

Holiness as service: *Therapeia* and *hyperetike* in Plato's *Euthyphro*

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The aporetic character of the *Euthyphro*, its failure to arrive at an idea (*eidōs*), or even a provisionally acceptable definition of holiness (*to hosion*) does not mean that the result of the dialogue is negative.¹ Several commentators claim that a Platonic account of holiness can be inferred from passages in the *Euthyphro*,² especially 12e6–14c5. Other commentators make the weaker claim that a conception of holiness is evident in Socrates' speeches in the *Apology* and even some of the later dialogues.³ Such views, however, fail to do justice to Socrates' contention in the *Apology* that he is aware that he is not wise. Having an *eidōs* or idea of holiness would amount to having the sort of wisdom which Socrates explicitly denies having. Whether Plato ever made a claim to such wisdom is not obvious, since he does not speak in his own name in any of the dialogues. Any inference from the dialogues to a strictly Platonic doctrine is at best problematic. To identify a Platonic, though not a Socratic doctrine of holiness, we would have to distinguish the thought of the historical Socrates as he is presented in Plato's work from the doctrines that Plato held. This approach would have to maintain a break in the Platonic texts between those dialogues which treat the historical Socrates and those which present Plato's so-called "mature" thought. The aporetic character of the dialogues, as well as Plato's silence on the matter of his differences with Socrates, makes impossible maintaining such a distinction even with the help of the dubious division of the Platonic dialogues into the early, middle, and later works.⁴ Whatever Plato's views may have been, the question remains as to how we can infer a Socratic conception of holiness from the *Euthyphro* while not discarding Socrates' claim about his lack of wisdom in both the *Euthyphro* and the *Apology*.

To search for a "Socratic" conception of holiness in the *Euthyphro* and *Apology* means to search for a conception of holiness that could have been held by the *character* Socrates in the works written by Plato. This attempt does not commit us to the claim that this conception of holiness was held by

the historical Socrates or by the author of the texts, Plato. It does imply that Plato was aware of this conception to the extent that he allows his character Socrates to hold such a view.

To rightly infer a Socratic conception of holiness from a reading of the *Euthyphro* we must find textual support for undertaking the project as well as for the details of the conception itself. Most scholars who have engaged in such a project take Socrates' remarks at 14b9-c5 as decisive.⁵ Here Socrates claims that if Euthyphro had been willing to answer his question concerning the chief result of the gods' work, then Socrates would have obtained all the instruction he needed about holiness. If Socrates could have anticipated what Euthyphro should have said to "instruct" him about holiness, then he must have already known the contents of such "instruction." He must have known what holiness is.

Rather than giving a direct answer to Socrates' questions at 14a9-11, Euthyphro protests that "it is a long task to learn of these matters accurately." Then he claims that knowing how to do what is gratifying to the gods in praying and sacrificing results in the salvation of individual families and cities. After admonishing Euthyphro for not answering his question and lamenting this wrong turn in the discussion, Socrates follows Euthyphro's turn to the issue of prayer and sacrifice. Because of Socrates' regret at this wrong turn, I take this passage as the promising place to pursue the correct definition of holiness.

However, we must be cautious. We have no way of knowing whether an answer to Socrates' question leads to an acceptable account of holiness unless we ourselves "know" what holiness is. If we know what holiness is, we have no need to examine the discussion portrayed in the *Euthyphro*. Moreover, we have no reason to assert that Socrates knew what holiness is all along and was merely being ironical with Euthyphro throughout the course of their discussion. Such an assertion would make it extremely difficult to explain why Socrates bothered to talk to Euthyphro in the first place, much less submit to Euthyphro's "instruction." If we held that Socrates knew what holiness is but deliberately concealed his knowledge from Euthyphro for the purpose of helping Euthyphro to discover his own lack of knowledge, we would be in the position of calling Socrates a liar⁶ and having to come up with evidence that Socrates held a doctrine before the conversation took place. Although Euthyphro does not really know what holiness is, it does not follow that Socrates cannot learn anything from a discussion with Euthyphro.

