

Polytheism and the *Euthyphro**

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ABSTRACT: In this reading of the *Euthyphro*, Socrates and Euthyphro are seen less in a primordial conflict between reason and devotion, than as sincere Hellenic polytheists engaged in an inquiry based upon a common intuition that, in addition to the irreducible agency of the Gods, there is also some irreducible intelligible content to holiness. This reading is supported by the fact that Euthyphro does not claim the authority of revelation for his decision to prosecute his father, but rather submits it to elenchus, and that Euthyphro does not embrace the 'solution' of theological voluntarism when Socrates explicitly offers it. Since the goal of this inquiry is neither to eliminate the noetic content of the holy, nor to eliminate the Gods' agency, the purpose of the elenchus becomes the effort to articulate the results of this productive tension between the Gods and the intelligible on the several planes of Being implied by each conception of the holy which is successively taken up and dialectically overturned to yield the conception appropriate to the next higher plane, a style of interpretation characteristic of the ancient Neoplatonists.

The *Euthyphro* comes at the very beginning of the traditional arrangement of Plato's dialogues—traditional at least as far back as Thrasyllus—and, at least for us, tends to set the stage for the unfolding of Plato's thought, though the relative dearth of attention paid to it in antiquity stands in contrast to the importance assigned to it today. This fact should, indeed, alert us to the possibility that typical modern approaches to the dialogue are motivated by typically modern concerns. It is most well-known for the so-called 'Euthyphro dilemma' it has imparted to the philosophy of religion. This problem is concisely stated in the dialogue at 10a: "Is the holy [*hosios*, also frequently

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translated ‘pious’], holy because it is loved by the Gods, or loved [by them] because it is holy?” Without wishing to discount the significance of the abundant reflections upon this problem in philosophy after antiquity, or to deny that we can see ancient Platonists on many occasions wrestling with the ‘Euthyphro problem’, albeit not explicitly linked to this dialogue, it would not be unfair, I think, to say that thinkers after antiquity have approached the problem within the framing of monotheism. Some scholars, to be sure, particularly recently, have displayed greater openness than others to situating the [21] piety of Socrates and of Plato *within* Hellenic polytheism, rather than on a trajectory away from it and toward some variety of philosophical monotheism; Mark McPherran and Jon Mikalson, in particular, stand out in this regard. To be open to this requires acknowledging, among other things, that the absence, in a given dialogue or even generally, of explicit affirmations, much less elenctic justifications, of elements utterly basic to the worldview of a Hellenic polytheist cannot be taken as manifesting a lack of support for them. It seems too often as though Socrates is on trial again in the pages of modern scholars who demand from him and from Plato an arbitrarily high threshold of proof that they identify with the tradition of Hellenic polytheism, or define that tradition so narrowly as to ensure that they do not.¹ While in many respects it is quite difficult to

¹ Examples of this tendency in the literature abound. For example, Kofi Ackah declares the “dialectical result” of the dialogue up to 11a

say something novel about Plato, in *this* respect, that is, insofar as one would speak about Plato the polytheist, it still is not.² This essay is not about polytheism as a mere socio-historical fact in the *Euthyphro*; rather, it concerns the meaning and value of the *Euthyphro* for the polytheistic philosophy of religion. Therefore, I do not intend to concern myself a great deal with the abundant secondary literature on the dialogue, but rather with reading the text, thinking along with it

to be that “piety understood as a relationship between humans and externally existing, fully anthropomorphic gods has no probative basis and is logically incoherent,” (“Plato’s *Euthyphro* and Socratic Piety,” *Scholium* 15 (2006), p. 30), when demanding proof for the existence of the Gods is far from being the goal of this Platonic dialogue; nor is it clear how such positive ontological results are supposed to be produced from the dialectical procedure. Similarly, Roslyn Weiss argues “that it does not follow from Socrates’ engaging in sacrificial rites either that he believes in the gods to whom he sacrifices or that he regards such activity as pious,” and even dismisses his final words at *Phaedo* 118a as a “genuine expression of piety,” (“Virtue Without Knowledge: Socrates’ Conception of Holiness in Plato’s *Euthyphro*,” *Ancient Philosophy* 14 (1994), p. 272 n. 23.). Weiss takes no account of the testimonies elsewhere in Plato, or in Xenophon, to Socrates’ belief in the Hellenic Gods, despite the fact that her thesis concerning the non-epistemic character of Socratic piety would be entirely consistent with sincere participation in the Hellenic theophany. McPherran, at least, does not deem to accuse Socrates of having forsworn his several civic oaths, “all of which called the gods of the state as witnesses” (“Does Piety Pay? Socrates and Plato on Prayer and Sacrifice,” p. 95).

