

Socrates' Piety

—Through A Study of Plato's *Euthyphro*

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ABSTRACT

Whether Socrates as a model of philosophers is pious is an issue about whether philosophy itself is pious. For this reason, a study on the essence of Socrates' piety should be introductory in the study of political philosophy. The so-called "introductory" also means the author, through the process of writing this article, once again understands the complexity of Socrates' piety and the delicacy between city-state politics and philosophy. Political philosophy in this sense is what this article intends to show via a study of Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*.

Keywords: Socrates; piety; *Euthyphro*; justice; city-state

1. INTRODUCTION

Is Socrates pious? Or, are philosophers pious?^[1]

The questions concern whether Athens properly exercised its rights when it sentenced Socrates to death. As a virtue, piety matters to the destiny of a city-state^[2]. In the modern society, piety is a basic duty in the lives of citizens, requiring them to be loyal to their country, no matter what form this loyalty takes. We can imagine a modern regime that does not see loyalty as a virtue, but no existing regime does not reject fundamental conflicts between the way of life admired by its citizens and the paradigms by the regime itself. Then, consider Socrates' piety issue. Is Socrates as a model of philosophers fundamentally incompatible with the regime of Athens? If so, we cannot justify "Socrates' piety" on the grounds of "the injustice of Athens". Any city-state has the "right" to suppress a way of life that is fundamentally opposed to itself, even if the suppression is unjust. But according to Plato and Xenophon, Socrates has always been a diligent worshipper. Take *Euthyphro*, for example. Socrates is politically inclined towards the sacred tradition of city-state politics; he is a conservative in religion and politics. His caution and piety in action must be based on his philosophy, which is the very foundation of this article's interpretation of the dialogue, *Euthyphro*.^[3]

2. WORSHIP OF THE GODS AND KNOWLEDGE

The dialogue takes place at the βασιλέως στοάν (the porch of the King Archon). βασιλέως (the King Archon) is a vestige of the ancient monarchy in "modern" Athenian democracy. When functions of monarchs were replaced by various functions of archons, monarchs also performed a function in "religious" affairs in the tradition of city-states. The changes in the regime of Athens did not make Athens become something new, at least on the surface. Beyond the regime existed "orthodoxy". Meletus, the chief accuser of Socrates, was a representative of this "orthodoxy"^[4]. The word "orthodoxy" originates from Greek and literally means "correct opinion". "To me, among all statesmen he is the only one who knows how to deal with politics correctly. (καὶ φαίνεται μοι τῶν πολιτικῶν μόνος ἄρχεσθαι ὀρθῶς; (2d))" Just as farmers who put farming first, statesmen should care about youth first. How to care? Being orthodox, that is, following correct opinion—orthodoxy. Then, where does orthodoxy come from? From ancient times. Different from opinions in modern times, orthodoxy is not one part of many opinions, and there are not many kinds of orthodoxy available. Orthodoxy is orthodoxy as such, for it defines what is the right way of life in advance. Meletus accuses Socrates of his "ignorance" making young people doubt orthodoxy-correct opinion: Tradition is not necessarily the best. Socrates' ignorance does not mean that he has a more correct opinion taking the place of orthodoxy, but that his way of life, namely, philosophy,

makes orthodoxy malfunction. His ignorance is not complete ignorance, but search for knowledge. His ignorance does not mean not being obedient when orthodoxy commands piety, namely how to live your lives, but interrupting it and asking “I don’t know what does piety you are saying mean in itself.” In terms of concrete acts, Socrates does not go against orthodoxy, because he is not a liberal, and he participates in city-state ritual activities like the vast majority of Athens’ citizens.^[6] In terms of political affairs, Socrates is cautious: though he does not know whether he is pious to participate in ritual activities only through “outward activities”, he still does so anyway. Socrates does not hide his true self through outward activities to avoid possible scrutiny of orthodoxy for any political purposes.

