

***Euthyphro* Notes**

This text focuses on ethical themes.

The subject of the dialogue is *hosion*: knowledge of proper ritual in prayer and sacrifice and performance. Euthyphro uses it in a wider sense akin to “righteousness.”

In *Euthyphro*, Socrates meets Euthyphro outside the court of the king-archon, the court of justice for serious matters. He’s being indicted by a young man named Meletus, whom Socrates doesn’t know on charges that he corrupts young men and is “a maker of gods, and on the grounds that I [Socrates] create new gods while not believing in the old gods.”

Please note that the weight of the crime is heavy, and Socrates will be put to death because of it. All of Plato’s ancient readers would already know that. As we will see, Euthyphro is at the court concerning a murder charge, so that might give a sense of the gravity of the charge against Socrates.

Euthyphro notes that the indictment against Socrates (by Meletus) is likely because Socrates, like Euthyphro, has the ability to prophesize. There’s some background context here. According to the oracle at Delphi – the high priestess at the Temple of Apollo – Socrates was the wisest man in Athens. In order to test this, Socrates intentionally puts himself into dialogs with people who claim to know about things he doesn’t know so they can teach him. Inevitably, he finds that most people do not have the knowledge they claim to know, so his wisdom comes from at least knowing that he doesn’t know anything.

Socrates proceeds to engage Euthyphro through *elenchus* or logical refutation by question and answer. In the discipline of philosophy, this becomes part of philosophical method. Ancient philosophers like Socrates are interested in *conceptual or analytic* claims as opposed to *synthetic or empirical* claims based on things we can measure in the world.

Philosophers are concerned with what we know and how we know what we know. The Milesian philosopher Thales had said, “know thyself” (Γνῶθι σαυτόν, *gnōthi sauton*). Socrates “knows himself” in his ignorance.

Euthyphro, on the other hand, claims to be an expert in *hosion* and that he’s at the court to bring charges against his own father on the murder of a day laborer who in a drunken rage killed one of his household slaves. Euthyphro’s father neglected to care for the murder, whom he tied up and left without food or water while waiting until the authorities said what ought to be done with the man.

Although Euthyphro attributes the ability to prophesize as something he and Socrates share, an ability that others are jealous of, Socrates subtly distinguishes between himself and “you prophets” like Euthyphro.

Socrates is excited to talk to Euthyphro since Euthyphro claims to know about *hosion*; but note he’s already starting to build a defense against Meletus because if he can learn from a young man

like Euthyphro or at least agree on what *hosion* is, then his age as a corrupter of young men would no longer be an issue and Meletus would have to make the same charge against Meletus. Euthyphro goes on to agree to teach Socrates.

Socrates asks for a definition of piety (*hosion*). Euthyphro points to what he's doing now in charging his father. He then points to the gods' overthrowing of fathers as another example. Socrates isn't happy with simply pointing to one act or one instance but rather wants to know what is always pious and how one knows, nor does he think pointing to the actions of the gods is adequate since they do not always agree with each other on what is right to do.

Socrates goes on to clarify a method based on deductive reasoning, an important philosophical distinction in method with Euthyphro. On questions of measurement or quantity, we can simply measure or count to overcome disagreement. But on questions of the just and the unjust, the good and bad, the beautiful and ugly, we cannot easily come to a satisfactory conclusion and may even become hostile to each other. Even the gods don't agree and have wars about disagreements on these issues.

Euthyphro then changes direction and points to appropriate punishments for crimes, but this doesn't satisfy Socrates because again it suggests specific actions rather than focusing on the discernment required to judge those actions as correct.

In logic, Euthyphro's attempt to change the focus of discussion is a fallacy known as a red herring.

Euthyphro then revises his definition: The pious is the thing that all the gods love and the impious is what all the gods hate.

Socrates asks: "Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?"

Notice that Socrates shifts to use of analogies for things in the world: something being led, carried, seen, etc.

Here we begin getting some attention to perception: the thing being seen and the being seeing the thing.

"It is not being seen because it is a thing seen but on the contrary it is a seen thing because it is being seen"

Actions in the world require a subject to do the action.

The pious thing is not pious in itself, because the thing in itself is different from the gods bestowing love on it.

Euthyphro has only shown an affect or quality of something pious, not its form.

We're back at the beginning in a circle.

We then get the Daedalus discussion, who was a sculptor and ancestor to Socrates whose wooden sculptures were able to move. Socrates wants Euthyphro's propositions to stay put instead of continuing to be circular. Euthyphro says it is Socrates who is making them move. Socrates says, if so, it is he who seems to be more clever than his ancestor since he can affect other living beings rather than simply making things himself.

We then get a discussion about piety and justice being the same thing. Socrates moves to a discussion about emotions fear and shame. He says shame is a part of fear and fear "covers a larger area" than shame; therefore, it is incorrect to say where there is fear, there is shame but rather where there is shame, there is fear.

Again, this is deduction reasoning, placing things in order from general to specific in order to have a solid foundation for logical discourse.

Inductive logic proceeds from the other direction (specific to general) and is used to establish probability or likely outcome.

We then turn back to piety and justice. Piety appears to be a *part* of justice. When Socrates asks Euthyphro to tell him which part of justice the pious is, Euthyphro says it's "the part of the just that is concerned with the care of the gods, while that concerned with the care of men is the remaining part of justice."

Socrates notes a new term, "care," has entered the discussion and has not been defined yet.

"care" of the gods is likened to a slave doing service for a master.

"Tell me then, my good sir, to the achievement of what end does service to the gods tend?"

"Many things"

Socrates makes analogy to generals but gets Euthyphro to agree that their primary aim is to win wars.

Euthyphro gets a bit flustered but

"I say that if a man knows how to say and do what is pleasing to the gods at prayer and sacrifice, those are pious actions such as preserve both private houses and the public affairs of state. The opposite of these pleasing actions are impious and overturn and destroy everything."

Socrates makes his words more precise:

Premise 1: Piety and the pious are knowledge of how to sacrifice and pray.

Premise 2: To sacrifice is to make a gift to the gods, whereas to pray is to beg from the gods.

Conclusion: Therefore, piety is a knowledge of how to give to, and beg from, the gods.

This is circular reasoning. But Socrates rephrases with a few more clarifying remarks:

Premise 1: Piety and the pious are knowledge of how to sacrifice and pray.

Premise 2: To sacrifice is to make a gift to the gods, whereas to pray is to beg from the gods.

Conclusion: Therefore, piety is a sort of trading skill between the gods and men.

Socrates then says it's obvious that we receive good things from the gods but what can we possibly give them that they need from us?

Euthyphro: honor, reverence, and what I mentioned just now, to please them.

Socrates: So, the pious is once again what is dear to the gods. This is circular reasoning and it was contradicted earlier when we determined that the pious and the god-loved are *not* the same thing. We got off track somewhere. We have to start again from the beginning so you can show me your knowledge of why you are prosecuting your father on behalf of a servant.

Now remember earlier Socrates determined that shame is a part of fear.

If the pious is to act in honor and reverence to the gods, why would you prosecute your father on behalf of a servant?

Shouldn't your fear of being shamed prevent you from doing so?

"If you had no clear knowledge of piety and impiety you would never have ventured to prosecute your old father for murder on behalf of a servant. For fear of the gods you would have been afraid to take the risk lest you should not be acting rightly, and would have been ashamed before men, but now I know well that you believe you have clear knowledge of piety and impiety. So tell me, my good Euthyphro, and do not hide what you think it is."

Euthyphro says he's got to go.

Socrates is upset to not have learned how to fend off the indictment of Meletus from this young prophet.