

THE *EUTHYPHRO* AS TRAGEDY; A BRIEF SKETCH

DENNIS A. ROHATYN

PLATO'S *Euthyphro* is not so much a dialogue as an intellectual tragedy, a tragedy with no plot development and therefore, like a short story, all the more powerful in its dramatic impact. The tragedy in the *Euthyphro* lies in the fact that Euthyphro is a man of courage who lacks intelligence. He knows that he is doing the right thing by prosecuting his father for murder, hence impiety; he knows that this is no light matter; he knows that it would be wrong to refrain from prosecution, merely because it is his father, since Euthyphro believes in the equality (or equal right to life) of all men, slaves as well as free, friends as much as enemies, relations or strangers (*Euthyphro* 4B). But, while he knows *that* it is right, he cannot explain *why*. He is unable to "define" piety in such a way as to avoid circularity (10A, 11A), and consequently he is guided by intuition or blind instinct, not knowing the *reasons* for the justness (12A) of his actions. Piety he is able to practice, but the theoretical underpinning eludes him. Were Euthyphro able *both* to be pious in deed and accurate in his intellectual apprehension of piety, he would be more than a pious fellow, but the embodiment of piety itself, like his counterpart in the drama, Socrates. But this achievement is not within his grasp. And yet, limited though his powers of verbalization and logic may be, Euthyphro does realize, too, that the state is in the wrong for prosecuting Socrates on the identical charge of impiety; and he is even clever and experienced enough to note that Meletus is not really upset about Socratic 'atheism,' but instead is seeking to disrupt and overthrow the Athenian polity (3A-B).

The charge that Socrates denies the conventional gods, while allegedly inventing (*sic*) new ones for the approbation of his following, is characteristically ironic of Plato, in light of the later question, "do the gods love piety because it is pious, or is piety pious because the gods love it?" (10A). Euthyphro misses the import of the question, and so do most of the commentators.¹ A superficial analysis reveals that if the gods love piety because it is pious, that still does not tell us what piety is; and so the concept of piety must be placed on an independently secure footing. But suppose the gods love piety for some other reason. Does this make any difference? No; we still lack an explanation of piety, and so are compelled to resort to an ethical study of *to hosios*, which will be independent from the proposal put forward by Euthyphro. So much is logically implied by Socrates in his adumbration of the 'is-ought' dichotomy, when he iterates that "that which is pleasing (to the gods) is of a kind to be loved sheerly because it is loved, whereas that which is pious (regardless what the gods' attitude towards it may be) is loved (if it is loved) because it is something *to be* loved" (11A; italics supplied).

This distinction between the normative and the descriptive escapes Euthyphro, but something more significant by-passes him as well: what Socrates is saying is that the gods are plainly *irrelevant* to both the context of discovery and the context of justification (which in Socrates' eyes are, according to the conception of shared inquiry that he holds, one and the same process and result), when it comes to answering the question, 'what is piety?' While Euthyphro is so poor at generalizing that he cannot draw the appropriate conclusion, it is easy enough to extend this lesson to (at least) all ethical predicates, and to demand a self-contained analysis of any concept *X* into whose "essence" we presumably inquire when we ask, 'what is *X*?'

The universal "moral" to be extracted is therefore that religion (*viz.*, the gods) should not play a role in the determination of the meaning of ethical terms. And while this expression 'should not' is itself valuational, it does not jeopardize the intelligibility or truth of the foregoing proposition, since it can be retranslated as follows: religion does not play any *logical* role in the examination and attempted definition of key terms in ethics. (It may, of course, exercise a residual function of some sort, e.g., an emotive or persuasive one).

This is a rather meticulous way of saying that religion is irrelevant to

¹ The best recent full study is ALLEN, R. E.: *Plato's "Euthyphro" and the Earlier Theory of Forms* (New York, 1970). For a quick look at the passage under discussion (10A), see FLEW, A. G. N.: *God and Philosophy* (New York, 1966), p. 109.

ethics, or that ethics is an "autonomous" discipline. Think how revolutionary an idea this must have been in 5th-century B. C. Athens! While Euthyphro is in no position to perceive it, Socrates' numerous detractors and accusers may well have been. Socrates is in effect affirming the gospel of a "secular" ethic here, and it is this which explains Nietzsche's ridicule of Socrates as an incurable "skeptic" (although not quite in the manner of Hume), as well as Socrates' own assertion that "the unexamined life is not worth living" (*Apology* 38A). For Euthyphro, although certainly right-minded, is like one of those passionate men of the 6th-century whom Nietzsche describes, living life for the sake of an idea or a principle, but never stopping to examine whether the concept is understood, or even makes any sense. It is this impetuous dedication that Nietzsche identifies with the spirit of true religiosity (or faith), and consequently Nietzsche, in *Philosophy and the Tragic Age of the Greeks* and elsewhere, is not at all receptive to Socrates' consistent hostility towards, and antagonism for, unexamined precepts. Socrates himself illustrates the benefits of his own "aporetic maieutic" in the presence of Euthyphro, although the latter is hardly aware of it, for he falls into the trap of saying that the relationship between the gods and men is akin to that between "slaves and their masters" (13D)—this is the same Euthyphro who upheld the equality of men before themselves and before gods, a little while earlier. Under pressure, Euthyphro succeeds only in modifying this description to the point where piety is seen as conducting commerce, or business intercourse, between men and the gods (14E), in the spirit of Aristotle's later delineation of one of the forms of 'friendship' between citizens.