On the other hand, if the *Euthyphro* cannot teach us anything worth knowing about holiness, then we have no reason to study it. But the absence of a clearly spelled out doctrine concerning holiness does not mean that we can learn nothing from the discussion. Likewise, Socrates must have

thought that he could learn something valuable about holiness from a discussion with Euthyphro. But what can Socrates, or we who study the *Euthyphro*, learn about holiness from the discussion?

A passage in the *Euthyphro* suggests the project of inferring a conception of holiness from the dialogue and gives us a hint about how to proceed. This passage begins at 15c13 where Socrates says “we must begin again at the beginning and ask what holiness is, since I shall not give up willingly until I learn.” Euthyphro has had enough of this and takes his leave of Socrates and the discussion. Socrates’ willingness to pursue the matter until he has learned about holiness by beginning again is by no means precluded by Euthyphro’s hasty exit. Socrates can recollect the details of the previous conversation and perform the same inferential analysis of the discussion that the reader can.

Thus, we need not assert that Socrates had complete wisdom or the *eidōs* of holiness before him at the beginning of the *Euthyphro*, but we can leave open the possibility that his analysis of the remembered conversation could yield such an *eidōs* or wisdom. We do not even have to claim that this analysis yields the fullest understanding of holiness (the *eidōs*), only that the understanding it does yield does not fall prey to the contradictions involved in Euthyphro’s attempts to define holiness.⁷ The pursuit of the problem of holiness may well lead us to the pursuit of a more difficult question, upon whose resolution a full understanding of holiness ultimately depends. The analysis of the *Euthyphro* may result in correct opinion rather than full wisdom, but such opinion could lead us away from false opinions about holiness and toward wisdom. The path to such an understanding of holiness is the recollection of the dialogue between Socrates and Euthyphro.

A recollection of the entire dialogue naturally leads us to 14c1 where Socrates claims that the dialogue has taken a wrong turn. My task is to show why this was a wrong turn. To do this I begin with the place where the dialogue seems to make the correct turn, 12e, when Euthyphro asserts that holiness is that part of the just which has to do with attention (*therapeia*) to the gods. Here Socrates says that Euthyphro seems to speak well (*kalos*), but he needs to understand what Euthyphro means by “attention.”

Socrates gives Euthyphro three examples of *therapeia*, directed toward horses, dogs, or cattle. Euthyphro agrees that holiness and piety are *therapeia* directed toward the gods. Socrates then gets Euthyphro to agree that all *therapeia* aims to accomplish some good or benefit to the one to whom it is directed. He even asks whether Euthyphro thinks that *therapeia* is ever meant for the injury of what it is directed toward. Euthyphro swears by Zeus that it is not. However, we can argue that in each of Socrates’ examples *therapeia* results in the good or the improvement of the care-giver

rather than the recipient of the care. The good of the recipient or object of *therapeia* is incidental to the good of the care-giver. The very notion of what is good is determined by the giver of care and not the recipient. This point about *therapeia* is reflected in the fact that horses, dogs, and cattle, the recipients of *therapeia* in Socrates' examples, do not ask to be recipients of *therapeia*. Their wishes are not consulted, not really even considered by the care-giver. The care-giver is a member of a higher species of animal than the recipient of the care. Horse-trainers are not themselves horses. This paradigm of holiness and piety fail, not only for the reasons stated in the dialogue, that is, the gods cannot be improved or made better, but also because such care is for the benefit of the giver of care without the request or even consent of the recipient. The gods demand piety and holiness, while horses do not demand to be trained to pull chariots.

Euthyphro's reason for rejecting the paradigm, that the gods cannot be made better by us, obscures the fact that human beings are holy or act piously for their own benefit, at least indirectly, at the request of the recipients of such care, the gods. A satisfactory account of holiness must take into account that the gods, a higher species of being, request or demand holiness for the benefit of the lower. We might claim that holiness is closer to *therapeia* given by the gods with human beings as the recipients. The gods care for human beings by requesting designated behavior from us. This could not serve by itself as an adequate definition of holiness without explanation of why the gods require holiness of human beings and why the gods care for them.

