

# Class Two Handout - Euthyphro

Philosophical Perspectives I - Ryan Simonelli

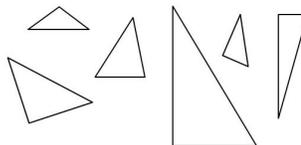
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## 1 The Context

- **The Euthyphro:**
  - One of Plato's early dialogues (along with "Apology" and "Crito," which we'll read next). Written sometime between 399 and 395 BC.
  - Though the specifics of this conversation are likely fictionalized, the general philosophical approach of the character Socrates is likely quite close to that of the historical Socrates.
  - Plato is clearly sympathetic towards Socrates (unlike some of his contemporaries, such as Aristophanes, who we'll look at next week). This will be notable when it comes to how to interpret Socrates in the dialogue.
- **The Historical Context and Setting:**
  - Taking place three weeks before the trial of Socrates in 399 BC.
  - Socrates has been summoned to court to hear his charges before the trial.
  - The charges, pressed upon Socrates by a man name Meletus, are of corrupting the youth (2c) and being "a maker of gods" (3b).
    - \* The official charge is *asebeia*: impiety, irreverence towards the state gods.
    - \* We'll look at these charges and why Socrates had them pressed upon him a bit more in the next class.
  - Euthyphro is also there at court to press charges on his father who has killed a servant of theirs.
  - Socrates seeks knowledge of religious matters, and, particular, the nature of piety, from Euthyphro so that he can bring this knowledge to bear in his defense.
    - \* In the English translation of the dialogue, "piety" is the translation for the Greek word *hosion*, which could also be translated as "holiness" and perhaps "righteousness."

## 2 Euthyphro's First Attempt (5d-6e)

- **Euthyphro:** "the pious is to do what I am doing now, to prosecute the wrongdoer," (5d).
- **Socrates's Response:** That's an *example*, rather than a *definition*.
  - **A Platonic Formulation:** "I did not bid you tell me one or two of the many pious actions, but *that form itself that makes all pious actions pious*," (6d).
  - **A Simple Example:** What is the form that makes all these triangles *triangles*?



**Answer:** All of these triangles have the form of a three-sided closed figure, and, in virtue of having that form, they're all triangles.

- **Discussion Question:** Socrates is asking for the specification of the shared form in virtue of which all pious actions are pious? Is this a fair request in every case? Might there be some sorts of things for which we can't specify a single form they all share?

- **An Example from the Early 20th Century Philosophy Ludwig Wittgenstein:** What is it that all *games* have in common that makes them all games?

**Wittgenstein (*Philosophical Investigations* 66):** Consider, for example, the activities that we call "games." I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, athletic games, and so on. What is common to them all? – Don't say: "They *must* have something in common, or they would not be called 'games'" – but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them, you won't see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, affinities, and a whole series of them at that.

### 3 Euthyphro's Second Attempt (7a-9d)

- **Euthyphro:** "what is dear to the gods is pious, what is not [i.e. what is hated by the gods] is impious," (7a)
- **Socrates's Response:** At least on one reading, that definition is going to yield contradictions.
  - We often have disagreements about what's just or unjust, ugly or beautiful, good or bad that aren't easily resolved.
  - Presumably, the same is the case for the gods.
  - What we love or hate is determined by what we take to be just or unjust, ugly or beautiful, good or bad.
  - So, presumably some gods will love what others hate.
  - So, if being pious is being loved by some gods and being impious is being hated by some gods, then, since some gods will love what others hate, some things will be both pious and impious—a contradiction.
- **The Basic Point:** We must distinguish between defining what is pious as that which is loved by *some* gods and defining it as that which loved by *all* gods. The former will lead to contradiction, but the latter won't.
- **Sidenote/Advertisement:** If you decide to do more philosophy, and you take elementary logic, you'll learn to be able to formally disambiguate these definitions involving "some" vs. "all" (words known as "quantifiers") as follows:
  - **First Interpretation:**  $\forall x(Px \leftrightarrow (\exists y(Gy \wedge Lyx)))$
  - **Second Interpretation:**  $\forall x(Px \leftrightarrow (\forall y(Gy \rightarrow Lyx)))$
- **Question:** Socrates does not pursue this thought, but does the second interpretation ("all gods") resolve the contradiction at the cost of making it such that nothing can be counted as pious or impious, since the gods will always disagree?

