

Implicit Characterization in Plato's *Euthyphro*

Plato's *Euthyphro*, like most Socratic dialogues, has one primary question, which is "What is piety?" It is also similar to many early Socratic dialogues in that it has an aporetic ending. There is an abundance of scholarship on this aporetic ending; many scholars have attempted to find a positive definition of piety within the text.¹ In contrast, there is a relative dearth of scholarship on the beginning of the dialogue, which focuses on the setting and the characters involved. The beginning sections are of lesser importance to the eventual elenchus of the dialogue, but the wealth of information contained therein provide a lens for a non-traditional interpretation of the text.

The dialogue begins when the eponymous Euthyphro meets Socrates at the stoa to await their separate pre-trial proceedings. Socrates and Euthyphro explain to one another the circumstances of their trial; we hear about Meletus, Socrates' accuser, (though Meletus is never actually present in the dialogue) when Socrates tells Euthyphro that Meletus is prosecuting him. Euthyphro is prosecuting his father in a complicated murder case; this situation points to a contradiction between Euthyphro's duty to the gods and his filial duties, and begins the discussion of the definition of piety.

Through this introduction, Plato implicitly sets up a dynamic between Socrates, Euthyphro, and Meletus. This dynamic changes during the course of the dialogue. Initially, Euthyphro aligns himself with Socrates, but through the conclusions of both interlocutors, Plato actually ends up establishing a parallel between Euthyphro and Meletus, placing them in opposition to Socrates. The parallel between Meletus and Euthyphro influences the meaning

¹ See, for example, S. M. Cohen 'Socrates on the Definition of Piety: Euthyphro 10A-11B', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 9 (1971), 1-13; reprinted in Vlastos (ed.), *Socrates*; M.L. McPherran 'Socratic Piety in the Euthyphro', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 23 (1985), 283-309; reprinted in Benson (ed.), *Essays on the Philosophy of Socrates*; W.G. Rabinowitz 'Platonic Piety: An Essay toward the Solution of an Enigma', *Phronesis* 3 (1958), 108-20.

and interpretation of the rest of the text, especially when Socrates eventually refutes Euthyphro's definition of piety.

Admittedly, there are also differences between the two men; Mark McPherran, in *The Religion of Socrates*, notes that Euthyphro endorses many traditional Greek religious beliefs, but his willingness to prosecute his father is very untraditional. Further, he easily accepts Socrates' *daimonion* without qualm, and "is willing to accept- with a quite non-traditional presumption- Socrates' imputation of wisdom to him (4b)."² Meletus is not portrayed as being radical, as Euthyphro is portrayed; but the differences between the two men are of degree rather than type. Both are attempting to defend a religious conception that they believe is rooted in the traditions of Homer and Hesiod.³ Euthyphro is portrayed as more radically conservative than Meletus, but both he and Meletus resist change or development in religious thought.

When discussing Socratic piety in the *Euthyphro*, McPherran recognizes the connection between Meletus and Euthyphro, but instead emphasizes the relationship between Socrates and Euthyphro. This comparison heavily relies on McPherran's thesis that Socrates himself was deeply religious, if nontraditional. But even if one accepts only Socrates' sincerity in the *Apology* in his appeal to his *daimonion* and to Delphic Apollo, the comparison neatly leads itself to McPherran's point in this section: Euthyphro is not merely a foil to Socrates, but "a dark doppelganger of Socrates, a lesson in what Socrates is *not*."⁴ McPherran's insight underscores the irony of the strong parallels between Meletus and Euthyphro. It adds a new dimension to these parallels, emphasizing the injustice of the charges and trial of Socrates.

The parallel begins to unfold with Socrates' explanation of his case⁵. Socrates is being prosecuted by Meletus, a young man from Pitheus, who must be extremely wise, Socrates says, because he attempts to reform the state by ensuring that the youth are not corrupted; Meletus

² McPherran, Mark L. *The Religion of Socrates*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1996. 35. Hereafter referred to as "McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates*, x".

³ See *Euthyphro* 5E-6A, where Euthyphro compares his prosecution of his father to Zeus and Cronos.

⁴ McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates*, 35

⁵ The stoa is where pre-trials were held, before a lawsuit went to the assembly.

claims that he is indicting Socrates for doing this. There is more than a hint of facetiousness when Socrates next says that Meletus will become a “great public benefactor.”⁶ The reader knows, of course, that by depriving Athens of Socrates, Meletus is actually harming the state. This statement is an excellent example of Socratic irony.

But Euthyphro does not understand the irony and says that he feels Meletus is actually harming the state. He wonders what the charge entails; Socrates explains that he is being charged because according to Meletus, Socrates has invented new gods, or, as Euthyphro says, instituted religious reforms, as well as corrupted the youth.