Euthyphro's next definition of holiness as the *therapeia* that servants pay to their masters is an interesting development because Euthyphro, a slave owner, rather than Socrates, introduces this paradigm. Euthyphro recognizes that this *therapeia* is directed toward someone superior (at least in a political sense) to the care-giver. Because slaves and their masters are of the same species, however, we might say that the superiority of the master is conventional or political rather than natural. The gods are naturally superior to human beings, not merely politically or conventionally superior. That Euthyphro notices this point is not clear.

In the case where a servant cares for a master, the slave does so at the demand of the master. Like the gods, the master demands this *therapeia*. The master is directly benefitted by this care; while the slave is harmed by having to provide it. If slaves were benefitted rather than harmed, we would expect them to be willing to pay for the privilege of serving. The care that Euthyphro has in mind here is best understood as "menial service" because the recipient of this service is both the initiator of the service relationship and its main beneficiary. Socrates introduces the term *hyperetike* to characterize this service. Although the term can mean any ministerial service or

supporting art, the social resonance of the example Euthyphro chooses is decisive. He is concerned with the hierarchical relationship of master to slave rather than the more technical subordination of bricklayer to architect. That the master benefits from such service is inconsistent with the previous assertion that the gods cannot be improved or made better by human beings. At this point holiness appears as a service (*hyperetike*) to the gods which the gods require of human beings, perhaps contrary to their wishes, which benefits or improves human beings. This, our second provisional account of holiness, still does not account for why the gods would be concerned with the good of human beings, nor does it specify what the good of human beings is.

Immediately after he introduces the term "*hyperetike*," Socrates gives three examples of this ministerial service. In each, he is concerned with the work (*ergon*) that *hyperetike* serves its recipient to produce. On the surface, Socrates' analysis is more technical than social. The *hyperetike* which serves the physician, serves to produce health, the shipbuilder – a ship, and the house-builder – a house. In each case the one who is served in turn produces a definite work or *ergon*. Socrates asks Euthyphro what work (*ergon*) the *hyperetike* that serves the gods serves to produce. Euthyphro answers "many fine things." Although his answer could be read as an evasion of the question, it also directs us toward an ambiguity in the examples chosen by Socrates. In the case of the physician, the shipbuilder, and the house-builder, it is taken for granted that the *ergon* produced is a single thing. Yet you might argue that physicians, by producing health, produce that result for their patients while producing money (which in turn buys many fine things) for themselves.

In each of these three examples of *hyperetike* whom the *ergon* is for is never specified. Yet the *ergon* health is itself the health of someone other than the physician or the servant of the physician. The shipbuilder produces ships for other people to sail in, and the house-builder produces houses for other people to live in. These products are used by a third party in addition to the artisan and the artisan's servant. This third party, by purchasing the *ergon* is both benefitted by the *ergon* and benefits the producer. The artisan or "master" benefits those who purchase the *ergon* and is benefitted by their money, while the menial servant benefits in the same way that the artisan does if at all. On this view *hyperetike* serves to produce the *ergon* such as health, a ship, or a house, which itself in turn results in the artisan's receipt of money which allows for the purchase of many fine things. Therefore, at least indirectly, *hyperetike* produces many fine things in the case of these arts as well as in the case of the gods.

Socrates's reluctance to accept the answer "many fine things" is perhaps a sign that the paradigm of *hyperetike* fails not only because the exact

nature of these “things” is not specified by Euthyphro, but also because this paradigm would allow for the gods, like artisans, to indirectly benefit from the work that this service to the gods serves to produce. The question is “Why do the gods demand this service which helps them produce many fine things?” Why physicians, shipbuilders, and house-builders produce their works is clear enough: they need to do so in order to benefit from their sale. Although one might argue that the artisans, qua artisans, do not benefit from their art, and that the art of benefitting from the practice of an art is another art, the “wage-earning” art,⁸ no instances exist of such a pure practice of an art which does not benefit the artisan.