² ‘Still’ in the sense that there are definite indications of positive movement toward at least the openness I described; Gerd Van Riel’s *Plato’s Gods* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013) being a prominent example. My reference to Plato here, rather than to Socrates and Plato, represents an initial acknowledgement that I see Plato’s depiction of Socrates in the so-called ‘early’ dialogues as part of a theoretical continuum with Plato’s ‘late’ metaphysics, and not as a categorically different undertaking.

and around it, but informed particularly by hermeneutic strategies characteristic of the Neoplatonists. [22]

At stake in the *Euthyphro*, clearly, is the relationship between theology and philosophy. Euthyphro is a diviner, Socrates a philosopher: one of the things we must measure for ourselves is just how great this difference is, and what is its true nature. This difference can be exaggerated. As McPherran points out,³ Socrates' interactions with his *daimonion* do share certain traits with divination, and Socrates does upon occasion speak of himself as a sort of lay *mantis* (e.g., *Phaedo* 85b; *Phaedrus* 242c). Euthyphro, for his part, is akin to Socrates in more than just the ways he cites himself at the beginning of the dialogue, and of which modern readers are too derisive. It should not be, after all, an affront for Euthyphro to express such a kinship.⁴ Moreover, since the later antique Platonic tradition regarded the etymologies *à la* Euthyphro in the *Cratylus* (396d & sqq.) not as mocking, but as sincere, the notion that Socrates and Euthyphro have each something to learn from the other is not

³ "Socratic Reason and Socratic Revelation," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 29.3, July 1991, pp. 345-373.

⁴ One interesting commonality between them not cited by Euthyphro himself is a strong concern with purification. While commentators have often remarked upon Euthyphro's concern with *miasma* as exceptional, typically in support of arguments that Euthyphro's religious orientation lies outside the mainstream of Athenian religious life, somewhere on the 'Orphic' spectrum (e.g. Kahn, "Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus", pp. 56-7), they have not tended to relate this to Socrates' own conception of elenchus as "a kind of ritual purification of the soul," (McPherran, *Religion of Socrates*, p. 152), and to the (much debated) 'Orphic' aspects of Plato's own thought.

outlandish. In this sense, we may see Euthyphro and Socrates as engaged in the same work, broadly conceived: namely, out of a personally experienced sense of divine vocation, trying to grasp for themselves, and not merely through passive participation in the social dimension of cult, something about the nature of the Gods and about the nature of the cosmos as the Gods would know it. Hence Proclus⁵ sees Socrates in the *Cratylus* as mediating between Euthyphro's 'imaginative' (*phantastikos*) and passively given (*boskêmatôdeis*, literally as of what is fed to domesticated animals) conceptions about the Gods, and his own characteristically 'scientific' (*epistêmonikos*) understanding, by assuming a 'doxastic' mode in the *Cratylus* etymologies, one, that is, in which there is at once that which is the object of belief or *doxa*, such as the proper names of Gods who are the objects of experience and religious regard, *and also* intellectual insight, as we see in the interpretation Socrates develops from examining the names of the Gods as modified words or strings of words. In this doxastic labor Socrates recovers from the names given to the Gods in the theophanic experience of the ancients that moment of cognitive and intelligible *response* to theophany that embodies, inseparably, the presence of the Gods and of the human agent *together* in the encounter. [23]

⁵ *In Platonis Cratylum Commentaria*, ed. Pasquali, pp. 67.24-68.9.

The contrast between Socrates and Euthyphro against a shared background of common effort is echoed in something Socrates says at 3d, namely that Euthyphro is not in danger of prosecution from the people because he does not impart his wisdom (*sophia*) to others, or rather, we might say, that as a diviner Euthyphro shares only the *results* of his inquiry. Socrates is ironic, or perhaps merely polite, in attributing to Euthyphro a wisdom withheld, when the wisdom in question can only be attributed, first, to the Gods themselves, and second, to the one who can arrive at an adequate *interpretation* of what is conveyed to the diviner, and through them to a wider public. Even if Euthyphro possessed the wisdom to interpret the results of his divination, this would bear an ambiguous relationship his job description, so to speak, as a diviner.⁶

It must be said, in this connection, that Euthyphro never claims in the dialogue to have been specifically directed by the Gods to do anything. Can we, then, simply *assume* that Euthyphro is acting as a result of some kind of divination? I do not see how we can. It is, rather, Euthyphro's father who is explicitly said to have sought out a