When Euthyphro tells Socrates why he comes to the porch of the King Archon, the city-state just thinks he is crazy, just as he thinks the city-state is crazy. Euthyphro wants to prosecute his father for committing murder, and murder is impious. The specific detail is as follows. The victim, who is a worker of Euthyphro’s family, killed his fellow worker after drinking too much. For this reason, Euthyphro’s father bound the victim in a ditch and left him behind. The father did not know how to treat the victim privately, so he sent someone to Athens to ask priests. The place where Euthyphro lives is an island called Naxos (Νάξος), a remote island off the coast of the southeast Athens which is the colonial power of the island.^[5] So it took a long time before the father heard from priests. According to Euthyphro, the immediate cause of the victim’s death was cold, starvation and being tied up; the ultimate cause was the father’s neglect. And he also give the reason why his father neglected the victim: The victim himself was the murderer.^[7]

Taking a close look at Euthyphro’s account, we can easily come to a conclusion that the true cause of the victim’s death is the father’s piety. Murder is something evil that has disgraced the family. To remove the disgrace, the family should listen to the city-state’s opinions, or more accurately, the opinions of the gods. This is why the father sent someone to consult priests. The piety of the father is: to obey the gods. To “obey” means ignorance, or rather, the foundation of the father’s piety is ignorance and obedience. Therefore, a deduction can be unfolded as the follows, though Euthyphro has never spoken it out: The city-state’s piety is the very reason for the impiety of Euthyphro family’s murder; piety is the cause of impiety. But this paradox cannot be drawn by Euthyphro himself, because he has never thought about what “piety itself” truly is.^[8]

Although Euthyphro is unaware of the possible conflict between the piety to him and the piety to the city-state, we can form two different views on piety from that. An aspect of piety in orthodoxy is: There is no need to know why to be pious or what being pious is, but there is an only need to obey the gods’ commands conveyed via

priests without challenging them. However, Euthyphro’s piety is built on the knowledge of piety that he claims to be deeper and more precise. Specifically, he knows what is right: to accuse his father of murder; and as long as it is rightness-just, it is definitely not be impious. Correctness is not what the city-state tells what one should do, but what he/she should do one already knows. One should be properly pious, instead of being obediently pious. In Euthyphro’s view, only with the correct knowledge of piety can one know how to act piously. On the surface, Socrates also takes such position, but the fundamental difference is Socrates knows he has no such knowledge of piety.^[9] Then, is there a real conflict between such knowledge and the city-state’s orthodoxy? Maybe there is. But such conflict does not influence the fundamentals of the city-state’s religion, which is essentially different from the Socrates trial.

Socrates does not argue against Euthyphro from the position of the city-state. Socrates, even as a political conservative, is not a natural dogmatist. Socrates knows he is ignorant about the gods’ affairs, but he yearns for knowledge of them. If there is indeed a kind of knowledge of how to act in a pious way, Socrates must have acted in accordance with that knowledge. But we don’t know how Socrates would make decisions when such knowledge and commands conflict with each other. A safe and prudent method is, failing the knowledge, one should just follow the city-state’s commands. According to Xenophon, Socrates does participate in the city-state’s religious activities like other Athenians.^[10] But according to Plato, Socrates is even more serious than anyone else, and he has spent his whole life proving whether the Delphic Oracle is true: The gods could not give wrong instructions, and the city-state’s religion could not go wrong. If one thinks it is wrong, he/she must have not understand it properly. In city-state systems, only a few people can rationally know that there is no absolute disagreement between the gods and piety. There is no irreconcilable conflicts between reason and divine instructions^[11]. For Socrates, knowledge of piety can at least assure that the impious acts he is accused of is intentional. Just as sinful as manslaughter, blasphemy committed in ignorance is much less sinful than intentionally committed. After hearing that Euthyphro has had knowledge of piety, Socrates says as such.

