

Philosophy and the art of questioning - Plato's *Euthyphro*

The setting for Plato's early dialog, *Euthyphro*, is in front of the offices of the magistrate who has registered and will make preliminary inquiries into the serious charges levied against Socrates for the crimes of impiety, innovating on matters concerning the gods, and corrupting the youth of Athens. In an effort to prepare himself for the trial, Socrates questions a young man, Euthyphro, who claims to have knowledge about piety and all things concerning the gods. Euthyphro is in fact involved in a court case himself. He is prosecuting his own father for the murder of a servant, but the case is anything but clear cut, as the man who was allegedly 'murdered' was killed accidentally while being detained for a brutal crime, the cold-blooded murder of a slave. Socrates is at first aghast at the level of confidence Euthyphro has in his knowledge of what is right and wrong about these matters.

Socrates: Euthyphro, in Zeus' name! - do you think you know so precisely how things are, to do with the gods, and with what's pious and impious, that – if everything happened in the way you describe – you're not afraid of turning out to be doing something impious yourself, on your own account, by prosecuting your father?

But Euthyphro, with the arrogance of youth and spiritual pride, is utterly sure of himself. He questions Socrates as to why he could think any act of murder outside the law could ever be justified in the name of the gods. Socrates is impressed by this boldness and recognizes an opportunity to prepare himself for his own trial. He asks Euthyphro to teach him about piety, to help him answer the charges against him. Euthyphro agrees.

Socrates is clear from the beginning that he wants to know the fundamental nature of the pious and the impious:

Socrates: So now, in the name of Zeus, tell me what you were claiming just now to know with such clarity: what sort of thing do you say the pious is, and the impious, in relation not just to homicide but to everything else? Or isn't the pious the same in every type of action, I mean the same as itself, and isn't the impious too, while being opposite to everything pious, itself like itself, possessing some single character in respect of its impiety, whatever it is that is going to be impious?

Euthyphro: Of course, Socrates, absolutely.

Socrates: So tell me what you say the pious is, and what the impious is.

Euthyphro: Then I tell you that the pious is the very thing I'm presently doing – proceeding against the person committing criminal acts, whether it's acts of homicide, or stealing sacred objects, or any other crime of a similar sort, whether the perpetrator happens to be his father or his mother or anyone else whatsoever, and that it's not to proceed against them that's impious. Just observe, Socrates, how impressive a proof I'm going to give you that that's what the law is – not to let the

person acting impiously get away with it, even if he happens to be, well, whoever he is. It's a proof I've already given to others, too, to show that things would be correctly done in the way I'm proposing: don't humans themselves actually believe Zeus to be the best and most just of the gods? And don't they also agree that he tied up his own father, because he was swallowing his sons – unjustly – and that Zeus' father too had castrated his father, for similar reasons? Yet they react angrily against me for proceeding against my father when he acts unjustly, so managing to contradict themselves by saying one thing about the gods and another about me.

Socrates: I do wonder, Euthyphro, whether the reason why I'm being indicted is just that it's difficult for me, somehow, to accept it when a person says this sort of thing about the gods; this, it seems, is why someone or other will claim that I'm in error – and now if you, an expert in such matters, agree with them as well, then people like me had better go along with it too. What else are we going to say for ourselves, when we ourselves admit that we know nothing about the subject? But do tell me, in the name of friendship, do you really and truly believe that these things happened as you say?

Euthyphro: Yes, and still more amazing things than these, Socrates – things most people don't know about.

Socrates: War too – is it your view that there actually is war among the gods, against each other, and that they hate each other frightfully, fight battles, and do lots of other such things; the kinds of things that are not only told us by the poets but thanks to expert painters also decorate all of our sacred objects, not least the robe at the Great Panathenaea, which is brought up to the acropolis full of such pictures? Are we to say these things are true, Euthyphro?

Euthyphro: Not only that, Socrates; as I was saying just now there are a lot of other things about the divine realm that I'll explain to you if you really want to hear about them and I've no doubt you'll be astounded when you do.

Socrates clearly is questioning traditional ideas about the gods. Challenging people's notion of the divine is a dangerous thing to do in any cultural context. Thus, the criminal charge, levied against Socrates of corrupting the youth by innovating religious ideas of his own. This is a serious charge and one that is hard to defend against 500 unruly Assemblymen, especially because it appears to be true. Socrates is *not* questioning that the gods exist, but the way they have been characterised by traditions of the past. The more devout members of the Athenian leadership might well ask, what's the difference?

