

# Plato's *Euthyphro*

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## *The First Principle*

- Our first text will be from Plato and centered around his teacher Socrates (469-399 BC).
- Before Socrates (and during his life) the main outlines of philosophical inquiry had begun to take shape.
- The main question posed by the pre-Socratic philosophers was metaphysical:
  - What is the first principle (*archē*) of all reality?
- The question itself can be understood in two main ways:
  - What is the material of which all things are composed?
    - \* Water (Thales)
    - \* Air (Anaximenes)
    - \* Fire (Heraclitus)
    - \* Solid, shaped atoms (Leucippus, Democritus)
  - What is responsible for the organization of all things?
    - \* Number (Pythagoras)
    - \* Mind (Anaxagoras)

## *Unity and Plurality*

- The search for a first principle of all things is at bottom a search for a *unified* explanation of a *plurality* of things.
- An alternative approach, taken by Parmenides, is to deny that there is any plurality at all.
- According to Parmenides, all that is, is one (metaphysical monism).
- His student, Zeno of Elea, proposed several famous paradoxes to support Parmenides's monism.

- Zeno used a distinctive argument form, *reductio ad absurdum*, that has been widely used by philosophers ever since.
  - Assume that opposite of a thesis is true.
  - Show that a contradiction or absurdity follows from the assumption.
  - Conclude that the opposite of the assumed thesis is false, in which case thesis itself is true.

### *Plato and Socrates*

- Most of the writings of Plato (427-347 BC) consist of dialogues between Socrates and various residents of and travelers to Athens.
- In most of the dialogues, the words of Socrates apparently reflect the thoughts of Plato.
- One of Plato's chief concerns was with the metaphysical question of the basis of unity among a plurality of things.
- This is the key issue in his early "Socratic" dialogue *Euthyphro*.

### *The Form*

- We commonly think that distinct objects, acts, etc. (what we will call "things") are of the same *kind*.
  - Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Tiger Woods, are all *people*.
  - Observing religious holidays, making sacrifices, behaving virtuously, are all *pious* acts.
- Plato's philosophical thesis was that things fall under the same kind because there is something "the same and alike" in every one of them.
- The *form* is what "makes" things the kind of things they are.
- Whether a thing falls under a kind depends on whether it has the form.
- Plato produced a philosophical theory of forms in general.
- In the *Euthyphro*, Plato is concerned with the specific problem of finding the form for one kind of thing, the pious act.

### *The Case of Piety*

- One does not describe the form of piety by merely listing pious acts.
- Any description of the form of piety must at a minimum give a *necessary and sufficient condition* for an act to be pious:
  - (Necessary condition): For any act x, if x is pious, then x satisfies the condition,
  - (Sufficient condition): For any act x, if x satisfies the condition, then x is pious.
  - (Necessary and sufficient condition): For any act x, x is pious if and only if x satisfies the condition.
- Euthyphro's thesis is that "being loved by the gods" is a necessary and sufficient condition for the piety of an act, and being hated by the gods is necessary and sufficient for the impiety of an act.
  - For any act x, x is pious if and only if x is loved by the gods.
  - For any act x, x is impious if and only if x is hated by the gods.

### *A Problem with the Proposal*

- Socrates notes that there is anger and hostility in disagreements between the gods.
- Euthyphro agrees that the only subjects of disagreement that could provoke such a reaction would be what is:
  - Just or unjust,
  - Good or bad,
  - Beautiful or ugly.
- If god x thinks that an act is just and god y thinks it is unjust, god x will love it and god y will hate it.
- Gods in fact disagree over which acts are just.
- It follows from Euthyphro's conditions that such acts are both pious and impious, which is absurd.
- So, the conditions given by Euthyphro are not sufficient for the piety or impiety of an act.

### *A Revised Proposal*

- Euthyphro chooses to give up the claim that being loved by “the gods” is a sufficient condition for being a pious action, since there are conflicts in what the gods love and hate.
- His new description of piety is “being loved by all the gods.”
  - For any act x, x is pious if and only if x is loved by all the gods.
- Socrates allows that being loved by all the gods is “the same and alike in every [pious] action.”
- But this condition is said by Socrates to be only a “quality” that is shared by all pious acts.
- The shared quality is not the form of piety, because the form must explain what *makes* a pious act pious.
- Thus, merely providing necessary and sufficient conditions for pious acts is not a sufficient account of the nature of piety.