“If, Meletus, you agree that Euthyphro is wise in these things, I am also acting correctly (ὀρθῶς νομίζειν), and you should not charge (δικάζου) me; if you disagree, you should target this man who is my teacher, and send him to court instead of me and accuse him of corrupting the old men, me and his father, because it is he who instructs me, and he who accused and punished his father. (‘καὶ εἰ μὲν, ὦ Μέλητε,’ φαίην ἄν, ‘Εὐθύφρονα ὁμολογεῖς σοφὸν εἶναι τὰ τοιαῦτα, καὶ ὀρθῶς νομίζειν καὶ ἐμὲ ἡγοῦ καὶ μὴ δικάζου: εἰ δὲ μή, ἐκείνῳ τῷ διδασκάλῳ λάχε δίκην πρότερον ἢ ἐμοί, ὡς τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους διαφθείροντι ἐμέ τε καὶ τὸν αὐτοῦ πατέρα, ἐμὲ μὲν διδάσκοντι, ἐκείνον δὲ

νουθετοῦντί τε καὶ κολάζοντι' 5b)" In other words, if there exists a kind of knowledge about piety, Socrates must have learned about it, and as a result, he could persuade the city-state and defend his piety. But if knowledge of piety is impossibly available, and the city-state religion monopolizes all authority about what piety is, any effort by Socrates to defend himself makes no sense. Therefore, whether Socrates is pious bears close relationship to "whether or not he has knowledge about piety"; and Euthyphro claims to have knowledge about the gods, then debates on whether his knowledge has correct foundation is also subtly connected with the issue of Socrates' piety.

3. EUTHYPHRO'S THREE DEFINITIONS

3.1 *The first definition*

Euthyphro's first definition of piety is concrete that what he is doing is righteous and pious. Specifically, one is pious as long as he/she charges those who do not act righteously, regardless of the accused's status and relationship with the accuser, proof of which is that Zeus did the same. From this, a general definition may be got: Piety can mean acting like the gods and imitating their deeds and morals. This definition reminds us of the views on piety of philosophers in *Theaetetus*, namely that piety means approaching the gods. In this sense, the gods are the goal of philosopher's life, and city-state life is what philosophers must flee, in whatever way in which they act like the gods as best they can. In efforts to perfectly approach and imitate the gods, philosophers' piety is perfectly closer to the gods' wisdom and justice. The closer philosophers approach the gods, the more they like the gods and the more they become pious, and thus the further they get away from city-state life. All the gods are infinitely righteous, because they never do wrong to one another, nor to mortals. The gods' justice is unconditional and based on justice itself. They would not become more capable or motivated to be more righteous for they are pleased to see philosophers imitate and approach them. It seems that, just like the philosophers in *Theaetetus*, Euthyphro can also defend himself as follows: I know more about the gods than ordinary people do, and my accusation against my father is closer to Zeus's act; therefore, I am more pious than most people.

But the above self-defense makes sense only if Euthyphro's knowledge is correct, or, Euthyphro correctly knows Zeus. There is always one possibility: If the narrative about Zeus that has been passed down to this day is true, we probably have not understood it correctly. But one thing is certain that Euthyphro's and the city-state's understanding of the "justice" of Zeus is not true. That "justice" is not unconditional and not based on itself. In other words, that "justice" is also unjust at the same time. Technically, justice can never be harmful to others.^[12] If the justice of Zeus lays the foundation of the

order of all the Greek gods, this justice's premise turns out to be injustice, just as each father of the state in secular world is also a rebel. By following Zeus, Euthyphro prosecutes (defy) his father in order to cleanse the taint of his family and rebuild the family order on the basis of purity and justice; but this kind of justice finds its way by overthrowing the existing order, so it is not unconditional^[13]. Euthyphro does not understand what "imitating the gods" really means, and in his eyes Zeus is just a model he defines according to his own preferences^[14]. He is taking advantage of the gods to serve his prosecution, rather than imitating the gods. So even though Euthyphro's first definition is closest in form to justice of philosophers, its essence is blasphemous. If the gods are the fathers of Euthyphro's father, imitating Zeus' being against his father is, ultimately and unavoidably, to defy Zeus, because Zeus is both a father and a son^[15].

From Euthyphro's first definition, we can draw the following inferences. First, imitation of the gods is piety; second, acts of the gods are not completely just, so there is a potential conflict between piety and justice.