Like many of his dialogs, Plato hints at the main point of the dialog in the very opening line. "What's changed?" Euthyphro asks, why are you, Socrates of all people, here before the magistrate's offices? Plato is asking the question for his readers at the time. We could easily ask it today. What's changed in matters divine. Have the gods themselves changed? Is the

divine itself different today than it was back then, or is it our understanding of the divine that has changed? Does this change the very nature of what we hold to be sacred or is the pious the same as it always was and always will be?

These questions and others emerge as the dialog continues. Socrates rejects Euthyphro's first answer to the question, what is the pious, imploring Euthyphro to provide him not with mere examples of piety and impiety, as is the case against his father, but with "*the very character by virtue of which all pious things are pious.*" Euthyphro tries again, this time by defining the pious as "what's lovable to the gods". Socrates likes this answer better than the last because it at least attempts at a general definition, but then he rebuts it by presenting Euthyphro with the picture he himself painted of the gods. If the gods, in fact are fighting between themselves over all kinds of things, how could they ever agree on what is lovable? Socrates tries in vain to show the young man the immediate relevance of this question.

Socrates: This, Euthyphro, affects what you're now doing in trying to punish your father: it'll be nothing to be astonished at if in acting like this you're doing something of the sort Zeus loves, but Cronus and Uranus are hostile to, and that Hephaestus loves but Hera doesn't – and the same will apply in the case of any other pair of gods who are at odds over this sort of thing.

Euthyphro, with Socrates' help, then offers a third definition: "whatever all the gods hate is impious, whatever they all love is pious, and whatever some of them love and others hate is neither or both together"

Socrates takes this definition and tries to unpack it by asking the key question of the dialog: "*Is what is pious loved by the gods because it's pious, or is it pious because it's loved by them?*" The question is a fundamental one and points to the essence of Platonism. Does the pious exist "prior to" the gods? Is the pious something that is more fundamental than even those entities we recognize as the divine objects of piety? The dialog gets more complicated as Socrates tries to clarify his question, but in the end Euthyphro agrees that "the pious is loved for the very reason that it's pious, and that it's not pious because it's loved."

Euthyphro is perhaps too quick to follow Socrates to this conclusion. How might we pose the question in a way that is more palatable to modern minds? We tend to replace the idea of "the gods" today with the idea of religious or cultural convention, but the question remains the same: is what is pious traditionally loved by people in religious conventions because it is actually pious/holy/sacred, or has it become pious because it has been traditionally loved by people as part of religious convention?

Is what makes an act pious, a place holy, an object sacred, solely religious convention? If so, how does it initially get recognized as such? What effect does it have on us to believe that an act is pious? What effect does it have on the person, place, or object that is deemed sacred or holy? What effect does it have on the idea that is deemed sacred or holy? If what makes an

act pious some absolute and unchanging form of the pious itself, "what is that character by virtue of which all pious things are pious?"

These questions open up the notion of an absolute immutable form of piety. How might such a thing exist? Where might such a thing exist? How can we even have the notion of such a thing if it doesn't exist? Questions like these lead inevitably to all kinds of ideas we would characterise as spiritual or religious. The idea of an immutable world, Heaven, that is perfect and eternal. The idea of a Soul that is somehow in touch with a trace of that perfect world. How else could we recognise those forms like beauty, truth, goodness and piety when we see them?

Socrates chooses to focus on the logical structure of the question. Pulling out the difference between the thing that is loved and the pious itself. He objects to Euthyphro's third definition of the pious on this basis.

Socrates: "You (Euthyphro) don't want to reveal its essence to me, but just to tell me some feature it has – that the pious is affected in a particular way, namely that it's loved by all the gods; as for what it is that has this feature, you haven't told me".

The dialog continues. Euthyphro and Socrates try a number of times to identify the essence of the pious, but to no avail. The pious is part of the just. Piety is "tending" to the gods. Piety is a kind of expertise in sacrifice and prayer. The pious is gratifying to the gods, but not in any way beneficial to them. All of these fail for one reason or another. In spite of Socrates' protestations, Euthyphro in his arrogance, loses patience and leaves Socrates to face the Assembly alone with the knowledge that he doesn't in fact know what piety is, much less impiety, the very crime, for which he will be condemned to death.

Socrates: Now look at what comes next. If the pious is a part of the just, then it seems to me we must discover exactly which part the pious is of the just. Well, if you were asking me about one of our recent examples, for example which part the even is of number, and what this number actually is, I'd have said that it's any number that's isosceles and not scalene, don't you think so?

Euthyphro: I do.

Socrates: So, you take your turn and try to show me in the same way which part of the just is pious, so that I can tell Meletus, too, not to go on treating me unjustly and indicting me for impiety, on the basis that I've already learn sufficiently well from you what's pious and what isn't.