The dynamic between the characters begins when Euthyphro compares himself to Socrates in section 3 in an attempt to put himself on the same level as the former in an expression of sympathy. He states that the Athenians “are resentful of all people like us.”⁷ He complains that the Athenians laugh at him when he makes religious prophecies, even though the prophecies turn out to be correct. He dismisses the Athenians, however, and says that he and Socrates must meet them boldly.

From these remarks, it is clear that Euthyphro either disregards practical consequences or he is naïve about them. This is evident already, though it is early in the text. In contrast, Socrates has a much more accurate idea of the impact of his actions, and highlights this distinction between the two men. He tells Euthyphro that ridicule is not something to worry about, but when a man teaches others his wisdom, the Athenians get angry. This statement indicates a fundamental difference between Euthyphro and Socrates. Euthyphro is mocked for his religious prophecies and merely dismissed, but the Athenians are angry with Socrates for teaching them wisdom. By implication, Euthyphro’s religious convictions do not teach wisdom. Euthyphro misses this slight, as well; he agrees with Socrates and says that he would not like to test the Athenians. Socrates asserts that his own enjoyment of talking with others places him in

⁶ Plato, *Euthyphro* 2D. All translations are my own.

⁷ Plato, *Euthyphro* 3B, emphasis added.

danger; at one point, he even says “if they were only going to laugh at me, as you say they do at you, it would not be at all an unpleasant way of spending the day... But if they are going to be in earnest, then only prophets like you can tell where the matter will end.”⁸ In another display of dramatic irony, Euthyphro brushes this aside, saying that he thinks nothing will come of Meletus’ case against Socrates.

So, rather than reinforcing Euthyphro’s intended parallel between the two men, Plato presents the reader with a contrast between them. While Euthyphro is a self-important but disregarded religious prophet, Socrates is a low-key dialectician who teaches wisdom. Euthyphro gains harmless ridicule for his actions; Socrates’ actions place him in danger. In this portrayal, Socrates seems to be a much more serious intellectual than Euthyphro. Socrates’ actions instill such a vastly different and more serious reaction that Euthyphro is implicitly belittled, even if that entails trusting the judgment of the Athenians up to a certain point (which the audience knows is a questionable choice). There is something real at stake in Socrates’ project which is lacking in Euthyphro’s religious actions.

As the characterizations of Socrates and Euthyphro are already diverging from another, a new stage of the parallel begins. The conversation shifts to Euthyphro’s situation. In further contrast to Socrates, Euthyphro is not the prosecuted but the prosecutor of his case; he is charging his father with murder. Socrates expresses wonder at this fact. In Greek society, respect was due to parents as a religious duty; according to this standard, Euthyphro’s case is impious. However, prosecuting a murderer is also a religious duty.

Because of this ambiguity, Socrates asks Euthyphro for more details of the case. Euthyphro explains that his father is responsible for the death of one of his workers; the worker had killed another man while he was drunk, and Euthyphro’s father tied him up and left him in a ditch to await a judge. Euthyphro’s father neglected the man in the interim, so he died from exposure and hunger. Socrates asks Euthyphro if he really knows what is pious and what is

⁸ Plato, *Euthyphro*, 3c-d

impious to the extent that he can prosecute his father in such a case. Euthyphro asserts that he does in fact know what is pious and impious.⁹

As the dialogue moves into the next stage of the parallel, it is very clear that Socrates has distanced himself from Euthyphro, contrary to what Euthyphro believes. This allows Socrates to place Euthyphro in what appears to be opposition to Meletus in the third stage. In 5A Socrates asks to be a student of Euthyphro, and says that he would like to have Euthyphro defend him in court against Meletus. Socrates states that he should go into court and claim to be a student of Euthyphro, so that Euthyphro and Meletus could go head to head. Euthyphro agrees that this would be a good plan, and even boasts that he would defeat Meletus. He relishes the thought of going against Meletus in court, saying, "I should have a good deal to say about [Meletus] in court long before I spoke about myself."¹⁰

But paradoxically, any reflection on whether or not Euthyphro could win in court inevitably leads to a comparison between him and Meletus, a comparison that in the final analysis shows that they are much more alike than they are different.

Meletus charges Socrates essentially for being impious, assuming that he holds religious beliefs that endanger the state; by prosecuting Socrates in a case that ends in his death, Meletus is the one harming the state by depriving it of its best teacher. In another sense, Euthyphro is also endangering the state by holding religious beliefs that endanger the sub-state, his family.¹¹ Thus, Euthyphro is just like Meletus- both charge an older man against custom and are potentially overzealous in their notions of piety. Like Euthyphro, Meletus is the dangerous one, not Socrates. However, Socrates never says as such. He would never instruct by making these claims directly; he would draw these conclusions out of his interlocutor through dialogue. Plato informs the reader of this truth by creating a situation and writing a dialogue that allows the

⁹ Plato, *Euthyphro*, 4E

¹⁰ Plato *Euthyphro*, 5A

¹¹ Just like Meletus' questionable charges against Socrates, Euthyphro's case is also debatable in that his father never actually spilled blood when he "murdered" the manservant; instead the man died by exposure, which is much more religiously acceptable, and would not have created blood pollution.

reader to come to this conclusion for his or herself. By placing it in a recognizable setting, the point is exemplified, rather than explicitly stated. Any simple attempt to spell out the conclusions would be contrary to the Socratic method.