⁶ See Aaron Landry, "Inspiration and Τέχνη: divination in Plato's *Ion*," *Plato Journal* 14 (2014), pp. 85-97 for a nuanced treatment of the issue of the diviner's knowledge. Even Theoclymenus, Socrates' example of possession divination, from *Odyssey* 20.351-7, is able to interpret his divination (20.367-70) (pp. 90-1); and Diotima, from the *Symposium*, is at once diviner and philosopher (pp. 92-3). See also chap. 3, "Divination and its Range of Influence," in Jon D. Mikalson, *Greek Popular Religion in Greek Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 110-139.

religious adviser (*exêgêtês*, 4c). Even if we accept that Euthyphro would regard himself as an exegete adequate for his own purposes, Euthyphro simply does not ever frame his decision in a manner that presents it as the result of any kind of divination. All that we can see from what is on the page is that Euthyphro has *inferred* his responsibilities through analogy with myths. Plato therefore does not stage in this text a direct confrontation between reason and revelation. It would have been awkward, no doubt, for Euthyphro to say that he had been directed to this course of action by a God, and for Socrates to proceed to interrogate that revelation, especially since, as McPherran points out,⁷ Socrates speaks in his own case of receiving divine direction from divination and from dreams, as well as from his divine sign or *daimonion*. However, as McPherran goes on to argue, Socrates does nevertheless have a way open to him to criticize any given interpretation Euthyphro offers of the revelation he has received without resorting to impiety, and we ought not assume that Plato felt incapable of presenting such an inquiry in a suitable fashion. Indeed, the manner in which the discussion proceeds would seem to suggest that Euthyphro is not to be understood as acting on a specific divine direction, but rather on a general conception of what counts as pious behavior, [24] a conception which is in broad terms within the boundaries of what generally counts as piety among his peers, though

⁷ "Socratic Reason and Socratic Revelation," p. 351.

his application of these norms has led to a result that will surprise those peers.⁸ This makes the move to an inquiry into the *nature of piety* a natural one—in fact, a move that Euthyphro has already implicitly made himself. In this respect, we may class Euthyphro among those clergy of whom we read in the *Meno* that Socrates has had conversation, inasmuch as they wish to give a reasoning account of their ministry (*Meno* 81a). Or at least, that Euthyphro has a tendency in this direction, inasmuch as he seems to have a certain inchoate sense that reasoning should play some role in his religious life, even beyond the necessity for interpreting his direct communications from the Gods, so that his piety can inform even those decisions he makes *without* recourse to divination. In this respect, it may be significant that it is within the time it takes for his father's messenger to seek out the advice of the exegete that his hired man dies, though the death is directly caused by his father's negligence (4d). Nor are we told the result of the consultation with the exegete. It seems that Plato feels no need to even provide the materials for a confrontation between reason and revelation as such.

⁸ Jon D. Mikalson, *Honor Thy Gods: Popular Religion in Greek Tragedy* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 198-201 argues persuasively that "Euthyphro's concept of piety" as displayed in the dialogue, "echoes similar thoughts found throughout Greek tragedy," and that "scattered and fragmentary parallels for Euthyphro's ideas appear in other sources for popular religion," hence "his conception of piety was not idiosyncratic," (201).

Most notably in this respect, when given the opportunity by Socrates to render his stated beliefs mutually consistent by straightforwardly affirming that holiness just *is* an effect of divine will, Euthyphro does not do so, clearly wishing to preserve the noetic integrity of the notion of holiness (10a-c). What troubles Euthyphro, or at least perhaps does so once Socrates has pointed it out, is that he has no *rational* means for adjudicating between two conflicting pious duties: reverence for the law, and reverence for his father, whom he would prosecute under the law. Euthyphro's intention is to prosecute his father as the law would demand, and he sees this as following from a universal, implicitly rational maxim that the law should apply to everyone equally (4b). We know from *Gorgias* 480c that Socrates does in fact agree that one should try to see ones friends and family prosecuted if they have done wrong. But how has Euthyphro gotten to this recognition? He doesn't seek to justify this maxim, or his intended actions, through reason, or at any rate, only through a particular kind of reasoning, namely arguing that for him to prosecute his father in this fashion honors a principle established by the Gods when, for example, Zeus overthrows Kronos. We should not be too quick to dismiss this line of thought. Analogy is a form of reasoning, and the transition from the reign of Kronos to [25] that of Zeus as recounted in Hesiod does lead to the establishment of a more just order among the Gods, one chiefly operating through persuasion and the balancing

of honors (*timai*) rather than force of will (Ouranos) or calculation (Kronos).

