

THE *EUTHYPHRO* AS COMEDY: A BRIEF REJOINDER*

According to Aristotle's definition of tragedy, a tragic hero must be a person who is better than we are and who falls from happiness to misery, not through some vice or depravity, but through an error related to a flaw in his otherwise superior character (*Poetics* 1448a, 1-19; 1452b, 33 ff.). He must be sufficiently superior to the audience in attainments and position so that the members of the audience will experience fear as well as pity at his fall, both fear and pity requiring some identification with the hero. The audience must feel that, if such a downfall can be visited upon a man like *this*, how much more likely are we ordinary men to suffer at the hands of fate. Oedipus is pictured as the archetype of the tragic hero in that he is a great king, not by inheritance but by saving the city; he has the fault of *hubris* as exemplified by his encounter with the former king (who turns out to be his father); and he suffers overwhelming misery by inadvertence, but at the same time by means of his pride.

Taking this conception of Greek tragedy, Professor Rohatyn's contention that Plato's *Euthyphro* is a tragedy and that Euthyphro himself is a tragic figure seems misplaced. The importance of the matter is not just that of a definition of tragedy but one of the meaning of the dialogue and of the "development" of Plato's thought in his works.

It is a minor point in itself, but the *Euthyphro* is closer to Aristotle's notion of comedy than to that of tragedy. As Aristotle says in his few remarks on comedy, the comic hero is a person worse

*See Dennis A. Rohatyn, "The *Euthyphro* as Tragedy: A Brief Sketch," *Diálogos*, Vol. IX, No. 25, November 1973, pp. 147-151.

than the average and comedy is concerned with the ridiculous, defined as "a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others" (*Poetics* 1449a, 30-37). The audience can smile (or laugh) at the discomfort of the clown when he trips and falls because they feel superior to him hence they do not identify with his mistake or deformity as they do with that of the tragic hero. The way in which Plato depicts Euthyphro with Socrates exposing his pretensions for all to see makes it possible for the reader to find Euthyphro ridiculous.

However, the *Euthyphro* is not a comedy, despite the comic aspects of Euthyphro himself, because it is a dialogue (and so also not a tragedy as Rohatyn asserts). If the reader is to learn what Plato is saying, he must identify with both Socrates and Euthyphro: Socrates as the representation of such love of wisdom as the reader may have and Euthyphro as the representation of those motives we all have to justify whatever stance we have taken in the world, regardless of truth or anything else. To the extent that the reader sees what Euthyphro is, he finds Euthyphro ridiculous in comparison with Socrates. But to the extent that the reader admits that there is something of Euthyphro in himself, he recognizes that he, too, is ridiculous in his defensive postures. Plato is a poetic philosopher who is a master in the use of plot, character, diction, melody, and even spectacle when it serves his purpose, but any poetic elements are in a dialogue for the sake of the philosophic argument rather than for a poetic effect. The elements are there to try to arouse a dialogue in the reader aimed at some truth about the reader and his world.

Plato is not depicting Euthyphro simply as lacking in intelligence with regard to matters of piety. Were Euthyphro merely stupid, Socrates would be wasting his time and Plato wasting ours. A persistent theme in Plato is that intellect is not a separate function from a man's character, emotions, and actions. Euthyphro's fault is one of character; and character is an amalgam of emotions, thoughts and actions. He seems unable to understand what Socrates is trying to get him to see because his will is tied to an act that is already public and that embodies Euthyphro's self-image. Like the rest of us, he has developed mental reflexes to guard that image he has of himself, in this case the image of himself as the expert interpreter of the Greek gods. He has committed himself to a course of action to justify that image, and his commitment is such that he *will* not see any argument that may throw doubt on his commitment.

Euthyphro makes it clear that he is outraged that the Athenians do not respect his knowledge of the gods and things divine, that they

dare to laugh in his face in the assembly when he predicts the future on the basis of his divinations (*Euthyphro* 3C). He thinks that Socrates will sympathize with his resentment since he thinks Socrates also must consider *himself* an unhonored prophet in his own city. What Euthyphro's character prevents him from realizing is the distinction between an authority and an inquirer. What Plato shows in the *Apology* (as in other dialogues) is that the self-proclaimed expert is the truly ignorant man who will not learn (as opposed to one who cannot learn). Euthyphro, the authority on the gods, has brought a murder charge against his own father—an act of massive impiety by Greek standards—on the ground of a very ambiguous series of events. The victim was himself a murderer of one of Euthyphro's father's slaves, and he was hired servant under Euthyphro's father's care. His father had the servant bound and thrown in a ditch while the priest at Athens was being consulted as to what should be done with him, and the servant died before the messenger returned with the decision. Euthyphro has taken this drastic action against his father to show the scoffing assembly that he not only knows more about the gods than they do but that he acts on that knowledge, even against his closet kin. Further, he acts in emulation of Zeus, who bound *his* father Cronos for devouring his children. Euthyphro's commitment to his superiority over other men in understanding divine matters is so fixed that he will not see the flimsiness of his case against his father, just as he will not see what Socrates is trying to lead him to see about piety (4E). He can see only that this is an opportunity to demonstrate dramatically to the whole city how much more pious he is than ordinary men. Of course, Euthyphro stands in Plato's dialogue as an example of the ultimate impiety: the claim to *know* about the gods.