3.2 *The second definition*

Euthyphro's second definition is that piety is (doing) which is dear to the gods (ἔστι τοίνυν τὸ μὲν τοῖς θεοῖς προσφιλέσ ὄσιον). Socrates says that this definition has met his requirements in form. At first glance, this definition is the same as Euthyphro's father's "definition". There seems to be no difference between the gods' likes and instructions. It seems difficult to imagine that the gods would instruct people to do things that do not please them. But this is not necessarily the case. We can imagine that a father instructs his son to do something unfavorable to himself. For example, a father instructs his only son to join the army and serve the country, which is righteous and necessary, but may not make the father pleased. Socrates does not ask Euthyphro what exactly the meaning of God's likes is. Just as inferiors dare not conjecture the gods' intentions, he only asks Euthyphro what on earth the gods' likes are. Socrates says that in traditional Greek narratives, the gods conflicted with each other for their preferences were different. The story of the gods refers to wars and battles, just like the history of mankind. Socrates equates the conflicts among the gods with the conflicts among what the gods hold dear^[16]. Euthyphro does not disagree with Socrates' saying, but he fails to understand what the conflicts among the gods mean. In other words, what are the gods disagree about with each other? Euthyphro seems to believe that such disagreement is completely disorderly, like a war between power and power with no arbiter above both powers.

Socrates distinguishes justice itself from things that are just, thereby introducing an arbiter above the gods and thus completing Euthyphro's first definition. It is not

justice itself that the gods argue about with each other, but whether something just is just. Euthyphro has to agree with this statement, or otherwise he cannot defend himself with that because Zeus (loves) defy (charge) Zeus' father. He is righteous to accuse his father. Euthyphro's first definition already presupposes "what the gods hold dear is just"; so we cannot say that Socrates's revision of the definition includes his preference. The purpose of Socrates' addition is, as he literally claims, to clarify the definition itself. Regardless of whether what is just is what is loved by the gods, or whether what is loved by the gods is what is just, Euthyphro has already made it clear what is loved by the gods must be just. In terms of "justice", the gods do not disagree among themselves; but there are still conflicts among them, which only illustrates that there is a difference between what the gods love and "justice". The conflicts are not about whether justice itself is good and favorable, but whether something is just. The gods' opinions don't diverge when it comes to that wrongdoers should be punished, and they are ugly; the only divergence is whether a specific action itself is just, rather than whether justice itself is just. Since the gods do not act out of perfect justice, their actions in some way are unjust. Merely saying something is "loved by the gods" is not enough to guarantee that something is "just". This is also the reason for Euthyphro's hesitation in his definition, as he naturally links the two without thinking about the possible relationship between them.

Under the exhortation and guidance of Socrates, Euthyphro stands for the identity between piety and justice, but the latter does not realize what the identity means. If the gods do not act under perfect justice, justice itself must be above the gods. Euthyphro is not radical enough to propose that the gods love to do something unjust. To Euthyphro, both "justice" and "piety" are virtues, but he has not went deeper to think about the relationship between the two. In this sense, compared to wise men, Euthyphro is more a man of city-states, who comply better with the requirements of city-state orthodoxy; because in Euthyphro's view, both justice and piety can be regarded as the abilities in "political arts". Likewise, Socrates has not led the dialogue towards this direction.

In brief, the gods are also judged by justice itself, a conclusion that was previously included in Euthyphro's definition. Both the gods and mortals are governed by three principles, namely that justice is justice, beauty is beauty, and good is good, and the unity between them. What is loved by the gods must be beautiful and good, and thus just. The three principles are above the god-beloved—the former is the reason for the latter. We only need to grasp the principles, without the need to speculate on the reason behind the god-beloved. To put it simply, something is pleasing to the gods because it is just, beautiful, and good. Love is a kind of desire, but there is nothing good or bad about such desire. On the contrary, it is the object being loved that defines the quality of the

desire itself. According to Platonism, the principles are the cause of the god-beloved, and thus of piety.