### *An Explanatory Deficiency*

- Why does Socrates claim that being loved by all the gods does not make a pious act pious?
- Socrates’s argument depends on a general principle:
  - Anything that is loved is loved because of a feature it has that makes it loveable.
- So, if all the gods love a pious act, it is because there is something about the act that makes it loveable.
- If being pious is what makes a pious act loveable to all the gods, then the fact that all the gods love it cannot explain why the pious act is pious; such an explanation would be “circular.”
- So, we must look for some feature of the act other than piety to explain why a pious act is loveable, and hence why the gods love it.
- In that case, we cannot explain what piety is merely by the quality of pious acts that they are loved by all the gods.

### *What Makes a Pious Act Pious?*

- Following a suggestion of Socrates, Euthyphro takes piety to fall under the more general kind, “the just.”
  - Piety is the part of the just that concerns the care of the gods.
- This account of piety remedies the problem with the proposal that what is pious is what is loved by all the gods:
  - It shows what makes a pious act pious, without appealing to piety itself,
  - It explains why all the gods love a pious act, since they all love the just.
- Socrates attempts to refute the account by claiming that the gods cannot be cared for:
  - The gods cannot be benefitted by a pious act, since they cannot be made better,
  - The gods are not served by a pious act, since they need no help in attaining their ends.
- Socrates’s conclusion is that there is no part of the just that concerns the care of the gods, so this attempt to explain what makes a pious act pious fails.

### *A Final Attempt at Accounting for Piety*

- Euthyphro takes a last stab at giving an account of what makes pious acts pious.
- He proposes that pious acts are acts which are performed on the basis of piety.
- Piety itself is knowledge of how to give to, and beg from, the gods.
- Like the last one, this account would show what makes a pious act pious.
- It would also explain why the gods love a pious act, i.e., the act is loveable because it is performed in the proper way.

### *Objections to the Final Attempt*

- Socrates has two objections to the account of piety as knowledge of how to give to, and beg from, the gods.
- The first objection is similar in its structure to the objection to the previous account of piety.
  1. To give correctly is to satisfy needs.

2. But the gods have no needs to satisfy.
  3. So, there is no correct way to give to the gods, and so no knowledge of how to give to the gods.
- The second objection focuses on what it would be to give to, and beg from, the gods properly.
    1. To give to, and beg from, the gods properly is to act in a way that is loved by all the gods.
    2. So, a pious act is one which is performed in such a way as is loved by all the gods.
    3. But being performed in a way such as is loved by all the gods does not explain what makes a pious act pious.
    4. So, being performed based on knowledge of how to give to, and beg from, the gods is not the form of piety.

*Must the Loved be Loveable?*

- Euthyphro yielded to all of Socrates's objections, but he did not have to.
- He might have rejected Socrates's general principle that something is loved only because of some feature it has that makes it loveable.
- Thus, he could have held that pious acts are loved by the gods simply because they are inclined to love them.
- Then the fact that the gods find the acts pleasing can explain why they are pious: that is just what it *means* to be pious.
- Socrates might object that the gods would then be guilty of acting arbitrarily by loving something without having a reason for loving it (or even that they could not do so).
- And Euthyphro might reply that as gods, they do not have to have a reason for doing what they do.

*Relativity?*

- Against this response, it might be claimed that surely there is *something* about a loved object that makes it lovable.
- People (and gods) love things because those things have features that they find appealing to them.
- And there is tremendous variation in what appeals to humans and gods.

- This suggests that at least most things are not lovable as such, or in themselves, but are lovable only to beings with a certain kind of make-up.
- So, although being loved by all the gods might not explain what makes a pious act pious, some feature of the gods which makes them all love the act does explain this.
- For example, if a pious act is just, it is loved by the gods only insofar as the gods have a preference for justice over injustice.
- If the gods preferred injustice to justice, then pious acts would be unjust.