

The Vicissitudes of Ancient Greece, Euthyphro's Definitions of Piety and Geographical Factors

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ABSTRACT

Euthyphro, the dialogue written by Plato, records the debate between Socrates and Euthyphro before the trial of Socrates (399 B.C.). Since the text was written by Plato, who was one of Socrates's students, we can assume that it not only contains Plato's subjective impressions of this encounter but also traces of a worldview held by elite Athenians. Essential conceptions of nature and geography are not always entirely conscious, but they affect our ethical values and moral assumptions. This paper shows that Socrates and Euthyphro's conceptions of piety were directly connected to geographic variables critical to the Athenian polity. By analyzing the truth claims, vocabulary, metaphors and analogies used in Plato's narrative, it can be seen that how geographical conditions shaping the cultural and physical environment of the Greek ecumene informed a classic dialogue on justice and holiness. This paper assesses the ways in which resource availability, environmental constraints, and the infrastructure of political power in the Attic peninsula informed conceptions of justice and holiness in a democratic system in which participation was limited to adult male citizens. The vicissitudes of environmental geography affect all political systems and are expressed, consciously and unconsciously in narratives on justice, holiness and power.

Keywords: *Ancient Greece, Socrates, Euthyphro, historical geography*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper adopts the perspective of historical geography in a textual analysis of the changing socio-ecological fortunes of ancient Greece as they are expressed in *Euthyphro* (Plato), a text composed by Plato in approximately 399 to 395 BCE. In the dialogue between Socrates and Euthyphro, recorded by Plato in the text *Euthyphro*, Euthyphro proffered five definitions of piety in total, and Socrates utilized debate and rhetorical techniques to rebut Euthyphro's points, which cajoled him into accepting Socrates's argument. To some extent, this seems to be a simple logical rebuttal; however, we need to know that the definition of piety could vary based on personal understanding. In other words, there has never been a standard definition for piety, and we need to recognize this problem dialectically. We need to admit that each era has its own distinctive cultural and ecological background that could differentiate how people would commonly define this and other terms. Though it is impossible to deduce a precise result, as we cannot communicate with Socrates directly, through the use of historical data and geographic analysis, we can deduce that the relatively barren land and low agricultural

output, as well as the dearth of forest and mineral resources in fifth-century Greece affected the formation of this dialogue. Perlin in his book *A Forest Journey* writes: "Intermixed in these troubled times were power intrigues and civil violence. Rival kingdoms in the Mycenaean world apparently took advantage of the chaotic conditions to raid one another, seeking precious resources such as grain and timber stored in the palaces. Within each kingdom power-hungry individuals most likely used the uncertainty of the period to press for their ascendancy to power" [1].

This section of his essay illustrates the relationship between the ancient Greece's disadvantages in resources and active commercial activities and wars in order to get those resources and how this shaped the distinctive thoughts of the ancient Greeks. This paper will examine the five definitions of piety defined by Euthyphro and explain how they relate to the lands and livelihoods that shaped Athenian society as well as the lives of people in other nearby city-states.

2. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS - PIETY

In the first definition, Euthyphro proposed that piety is what he is doing at the moment: prosecuting his father for manslaughter. Furthermore, Euthyphro proposed the second definition: piety is what is pleasing to the gods. In the third definition, to overcome Socrates' objection to his second definition of piety, Euthyphro amended his definition to "what all the gods love is pious, and what they all hate is impious". In reply, Socrates posed the question that would become renowned in philosophy as the Euthyphro dilemma: "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious? Or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?" In the fourth definition, Socrates suggested a definition of piety, which is that "piety is a species of the genus 'justice'", but he led up to that definition with observations and questions about the difference between species and genus, starting with the question: "Are you not compelled to think that all that is pious is just?" In the last definition, Euthyphro proposed: "Piety is an art of sacrifice and prayer." He suggested the notion of piety as a form of knowledge, of how to do an exchange: giving gifts to the gods and asking favors in return. [2]

Based on the content summarized above, one could categorize the factors related to geography that affect the development of the plot of this dialogue into the several points below: the importance of slavery in the Athenian economy, the highly-developed system of commerce throughout the Greek ecumene, and the centrality of intercultural interactions (e.g., the absorption of philosophical thoughts, vocabulary choice, etc.), which supported the structural, institutional and economic features of ancient Greek society that is applied in Plato's original script.

