

The Religious and the Just in Plato's *Euthyphro*

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Many traditional perplexities about Plato's dialogues can be resolved by taking the dialogue form seriously. One such puzzle is that concerning Socrates' apparent rejection in the *Euthyphro* of the view of the relation between the religious¹ and the just that he defends in the *Protagoras*.² I will examine this case as an illustration of a method that attends carefully to the dialogue-form, appealing to dramatic setting and characterization in interpreting the argument and noting possible ways a reader might respond to the dialogue.³

The question is: Does Plato have Socrates maintain in the *Euthyphro* that the religious is only a part of the just, in conflict with the claim in the *Protagoras* that the religious and the just are the same? It is generally assumed that he does. In the well-known exchange between Vlastos and Penner on the unity of virtue(s) which focuses on the *Protagoras*, both claim that Socrates holds a conflicting thesis in the *Euthyphro*.⁴ Others have also expressed this view.⁵ Indeed, C.C.W. Taylor has recently asserted that the claim that the religious is only a part of the just 'is not Euthyphro's hypothesis, but Socrates', and must therefore be assumed to have Plato's approval'.⁶

The fact that this claim conflicts with what Socrates defends in detail in the *Protagoras* has led some commentators to say that Plato did not intend us to see Socrates' affirmation that the religious is only part of the just in the *Euthyphro* as something he would defend in the final analysis; so A.E. Taylor and Robert G. Hoerber, but neither considers the possibility that Socrates does not in fact make this affirmation in the *Euthyphro* or that there are grounds *within* the *Euthyphro* for saying that Socrates would not defend it.⁷

My contention, then, is that a careful reading of the dialogue will show that Socrates does *not* hold, agree to, or advocate the claim that the religious is only a part of the just in the *Euthyphro*. Moreover, I will argue that insofar as one can infer a view that Socrates would advocate from his remarks in the *Euthyphro*, that view is that all religious acts are just and all just acts are religious—the position he defends in the *Protagoras*.⁸

The *Euthyphro* falls into three parts: an introduction which sets the scene and provides the topic for discussion (2a-4e), the effort to define what the religious is (4e-9e), and the explicit discussion of the relation between the religious and the just (9e to the end). I will argue that my interpretation provides the most plausible reading of all three parts.

The issue of the relation between the religious and the just is introduced with Euthyphro's explanation of why he is prosecuting his father (3e-4e). Socrates is shocked by Euthyphro's announcement that he is prosecuting his father for murder; but he assumes that the victim was a member of Euthyphro's family (4e), and implies that Euthyphro's action would be inappropriate if this were not so. Euthyphro responds:

It is laughable, Socrates, that you think it makes a difference whether the person killed belonged to another family or my own. What one must watch out for is not that, but only whether the one who kills killed justly or not. If justly, then leave him alone; but if not, prosecute, even if the one who kills shares your hearth and eats at the same table. For your stain is equal if you knowingly associate with such a person and do not purify yourself and him by proceeding against him with a private suit. Anyway, the man who died was at least a dependent of mine. While we were farming on Naxos, he worked as a hired man for us there . . . [Those who now criticize my action] have a poor understanding, Socrates, of how things stand in divine matters regarding the religious and the irreligious. (4b7-e3)⁹

Euthyphro rejects the implication that his action is improper and claims that it is justified on religious grounds.¹⁰ Socrates probes Euthyphro's understanding of this issue by first asking him to explain what the religious is and then by asking him how he understands the relation between the religious and the just. I will examine the latter query, which belongs to the third section of the dialogue, first. It is important to note exactly what Socrates says and not to lift his arguments from their context.

First, Socrates asks, 'Do you not think that everything that is religious is necessarily just?' (11e4-5). Euthyphro agrees, and the possibility that some religious actions may lie outside the realm of the just is never considered. In effect, Euthyphro here commits himself to saying that his prosecution of his father is just. Socrates next asks, 'Then is everything that is just religious? Or is everything that is religious just, but not everything that is just religious—some of it being religious while some of it is something different?' (11e7-12a2). Euthyphro does not understand the latter possibility and Socrates patiently explains it. Once Euthyphro grasps the point, Socrates repeats the options: 'Where there is the just is there also the religious? Or is it the case that where there is the religious there is also the just but the religious is not always where justice is, for the religious is only a part of the just? Should we say the latter or does it seem otherwise to you?' (12c10-d3). Euthyphro is given an open choice, and he takes the latter option. It is Euthyphro and not Socrates who makes the choice; so the hypothesis is not Socrates'. Instead, Socrates follows Euthyphro's lead and examines what is said: as Socrates says later in the same section, 'the one who is questioning must follow the one being questioned wherever the latter may lead' (14c3-4). Plato has Socrates explicitly offer twice the choice of the alternative found in the *Protagoras* that the religious and the just are the same, and it is Euthyphro not Socrates who avoids it.