As a dialogue, the *Euthyphro* acts as the conversation between Meletus and Socrates that could never actually happen inside the courtroom. It is the battle of principles that should have occurred before Socrates was ever called to court. The knowledge Socrates is trying to draw out of Euthyphro is also the knowledge he needs Meletus to discover. Socrates easily disproves Euthyphro's initial definition of piety. Neither Euthyphro nor Meletus is able to withstand Socrates' elenchus. In other words, Euthyphro is a type of Meletus, standing in for him. Because Socrates's acts of "corruption" occurred precisely through his dialogues with others, Meletus could never engage in this dialogue with Socrates. In his own terms he would be "corrupted"- although to Plato and the reader, this would mean that he is led closer to the truth. This situation is echoed in the *Meno*, in which Socrates's other accuser Anytus walks away from a conversation with Socrates.¹²

This dynamic engenders a great deal of irony, which becomes all the more apparent after an examination of Euthyphro's comments about piety in the two cases. Meletus took Socrates to court on the charge that Socrates was inventing new gods, or instituting religious reforms, as Euthyphro phrases it in 3b. But Euthyphro objects that Meletus is "striking a blow at the very foundation of the state."¹³ In contrast, Euthyphro thinks that he has very sound reasoning on the subject of his own indictment; in section 4, he defends himself eloquently:

What difference does it make whether the murdered man were a relative or a stranger? The only question that you have to ask is, did the murderer kill justly or not? ... The pollution is the same if you associate with such a man, knowing what he has done, without purifying yourself, and him too, by bringing him to justice.¹⁴

He is taking a very principled stance; by his original conception of piety, he is choosing the correct course of action. He is willing to stand up to his family in order to uphold his moral

¹² Plato, *Meno* 94E

¹³ Plato, *Euthyphro*, 3A

¹⁴ Plato, *Euthyphro*, 4B-4D

values. But he isn't questioning or examining the values themselves; he is simply standing up for them blindly. His integrity is admirable, but ultimately misplaced.

If Socrates had a positive definition of piety in mind when he was talking with Euthyphro, Plato didn't think it fit to include it in the text. Perhaps the definition he would have given would be too radical to be seriously considered in Athens at that time. Whether he felt restricted by the contemporary political circumstances or not, it seems clear that if Socrates could have stated and defended his definition of piety, his entire court debacle (and his death) might have been avoided. He was not able to do this. Instead, Plato gives us a sort of pre-*Apology* account that actually attacks Meletus because he is the same type of person as Euthyphro. Plato is warning his readers against their type of dogmatism. It is fitting that neither Euthyphro nor Meletus is actually evil; Socrates believed too much in the Athenian legal system for pure evil to triumph.¹⁵ Instead, these men are misguided; they act with arrogance, presuming they know the ins and outs of a subject which they cannot even clearly define; and what is worse, their actions have direct practical repercussions to which they are too blind to pay proper attention in their arrogance.

Both Euthyphro and Meletus have taken a case in which harm to other men is done, and turned it into a case of duty towards the gods. This change of focus does not change where the consequences of their indictments strike; despite the fact that their lawsuits come solely from a deep respect for the gods, men are the ones who are harmed by the proceedings. Euthyphro defines justice as that which is acceptable to the gods, and that which "preserves the state, as it does private families."¹⁶ By Euthyphro's own earlier words, the reader knows that the actions of Meletus harm the state; but despite being the one to actually make this claim explicitly and recognize the error of Meletus's actions, Euthyphro misses what is quite clear to the reader. It would be easy to see that Euthyphro is harming his family just as Meletus is harming the state,

¹⁵ See, for example, the *Crito*.

¹⁶ Plato, 14B

even if the parallel between Euthyphro and Meletus hadn't been drawn. The parallel makes it that much more ironic that Euthyphro is the one who makes this point. Euthyphro begins the dialogue by defining piety as that which he is doing, and ends it by giving a definition of piety as that which does not harm private families, pulling the rug (of his definition) out from under his own feet.

Meletus and Euthyphro make the same mistake. In their religious fervor and determination to do all that is correct towards the gods, they become complacent about what piety can and should be, and they ignore the real world repercussions of their actions. In aiming to do justice towards the gods, they do injustice to their fellow man. They both assume that the legal system is completely outward facing, looking to appease the gods rather than men. In theory, this sounds acceptable, but the reader knows all too well what this means in practice.