And yet, the same half-baked ideas which are so easy to ridicule coming from Euthyphro, make their appearance in other Platonic dialogues, through the mouth of Socrates. In the *Phaedo* he argues, albeit only as a provisional analogy, that we are the "chattel" and property of the gods, and that therefore we have no right to commit suicide. At the conclusion of the *Apology* (41D) he takes care to note that our "affairs are not neglected by the gods," that they take a wholesome interest in us and will see to it that we are rewarded for good, punished for evil, so that we have nothing to worry about if we have led an upright life. In the *Republic* the ring of Gyges presupposes the opposite, but this is strictly a logical experiment carried out at the urging and insistence of Glaukon and Adeimantus; in the final Myth of Er, Plato returns to this same vision of the after-life as one in which men of experience (i.e., those who have been exposed to the vicissitudes of fortune and who have overcome temptation, rather than having led sheltered lives or else succumbed to false ideals) do triumph, even though their earthly existence may be unhappy and full of travail (whereas, for Aristotle, virtue is not its own reward, unless it is accompanied

by happiness, both in this life and in the circumstances surrounding its termination). Finally, in the *Euthyphro* itself (8D) Socrates expresses no qualms about punishment itself, whereas in the *Republic* he is concerned to argue that it makes men worse, and therefore is a self-defeating method for rehabilitating the bad and the unjust, the law-breaker and criminal. Since Socrates makes plain that his major concern is with the "improvement" of men (since the gods cannot be improved; see 13C) and with the introduction of worthwhile "reforms" holding out the hope of "a better life for the future," for men on earth as well as in their relationship with the divine (16A), it is clear that the context of inquiry does not change significantly, for present purposes, from one dialogue to another. What then can be said on behalf of Plato? Did he "contradict" himself from one dialogue to the next? Hardly; there was a "development" in his views—but sometimes, this took the form of a retrogression to an earlier doctrine or tenet, as we see here by comparing the *Euthyphro*, one of the earliest of Plato's literary productions, with a few of its successors.

The interesting point here is not whether and that Socrates is made to utter conflicting things on different occasions; it is that the notions entertained by Euthyphro, unsophisticated and fallacious though they often be, win a "permanent place" in other parts of the Platonic corpus. Ethics has nothing to do with religion, Socrates in effect confidently avers—and yet, ethics and religion are tied together at the end of the *Republic* by means of the concept of human destiny.² Similarly, we find Socrates in the *Apology* answering to the fear that the gods are indifferent to man's fate, and reassuring his jury that they are not, although simply as part of Socrates' own game of one-upmanship with the judges who have convicted and sentenced him. (Perhaps this is anticipated by the interlude in the *Euthyphro* during which Socrates distinguishes between fear and reverence, at 12B-C, while introducing the concept of 'shame' and connecting it with 'reputation for being wicked'). So, while Euthyphro may be an object of derision, his common-sense wisdom is not; like one of Bradley's early ethical "stages," Plato manages to incorporate the particles of insight displayed by Euthyphro into his moral theory, as it develops throughout the early and middle periods of his creative activity.

The tragedy of the *Euthyphro* is that Euthyphro himself is unable to participate fully in the intellectual quest enjoyed by Socrates. Indeed, the tragedy of Socrates' life was not that he was martyred, but that he never found a suitable intellectual partner (with the possible exception of Parmenides, if the conversation reported between them is to be believed as

² For details, see the present writer's "Structure and Function in *Republic* Ten: An Overview," forthcoming.

historical), one on his own "level" (perhaps this is why Plato was compelled to invent the discussion with Parmenides, if indeed it is purely fictional as an account). Then again, Socrates' failure to discover someone with whom he could share in the joys of joint intellectual research, progress, and discovery, may reciprocally explain the ineluctability of the personal and political misunderstandings which led to his eventual execution. Even Euthyphro realizes that this is somehow to be Socrates' fate, in view of the latter's "divine sign" (3B). The pity is, or was, that Euthyphro, by himself or with Socratic assistance, could not mentally accomplish anything more; and this was a much harder "cross" for Socrates to bear than that of 'corruption of the young,' which to his great regret he was never able to achieve, either.

Roosevelt University