Euthyphro's application of analogy implies that a principle can be univocally applied to Gods and to humans, despite their different ontological status: "they are inconsistent in what they say about the Gods and about me" (6a). This again suggests that Euthyphro is really seeking, whether he recognizes it or not, an exercise of reason that would transcend the division between humans and the Gods. Nor does Euthyphro see a *symbolic* interpretation of the myth, even though he emphasizes to Socrates the supra-rational nature of the events treated in myths. For when Socrates expresses doubt that there could really be war between Gods, Euthyphro characterizes such truths as 'marvelous' and 'astonishing' (6b, c), but does not draw the further conclusion that just insofar as these mythic events are *mysterious* that they might *not* therefore provide simple, unproblematic analogies to human behavior. Daniel Werner's recent study, "Myth and the Structure of Plato's *Euthyphro*,"⁹ though highlighting the importance for the dialogue of Euthyphro's "adherence to traditional myth," fails to even recognize the possibility of a pious *and* symbolic hermeneutic of myth beyond the simplistic opposition of *mythos* and *logos*. The issue cannot be reduced, as Werner would wish, to a matter of an "acceptance" or "rejection" of traditional myths, or of whether

⁹ *International Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 52, No. 1, Issue 205 (March 2012), pp. 41-62.

“acceptance” of the myths is “loose” or “wholesale” (p. 46). Mythic reception is hardly so simple. We should not assume that Plato would be averse to a symbolic hermeneutic of myth. In the critique of mythic poetry in the *Republic*, myths requiring esoteric (or ‘hyponoetic’, *Rep.* 378d) interpretation are not suitable for unmediated, simplistic application, which is why it is questionable to impart such myths to children, who are not capable of advanced theology, or to inhabitants of a ‘fevered’ city whose state of total mobilization, a permanent state of emergency, may render them similarly impaired. Such symbolic interpretation has as its guiding principle, not the reduction of ‘irrational’ myth to some purified *logos*, but the pious regard for the Gods as being “each the most beautiful and best thing possible” (*Rep.* 381c).

Insofar as problematic myths like these shed light in particular upon the *ontological difference* between humans and Gods, however, it may well be these myths that interest us most of all. To guide us in their interpretation, however, we shall need philosophical, ontological tools. Once these were developed within Platonic schools, the interpretation of such myths flourished, not in a defensive posture, but rather for the genuine ontological value such myths have to offer.¹⁰ But in the *Euthyphro*, the difference between humans and Gods is [26] approached obliquely, through a series of hypotheses

¹⁰ See, e.g., Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian*; Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*.

about the nature of holiness all of which have a domain of valid application, but all of which also contain some seed of their dialectical reversal, which will urge us further along in a manner that, in fact, sketches for us the outlines of the structure of being. This, at any rate, is the style of positive interpretation of dialogical refutation favored in the later Platonic schools, and which serves us better than other interpretive hypotheses with respect to this dialogue, if we do not assume that Plato intends to portray Socrates as overturning, rather than merely refining, popular conceptions of piety.¹¹

The essential question in the *Euthyphro*, and in the Platonic approach to theology generally, I would argue, is the relationship between the singular (the unique or ‘peculiar’) and the common. When Euthyphro chooses to treat the events of myth just like worldly events, and looks to define holiness according to what the Gods choose, he chooses in favor of the singularity of the Gods as individuals, rather than orienting himself to divine *attributes*. He affirms the integrity of the Gods by affirming the unique, unrepeatable nature of the mythic event, which can offer a paradigm for practice precisely insofar as it does *not* depend upon some further principle which it merely instantiates, and which would therefore demand a

¹¹ See Mikalson (2010) for an extended defense of the mainstream nature of at least some version of all of the models of piety proposed in the *Euthyphro*.

prior elucidation. At the same time, he searches for a universality which would not compromise singularity.

From the perspective of later Platonic philosophy of religion, Euthyphro indeed shows the proper instincts at least, in that he wishes *both* to secure the ontological priority of henadic individuals (the unique Gods) to the eidetic or formal in its entirety *and* to pursue an *eidōs* of the holy—for Euthyphro does not accept the proffered voluntarism in which the holy would be holy purely by virtue of the Gods' having chosen it. We do not have to assume that, as R. E. Allen would have it, Euthyphro is simply a theological voluntarist who misunderstands his own position.¹² Rather, we can see Euthyphro as experiencing a legitimate pull in both directions, and that preserving and articulating this tension, rather than collapsing it into one pole or the other, is the Platonist's legitimate aim as well. This tension can be seen as driving the *Euthyphro's* dialectic.

