

Plato's *Euthyphro*

Introduction for the August 9 discussion.

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said that all western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato. Pierluigi's presentation of Donald Davidson last month illustrates the point. Davidson's claim that objective reality is revealed only through conversation echoes and revives Plato's distinctive claim dialogue leads to truth. Davidson says that the recognition of objective truth requires triangulation between persons and the world. He analogizes to the necessity of triangulation to perceive distance.

Our sense of objectivity is the consequence of another sort of triangulation [than the perception of distance], one that requires two creatures. Each interacts with an object, but what gives each the concept of the way things are objectively is the base line formed between the creatures by language. The fact that they share a concept of truth alone makes sense of the claim that they have beliefs, that they are able to assign objects a place in the public world.

Similarly, Davidson's principle of charity, the presumption that in interpreting what another person means, that the person not only shares with you a vast number of truths about the world, even to disagree, but also a certain rationality and coherence of thought. Socrates exemplifies this principle, for example, in *Euthyphro* 14b7 where he ironically takes Euthyphro's garbled attempt at definition as a coy hiding of the ball, while rearticulating a clearer and creditable version, even though it ultimately fails the test of reason. It's not surprising that Davidson began academic life in classical philosophy and wrote his dissertation on Plato's *Philebus*.¹ For Davidson and for Plato, objective truth is not individually accessible, but lives in the fullness of persons trying to understand each other. Knowledge is not individual.

¹ Pierluigi brought this to my attention.

Plato sets Socrates' special sort of conversations (*elenchoi*) in the full context of human drama, quirks of personality, underlying and unconscious desires and aims (here Oedipal), jokes and humor, especially irony, and Davidsonian charity. One neglects these aspects of, say, the *Euthyphro*, at peril.²

Euthyphro meets Socrates on the courthouse steps. Socrates is there to receive charges brought for inventing *new* gods and corrupting the youth, charges for which Socrates will be executed. The young Euthyphro is a sort of religious fanatic, at court to charge his father with murder. Euthyphro's question opens a package of Platonic irony. He asks, What's *new* Socrates that finds you here at the courthouse rather than the Lyceum where you usually hang out?

In Aristophanes' hilarious parody of Socrates in his play, *Clouds*, Socrates calls his school "The Thinkery" (φροντιστήριον) where, along with studying *new* naturalist gods, its students learn to make the weaker argument seem the stronger. The argument that a son can rightfully punish his father is the paradigm sophistry, precisely what Euthyphro plans to do.³ Euthyphro is, so he claims, emulating the behavior of the Greek gods. After all, Kronos castrated his father Ouranos and Zeus cast Kronos into the outer darkness, both to punish their fathers' crimes. A stunning sequence of Oedipal transition of cosmic power! Moreover, Euthyphro claims that family relationships are irrelevant to religious law. No familial favoritism here!⁴ To Socrates, attributing shameful and venal

² As an example, the brilliant philosopher in his early career translated Plato's *Theaetetus* with full line by line commentary. However, he *completely* neglects the spectacularly tragic setting of the dialogue in which Theaetetus is being brought home dying of plague and war wounds. The dialogue flashes back to a conversation between Socrates and the boy Theaetetus, a promising student of mathematics developing a geometrical number theory, this on the very day Socrates later goes to receive the charges for which he will be executed. Written far apart in time, the dialogues condescend in their drama.

³ The patriarchal character of ancient Greek society and thinking is not merely shameful and immoral, but damages understanding catastrophically. Not entirely able to escape this catastrophe, one must say in fairness that Plato argues strenuously for the equality of women in the Republic and several sources of enlightenment in his dialogues are women, e.g., Diotima, in the Symposium. I believe his thought is maimed nevertheless.

⁴ Notably, Socrates in the Republic (and perhaps in real life) wanted to ban the poetry that presents gods doing shameful things—and here says, almost sub rosa, that he doesn't believe such things of the gods.

acts to the gods is bad teaching. These matters, and much more, arise dramatically in first few lines of the dialogue.

Since Euthyphro has set himself out as expert in religious doctrine and its mysteries, Socrates asks him to teach him what piety is, so that he can defend himself against the charge of impiety that Meletus has brought against him. Neither Socrates nor Euthyphro knows Meletus, but he is a barely bearded young man charging Socrates at seventy with a capital crime, a setup that echoes Euthyphro's plan to prosecute his father for murder. Euthyphro believes what is perceived as Socrates' heresy as his claim to hear, on occasion, a voice, a daimonion (Jiminy Cricket?), warning him when he is about to do something wrong.

Euthyphro tries definitions of impiety which, under dialectical examination of his attempts, come full circle to the view that what is pious is just whatever the gods like. Euthyphro blames Socrates for making his words squirm around rather than staying in place. Socrates jokes that he must be like Daedalus, the mythological craftsman, whose statues were so lifelike they moved, and then quips that he must be even more skillful than Daedalus because he makes *other* peoples' words squirm. But this is not *just* a joke because Socrates' enterprise is precisely to make the word—the logos—live.

I want to make one more point about reading Plato. There are in every Platonic dialogue points of logic. In *Euthyphro*, a lot hinges, for instance, on the invalidity of inferring the truth of the converse from a proposition. In Aristotle's logic class, we would learn that it is invalid to conclude that, if all A is B, then all B is A. But in reading Plato the A's and B's are themselves filled with living and meaningful content. For example, Socrates explains this logical point when he says he disagrees with the poet who says that "where there is fear, there is also shame." He disagrees because we can fear lots of things, like sickness and poverty, without feeling shame. While shame involves fear, fear need not involve shame. But in a Platonic dialogue, everything invites philosophy. The relation of fear and shame are in play because the example is set in the drama of

Oedipal transitions of power in which shame and fear are in focus. Plato is an excellent logic chopper, but the examples themselves are embedded in the drama. I can't explain that better right now.

It is not my intention here to lay out each attempt at definition of piety/holiness and its demise, though doing so in conversation with others would be a great pleasure. *Euthyphro* is famous for a "dilemma," which should easily occupy our discussion: Are actions good because gods like them or do gods like them because they are good (10a1). Euthyphro chooses the latter horn of the dilemma (10d14), allowing the investigation to proceed while leaving the the gods' predilections out of it. But isn't it a bit weird to talk about "piety" and "holiness" while leaving the gods aside?

I suggest that the real dilemma is whether, in the absence of an appeal to some compelling authority (like Jiminy Cricket), the notion of right action is coherent at all. Does moral law without a legislator make sense? An answer is that freedom and autonomy themselves are ultimate values. We cringe when Euthyphro says the proper relation of a person to a god is as a slave to a master. Is it better to act freely than to act well? These are a few of the questions that might arise on August 9.

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