### 4 Euthyphro's Third Attempt and the Main Argument (9e-11b)

- **Euthyphro:** "the pious is what all the gods love, and the opposite, what all the gods hate, is the impious," (9e).
- **Socrates's Response:** It seems like the the gods love things because they are pious, but this can't t be the case if being pious just is being loved by the gods, since, if that's so, something's pious because it's loved by the gods.
  - **Claim One:** What is god-loved is so because the gods love it. (10a-10c):

- \* If Atlas is carrying the world, then the world is an “Atlas-carried thing” because Atlas is carrying it.
- \* If Artemis sees a deer, then the deer is a “Artemis-seen thing” because Artemis sees it.
- \* If Apollo loves Euthyphro’s action, then Euthyphro’s action is an “Apollo-loved thing” because Apollo loves it.
- \* Generalizing, if the gods love X, then X is a “god-loved thing” because the gods love it

▸ **Claim Two:** What is pious is loved because it is pious (10d).

Suppose, now, we grant this third attempt at a definition:

▸ **Euthyphro’s Definition:** To be a pious thing is to be a god-loved thing

We have an **explanatory circle:**

- By Claim One and Euthyphro’s Definition, a pious thing is pious (i.e. god-loved) because the gods love it.
  - By Claim Two, the gods love a pious thing because it is pious.
  - If something’s being loved by the gods explains its being a pious thing, its being a pious thing can’t, in turn, explain its being loved by the gods.
- **Euthyphro’s Dilemma:** Either give up the Definition or give up Claim Two.
  - **Socrates’s Upshot:** No definition has been provided: “you told me an affect or quality of [piety], that the pious has the quality of being loved by all of the gods, but you have not yet told me what the pious is,” (11b).
  - **Question:** Socrates spends quite a bit of time elaborating the reasons for Claim One, but there’s not really any argument for Claim Two; Euthyphro just agrees to it and the dialogue proceeds on the assumption that it is correct. Do we have any reasons to think Claim Two is right? Is that a route that Euthyphro could have gone?

## 5 Euthyphro’s Fourth Attempt:

- **Euthyphro (after some prompting from Socrates):** “the pious is the part of the just that is concerned with the care of the gods,” (12e).
- **Socrates’s Response:** When you spell this out, you end up back at your failed third attempt.
  - The kind of “care of the gods” involved in piety here is kind of service of them (13d), specifically giving them what is dear to them (15b).
  - “Do you not realize that you are saying that what is dear to the gods is the pious? Is this not the same as the god-loved?”

## 6 Questions We Have At the End

- We have not learned what it is to be pious at the end of all of this. What, if anything, *have* we learned? What’s the point of the dialogue, for us readers who are interested in furthering our philosophical understanding?
- The dialogue seems to be about the rather specific issue of the nature of piety as it pertains the Greek gods. Do the ideas in this dialogue extend beyond Greek gods in particular? Do they extend beyond the notion of piety altogether?
  - Posed as a challenge to divine command theory in monotheistic of religious traditions.
  - Completely unrelated to religious matters, UChicago faculty Jason Bridges has posed a Euthyphro problem for certain theories of linguistic meaning in contemporary philosophy of language.

- Is Socrates seriously seeking an account of piety from Euthyphro or is he (to use a bit contemporary internet slang) “trolling”?
  - Some quotes which could be interpreted either way:
    - \* “I am eager to become your pupil, my dear friend” (5c).
    - \* “you are younger than I by as much as you are wiser,” (12a).
    - \* “I am so desirous of your wisdom, and I concentrate my mind on it, so that no word of yours may fall to the ground,” (14d).
    - \* “By going you have cast me down from a great hope I had, that I would learn from you the nature of the pious and the impious and so escape Meletus’ indictment by showing him that I had acquired wisdom in divine matters from Euthyphro,” (15e).
  - If Socrates is genuine in these quotes, how could he really think he’s going to learn anything from Euthyphro, given how easily he runs logical circles around him, refuting his various proposals?
  - If Socrates is trolling, what on Earth could be his reason? Moreover, given that Euthyphro seems genuine, wouldn’t trolling here make Socrates kind of a jerk?
- What is Euthyphro, who seems quite confident in his knowledge of religious matters, having “accurate knowledge of all such things” (5a), to take away from this exchange? Should he relinquish the confidence he originally had? Can we draw a lesson about the Athenian people as a whole from what takes place with Euthyphro here?