2.1. The Slave Economy and the Geography of Ancient Greece

To yield some deeper insights regarding the first definition, we should consider how Euthyphro presented charges of murder against his father. At the beginning of the dialogue, we learn that Euthyphro has brought the case to court because after arresting one of the workers for killing a slave from the family estate on Naxos Island, his father tied the worker up and threw him in a ditch where he died of exposure to the elements without proper care and attention. At the time, Euthyphro's father was waiting to hear from Athenian officials about how to proceed. The occurrence of the tragedy represents a single episode in the longer history of widespread slavery in ancient Greece. Due to the lack of extensive floodplains with broad valleys and arable lands associated with fertile alluvial soils, early Greek civilization was not as self-sufficient in food production as were ancient Egypt, India, China and Babylonia. Furthermore, the Mediterranean climate is hot and dry during the summer but cold and humid in winter, which

is not advantageous for the growth of grain crops (e.g., rice, wheat, barley, millet and maize). The topography of the Peloponnese Peninsula consists primarily of hills and short, narrow streams, which contribute to the mismatch between the density of population and the yield of foods [3]. Therefore, in order to increase the supply of food to meet the demands of Greek polities, unless using other brutal methods, the ancient Greeks had to depend upon a large number of slaves, about 80,000 to 100,000 (approximately one-fourth of the residents in Athens were slaves). The slaves were treated as commodities (Aristotle described them as properties that could breathe) and norms for their treatment depended chiefly on the proclivities of their masters (refer to the Figure 1 "*Model of the Greek Slave*" that even part of the slaves in Ancient Greece cannot afford clothes [5]) [4]. Therefore, the tragedy of the story in the first definition was initially generated from the agricultural constraints and associated labor demands of a Mediterranean climate. These realities should not be conflated with environmental determinism; they must be understood in terms of the complex political ecology, economy and hierarchy endemic to the Greek city-state as a socially stratified polity.

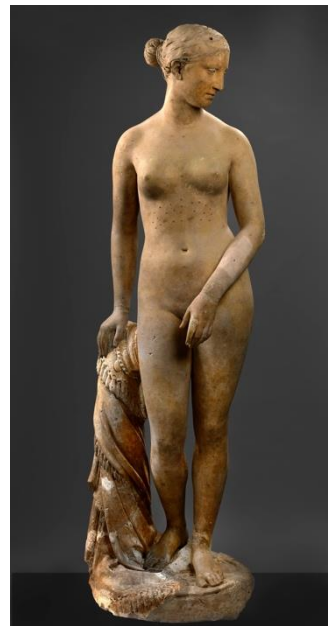


Figure 1 The Sculpture *Model of the Greek Slave* [5]

2.2. Commercial Activities and Agricultural Problems of Ancient Greece

As Socrates subjects Euthyphro to the elenchus, the influence of business and trade activities in ancient Greece becomes manifest in the thoughts and values of both interlocutors. Both mention the spontaneous and pious "trade" between gods and the citizens, and the exchange between gods and citizens for knowledge and favors. The word "trade" in the original script is *ἄρπαι*, which could mean trade, barter or exchange. Most

discussions about the relationship between deities and the mundane realm were in terms of trade and exchange: what did I get from the gods, and what should I offer to the gods. Likewise, due to the relatively low volume of food production, the ancient Greeks relied heavily on food imports, which led to the economic reliance of ancient Greek city-states on commercial activities. This reliance differed from many farming civilizations in the same period [1]. The distinctive social mode caused the position of business and commerce to be prioritized in ancient Greek society [6]. Thus, most descriptions of the relationships in the dialogue regarding transactions with the gods adopted the form of metaphors involving trade.

Supporting these points even more robustly, Ancient Greek had had an entire ritual lexicon system that included those “commercial” vocabularies describing the relationship between gods and the mundane [7]. Take the example of the original version of Homeric Hymns. Though these were written in a language known as Homeric Greek that was different from the one that Socrates and Plato used, they are close relatives that shared the same cultural environments. In Homer’s verse, a range of ancient Greek words including ἀπάρχεσθαι (aparchesthai) [8] are associated with sacrifices involving cutting some of the sacrificial animal’s hair as a first offering to be burnt in the fire to a god. The word aparchesthai can also describe inheritance taxes, entrance fees, board officials, or birth certificates [9]. The usage of words meaning sacred sacrifices like aparchesthai in Homeric texts and in the post-Homer era commercial realm of suggests a close relationship between cosmology and an economy based on inter-state and broader regional commerce.

