

Piety, Knowledge, and Critical Inquiry in Plato's *Euthyphro* (with reference to Plato's *Apology*)
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For those of us who are deeply committed to the practice of critical inquiry, few if any texts are more valuable than the dialogues of Plato. Indeed, the conventional emphasis on the role of critical inquiry in Plato's dialogues, justified though it unquestionably is, may at times lead to us to undervalue their many other virtues. The signal importance of those other virtues is brought to light when it becomes clear that they are bound up with the very *raison d'être* for the sort of critical inquiry that Socrates employs in most of the Platonic writings. To illustrate this, I shall in this paper briefly examine the relationship between Socrates' practice of critical inquiry and the virtues of piety and a proper approach to knowledge claims in Plato's *Euthyphro*, while also referencing his *Apology*.

The *Euthyphro* begins with the title character greeting Socrates outside the court where he (Socrates) is about to be tried. Each man tells the other why he is there. Socrates recounts some of the charges against him, charges which will be familiar to readers of Plato's *Apology*, the action of which occurs directly after the events presented in the *Euthyphro*: he corrupts the youth of Athens by inventing new gods and failing to acknowledge the old ones (3A). For his part, Euthyphro says that he has come to the court to prosecute his father for manslaughter. When Socrates expresses surprise at this, Euthyphro, claiming to be an expert in religious matters, responds that he is undertaking this action in accordance with divine law. Socrates responds by proposing that he become Euthyphro's pupil so that he can argue in court that he regards it to be "of great importance to know about things divine" (5A), which will presumably undermine the charge of impiety which his accusers have levied against him. The remainder of the dialogue consists primarily in Socrates questioning Euthyphro, presumably as pupil to teacher. Euthyphro proves unable to provide an account of piety that satisfies the standards of Socratic inquiry, and the dialogue ends without any such account having been given.

That is to say, there is no overt account of piety in the dialogue that is to be regarded as satisfactory. Is there, however, a covert account, an implicit conception of piety that reveals itself upon deeper investigation? And, if there is indeed such an account, how might it be related to the sort of critical inquiry that Socrates undertakes within the dialogue?

We'll begin our exploration of these questions by examining the textual evidence concerning Euthyphro's claim to be a religious expert. As was previously noted, Euthyphro

justifies his prosecution of his father by referring to divine law. In explaining this to Socrates, he acknowledges that all of his relatives disagree with his action, likewise on religious grounds; they have unanimously told him that “for a son to prosecute his father as a murderer is impious” (4D). Upon hearing this, Socrates asks Euthyphro whether he has “such an accurate knowledge of divine things” that he has no fear that he might in fact *be* committing an act of impiety (4E). Euthyphro reaffirms his confidence in his decision, claiming that his knowledge of divine matters makes him better than “the general run of men” (5A), presumably including the rest of his family.

Plato provides ample evidence that Euthyphro’s claim should be regarded with suspicion. Earlier in the dialogue, Euthyphro tells Socrates that he (Euthyphro) has the gift of prophesy, boasting, “I have never made a prediction that did not come true” (3C). Shortly thereafter Socrates says about his court case, “[T]here is no knowing how the case will turn out. Only you prophets can tell.” Euthyphro responds, “Well, Socrates, I dare say that nothing will come of it. Very likely you will carry your case” (3E). Given that any reader of this dialogue would be well aware of Socrates’ subsequent conviction and execution at the hands of the Athenian court, Plato could hardly have made Euthyphro’s lack of prophetic ability plainer. This episode casts considerable doubt on subsequent claims Euthyphro makes concerning his religious expertise, which in turn implies that his confidence in those claims is unwarranted.

After proposing that Euthyphro become his teacher, Socrates asks him to state what piety is. Euthyphro replies by recounting the well-known story from Greek mythology in which Zeus bound his father, Cronos, in chains for wronging him, just as Cronos had previously castrated his father, Ouranos, for similar reasons. Socrates responds by asking Euthyphro whether he thinks that he (Socrates) is being brought to trial because he “somehow” finds it difficult to accept such stories of the gods. He then concedes that he might be wrong to doubt those stories, stating that if experts on religion, such as Euthyphro claims to be, believe them, he (Socrates) will be duty-bound to believe them as well. This, he says, is because his is “ignorant about these matters” (6B). Thus, Socrates’ awareness of his own ignorance leads him not only to doubt received wisdom, but even to doubt his own doubts.

With this response, Socrates tacitly draws a clear distinction between Euthyphro and himself. Euthyphro claims to know everything worth knowing about piety. Socrates, on the contrary, claims to know nothing about it. On the basis of his claim to possess religious knowledge, Euthyphro is certain that he is practicing piety in prosecuting his father, in part on the basis of the analogy of himself with Zeus, the all-knowing. On the basis of his claim to lack religious knowledge, Socrates professes his uncertainty not only about the veracity

of the traditional stories of the gods, but also about his doubts about those stories. Therefore, as Socrates states explicitly, if Euthyphro actually has the knowledge that he claims to have, his knowledge will trump Socrates' ignorance, and Socrates will be duty-bound to follow his lead.