Mr. Rohatyn says that the point of the dialogue is that religion cannot serve as a foundation for ethics and that in other dialogues Plato seems to contradict this secularizing of ethics (although Rohatyn does not insist on the latter observation). What seems at issue in this regard in the *Euthyphro* is that the conventional gods of Greek mythology obviously *do* not serve as models of moral behavior for men. (It is in the *Republic* that Plato argues that such gods *cannot* serve as moral models.) Only a fanatic can think that the Zeus of Homer and Hesiod provides patterns of action for a man living under the laws of Athens. Socrates' attitude toward the gods and religion in the *Euthyphro* *seems quite consistent with his attitudes in the other dialogues*. For instance, there is no irony in the charge in the *Apology* (as Rohatyn suggests) that Socrates does not believe in

the gods of the state but invents new gods; anyone who seriously thinks about religion is likely to invent new gods and equally likely to be condemned for it. The irony in the *Euthyphro* lies in Euthyphro's accepting the notion that Socrates is accused of inventing new gods and, in the face of his self-imposed role as the authority on the traditional gods, not questioning Socrates about the charge. Instead he likens his situation in relation to the people of Athens to that of Socrates on the eve of Socrates' trial (3B). In the *Republic*, Socrates argues in setting up the education system for an ideal city that gods are the source of all good and only of good (378C-380A). It is to such gods he refers when in the *Phaedo* (62B) he says that men are the property of the gods; clearly he is not referring to the mythical gods of Euthyphro. The same is true in the *Apology* (41D) when he says that a good man's affairs are not neglected by the gods. Socrates there is expressing his view on the god's relation to good to comfort his friends about his fate. And in the Myth of Er in the *Republic*, Plato is as clear as he can be when dealing with ultimate mysteries as to the relation between the gods and lives of men. The gods do set the conditions of life; the rules of the game derive from the nature of the Good; but the kind of life a man will lead depends finally upon the destiny he *chooses*, no matter whether he chooses first or last in the great reapportionment of destinies (617C-620A). The good man is "looked after" by the gods because the good man has truly chosen goodness and thus goodness governs his life. True virtue is its own reward in the sense that the good man is always better off than the bad man—in prosperity or adversity, as Aristotle, too, says in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1100b, 22-1101a, 10)—both in this life and in any other life there may be. The gods are wise and the gods are good, but we have no direct access to the gods' wisdom or goodness. Men have to *learn* what things are better and what things are worse. In that sense, for Plato ethics does not grow out of religion. Even when an oracle or an inspired poet gives us a revelation from a god, we must find out for ourselves what that revelation means; and, if it turns out not to be good, we can be sure it did not come from the god (*Apology* 21B and *Republic* 335E). But to the extent that we discover aspects of the Good, we will have discovered aspects of the divine; and Plato could call one of those aspects by the name of an Olympian god, so long as he seized upon something truly good in the mythology of that god. Thus Socrates can pray at the end of the *Phaedrus*: "Beloved Pan, and all ye other gods who haunt this place, give me beauty in the inward soul; and may the outward and inward man be

at one. May I reckon the wise to be the wealthy, and may I have such a quantity of gold as none but the temperate can carry" (279B).

Plato's dialogues are various because they deal with a variety of problems. The characters are people actually involved in the problem dealt with, not straw men idly pursuing an abstract question. Therefore the shape of each dialogue is unique. It is constructed of characters, settings and procedures at least slightly different from those in any other dialogue because its problem is different from theirs. The context of each argument makes clear what Plato means by Socrates' varying references to the gods, for example. But all human problems are interrelated, of course, and so are all the dialogues. Some are simpler, some more complex. Some are inconclusive in that they are designed to show us some truth about our own shortcomings. Others are relatively conclusive to show us how far it is possible to go under the proper guidance, if we are brave and do not weary of seeking (*Meno* 81B).

Euthyphro is not brave. He fears the truth when truth threatens to expose him to himself, and so he hurries off with a lame excuse at the end of the dialogue. He is a man in need of examining the basic assumptions and commitments of his life, but he does not have the extraordinary courage required to go through with such an examination. The pity is not, as Rohatyn suggests, that Socrates has such an inept protagonist in the dialogue but that Euthyphro does not have the will to view himself as what he is. Socrates least of all men, is an object for pity: he has enjoyed the pursuit of truth in Athens all his life. As pictured in Plato's works, he is a man who has learned about himself from Thrasymachus, from *Meno*, from *Ion*, and from *Euthyphro*, as well as from *Glaucon*, *Adeimantus*, and *Parmenides*. He is the wisest of men because he is the most pious of men: he knows that he does not have the wisdom of the gods.

The *Euthyphro* is neither a tragedy nor a comedy. It is a philosophic argument that produces comic effects only if we identify ourselves solely with Socrates and think Socrates is a man who *knows* the truth (which would be the Socrates of Aristophanes' *The Clouds*) or that produces tragic effects only if we identify solely with Euthyphro's attempt to establish his superiority to other men and reject Socrates' search for truth as the work of a pedantic busybody (which perhaps would make us characters akin to Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*). In neither case would we be grasping Plato's argument in the dialogue. Part of the difficulty of understanding Plato stems from the fact that he is a great psychologist who puts psychology in the service of truth and who sees truth as first of all "home-truth." He

demands of us that we be brave and not weary in the search for the truth about *ourselves*, and those are considerable demands.

Darnell Rucker
Skidmore College