Euthyphro realizes in an inchoate fashion that affirming divine individuality—and, inherently, plurality—ought not lead to a skeptical or nominalistic rejection of the eidetic altogether. 'Holiness' ought to have *something* [27] common to it, though he is correct to reject that such a common substance—or a common substance for any of the virtues—will subordinate the Gods *existentially*, and Plato does not

¹² *Plato's Euthyphro and the Earlier Theory of Forms: A Reinterpretation of the Republic* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1970 [repr. 2013]), p. 44.

press such a conclusion, either. The Good, rather, as we will see from the *Republic*, is beyond substance (*ousia*), which in the later development of Platonism was elucidated, in conjunction with the henology of Plato's *Parmenides*, as expressing the primacy of the unitary or singular (*heniaios*), of individual existence (*hyparxis*), over the ideal or formal.¹³ Hence the 'Euthyphro problem' is really that of how the common emerges from the singular. The singulars 'down here', so to speak, everyday units, may indeed be ontologically posterior in many ways to the forms they participate, but the *ultimate* singulars, the Gods, eternally *generate* their community. Moreover, even if we had no Gods, we would have to be able to at least conceive such autonomously good agents in order to secure the metaphysical possibility of freedom. It solves nothing to either reduce these agents to arbitrary, and hence unfree choices, *or* to a good which arbitrarily chooses them.

We see a reflection of this problem of peculiarity in the discussion of conflicts among the Gods (7b-d). Insofar as the conflicts between the Gods are understood to be *peculiar* to each, they lack, by definition, objective resolutions. In this way they are like disputes over the Good among us, which in our case produce enmity (7d). This is not to say that enmity results in the divine case, and Socrates would certainly reject that it does. But when the conflicts among the Gods

¹³ Cf. "Polytheism and Individuality in the Henadic Manifold," *Dionysius* Vol. 23, 2005, pp. 83-104.

are understood as strife among absolutely unique individuals, all of whose attributes are also taken as wholly unique to each of them, there can necessarily be no formalization of the conflict as embodying a conflict of objective principles that might therefore be mediated. Dispute on this plane, the plane of pure singulars, is always a dispute over each separate act (8e), and any resolution will also be unique. Hence for us as well, when we take ourselves existentially, that is, as singulars, each problem of the application of principles is occurring as it were for the first time, every time. If Euthyphro is going to stay on the plane of singulars—which is in one respect a *low* plane of being, when it pertains to singulars such as us, but in another respect *the highest*, when it pertains to *a priori* singulars such as Gods—then only a *singular* judgment, such as an act of divination, can justify his act.

Euthyphro does not resort to this, however, inasmuch as he continues to accept Socrates' challenge to him to produce *universality*, something that can be affirmed as true of *all the Gods*, without restriction, and hence something true of them *qua* Gods. This is the breakthrough in which we are invited to participate: an inquiry into the Gods as a *kind* of thing, with an essential nature, a nature of Godhood. At the beginning of the Platonic enterprise, therefore, we are advised [28] that the inquiry will extend even this far. But where we mistake the enterprise is in seeing its end as placing a reified essence prior to the existence of the Gods, or, for that matter,

affirming a wholesale subordination of other individuals to the Idea. Moreover, what prevents the latter is precisely that very Platonic piety which will not subordinate the Gods in this fashion. Hence other singulars are saved, too, in varying degrees, and with a status doubtless 'problematic', by that philosophical piety which saves the Gods. Saving the singulars *is the problem*, and this is what recognizing Platonic piety, not toward the Idea, but toward the *immortals*, and toward the possibility of fellowship with them in and through our mortal being, allows us in turn to understand about the entire Platonic project.¹⁴

The dialectical ascent, then, begins in earnest from 10a-c, where Socrates poses to Euthyphro the question of whether he wishes to regard holiness as simply a passive quality of things resulting from their having been chosen by the Gods. That it should be merely an implicitly arbitrary choice and a resulting *pathos* of something, rather than a relationship more fundamental and even in some way constitutive for both, is the bottom, baseline position, but one which also, if we read it proleptically, reflects, just by virtue of being the lowest, something of the pure causal activity of the highest principle, for the Gods as the ultimate agents will indeed, in the ultimate development of antique Platonism, possess this sheer sovereignty over

¹⁴ I have developed this at further length through a reading of the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* in "Plato's Gods and the Way of Ideas," *Diotima: Review of Philosophical Research* 39, 2011 (Hellenic Society for Philosophical Studies, Athens), pp. 73-87.