Nothing that Socrates says by way of introducing this claim that the religious is only a part of the just into the discussion suggests that he would defend it himself.¹¹ There

is, thus, no support in the text for the standard interpretation that Socrates advocates here a view contrary to the one he defends in the *Protagoras*. Indeed, Socrates' examination of Euthyphro's efforts to explain what part the religious is of the just seems to suggest that the just and the religious are the same for him.

Euthyphro's first attempt to distinguish the religious part of the just is to say that it consists of tending or caring (*θεραπεία*) for the gods. When Socrates points out that this means human beings are able to benefit the gods and so make them better, Euthyphro is horrified and revises his account. Now he says that the religious part of the just is the service (*ὑπηρετικὴ*) of the gods. Socrates asks him what goal the gods seek to accomplish using human beings as their servants. Euthyphro fails to answer this question, saying first 'many fine things' and, then, under pressure to be more specific, retreating to his earlier claim that the religious involves pleasing the gods. Socrates points out this retreat and no more is said about the claim that the religious is only a part of the just.

Thus, Socrates' examination of this claim ends with an unanswered question: What is the goal of the gods in this world? This question receives a heavy emphasis. It is repeated three times (13e6-7, 13e10-11, and 14a9-10) and, following Euthyphro's obfuscating retreat at 14a11-b7, Socrates makes the remarkable statement:

If you want to, Euthyphro, you surely could tell me the ultimate goal I asked about much more succinctly. However, it is clear that you are not enthusiastic about teaching me, for just now when you were close to doing so, you turned aside. If you had given me that answer, I would now have acquired from you an adequate understanding of the religious. (14b8-c3)

What could this answer, to which Socrates gives such extraordinary status, be?¹² There is a plausible candidate within the context of the dialogue.

Socrates objected earlier to stories which present the gods as engaging in unjust actions (6a6-9) and suggested that, in his view, the gods are concerned with justice. Hence, if the gods are concerned with human beings at all, one may infer that they are concerned with justice among human beings. Moreover, the immediate context of the question is one in which justice is explicitly a major topic, while it is implicitly so throughout the dialogue because of the shadow of Socrates' impending trial. It seems reasonable, then, to infer that the goal the gods hope to achieve by using human beings as their servants is the spread of justice among humankind. If so, then the gods love all cases of justice; and if the religious is what the gods love, then the religious is not a part of the just, it covers the whole of the just. This, coupled with the unchallenged agreement that everything religious is just, suggests that the religious and the just are the same.

Not only, then, does Socrates not here hold the view that the religious is only a part of the just, his examination of this claim directs the reader to the thesis that the religious and the just are the same. This interpretation of the dialogue gains further support from reflection on the other major unanswered question in the *Euthyphro*, namely, Why do the gods love what they love? This occurs in the second of the three sections of the dialogue, to which I now turn.

When, after some stumbling, Euthyphro comes up with a definition of the religious

as what is loved by the gods (9e1-3), Socrates probes his account by asking, 'Is the religious loved by the gods because it is religious or is it religious because it is loved?' (10a2-3). Euthyphro says he does not understand the question. Socrates explains by pointing out the difference between an action which is taken in regard to an object and the condition of the object which results from that action,¹³ and then asks again whether, if the religious is what is loved by the gods, it is loved 'because it is religious, or for some other reason?' (10d1-4). Euthyphro takes the former option, and Socrates draws attention to the resultant circularity by repeating several times with a questioning inflection: 'It is loved because it is religious?' (10d6-7); that is, 'It is loved because it is loved?' (10d9-10). He makes two things clear: the definition of the religious as what is loved by the gods is still being tested; and, this definition renders the option Euthyphro has chosen absurd. This absurdity receives much emphasis, and Euthyphro is completely befuddled. Socrates then abandons this issue and abruptly introduces the question of the relation between the religious and the just.

It is important to note that Socrates does not attack the definition of the religious as what is loved by the gods as such (except as a final effort to get Euthyphro to see what needs to be said). Rather, he points out that Euthyphro cannot have it both ways. If 'religious' means 'loved by the gods' then we cannot say that the gods love what they love because it is religious. Socrates also observes that the definition of 'religious' as 'loved by the gods' does not explain why the gods love religious things—just as saying that something is being carried does not explain why it is being carried. Euthyphro finally sees that it will not do to say that something is loved because it is loved, as though that were a reason for loving it, but he still fails to see what the reason is (10e5-8). In order to point Euthyphro more directly at the still unanswered question, Why do the gods love what they love?, Socrates now reformulates the question, What is the religious?, into the question, Why do the gods love religious things? (11a6-b5). This reformulation would not have been required if Euthyphro had not made the blunder of saying that the gods love what they love because it is religious. The point is to draw attention to the necessity for giving a reason for things being loved by the gods, that is, a reason for their being religious. If we now recall the earlier, direct question and its final phrase, Do the gods love what they love 'because it is religious, or for some other reason'? (10d1-4), an answer now suggests itself: 'For some other reason, namely, because the things they love are just.' The definition of 'religious' as 'what is loved by the gods' stands, and we are again led to the suggestion that the religious covers the whole of the just. If the gods love something, it is because it is just; and if something is just, the gods love it. The religious, doing what the gods love, is not a mere part of the just.