2.3. Cultural Interaction and the Geopolitical Position of Ancient Greece

Lastly, the philosophy contained in the dialogue between Socrates and Euthyphro shows a strong influence from older Middle Eastern philosophy, especially that of the Persians. Socrates was accused of creating his own gods rather than believing in the Athenians’ official gods. However, there is evidence to show that the gods created by Socrates were adapted from Zoroastrianism (possibly there are also some factors that were borrowed from other primitive religions in the ancient Middle East) (this could be seen on the the Terracotta Sarcophagus Rim (figure 2) that was evacuated in the east Ancient Greece (Asia Minor), and this artifact contains strong scent of styles from the ancient Middle East civilizations, possibly relating to

Persia and Zoroastrianism [10]). Socrates believed that piety is to be like gods, and Euthyphro mentioned that piety is a kind of sacrifice. These thoughts were not first conceived by the two interlocutors but borrowed from the Persians [11]. In the myth of Er, the souls must choose between two paths: on the left is the way to descend from heaven to hell, on the right is the ascent of the souls who rise from Tartarus up to the stars. The very idea of this ascension was relatively new in Greece and must have come from the Zoroastrian belief in the primeval choice and the Činuatō Pərətu (the name of a bridge which leads the souls of the dead in the other world) separating the good from the wicked, which accords to the elucidation of Socrates about choosing to be like the gods. Simultaneously, a lost part of the *Avesta* is summarized in the *Bundahišn* (the name traditionally given to an encyclopedic collection of Zoroastrian cosmogony and cosmology written in Book Pahlavi) and whose antiquity is proved by the Indo-Iranian myth of a primeval man sacrificed and dismembered to form the world’s different parts, aka a creator myth, which is pretty much the view of Euthyphro [12]. Owing to the frequent trade, as well as the wars, between Greece and Persia, along with the relatively close geographical distance between the two culture regions, there was intensive interaction between the two civilizations which could be referred to the figure 3[13]. The primary motivation for Greece to sustain stable trade with other countries and regions was its own dependence on food imports.



Figure 2 The Terracotta Sarcophagus Rim [10]

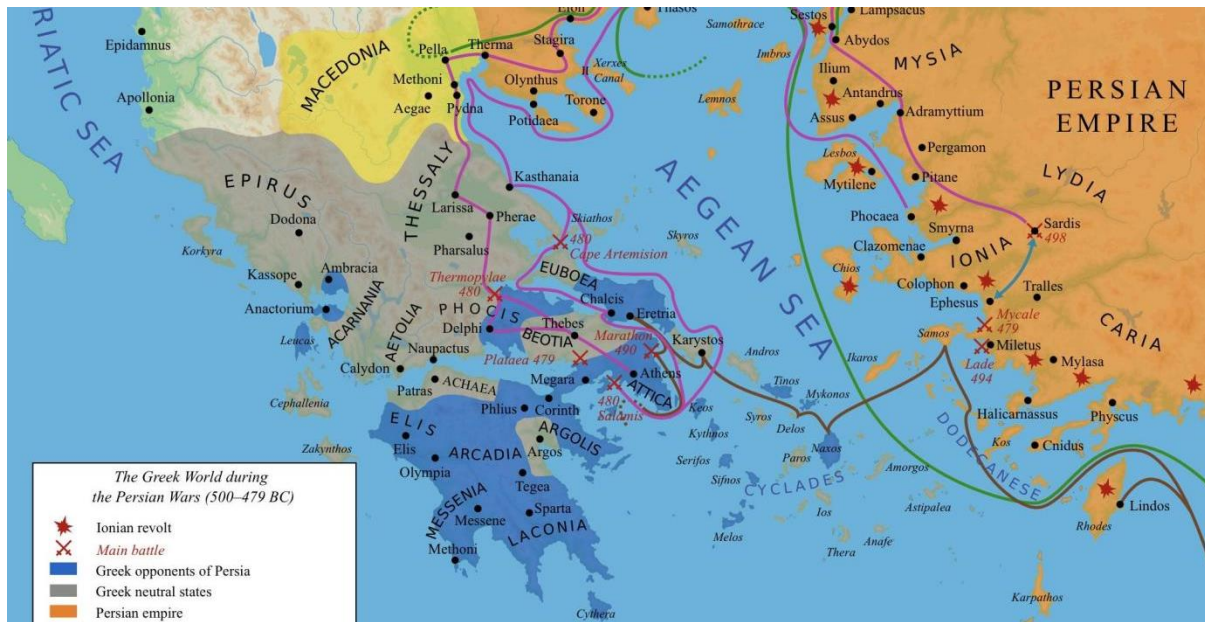


Figure 3 The Trading Routes of the Ancient Greek before the Persian Wars [13]

3. CONCLUSION

Overall, an overlapping set of disadvantageous geographical and agricultural conditions motivated the Greeks to trade and interact with other civilizations in order to meet their needs for food, fuel, minerals, and building material. Meanwhile, it led to the dependence on the slavery system, commercial relations with other regions, and the absorption of foreign cultural traits and practices. These factors reinforced one another mutually and ultimately shaped the renowned piece of philosophical writing known as Euthyphro.

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