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English 301

12 February 2020

Analysis #1

Plato and the Elusive Resolution of “Euthyphro”

In Plato’s dialogue, “Euthyphro,” the origins of morality and piety are seen as unanswerable dilemmas. It is so unanswerable, in fact, that Socrates and Euthyphro are unable to come to any sort of resolution through the extent of their exchange. The essence of this dilemma can boil down to two questions: Is an action pious because it is loved by the gods, or is it loved by the gods because it is pious? Both propositions have their respective validities and flaws. To claim that which is loved by the gods to be pious opens an endless realm of confusion due to their conflicting interests, while claiming piety to being loved by the gods because it is pious would limit their interests to that which is innately more powerful than the gods themselves. Thus, the solution must either be both working together in a cyclical nature; the gods love that which is pious, and that which is loved by deity must likewise become pious, or neither of the two.

Plato illustrates this age-old paradigm by describing Euthyphro in a binding moral dilemma as he is forced to choose between that which is pious and the legal preservation of his father. Were Euthyphro’s primary definition of piety for Socrates be correct, Plato would have claimed that piety is always seeking the pleasure of deity. Socrates retorts, “Is not piety in every action always the same? And impiety, again- is it not always the opposite of piety, and also the same with itself, having, as impiety, one notion which includes whatever is impious” (3-4)? If piety were to be held to a measurable standard, the ever-changing whims of the gods would inescapably conflict. Thus, that which is pious cannot only be so because of the gods’ emotions.

Socrates responds, “It is loved because it is holy, not holy because it is loved? … And that which is dear to the gods is loved by them, and is in a state to be loved of them because it is loved of them” (8)? This leads down a possibly endless rabbit hole, suggesting the gods are susceptible to an inherent power outside of themselves, leaving deity powerless to an external force. This conflicts with deity at its core, being that the gods are to be in complete control and power, not subject to an unseen moral code. Once again, the box in which piety fits remains elusive.

When Euthyphro at last resigns from the dialogue, Socrates connects this debate to his own trial and teases, “…now I am about to lead a better life” (13). By doing so, Plato invites the world to assess the moral code to which we adhere. Perhaps the only correct marriage of these two partial truths would be that the gods must have explicitly bound themselves to an inherent law to create the pious.