (2) and the falsehood of (3) and (4) would perhaps not allow of our concluding that pious actions and men are not the same classes as God-loved actions and men; as the truth of (5) and falsehood of (6) do not warrant us in concluding that the man who had just hit the speaker was other than his father.

A reader may be inclined at this point to make Mill's distinction: what the argument does validly derive from its premises is that 'God-loved' and 'pious' have a different *connotation,* even if they *denote* the same men and actions. But have we the right to ascribe any such distinction to Plato? I doubt if any such distinction is anywhere even clearly exemplified, let along formally expounded.

Using more Platonic language, the reader might suggest that *God-loved* and *pious* are supposed to be different Forms. But surely, for Plato, there could not be a Form *God-loved.* Rather, the view we are meant to adopt is that 'loved by all the Gods', unlike 'pious', answers to no Form whatsoever. Being God-loved is something that the pious "has done to it"; there is no reason to suppose that 'God-loved' expresses what something *is,* in that sense of 'what so-and-so *is*' which would mean, for Plato, that we are laying hold of a Form.

It is possible that the present argument is *supposed* to prove that the two terms 'God-loved' and 'pious' differ in *application;* for at the end of the dialogue Euthyphro is supposed to have contradicted his own previous admission by saying that pious acts are dear to the Gods, loved by the Gods (15a-c). If what the present argument is meant to prove were what some would express nowadays by saying that two terms differ in *connotation,* this criticism of Euthyphro by Socrates would be an unfair debating trick. But we need not impute deliberate unfairness; we need only suppose that at this stage in philosophical thought the different kinds of difference in meaning were not well sorted out. We could scarcely be confident that they are really well sorted out even today.

Let us now look at the way the premises of the argument are reached. It is accepted by Euthyphro without demur that (1) is true and (4) false. The truth of (2) and the falsehood of (3) are deduced by a tricky argument, relating to passive verbs in general. Plato of course could not use a grammarian's terms of art; they hardly existed when he wrote, and it would have spoiled the dialogue to introduce them if they had existed. So he has to make Socrates convey the general principle to Euthyphro by a series of examples; from these, Euthyphro is meant to get the application of the principle to the verb 'to love' in particular.

Here we come up against a linguistic obstacle. Taking 'ϕ pass.' as representing the ordinary inflected third-person singular passive of a verb, and 'ϕed' as representing the passive particle of the same verb, we may say that what Plato gives us are a series of examples in which these two propositions are contrasted:

(7) A thing ϕ pass. because it is ϕed

(8) A thing is ϕed because it ϕ pass.

The successive interpretations of 'ϕ' are 'to carry', 'to drive', 'to see', and finally 'to love'. But as regards the first two, it is extraordinarily hard to make out what the point is. In Greek, the expressions I have schematically represented as 'ϕ pass.' and 'is ϕed' are of course different; but in English both are naturally rendered by the ordinary present-tense passive form. One might try using the plain passive for the 'ϕ pass.' form and a periphrastic expression for the 'is ϕed' form; for example, one would get some such pair as this:

(9) A thing is carried because *carried* is what it is.

(10) Because a thing is carried, *carried* is what it is.

But this is just whistling in the dark; we just do not know how Plato conceived the difference between the forms I provisionally translate 'so-and-so is carried' and '*carried* is what so-and-so is', nor why it is supposed to be obvious that (10) is true and (9) is false.

Fortunately there is no need for us to try and solve this problem; for the supposed parity of reasoning between 'carried' and 'loved' just does not exist. Socrates is made to treat both as examples of "what things have done to them." We get the same assimilation in the *Sophist* (248d-e), where the Eleatic Stranger argues that being known is something the Forms "have done to them" (the same Greek verb is used as in the *Euthyphro*) and they therefore are

not wholly changeless. But this assimilation is certainly wrong; among grammatically transitive verbs, verbs like 'know', 'love' and 'see' are logically quite different from verbs expressing that something is shifted or altered.

We need not try to delineate this difference, which has been the theme of much recent philosophical writing. It will be enough to concentrate on the peculiar use of 'because' in one of the premises of the main argument:

(11a) What is pious is loved by the Gods because it is pious.

The conjunction 'because', and the corresponding word in Greek, occur in a lot of logically different sorts of propositions. To avoid confusion, I shall slightly rephrase (11a):

(11b) What is pious is loved by the Gods in respect of being pious.

This way of speaking—that something is the object of an attitude *in respect of* this or that characteristic—is one that I owe to McTaggart (*The Nature of Existence,* vol. ii, Section 465). Following close in his footsteps, I shall try to show the difference between propositions like (11b) and ordinary causal propositions.