Being in the last analysis. Conceiving of the holy in this fashion would also be consistent with the Platonic doctrine regarding *powers*, and therefore would conceive that which is holy as the receptacle of divine power. Thus in the *Republic* (477c-d), we read that powers (*dynameis*) can be discriminated in no other way than by that to which they are relative and by that which comes about through them.¹⁵ A power, thus, has no intrinsic character but what it is in that which it effects, and thus this putative definition of holiness may be regarded as the 'power' definition. Powers are therefore, in themselves, pure relations, and holiness the pure power of relation to the Gods, without any further intelligible determination, as *transcending* the intelligible. The proper understanding of the ontological status of the powers of the Gods lies on the far side of the investigation Socrates and Euthyphro are now undertaking, however, not to mention on the far side of the historical development of Platonism in antiquity. Therefore, Euthyphro correctly refuses to stay at this position as it is prereflectively articulated, and not ripe to be grasped, even though it would be [29] consistent with the intuition of the sovereign power of divine choice. He wishes, instead, to pursue the *choiceworthiness* of that which the Gods choose.

¹⁵ Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer's discussion of this doctrine in "The Dialectic of the Good in the *Philebus*," pp. 117-118 in *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

In addition to the desire for a substantial notion of the holy, however, Socrates points out a problem forcing the ascent, by posing the question of fear and reverence at 12a-b. We have reverence for something in regard to a virtue it possesses, while we fear something simply because of its action or possible action upon us; and yet insofar as reverence is a part (*meros*) of fear (12c), we see again the emergence of something with eidetic content from out of something conceived as a pure relation. Socrates thus presents Euthyphro with another implicit figuration of divine production.

The structural consideration with respect to fear and reverence leads Socrates in turn to the notion of holiness as a part of justice, as reverence is a kind of fear. Now it is a question, not of something structurally homologous to the relation between the Gods and the (eidetically) holy, but of something that might begin to speak to the nature of holiness itself. The question of piety as a part of justice concerns the place that piety, the activities specifically directed toward the Gods in devotion (*therapeia*), has in the system of the cosmos, of the total well-ordering of things. It takes up again the purely interactional or relational conception of the holy as that which is chosen by or beloved of the Gods. This conception is enriched, however, through recognizing that holiness thus conceived is an attribute, not of the holy thing in isolation, but of an economy of devotion. It represents an advance in this respect. But given its wide-

reaching significance, how can this economy be just one part of the whole of justice, just one activity among the many activities of necessity and of choice that fill up a life?

This question concerns the status of the Gods as a particular class among beings, a portion of the cosmos. Eventually Platonists will come to recognize [30] that the Gods cannot just be certain things among all other things. Hence, at the beginning of this journey, Socrates asks the *aim* of attending to the Gods. It cannot have as its aim supplying some need, and hence making the Gods *better* in some way (13c-d). This would be the case if the Gods were solely part of the cosmic system, immanent in it without remainder. There is something limited and misleading, therefore, about the economic model, at least if we understand it as a crude exchange. To every stage of the dialectic corresponds some belief or practice which the dialectical progression does not demand be abandoned, but for which rather it poses a problem, and solving this problem will save what is true in it. The priestesses and priests mentioned in the *Meno*, like Diotima in the *Symposium*, were not looking for something to supersede their devotional works, but for a way of articulating the relationship of these acts to the world.

If Socrates is holding the Gods' transcendence—at least partially or in some respect—of the cosmic economy in his pocket, so to speak, this is not at any rate an insight available to Euthyphro. The

next step in the dialectic, accordingly, comes with Euthyphro's substitution of a sublimated economy for the crude one based on need: service (*hypêretikê*) to the Gods in pursuit of their work (*ergon*) (13d-e). The importance of the relationship of service to the Gods is emphasized by its reemergence at a crucial moment in the *Parmenides* (134d-e), where the mastery-and-service relationship between the Gods and ourselves, insofar as it parallels the relationship between the forms and our knowledge of them, poses what is termed the 'greatest difficulty' with respect to the theory of forms, if it be poorly understood, for it implies that "we do not rule the Gods with our authority, nor do we know anything of the divine with our knowledge, and by the same reasoning, the Gods likewise, being Gods, are not our masters and have no knowledge of human affairs," (134e, trans. Fowler, mod.).