The second definition is a failure, for both Euthyphro and Socrates. For Euthyphro, who is only concerned with whether murder itself is just, so the the god-beloved and even the gods themselves are not sufficient to offer evidence for him to argue for the piety of his accusation. The gods are modals, not evidence. For Socrates, if he introduces the principle of justice to justify his piety, this would just prove the accusation of his "introducing new deities" justifiable. In other words, justice is not enough to justify piety, which, after all, is relevant to all the gods. If what is just is piety, piety is unqualified to be another virtue. More importantly, the Athenians do not prosecute Socrates for being unjust. Socrates needs a third definition.

3.3 *The third definition*

On the surface, Euthyphro's third definition, merely a modification of the second one, is changed to "Piety is what all the gods love (τὸ ὅσιον ὃ ἅν πάντες οἱ θεοὶ φιλοῦσιν)." The simplest understanding of this change seems to be that Euthyphro either delays or obscures the resolution of the contradiction among the gods, and replaces it with a most universal title, which is only expedient.

But it should be noted that although this third definition no longer discusses the disagreements among the gods, it centers again on the "the god-beloved". It is no longer the principles that determines the god-beloved, which itself is the cause and the driver. If piety concerns the gods, the principles must not be considered. It is impossible to know whether what the gods find pleasing is well-founded or arbitrary. One does not need to know and cannot question the reasons for the gods' likes. We can even imagine the possibility that the gods does not like human's piety. In conclusion, the point of the third definition is that the gods are the cause of piety. The understanding of the god's likes does not affect the meaning of piety.

This definition has been infinitely close to city-state orthodoxy, "Piety means to obey the gods." But one important distinction should not be neglected: Euthyphro claims that he has knowledge about the gods' likes, while the city-state does not "obey" according to knowledge.

4. "THE EUTHYPHRO DILEMMA"

To test what Euthyphro's third definition really means, Socrates proposes the famous paradox:

Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?

ἄρα τὸ ὅσιον ὅτι ὅσιόν ἐστιν φιλεῖται ὑπὸ τῶν θεῶν, ἢ ὅτι φιλεῖται ὅσιόν ἐστιν; (10a)

This article will make every effort to express it clearly.

“Love” (φιλέω), like “carry” (φέρω), “lead” (ἄγω), and “see” (ὁράω), is a verb. Every action has its agent and patient. And every action has a direction, that is to say, the patient cannot be the agent at the same time in the same action. Agent leads to the passive role of patient. What Socrates wants to express is such a very simple causation. The third definition can thus be stated as follows:

Agent (gods) → action (love) → patient (the pious).

In this sequence, each former is the cause of each latter, but it cannot be the other way around. For example, something’s being seen is not because it is what is seen, but it is seen. Likewise, something’s being loved by the gods is not because it is what is loved by the gods, but it is loved by the gods. If piety is what the gods find pleasing, piety is piety not because the gods love (action) the pious (the patient) because it is pious (state of the patient), but because the pious is pious because it is loved by the gods. The most immediate consequence of this causal sequence is that the pious cannot decide whether it is pious or not, and therefore it is not the cause of whether it is pious, just as something seen by someone cannot decide whether it is seen. It is not that the gods like something because it is pious; instead, it is pious because the gods like it. Whether or not to be pious cannot be decided by a thing itself, and moreover, it cannot be decided by city-state^[17].