The most obvious difference is that a person can have an attitude towards something in respect of its being X when the thing is not X but is mistakenly regarded by him as being X; I may e.g. admire a man in respect of his courage when he was in fact a great coward —and then his courage cannot be a cause or part-cause of my admiration. What is a cause or part-cause of my admiration is his *being believed by me* to be courageous; which is quite different from his being courageous, even if he is. And I certainly do not admire people in respect of *this* characteristic—being believed by myself, rightly or wrongly, to be courageous; that is not a characteristic I find admirable. No doubt the Gods would never falsely believe a man to be pious who was in fact impious; but we could still draw the distinction—the Gods would love him in respect of his piety, not in respect of his being *known to the Gods as* a pious man; that would only be the cause of the Gods' loving him, not the characteristic in respect of which they loved him.

Let us now rephrase (3) in the same style:

(12) What is God-loved is loved by the Gods in respect of being God-loved.

If (11b) is true, as Euthyphro surely wishes to say, and (12) is

false, then 'pious' and 'God-loved' must somehow differ in meaning—in fact, there must be a big difference. And surely (12) is false; nobody, God or man, can love a thing simply *for*, in respect of, being loved by himself. Similarly, nobody can fear a thing simply *for* its being fearful to him; if the Church approves the Bible *for* being inspired, then 'being inspired' cannot simply mean 'approved by the Church'; and so in general. The principle illustrated by the falsehood of (12) does seem to be both sound and sufficient to serve as a premise in the way Plato intended. Failing a rigorous account of verbs of attitude (intentional verbs, as they are now sometimes called), we cannot quite clearly see the rationale of this principle; all the same, it surely *is* a sound principle.

The remainder of the dialogue is of less interest. Socrates gets over to Euthyphro, with some difficulty, the idea that though anything pious is just, it does not follow that everything just is pious; he does this by the "You might as well say" technique familiar to readers of *Alice*—you might as well say that if all shame is fear, all fear is shame, or that if everything odd is a number, every number is odd (12a-d). We thus get the question: What sort of just acts are pious? Euthyphro replies: Those which concern the service of the Gods rather than men (12e).

Socrates professes himself unable to understand this answer. Huntsmen serve, or look after, hounds, drovers look after cattle, and so on; presumably this consists in helpful actions, actions that are for the betterment of that which is served. Then is piety aimed at the betterment of the Gods? Euthyphro of course protests that this is not at all the kind of service he meant; rather, we serve the Gods as slaves their masters (13a-d).

Socrates does not reject this answer, but raises further questions about it. The work of a subordinate is ordered to the particular end of his master; for a doctor the servant's work will be directed towards health, for a shipwright towards voyaging, for an architect towards building, and so on. What then is the magnificent work of the Gods in which we play a subordinate role as their servants? Or at least, what is the chief end of this work, as victory is the general's chief end and winning food from the soil is the farmer's? (13e-14a).

Euthyphro cannot answer this question; and we should notice that he is not logically committed to doing so. If men are the slaves

of the Gods, then by obeying them men will fulfil the Gods' ends, whatever these may be; but men can know that without knowing in what particular the Gods' ends are. "The servant knoweth not what his lord doth"; and Euthyphro would account himself only a servant, not a friend, of the Gods.

Instead of answering the question, then, Euthyphro states which actions specially constitute giving the Gods their due: prayers and sacrifices and the like. The answer is seriously meant, and deserves to be taken seriously if any theological discourse does. We may notice that for Aquinas the virtue of "religion" is the part of justice that gives to God what is specially due to him, and that he conceives the characteristic acts of "religion" as Euthyphro does. There are, of course, serious objections that can be raised about the rationale of acts like prayer and sacrifice. Socrates raises none of these; his retort is, as commentators say, "playful." At that rate, piety would be a skill of bargaining with the Gods ("If you choose to call it that," Euthyphro interjects), and the bargain is a bad one for the Gods, since only we and not they are benefited (14b-15a).

Euthyphro says, as he has said before, that of course our pious acts cannot benefit the Gods; they are acts of honour and courtesy *(charis)* that *please* the Gods. At this point Socrates charges him with going back to the old rejected explanation of pious acts as acts that the Gods love. The charge, as I said, need not be deliberately sophistical, but at least is far from having been logically made to stick. We may see this quite simply if we use the Mactaggartian apparatus of 'in respect of' that I introduced just now. Though the Gods cannot be pleased by an act in respect of its being pleasing to the Gods, they logically could be pleased by an act in respect of its *being intended* to be pleasing to them, as human parents are by the acts of their children. And Euthyphro's act in prosecuting his father could be pleasing to the Gods both as an act of human justice and as an act of piety; both in respect of its avenging a poor man's wrong, and in respect of its being intended to please the Gods.

Socrates presses Euthyphro to try again to define piety; surely he would not have ventured, without knowing what piety is, to . . . Here Euthyphro has to listen again to Socrates' appeals to conventional prejudices—including the class prejudice against a "serf fellow." But he has heard enough, and says he is too busy for

further talk. The commentators seem to agree that the dialogue ends with a moral victory for Socrates. I should prefer to think that, to use Bunyan's language, Mr. Right-Mind was not to be led a-wandering from the straight path.

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