The gods cannot produce (practice an art) for the same reason as human beings because they cannot be thought of as needing anything like wages. If holiness is a type of *hyperetike* directed toward the gods, then the *ergon* produced must not, even indirectly, benefit the gods. The gods’ work cannot be thought of as benefitting a third party because no third party exists without some sort of economic transaction. Even if an economic transaction occurred in which the gods did not benefit, it would have to be carried on between the gods and their human servants. Therefore, the work that the gods produce must either benefit no one or benefit the servants of these gods. On this view holiness is serving the gods at the gods’ request and direction for the benefit of human beings rather than gods. Although nothing is false in this definition it still does not explain what the works of the gods are or why the gods produce these works.

Socrates continues this line of inquiry by asking Euthyphro for the chief result of the many fine results that the gods accomplish with our service. He introduces two more examples of producers and results, where there is a crowning result of the many results that they accomplish. The crowning result produced by the general is victory in war, by the farmer food from the land. The absence of a third example here suggests that the chief result produced by the gods has yet to be ascertained.

Euthyphro cannot give Socrates the name for the crowning result of the many fine results brought about by the gods; instead, he shifts the discussion to the knowledge of prayer and sacrifice and the results of this knowledge, which is the salvation or saving of private families and whole cities. This is rather ironic since Euthyphro’s prosecution of his father for murder, a prosecution which he earlier claims is a “holy” act, would surely lead to anything but the preservation of his own family. Euthyphro’s “holy” act of prosecuting his father for murder does not serve to achieve the result of holiness understood as knowing how to pray and sacrifice correctly, the salvation of families and whole cities.

A close look at Socrates’ choice of examples shows that Euthyphro’s response to his question is not altogether inappropriate. The crowning result

of the general's art, victory in war, benefits the city as a whole, not to mention the general. In a sense, the general's art saves the city. The generals save by giving appropriate commands to others they are placed in charge of. In the *Apology* (28b–29a) Socrates explains his own service to the god in terms of obedience to a general. Likewise, the farmers benefit not only themselves and their families but the city as a whole which depends on their art for its food. This art also saves the city. The absence of a third example here directs us to think about what is missing from the other two.

In the case of farmers, we could argue that their art saves the physical body of private families and whole cities. They would starve without it. Likewise, the general's art saves the political life, or freedom (honor) of the city. Without this art the members of the city would be either killed or enslaved. So Socrates names arts which save the body and perhaps the social organization of private families and whole cities, but he does not mention an art which saves or protects their souls. Generals and farmers ultimately benefit human beings, though not in the highest sense. Perhaps the crowning result of the many fine things accomplished by the gods with our help is the "saving" or protection of the human soul. Holiness would then be service to the gods which results in the saving of the human soul. The gods rather than human beings both initiate this service and give the directions for how that service is to be carried out because only the gods would fully understand what saving and improvement means here. The gods are, presumably, wise, while human beings are not.

Euthyphro's response to the question of the crowning result is a wrong turn in the discussion because he introduces commerce between gods and men and because he mentions the private household and the whole city as the two essential parts of human life. For him the fundamental distinction is between private and public rather than the division of the human being into the physical body, the political or honor-seeking part, and the soul proper. Oddly enough, the word "soul" is never mentioned in the dialogue.⁹ The failure to mention the soul leads to the failure to arrive at an adequate definition of the holy.

Euthyphro cannot give an account of the crowning result of our service to the gods because he lacks an adequate understanding of the human good in terms of the soul. Socrates' claim at 14e–15a, "everybody knows what they [the gods] give, since we have nothing good which they do not give," cannot help Euthyphro or us unless we come to understand what is good in the most valuable sense. To come to an understanding of what is good for human beings, we must understand what human beings truly are. To neglect the soul would be to neglect an essential characteristic of human beings and so to neglect an essential part of the good for human beings. If we restore what is missing here – the soul, then we would understand holiness as that

part of justice which offer service to the gods at the request of these gods for the improvement of our souls.

