Euthyphro

Phil 234

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Overview

Murder was a religious offense, since it entailed 'pollution' which if not ritually purified was displeasing to the gods. But a son prosecuting his father would also be seen by many Greeks as 'impious'. Does, then, prosecuting your parent count as impious? Euthyphro thinks not. He is prosecuting his father for murder. Socrates is unsure. He think that knowledge of whether such a prosecution is pious or not would require us to know the nature of piety. Euthyphro agrees and claims that he does, in fact, know the nature of piety. Socrates tests this claim. Euthyphro is found wanting and so his claim to know that prosecuting his father is not impious is undermined.

The basic structure of the dialog is as follows:

- 2a–4a: Socrates encounters Euthyphro, who is about to prosecute his (E's) father for murder

- 4a–5d: S claims that only someone with expertise about piety, crucially including knowledge of its nature, should be confident that he were not acting impious in prosecuting a relative

- 5d–15d: E offers various candidates for the definition of piety, all of which S rejects

- 15d–end: S requests to start from the beginning, E refuses, leaves

Socrates' method

- S gets E to offer a candidate, C, as a definition of piety

- S then elicits further claims that seem to entail that C is not, in fact, the definition of piety

- What would S consider a satisfactory answer to the question "What is Piety?"?

- S doesn't tell us. Our job, then, is to extrapolate his view from his rejections of E's various attempts to answer the question.

Failed answers

1. Prosecuting the wrongdoer regardless of personal relationship to the wrong-doer (5e)

   - This is an *example* of a (kind of) pious action, not a specification of that in virtue of which all pious actions are pious

2. What is dear to the gods (7a)

   - If the gods disagree on important ethical matters (as E agrees they do at 6c and 7b–8a), then one and the same thing could be both pious (because dear to some god(s)) and impious (because hated by some other god(s)), but that is impossible

3. What is dear to *all* the gods (9e)

   - This only gives us a quality or affection of piety, it does not tell us what piety is

4. The part of justice concerned with the care of the gods (12e)

   - Care for X aims at benefitting X or making X better; But gods cannot be made better

5. The part of justice concerned with service to the gods (13d)

   - Service aims at some goal (e.g. service to generals aims to help them win wars, service to house builders aims to help them build houses) but Euth. can't specify what "fine thing" gods achieve such that service could aim to help them achieve that goal

6. Knowledge of how to sacrifice and pray (14d)

   - This definition reduces to [3] and the claim that sacrifices and prayers are dear to all the gods

Preliminary Results

Socrates' rejections of these various proposals, shows us that a satisfactory answer to question 'What is piety?', and more generally to all 'What is questions, must satisfy these criteria:

Univocal: there is a single unified definition for F. If sacrificing is pious and praying is pious, then the definition of piety will be the same in both cases. He recognizes that both a lion and a soldier can be brave.

General: It will apply to pious things. Check

Epistemically serviceable: Helps you figure out what actions, persons, beliefs are pious.

Socrates' rejection of [3]

Recall E's third attempt at defining piety. Piety = What is dear to all the gods (10a-11b).

- Socrates asks "Is the pious loved by the gods because it's pious? Or is it pious because it's loved?"

- Distinction between something's being Xed and something's Xing (e.g. something's being carried and something's carrying; being led and leading; being seen and seeing)

    - S claims that something Xing Y is prior to Y's being Xed
        * E.g. If we ask "Why is this piece of chalk being carried (led, seen)?" the answer is "Because Professor O'Connor is carrying (leading, seeing) it"
        * If we ask "Why is Professor O'Connor carrying this piece of chalk?" the answer is *not* "Because the piece of chalk is being carried by Professor O'Connor"

- So, by analogy, something's being loved by the gods is *posterior* to the gods' loving it (i.e. the fact that the gods love it explains why it is being loved, not the other way around)

- If we ask, "Why do the gods love it?", the answer is, "Because it is pious" and *not* "Because it is loved by the gods" (remember the carrying of the chalk: the answer to "Why is Professor O'Connor carrying the chalk" was not "Because the chalk is being carried by Professor O'Connor")

- But, as we saw above, the answer to "Why is it god-loved?" is "Because the Gods love it"

- But if "To be pious" and "To be God-loved" were the same thing (as E claims), then:

    - If the pious were loved because it's pious, [by substituting identicals], the god-loved would be loved because it's god-loved
    - But, we've shown that to be impossible

- Therefore: To be pious $\neq$ To be dear to the gods

S's question: "Is the pious loved by the gods because it's pious? Or is it pious because it's loved?" (10a), is about the "order of explanation," "priority," or "fundamentality" of the relevant phenomena.

He ultimately claims that the fact that a certain action is pious explains why (all) the gods love it, and not the other way round. This is why S says that E has identified (at best) a quality of piety, not the nature of piety.

"Euthyphro Dilemma": If certain actions were pious (right, wrong, obligatory, impermissible, etc.) *because* they are dear to the gods (or commanded but God/the gods, etc.), we would ask why the gods love what they love. Either it is [A] *arbitrary* what the gods love, or [B] the gods love what they do for *reasons*. Either way, trouble looms:

- [A] seems absurd (it is just obviously false that if the gods had happened to love rape, murder, etc. then rape, murder, etc. would be pious)

- If [B], it is the features of the actions in virtue of which the gods love them that explains why they are pious. The attitude of the gods is not what *explains* or *makes it the case* that they are pious

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Explanatory: of the Fnnes