This interpretation allows for the dramatic as well as philosophical elements in the dialogue, and it is consistent with what Plato has Socrates actually say in the text. Moreover, it establishes in the *Euthyphro* a view that is consistent with that Socrates defends elsewhere in the *Protagoras*.

NOTES

¹ ὅσιος has been traditionally translated as 'pious' in this dialogue. A.E. Taylor (1960, 154) protested that Socrates is really talking about religion rather than piety, and C.C.W. Taylor (1982, 110) makes a similar point. However, the most recent translations still use 'pious'. I agree with Taylor. The term 'pious' is too narrow and perhaps has pejorative overtones: it usually refers to someone who is self-consciously and ostentatiously religious. While Euthyphro is that, Plato is talking about something broader and basically affirmative; so I will use the term 'religious' throughout this discussion.

² Plato, *Prot.* 330b-331b.

³ For a recent explication of this approach to the dialogues, see Krentz 1983. See also Klein 1965, 3-31.

⁴ Vlastos 1973, 228; Penner 1973, 42. Vlastos says that the *Euthyphro* position 'has Socrates' unmistakable approval'.

⁵ See, for example: Burnyeat 1971, 219; Santas 1969, 202; Geach 1966, 380; Garret 1974, 175; Heidel 1900, 175; Rosen 1968, 112-114; Rabinowitz 1958, 114; Leshner 1975, 24-25.

⁶ Taylor, C.C.W. 1982, 116. Nevertheless, C.C.W. Taylor goes on to argue that the hypothesis is false and that one can reach the conclusion that it is from suggestions made in the *Euthyphro* (1982, 116-118). However, his view of how this conclusion can be reached is not as closely grounded in the text as my interpretation and requires the further claim, which is not explained or justified, that 'the only satisfactory account of [the concept of the service of the gods] is that it consists in being a good man'. I will suggest an alternative account of this concept which fits the text much more satisfactorily. Moreover, I reject Taylor's claim that this is Socrates' hypothesis.

⁷ Taylor, A.E. 1960, 154; Hoerber 1958, 105.

⁸ It is not my purpose to argue for any particular interpretation of this famous Socratic doctrine, only to argue that it is present in the *Euthyphro*.

⁹ All translations are my own.

¹⁰ Henry G. Wolz (1974, 496) also emphasizes the fact that Euthyphro initially sees his action as a religious one rather than a requirement of justice.

¹¹ Vlastos takes Socrates' statement at 14c2-3, 'If you had given me that answer, I would now have acquired from you an adequate understanding of the religious', as referring to the question as to what part of the just the religious is and thus indicating his support for the claim that the religious is only a part of justice. However, this remark actually refers to the question as to what goal the gods accomplish using human beings as their servants, a question which leads in a quite different direction, as we shall see.

¹² Since H. Bonitz (1886, 227-242) first suggested that answering this question is the key to the meaning of the dialogue, there has been an enormous amount of speculation about it. See, for example, Heidel 1902, 23; Gomperz 1905, 358-367; Friedlander 1964, 88-89; Burnet 1924, 57; and most recently Taylor, C.C.W. 1982, 177. All of these commentators, however, appeal to the idea of the Good from the *Republic* in one way or another, and none of them confines himself to the context of the *Euthyphro* as I do. R.E. Allen argues that there is no answer to this question: 'It is suggested that holiness may be service of men to gods in producing noble products. This definition is rejected, because it turns out to be impossible to say what those products are' (1970, 6). Allen sees this as impossible because, since 'holiness' is a 'virtue' and not an art or skill, it cannot have products (58). However, this is too narrow a reading of Socrates' point. Being religious is not having a skill the way being a house-builder is; but one can still speak of the consequences of being religious and these consequences can be seen as concrete results in the world—particularly if one takes the religious to be 'what the gods love' so that religiousness as a 'virtue' means 'doing what the gods love'. One can specify what these deeds would be. The 'products' of being religious, then, will be doing what the gods love.

¹³ The interpretation of this explanation has been the subject of much recent debate. See, for example, Cohen 1971, Brown 1964, Hall 1968. In effect, the issue Socrates raises is whether calling something 'religious' refers to the fact that the gods love it but does not indicate why they love it, or whether calling something 'religious' refers to the character of the thing which prompts the gods' love. In the latter case, of course, 'religious' cannot be defined as 'what the gods love'.

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