We still have not accounted for why the gods care about the souls of human beings. Our definition remains incomplete without it. We do not know what holiness is if we do not understand why the gods order us to serve them for the improvement of our souls. We require knowledge concerning the gods themselves, knowledge of their “souls” if you will, to understand why they require us to serve them in such a way that our souls are made better. Does Socrates ever admit to having such knowledge concerning the gods or the human soul? A look at the *Apology* yields an emphatic “no.”

Although Socrates claims that his philosophical activity is itself a service (*latreia* at 23b, *hyperetike* at 30a) to the god and a gift of the god to Athens, it does not follow that he fully understands the god or why the god made such a gift to the city. He obeys rather than fully comprehends.¹⁰ McPheran maintains that the textual evidence supports the view that Socrates does accept the word of his “divine guide.” Socrates is not simply a rationalist or an atheist. Leaving aside the historical question, the textual evidence does support the assertion that the character Socrates obeys his divine guide first and sometimes later give a rational account of why his guide was correct. I see an element of obedience in Socrates’ philosophic activity which cannot be explained without reference to a wisdom that Socrates recognizes but does not fully possess.

Socrates speaks of a god who has made his will known to Socrates and not of the gods generally. His knowledge of the “gods” is limited to his knowledge of the god who has commanded him. Even though Socrates claims that his philosophical examinations undertaken at the command of the god work for the good of the human soul (29d-e) and that good is called virtue, he denies that he knows or can teach virtue (see 20a1-c5). Although Socrates does express some true beliefs about the god, such as he cannot lie (21b8-9), he is wise (23a6-b4), that it is wrong to disobey the command of one who is better, god or human being (29b7-9), the god will not allow that a better human being be harmed by a worse (930c9-12), the god cares about human beings (31a8-9), and no evil can come to good human beings in life or death because the god does not neglect them (41d1-3), these opinions do not represent complete wisdom concerning the gods. Some of these opinions may have been arrived at by revelation or command of a god, others could have been arrived at by means of a dialectical refutation of their negations. Socrates claims that he is pious insofar as he obeys the command of the wise god to benefit his own soul and the soul of other Athenians by examining and exhorting them to virtue. Socrates would not be required to have a full understanding of virtue to do this; he would only

need to be able to refute those mistaken characterizations of virtue that lead human beings away from it. At 29d–30c Socrates states that his mission is to exhort those he meets to care for the perfection of their souls rather than the acquisition of wealth, reputation, and honor. His examinations tend to show that an interlocutor misunderstands virtue by neglecting the care of the soul.

Aside from his exhortations to care for the soul rather than wealth and the like, Socrates does not give a full account of how to care for the soul or a full account of what the soul is. To give a complete account of the soul and what is good for the soul would require the wisdom of a god. But if part of the good that the god works through Socrates is to make others aware that only the god is wise and that human wisdom is worth little or nothing by comparison, then Socrates could not both be wise in the fullest sense and holy or pious at the same time. He is, after all human. Socrates, then, can act piously without ever having to arrive at a full understanding or *eidos* of holiness, which would itself seem to involve a superhuman type of wisdom.

Holiness would then be that part of justice which involves service to the god through the philosophical activity or refuting mistaken conceptions of virtue and exhorting others and oneself to care for their soul with the realization that we mortals do not fully understand what the soul is, what care for this soul means, or why the god is concerned for the souls of human beings. Such service to the gods, though it does not transform human beings into gods, that is, does not make us wise, makes us better than those who think they are wise and are not. Thus, holiness can be understood to improve the souls of human beings without perfecting these souls.

The “positive doctrine” or teaching about the holy that we can infer from the *Euthyphro* does not lead us to complete wisdom concerning the holy or the human soul, nor does it yield a fully rational account of holiness. It cannot do these things because it depends upon obedience to the god rather than the full rational account of the good of the soul. Instead, this “doctrine” leads to that continuing philosophical activity whereby the souls of human beings are improved insofar as that is possible for mortals. The “crowning result” of this service to the god is the continuation of this very service. Philosophy is an art of living with a pious mission.