In the Platonic consideration of the economy of mastery and service, we glimpse the economy of recognition that Hegel would articulate so many centuries later. The difficulty of this relationship, embodied in Euthyphro's inability to say what is the work of the Gods in which we serve them, lies in the fact that there are relationships the very *idea* of which makes necessary reference to that which lies outside the realm of the *ideal*. It is not simply that we lack the knowledge we would need to assist the Gods properly in their work, but rather of conceiving, in the first place, a work as common to them

and to us. Knowledge in itself is the grasp of the formal by something not solely formal, namely the soul; so too, the *mastery* exercised by the Gods over us involves essentially entities which in a certain respect would not *exist* for them. Hence, we do not see ourselves in the myths. We may *analogize* ourselves to figures in the myths, as Euthyphro does when he analogizes himself to Zeus and his father to Kronos, or, more humbly, as when we see ourselves in the mortals portrayed in myth, but we are not straightforwardly there, in that world. Those mortals, too, can only be the object of analogy. In this way, there is something [31] in the devotional economy that transcends the economy of myth, which like the economy of the ideas or forms is fundamentally intellective. Here we see how a simplistic opposition of *mythos* and *logos* cannot do justice to the labors of Plato and Platonists. Myths have two faces, one of which looks back to the singularity of the Gods and of revelation, the other of which looks forward to hermeneutic exegesis and the ideas which emerge from it. The limitation of analogy lies in its potential obstruction of the recognition of the procession of being, with its necessary moment of *disanalogy*. Devotion must incorporate the alterity that makes it possible for Gods and mortals to recognize one another in the full alterity of their divergent existential conditions.

From the holy as simple object of divine intention, Socrates and Euthyphro passed on to the notion of a devotional economy of

holiness, which has now been refined implicitly from the gross economy of exchange to the sublimated economy of recognition. This economy of recognition transcends even the plane by which the Gods give form to the cosmos, namely the plane of mythic relationships and reciprocal action *within* the divine sphere. The economy of devotion, properly understood, therefore, transcends the economy of demiurgy. This would have to be the case for polytheism not to collapse into intellectualized cosmotheism, and for piety as a distinct activity to disappear. This is the recognition entailed in the reformulation McPherran offers of the conception of divine service in response to Socrates' forceful hint at 14c that Euthyphro has come very near the solution to the nature of holiness before turning aside.¹⁶ For McPherran, the positive Socratic conception of piety is accordingly "that part of justice that is a service of humans to gods, assisting the gods in their primary task to produce their most beautiful product." But we can see that something has dropped out of consideration in order to formulate this definitive statement, which is both *action-based* and focused purely on *human* action. This is a serviceable definition of piety as a human virtue or activity, but not, it would seem, of *holiness* as embodying, or at least *including*, the choiceworthiness of the objects of *divine* choice. This latter, rather, has been pushed back out of view, implicit in the notion of the Gods'

¹⁶ "Piety, Justice, and the Unity of Virtue," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 38.3 (July 2000), pp. 302-3.

'task'. For what makes something a task of the Gods? Is it simply that They have taken it up, or is it the task's intrinsic value?

Accordingly, when the difference between humans and Gods is elided, at least aspirationally, in Plato's *Republic*, the discrete virtue of piety vanishes altogether into that of justice, which is simply the proper *adjustment* of powers in the soul, in society, and in the cosmos to one another.¹⁷ There is a sense in which everything, simply by fulfilling its nature and playing out its role in the [32] cosmic system, is holy or is expressing piety, but does the attempt to define piety truly dissolve it? Or perhaps the worship of the Gods is something really distinct in itself, but is nevertheless undertaken purely for the sake of the cosmos? This is the position suggested by the notion that piety is "the science [*epistêmê*] of sacrifice and prayer" (14c), the object of which is to "bring salvation to individual families and to states" (14b). The way in which this position is described, both in its recourse to a notion of science, and in its salvific application not to the individual as such, but to greater social units, suggest that it is the highest point achieved by the intellectualized conception of piety, insofar as the latter will only with difficulty recognize the particular, by a process of determining 'down' to it by increasingly finer sortal 'nets'. Salvation, at any rate, as the product of devotion, is indicated by Socrates to be very close (14c) to the solution of the problem of what holiness or

¹⁷ Cf. McPherran, "Piety, Justice, and the Unity of Virtue," pp. 324-5, 326-7.

piety is with respect to its intelligible content, unless the nearness he indicates, but does not specify, is instead the notion of service in a noble work. Or can it be both, in the sense that the state of our souls in our disposition toward the Gods, that is, the *pure relation* among Gods and mortals, is itself the work, to which of necessity we are peculiarly qualified?

A relationship of *justice* toward the Gods is paradoxical to the degree that they do not need anything from us, and cannot be bettered by our attentions to them (15a-b), even if a beautiful work could be achieved by them and ourselves in concert. They must therefore *in themselves* remain in some respect outside the economy of reciprocal benefit that they underwrite. Even justice most widely and sensitively conceived will thus fall short in capturing what piety is, though it can go a very long way. The very best account we can give of religious life in terms of reciprocal exchange (*do ut des*), even refined to the ultimate degree, still lets something escape. The Gods, to exist in the way the Hellenic tradition intuitively grasps them—because we must recognize that Socrates at no time in this dialogue, or elsewhere, really, introduces novel, controversial premises concerning the Gods, but at most sets the consequences of one intuition against another—must not exist solely in the economy of piety, and therefore the inquiry into the nature of piety has run its course, with the Gods Themselves as its remainder and its

precondition. But piety's epistemological virtue is just that this immanent inquiry should reveal the objects of its peculiar concern in this light: the Gods would be of all things what concretely instantiates such self-sufficiency.