Euthyphro: Well, then, Socrates, the part of the just that seems to me to be pious is the part concerned with tending to the gods, while the remaining part of the just seems the one concerned with tending to human beings.

Socrates: Yes, and what you say, Euthyphro, seems to me, absolutely fine; I just need one little thing more from you. I'm not yet clear about what you're calling 'tending' here. I don't suppose you have in mind, with this 'tending to the gods', the sorts of tending that go on in relation to other things. I think we talk in this sort of way – take the example of horses: not everyone, we say, knows how to tend to horses, only the horse-trainer; right?

Euthyphro: Absolutely

Socrates: Because, I imagine, horse-training is tending to horses.

Euthyphro: Yes.

Socrates: And It's not everyone who knows how to tend to dogs, only the kennelman.

Euthyphro: Just so.

Socrates: I imagine because kennelmanship is tending to dogs.

Euthyphro: Yes.

Socrates: And herdsmanship is tending to cattle?

Euthyphro: Absolutely.

Socrates: So then, piety is tending to gods? Is that what you have in mind?

Euthyphro: I do.

Socrates: Well, if it's all tending, does it all have the same function? Is it something like this: is it for some good to, and benefit of, whatever's being tended to – as you can actually observe horses that are tended by horse-training being benefited and becoming better horses; don't you think so?

Euthyphro: I do.

Socrates: As I think dogs become better dogs, when they're tended to by kennelmanship, and cattle by herdsmanship, and so on in every other case; or do you think people tend things to do them harm?

Euthyphro: Zeus! I certainly don't.

Socrates: To do them good?

Euthyphro: Of course.

Socrates: Then piety too, since it's tending to gods, both benefits gods and makes the gods better? And will you agree to this in your own case – that whenever you do something pious, you're making one of the gods better?

Euthyphro: Zeus! I certainly won't.

Socrates: Right, Euthyphro, nor do I suppose this is what you have in mind – far from it; indeed, that's why I asked you what sort of 'tending to the gods' you had in mind, because I didn't think it was one like that.

Euthyphro: Yes, quite correctly, Socrates; that's not what I have in mind.

Socrates: Fine. So what sort of 'tending to gods' will piety be?

Euthyphro: The sort, Socrates, that slaves give to masters.

Socrates: I understand: apparently, it'll be some sort of expertise in serving the gods.

Euthyphro: Absolutely.

Socrates: then take expert service to doctors: what's the outcome it's expert at helping bring about? Would you be able to say? It's health, don't you think?

Euthyphro: I do.

Socrates: What about expert service to shipwrights? What's the outcome this expertise helps bring about?

Euthyphro: Evidently, Socrates, it's a ship.

Socrates: And expert service to builders, presumably, helps bring about – a house.

Euthyphro: Yes.

Socrates; So, tell me, my excellent friend: and this expertise in serving the gods – what'll be the outcome this expertise helps to bring about? Clearly, you're the one to know, seeing that it's exactly in things to do with the gods that you claim to be the world expert.

Euthyphro: Yes, and I'm telling the truth, Socrates.

Socrates; Then I appeal to you in Zeus' name to say what that super-fine outcome is that the gods bring about through using us to serve them.

Euthyphro: It's many fine things, Socrates.

Socrates: Yes. And the same is true of generals, my friend; all the same, you'd easily be able to say what sums up what they bring about – victory in war.

Euthyphro: of course.

Socrates: And farmers too, I think, ring about many fine things; all the same what sums these up is nourishment from the earth.

Euthyphro: Absolutely.

Socrates: So what, then, about the many fine things the gods bring about? What will it be that sums these up?

Euthyphro: I told you before, only moments ago, Socrates, that it's too great a task to learn exactly how it is with all these things. But this much I'll simply say to you: that if a person knows how to speak and to act in a way that's gratifying to the gods, whether in prayer or in sacrifice, these are the things that are pious, and these are the sorts of things that preserve both private households and the common interests of whole cities; and the things that are the opposite of gratifying are impious – the very things that overturn and destroy everything.

Socrates: Surely, Euthyphro, you could have given me a much briefer summing up of the sort I was asking for, if you wanted to; but as it is you're not eager to teach me, that's obvious. Look at what you've done, taking a side-turning just when you were at the point of enlightening me; if you'd only answered my question, by now I would have had sufficient lesson from you about piety. But as it is, because questioner must follow respondent wherever the respondent may lead, tell me again what you say the pious and piety are. Is it a kind of expertise in sacrifice and prayer?