Notes

1. Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Ancient Greek Philosophy in New York, 26 October 1991, and at the Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Portland, Oregon on 26 March 1992. I thank John Glanville for his comments.

2. See David D. Thayer, "Holiness, Piety, and Philosophy: A Study of Plato's *Euthyphro*", Ph.D. Dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University (1982), p. 118; C.C.W. Taylor, "The End of the *Euthyphro*," *Phronesis* 27 (1982): p. 116; Laslo Versenyi, *Holiness and Justice: An Interpretation of Plato's Euthyphro* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1982), p. 106. Versenyi discusses extensively the merits of this attempt and comes to the conclusion that the attempt to get a positive doctrine out of this section that still claims to be *hyperetike* must fail. I argue that we would have to transform our understanding of *hyperetike* from that of the everyday speech of the Greek to a philosophical meaning. Jan H. Blits, "The Holy and the Human: An Interpretation of Plato's *Euthyphro*," *Apeiron* 14 (1980): 33. Arthur H. Weston, "The Question of Plato's *Euthyphro*," *The Classical Bulletin* 27 (1951): 57–58. W.G. Rabinowitz, "Platonic Piety: An Essay Towards the Solution of an Enigma," *Phronesis* 3 (1958): 114–115. W.A. Heidel, "On Plato's *Euthyphro*," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 31 (1900): 171–172. For the most recent discussions of the problem of whether Socrates held a full account of piety, see ch. 6, titled "Socratic Piety," in Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 157–178, and Mark McPherran, "Socratic Piety in the *Euthyphro*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 29.3 (1991): 345–374.
3. See Versenyi, *Holiness and Justice*, pp. 105–107 for an analysis and criticism of such attempts.
4. For a persuasive argument against the commonplace that we possess a knowledge of the chronology of Plato's works and that such a chronology would be helpful in interpreting his work, see Jacob Howland, "Re-reading Plato: The Problem of Platonic Chronology," *Phoenix*, 45.3 (1991): 189–214. Howland correctly asserts that most contemporary Plato scholarship depends upon assuming a chronology for the dialogues and that, p. 214, "a successful attack upon these assumptions would force us to rethink the great bulk of orthodox Plato scholarship." This essay takes the sort of approach to Plato that Howland suggests.
5. See, for example, Heidel, "On Plato's *Euthyphro*," p. 171; also Rabinowitz, "Platonic Piety," p. 115; Weston, "The Question of Plato's *Euthyphro*," p. 57.
6. See ch. 1, "Socratic Irony" in Vlastos, *Socrates*. Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, *Socrates on Trial* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 38–47, argue that Socrates' moral commitments prevent him from engaging in any willful deception or dishonesty. Socrates' irony cannot be the same as willful deceit. Vlastos's conception of Socrates' "complex irony" also maintains a distinction between simply lying and Socratic irony. I agree that Socrates is not lying when he claims not to be wise and not to know what holiness is in the fullest sense. Unlike Vlastos I argue that Socrates understands knowledge to be a full rational account of the phenomenon and not the product of the *elenchus*. See Gregory Vlastos, "Socrates's Disavowal of Knowledge," *Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1985): 1–35. A persuasive argument against Vlastos's position is, Rosly Weiss, "Socrates's Disavowal of Elenctic Knowledge," paper presented at symposium on Vlastos's Socrates, Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association, Portland, Oregon, 27 March 1992.
7. Cf. Vlastos, *Socrates*, pp. 113–114.

8. Cf. *Republic* 342B4–8.
9. Of the commentators on the *Euthyphro*, Blits, “The Holy and the Human,” p. 19, makes the point, crediting Leo Strauss, that no commentator notices the absence of the soul in the *Euthyphro*.
10. See Marc L. McPherran, “Socratic Reason and Socratic Revelation,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 29.3 (1991): 345–374, who argues, p. 346, that “a somewhat traditionally religious Socrates is our best historical bet.”