But the problem is not so simple. Piety cannot be a virtue if the pious cannot decide whether it is pious or not. If one cannot understand what he/she should do when city-state commands him/her to obey the gods, what should he/she do? When Euthyphro’s father actively sent someone to Athens to listen to the advice of priests, how could he be sure that his initiative was in line with the gods’ will? Just as how something that is seen should make sure that it is just what the beholder sees, how can the pious make sure that it is just what the gods hold dear? Furthermore, how can the pious be sure that the god-beloved’s being just is the same thing as what the gods like? How can one prove that the gods love the secular world? Here we encounter the same dilemma as what the young Socrates meets in *Parmenides*. “Euthyphro, when you are asked what piety is, you are not willing to clarify (δηλώσαι) what it is (οὐσίαν), but only tell me what it experiences (πάθος), namely that piety is what all the gods love; as for piety itself, you haven’t explained yet (καὶ κινδυνεύεις, ὦ Εὐθύφρων, ἐρωτώμενος τὸ ὅσιον ὅτι ποτ’ ἐστίν, τὴν μὲν οὐσίαν μοι αὐτοῦ οὐ βούλεσθαι δηλῶσαι, πάθος δέ τι περὶ αὐτοῦ λέγειν, ὅτι πέπονθε τοῦτο τὸ ὅσιον, φιλεῖσθαι ὑπὸ πάντων θεῶν: ὅτι δὲ ὄν, οὐπω εἶπες (11b))”

That is, piety is piety, nothing to do with the action “love” exerted on the pious. Undoubtedly, in a city-state piety is a virtue. This is the premise of the argument.

Whether the piety of a city-state is true piety, piety is a virtue, which means that the city-state should be pious. Whether it takes form of memorial activities for ancestors, worship of the gods, or insistence on past practices of the conservatives against the progressives in modern society, piety can be expressed as what you should do. In this, piety as a virtue, already containing self-discipline of man of virtue. If we do not consider piety to be a city-state’s virtue that can be practiced, we go outside the city-state, and then negatively cancel all possibilities of pious political life. Neither of Euthyphro, Socrates and Plato has come to this possibility. This deserves our attention. Or, Euthyphro has “deliberately” avoided this possibility.

The pious already has certain value standards, that is to say, it already has determined what is good. Socrates would not go to the other extreme, and not argue that piety is not a virtue, or that every kind of piety is fake and falsified and has nothing to do with the gods. In the words of modern society, Socrates has basic political common sense; he would not think that the essence of piety is impious, just as Thrasymachus believes that justice is unjust in nature. In *Phaedo*, when Socrates confesses that he fails to think about the causes of beings as the natural philosophers do, he prefers to turn to another safer argument, namely that the beauty is beauty because beauty exists (100e). In *Euthyphro*, Socrates never goes to the extreme, denying that “piety is piety”; for it is an endless, fruitless, and even blasphemous argument^[18]. Euthyphro does not realize what exactly he is talking about when he says “piety is that which is dear to the gods.” How can he be sure that the pious is just the god-beloved? Possibly, it is the impious that the gods might like. In the so-called “Euthyphro dilemma”, this possibility can be described as that piety and being loved by the gods are not directly identical.

Is it right that “the pious is pious because it is loved by the gods”? Then is “the pious being pious” is as self-evident as “the just is just”? Can piety be righteously understood? With regard to Euthyphro, we can ask: What is the relationship between justice and piety^[19]? We must remember that in Euthyphro’s accusation against his father, he has already clarified that because the son’s accusation against the father is just, the son is also pious. Although this causation is not directly valid—Euthyphron’s argument is roundabout, based on an imitation of Zeus’s justice in overthrowing Kronos—but piety and justice are closely related.

5. CONCLUSION

As to the question of whether Socrates is pious, we can only get an answer from his acts, if a debate on knowledge of piety does not work out. In *Crito*, Socrates demonstrates his loyalty to Athens. As a philosopher, Socrates could suspect that the city-state’s execution of him is unjust, but as a citizen, he completely complies with the dogmatic city-state. It is a safe and conservative

option, which is also pious, before he acquires the knowledge of piety.

But *Euthyphro*'s conclusion is not so simple. It consistently implies the impiety of city-state politics itself, and in this sense, we can understand the significance of the privacy of this dialogue, because challenging the foundation of the sanctity of a city-state is absolutely politically impious and thus unjust. Socrates has no intention of challenging this sanctity of the Greek tradition. But as a philosopher, he also sees that this sanctity is built on an unreliable foundation. Probably, because of that, the decline of ancient Greek is inevitable. In this regard, this article will not provide an answer. But one thing is clear that a pious study of political philosophy must be prudent and modeled on Socrates' political activities.

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