The key word here is "if." Socrates sets forth all of his conditions hypothetically, setting the stage for him to try, throughout the rest of the dialogue, to discover whether Euthyphro can demonstrate that he actually has the knowledge that he claims to have. In so doing, Socrates doesn't simply accept Euthyphro's stories, or for that matter anything Euthyphro says about piety, "on faith," as we might put it. Such acceptance would constitute an appeal to exactly the sort of unquestioning certainty which Socrates rejects, since he, as a professed non-knower with respect to such matters, wouldn't have any basis on which to accept it.

By asking Euthyphro whether he thinks that he (Socrates) is being prosecuted for impiety because he has difficulty in believing the traditional stories of the gods, Socrates shifts the conversation from a declarative to an interrogative mode. He also subtly and skillfully shifts the subject of the conversation from piety itself to the status of knowledge claims about piety. In doing this, Socrates paves the way for critical inquiry, which entails a shift in the conversation from statements of traditional belief to hypotheses.

Statements of traditional belief, such as those Euthyphro favors, are authoritative and presumptively non-disverifiable propositions. The hypothetical approach, on the other hand, regards such statements as assumptions, and thus as subject to critical inquiry. In highlighting the shift from traditional belief to critical inquiry, Plato regularly makes it clear where Socrates doubts, and where Euthyphro – and we – should do likewise. For example, when Euthyphro exhibits confidence in the veracity of the traditional stories of quarrels between the gods, Socrates notes that this characterization of the gods would put them in the same position as human disputants "if they really do have quarrels about right and wrong, as you say they do" (8D). The key word here is, again, "if." This and subsequent instances of classifying statements about the disputes of the gods as assumptions, rather than as statements to be accepted on the basis of authority and/or tradition, clearly differentiate Socrates from Euthyphro with respect to their approaches to the kinds of knowledge claims that Euthyphro routinely makes. Euthyphro professes certainty that the gods engage in disputes with each other; in fact, he tells Socrates that he knows much more about those disputes than the ordinary Athenian does (6B). Socrates, on the other hand, exhibits the intellectual humility appropriate for a professed non-knower by neither

affirming nor denying this claim but rather regarding it as an assumption and therefore in need of further investigation.

Critical inquiry depends upon the hypothetical mode championed by Socrates; the recounting of traditional myths set forth as matters of fact eschews it. Euthyphro evidently fails to recognize the disjunction between the two in agreeing to submit his beliefs to critical inquiry. His consent and even encouragement of critical inquiry throughout the dialogue, while simultaneously preserving confidence in his infallibility with respect to divine matters, indicates that he has no real understanding of the nature of the hypothetical realm. He is evidently unaware that submitting his beliefs to critical inquiry potentially undermines them by converting them into hypothetical statements – that is, assumptions which could be otherwise. This lack of awareness on Euthyphro's part appears to be a byproduct of his confidence in his claims of knowledge, and Plato gives us ample evidence that this confidence is unwarranted. That evidence includes Euthyphro's demonstrably false claim of unerring prophesy, his presumptuous assertion that he is permitted, indeed expected, to act in the same manner as the king of the gods, and his manifest inability to present a definition of piety that can satisfy the rigors of critical inquiry.

Euthyphro continues to proclaim confidence in his knowledge of divine matters throughout the dialogue, and the fact that he is still making this claim as the dialogue approaches its end (13E) indicates that he has learned little if anything along the way. Socrates' final statements to him demonstrate this in several ways, not the least of which is – again – their hypothetical character. First, he exhorts Euthyphro to tell him the “absolute truth” about the gods because “if anyone knows, of all mankind, it is you” (15D). This statement, we can reliably conclude on the basis of Euthyphro's utter failure to satisfactorily demonstrate his alleged knowledge, invokes an implicit conclusion based on the logical form known as *modus tollens*. The content of that syllogism is this: If anyone knows the truth about the gods, Euthyphro knows it (as Socrates states); Euthyphro doesn't know it (as the dialogue makes abundantly clear); therefore no one knows it. Next, Socrates turns Euthyphro's claim to possess religious knowledge into another hypothetical: “If you didn't know precisely what is pious and impious, it is unthinkable that...you would ever have moved to prosecute your aged sire” (15D). This statement implies a sort of *modus ponens*: after all that has transpired, Euthyphro should recognize that he does not in fact know what he claims (or claimed) to know about piety and impiety, the consequence of which is that he should not have prosecuted his father in accordance with what he thought were the dictates of piety.

