

PHIL 31: Ancient Philosophy
Fall 2005; David O. Brink
Handout #3: Plato's Euthyphro

Plato's Euthyphro is an important Socratic dialogue. We learn not only about piety, but also about Socrates, his method, and his standards for moral knowledge. Euthyphro's claim to know that his contested action is pious (5a) triggers Socrates's "What is F?" question. If we look ahead, we know that Socrates rejects Euthyphro's definitions, but we should not therefore assume that Socrates disputes Euthyphro's claim that his action is pious. At least, Socrates would agree with Euthyphro that in deciding whether to punish one should look only to whether the killer acted unjustly (4b; cf. Ap 28b, Cri 48cd). Moreover, both Euthyphro and Socrates seem to adopt a wider conception of piety that links it with justice, rather than ritual (5d, 11e, 12de).

FORMS AND DEFINITIONS

It is agreed that there must be some one form that explains why all pious things are pious (5d). We might call this the **unity** assumption or the **one over many** assumption. Euthyphro and Socrates then discuss several definitions:

- D1: piety = prosecuting the wrongdoer (5d).

D1 violates the unity assumption. Socrates insists that the form of F must enable someone who is not F to identify all and only F things as F (6e; cf. 9ab). We might say that Socrates expects the form to supply a **decision procedure**. Euthyphro then offers a second definition.

- D2: piety = what is loved by the gods; impiety = what is disliked by the gods.

But if the gods disagree, as Euthyphro believes, one and the same thing is both pious and impious (7b, 8a). This shows that Socrates understands D2 as

- D2a: x is pious iff it is loved by some gods, and x is impious iff it is disliked by some gods.

Socrates suggests that we can only resolve disputes with the help of **measuring procedures** (7b-d). He also notes that D2 is problematic because he is unable to ascertain the will of the gods (9ab). This also suggests that he expects a definition of F-ness to be a decision procedure, which will allow anyone to apply the definition so as to sort the world reliably into F-things and non-F-things. Socrates waives these worries, and Euthyphro offers a third definition.

- D3: x is pious iff it loved by all the gods; x is impious iff it is disliked by all the gods; otherwise, x is neither pious nor impious.

D3 is agreed to be better than D2 (D2a). Perhaps D3 gives a more charitable interpretation of D2 than D2a.

THE EUTHYPHRO PROBLEM

Socrates does not dispute D3's truth but whether it provides an adequate definition. The problem -- the famous **Euthyphro Problem** -- is that there are two competing explanations of D3.

- D3a: **Voluntarism**: x is pious, because the gods love it; in particular, the pious = the god-beloved.
- D3b: **Naturalism**: the gods love what is pious, because it is pious.

Socrates gets Euthyphro to commit to D3b. The argument against D3a is complicated (10a-11b).

1. That which is loved by the gods (the god-beloved) is god-beloved, because the gods love it [10a-c].
2. The gods do not love the god-beloved, because it is god-beloved [10a-c].
3. The gods do love the pious, because it is pious [10d].
4. The pious is not pious because the gods love it [10d].
5. If the pious = the god-beloved, then the god-beloved is god-beloved because it is god-beloved [11a; by (3)].
6. If the pious = the god-beloved, then the pious is pious because it is god-beloved [11a; by (1)]
7. Hence, the pious is not the same as the god-beloved [11a; by (5) and (2) and by (6) and (4)].

Socrates is not arguing that voluntarism is incoherent, just that it is inconsistent with things most of us believe. (1) is a truism: to be god-beloved is simply to be loved by the gods. But then what makes the gods take this attitude toward something must be some other property of it, which is what (2) says. (3) claims that the gods love what is pious, because it is pious, which is especially plausible if piety is part of justice (5d, 11e, 12de). But then, as (4) claims, the god-beloved character of pious things depends upon their being pious, not vice versa. (5)-(7) draw out the anti-voluntarist implications of these claims.

Socrates's anti-voluntarism is significant for several reasons. First, Socrates's dissatisfaction with D3 shows that definitions are supposed to explain the property that all F-things have in common that makes them F (11a). Something can be a reliable symptom of F without explaining F's essence. This explanatory requirement goes beyond previous constraints on definition. It goes beyond unity. All F-things might be G, but G needn't explain what makes F-things F. The approval of the gods may be common to pious things, but it is not what makes them pious. Similarly, the explanatory requirement goes beyond the decision procedure requirement. The will of the gods might represent a perfectly reliable symptom of piety (if only we could ascertain their will), which allowed us to sort actions reliably into the pious and the non-pious, but it wouldn't tell us what made those actions pious.

Second, Socrates's critique of voluntarism raises questions about related doctrines in ethical theory, such as divine command theories and so-called response-dependent conceptions of value. Consider

1. If god exists (and has the usual attributes), then x is good or right iff God commands or approves of x.

(1) is ambiguous between (a) the voluntarist claim that x is good or right because God approves of it and (b) the naturalist claim that God approves of x because it is good or right independently of God's will (and because God is both omniscient and good). The voluntarist apparently represents moral value and God's will as arbitrary and unprincipled, whereas the naturalist represent God's will as principled. But naturalism implies that moral distinctions do not depend on God's will.

Similar issues arise in secular attempts to link moral value and the reactions or responses of appraisers.

1. x is good or right iff it is such as to elicit approval in an ideal appraiser.

This claim is also ambiguous between (a) the voluntarist claim that an ideal appraiser's approval makes something good or right and (b) the naturalist claim that an ideal appraiser is one whose approval is based on what's good or right. Indeed, theological voluntarism is really just a response-dependent view about value with a **very** ideal appraiser.

Third, in rejecting voluntarism Socrates represents the gods as sensitive to moral principle. Here, he seems to criticize the unprincipled and anthropomorphic conception of the gods familiar from Greek mythology. Instead, he endorses a moralized conception of the gods, first articulated by Hesiod and other natural philosophers. Socrates realizes that he is criticizing one important strand in Greek thinking about the gods, but he thinks that this criticism rests on a moralized conception of the gods that also appeals to common beliefs (6a).

A FINAL DEFINITION

Euthyphro offers one last definition of piety.

- D4: piety is that part of justice concerned with the care of the gods, while that concerned with the care of men is the residual part of justice (12e).

The problem with D4 concerns its provision for taking care of the gods. Either this means (a) attending to their needs or (b) attending to what pleases them. But (a) would represent them as dependent, vulnerable, and imperfect, and is not consistent with Socrates's less personal conception of the gods. (b), on the other hand, seems to reintroduce D2 or D3. On this negative note the dialogue ends.

SOCRATIC CONSTRAINTS ON DEFINITION

Attending to Socrates's response to Euthyphro's various definitions suggests some assumptions he makes about what to look for in a good definition.

1. Forms needed for definitions.
2. Unity assumption: one form over all F-things.
3. Form must supply decision procedures.
4. Form must supply measuring procedures.
5. Form must explain the property that all F-things have in common that makes them F.