The course of this dialectic has therefore proceeded along two tracks, one explicit, in which an intelligible content has been sought for holiness or piety, the progress of which has at every stage also revealed a corresponding, *implicit* conception of piety, in which the holy is so inseparable from divine activity itself as to escape any intelligible framing we might design for it. The circle to which Socrates refers, then, at 15b-c, is not a vicious one, unless we are [33] convinced that it is a failure to have elucidated the series of meanings attributable to piety, their sufficiencies and insufficiencies, and also to recognize in the end that there is something more than intelligible embedded in the concept. In this respect, Socrates' reference to his ancestor Daidalos suggests not merely that the argument has gotten away from Euthyphro, but the magic of ensoulment showing itself and arising through the effort at understanding. It is true that in a certain respect, when Socrates urges Euthyphro to "begin again at the beginning" with him (15c), the putative positive conception of piety discerned by McPherran at 14b has been undermined. The notion of service to the Gods in support of a work of theirs has only a relative stability; to return again to the beginning is to return to the motor

that has driven the dialectic all along, namely the creative tension between the impulse to compromise none of the Gods' agency, and the understanding that the Gods, being Gods, must have a will that is good, too, and hence this goodness is there to be found in the choices they make.

Euthyphro is often treated with rather more scorn by modern commentators than Socrates' other interlocutors, despite the fact that none of them hold up particularly well to Socrates' scrutiny. Some of this, I believe, is attributable to a bias against Euthyphro's religiosity, which is bound to please neither the atheist nor the monotheist. Euthyphro, in any case, as I have remarked, deserves credit for one thing, at least: he never seeks to jettison the notion of some intelligible content for the concept of the holy. He tries, instead, to hold together the search for this intelligibility and his intuition that there is something irreducible in the relationship to the living Gods. In this, Euthyphro shows himself a true Hellene, we may say, in refusing to divorce the Gods from the world and from reason, nor divorce *these* from the Gods. Whatever transcendence is accorded the Gods, it will not be of the sort that Kierkegaard demands for his God, namely the suspension of all rational and moral claims in the face of the divine command.

For failing to adopt this Kierkegaardian solution, or the alternative of an intellectualized piety refined virtually to the point of

atheism, Euthyphro is branded a shallow thinker who cannot see clearly enough to embrace either 'genuine' theology or rationality. But in refusing this dichotomy, Euthyphro remains true to the fundamental theological intuitions of his culture, and I would argue that Socrates and Plato would not wish him to do otherwise. Euthyphro may not be a gifted dialectician, but his project is theirs as well, a project in which the transcendence of the Gods in Hellenic theology will ground the cosmos and our free exercise of reason, not suspend it. It's not insignificant, in this light, that Euthyphro seeks divine sanction for recourse to the Athenian justice system, and his transgressiveness lies solely in that he would allow the law to be applied within his family, rather than shielding them.

Socrates, however, has by the end of the dialogue shown it to be thoroughly [34] problematic to attempt to justify social action by recourse to theology. But this is because Euthyphro has tried to do so, as it were, without the Gods themselves. Euthyphro tries to match mythic incidents to worldly problems as simple precedents, a portion of myth to a part of the world, but this part-to-part correspondence will undermine the whole-to-whole relationship of the Gods to the social and the cosmic order, the same whole-to-whole relationship that any living thing has to the cosmos, for the Gods are for Euthyphro and Socrates alike living immortals, and not abstract principles or mere formulae that can be applied indifferently, in their personal absence.

But this does not leave only divination, on the one hand, and a godless reason on the other, a dichotomy alien, I believe, to the mainstream of Hellenic thinkers.¹⁸ Socrates' own piety, on the testimony of Plato and of Xenophon alike, argues rather for an integration of reason and revelation in a unified soteriology.

¹⁸ Even Werner, in an account otherwise hostile to Hellenic theology, recognizes that Euthyphro's rejection of the voluntarism Socrates offers him is at least in part due to the fact that "Nowhere in the traditional myths are the gods represented as the sort of beings who definitively establish the nature of right and wrong (or pious and impious) simply through a decree or fiat," (p. 50).