The fact that Euthyphro has made no evident progress during the course of the dialogue leads Socrates to say to him, “I am sure you think you know exactly what is pious and what

is not” (15E). This phrasing acknowledges the fact that Euthyphro continues to think he knows what he claims to know, although it is by now equally evident that he does not actually know it. Euthyphro has been shorn of his knowledge claims – not by Socrates, but by his own shortcomings as disclosed by critical inquiry.

From this examination of the *Euthyphro* we might be inclined to infer that critical inquiry and piety are at odds, and that the former has trumped the latter in this dialogue. More specifically, since it appears that an uncritical piety such as Euthyphro’s cannot be maintained in the face of critical inquiry, we might wonder whether critical inquiry must perforce be impious. Such a conclusion would be unwarranted. In order to understand the proper relationship between the two, we must turn from the *Euthyphro* to its sequel, both in time and, we might say, complementarity: the *Apology*, Plato’s account of Socrates’ defense in court.

Early in the *Apology*, Socrates endeavors to account for the reputation that has rendered him subject to prosecution on the grounds of impiety. As he tells the Athenian jury, “I have gained this reputation, gentlemen, from nothing more or less than a kind of wisdom. What kind of wisdom do I mean? Human wisdom, I suppose. It seems that I really am wise in this limited sense” (20D). By way of contrast, concerning “wisdom that is more than human,” Socrates says, “I certainly have no knowledge of such wisdom” (20E). How, then, does Socrates know that he has any wisdom at all? Because “the god at Delphi,” presumably Apollo, had famously told his friend Chaerephon many years earlier that no one was wiser than Socrates (21A).

In Plato’s account, Socrates’ reaction to the oracle’s declaration is typical: he wonders about it. As he tells the jury, “I said to myself, ‘What does the god mean? Why does he not use plain language? I am only too conscious that I have no claim to wisdom, great or small, so what can he mean by asserting that I am the wisest man in the world?’” (21B). So he wanders about Athens trying to better understand the truth of the god’s declaration by asking questions of people who claim to be knowledgeable about various matters. In other words, Socrates responds to a knowledge claim by wondering about the meaning of the claim, asserting the insufficiency of his own knowledge, and investigating the claim by means of critical inquiry – that is, by undertaking the same process he effected with Euthyphro. The only significant difference is that here, unlike in the *Euthyphro*, Socrates seems to take for granted that the oracle’s claim must be true if properly understood; as he says, the god “cannot be telling a lie” because “that would not be right for him” (21B). In other words, piety demands that Socrates treat a truth claim by a god differently from a

truth claim by a human being. Nevertheless, intellectual humility and critical inquiry are present in essentially the same way in both dialogues.

Why, then, does Socrates initiate critical inquiry with his fellow Athenians? A number of passages in the *Apology* leave no room for doubt: he sees it a religious quest (“I pursued my investigation at the god’s command” (22A)). Once Socrates discovers the meaning of the oracle, namely that “real wisdom is the property of God, and...human wisdom has little or no value” (23A), his response is “to give aid to the god” by “undertaking service on the god’s behalf” (23B). This service, which is prominently displayed in numerous other Platonic dialogues, consists in this: “[W]hen I think that any person is not wise, I try to help the cause of God by proving that he is not” (23C). He even goes so far as to affirm that “God appointed me...to the duty of living the philosophic life, examining myself and others” (28E). Critical inquiry is therefore a religious obligation for Socrates, one that he willingly takes on even though he, as a mere mortal, does not know exactly what the divine law is – and, unlike Euthyphro, does not claim to know.

Socrates does not profess complete ignorance about divine matters. Indeed he cannot do so, for that would render his claim to be undertaking a religious quest nonsensical. The basic truths about the gods that he claims to know include, for example, that they are responsible for all the good things that we humans possess (*Euthyphro* 15A) and that they cannot lie because it would not be right for them to do so (*Apology* 21B). But, unlike Euthyphro, he also believes that our understanding of the nature and activities of the gods is extremely limited, and that recognition of that limitation is a sign of the proper intellectual humility which is an essential feature of both piety and human wisdom. And so Socrates’ wisdom is the result of a religious quest, a demonstration of his piety as well as of his intellectual humility. This stands in stark contrast with Euthyphro, whose lack of wisdom is manifest in the opposite traits, as well as of Socrates’ accusers in the Athenian court.

To conclude: In both the *Euthyphro* and the *Apology*, Plato demonstrates that Socrates doubts the traditional stories of the gods not because he is not pious, but because he is. In conducting his investigations, Socrates provides a model of the proper relationship between piety and critical inquiry. The lynchpin between them is intellectual humility, which stands in stark contrast to the vacuous arrogance demonstrated by Euthyphro, as well as by Socrates’ accusers. In order to follow the model of the quest for knowledge that Plato proposes and Socrates personifies, one need not practice piety or critical inquiry in precisely the way that Socrates does; but one must set out on that quest with an uncommon level of commitment, and with genuine humility. This is where liberal education begins.