

Free essay about euthyphro plato: the concept of piety

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Introduction

In ancient times, intellectuals and philosophers such as Plato, Socrates, Euthyphro and Aristotle among many others engaged in intense Philosophical debates about morality, science, sociology among many other issues. The debate between Euthyphro and Socrates on piety or holiness stands out as a classic philosophical argument. While Euthyphro offers different definitions on what he thought piety and impiety were, Socrates refutes them on his own grounds because he wanted to learn how to defend himself and justify acts of impiety filed against him by Meletus (Navia, 2007).

The Concept of piety or holiness takes a prominent position in the dialogue between Euthyphro and Socrates. The two had met at the Porch of King Archon and had legal matters to which they were required to attend.

Socrates was to appear as a defendant in impiety suit filed against him by Meletus while Euthyphro was set to appear as a plaintiff in a case where he charged his own father with murder (Plato, 2009). Socrates wanted Euthyphro to help him define piety so that he could defend himself against Meletus's accusations. The concept of holiness or piety takes prominence

because Euthyphro, who was advising Socrates was doing so regardless of his actions (charging his father with murder) being controversial.

Euthyphro had varying assertions on what constituted pious or impious actions. When Socrates first enquired on what piety was, Euthyphro stated, “doing as I do doing as the gods did” (Plato, 1999). Euthyphro meant that piety was seeking absolute justice for evils such as murder. He equated his imminent action of charging his father with murder to what Zeus did to Cronos and also to what Cronos did to Uranus. In both cases, sons charged their fathers with murder. Since Socrates hated mythological gods and tales, he refuted Euthyphro’s definition of piety (Plato, 2009). He interpreted that Meletus was leveling charges against him because he hated the gods. To completely disapprove of that definition, Socrates asked Euthyphro whether a single instance of piety such as charging one’s father with murder would suffice as the definition of piety.

After refuting the initial response from Euthyphro, Socrates asked for another definition of piety. Euthyphro stated, “Piety is what is dear to the gods and the impiety is what is not dear to them.” (Plato, 1999). Socrates was still not satisfied. He told Euthyphro that like men, the gods too had differing opinions on what is good or evil. As such, people and gods never agree on what is universally good or evil and, therefore, one act can be pious to some gods and impious or unholy to others. Socrates told Euthyphro that his (Euthyphro’s) action of charging his father with murder was controversial and it did not support his second definition of piety (Navia, 2007). While that action would please the Greek god named Zeus (who also charged his father with murder) but it would displease other gods, namely Uranus and Zeus

whose sons leveled murder charges against them.

In a third push for a definition of piety, Socrates asked Euthyphro, “ What part of justice is piety?” Euthyphro responded that piety was the part of justice which “ attends” to the gods (Plato, 1999). He stated that there is another part of justice which “ attends” to men. Socrates refuted that definition on the basis of the word “ attend”. He argued that “ to attend” is to bring benefits and improvements to that which is attended say a dog, a horse or a man. Socrates asserted that since the gods were supreme beings, “ attending” to them through pious acts would not bring them any benefits (Plato, 1999).

Socrates was able to logically and philosophically able to refute all the three definitions of piety offered by Euthyphro. It is evident that Socrates wanted to push Euthyphro to contend that an absolute definition of piety does not exist so that he would use the same to defend himself in the legal suit leveled against him by Meletus. First, Socrates sought the definition of piety from Euthyphro who was considered an impeachable authority. Socrates also knew that Euthyphro was set to level murder charges against his father which was considered a controversial issue (Navia, 2007). Socrates, therefore, knew that if he was able to successfully refute Euthyphro’s definitions (which he did), then he stood a chance of being acquitted against the impiety charges leveled against him by Meletus. Socrates makes reference of Euthyphro charging his father. He states, “ Supposing the circumstances to be as you state them, you are not afraid lest you too may be doing an impious thing in bringing an action against your father?” (Plato, 1999). In another instance, Socrates refutes that there is only one definition

of piety. “ Euthyphro; but you would admit that there are many other pious acts?” (Plato, 1999). After refuting Euthyphro’s third definition, Socrates compels Euthyphro to contend that there is no absolute definition of piety. Euthyphro is cornered and he says that the lengthy discussion needs more time. As such, Socrates achieves his goal of obtaining opinions of a revered man (Euthyphro) that there was no absolute definition of piety. He would refer to evidence gathered from his dialogue with Euthyphro to defend himself in the suit filed by Meletus.

I think piety refers to actions that exalt, or praise a god. Socrates would oppose this definition by stating that gods interpret different actions differently. He would state that what one god calls praise may not what other gods call praise. Socrates might argue that singing might be praise or exaltation to one god and noise/disturbance to another. As such, the differences in opinion between gods will forever vary in terms of actions that are deemed as either pious or impious.

Conclusion

At a meeting at the Porch of King Archon, Euthyphro and Socrates had a lengthy discussion on what piety was. Although Euthyphro offers Socrates several varying definitions, Socrates does not agree to any. This is so because he (Socrates) wanted Euthyphro to contend that an absolute definition of piety does not exist. Socrates wanted this contention by Euthyphro so that he would use the same to defend himself in a case of impiety filed against him by Meletus. In all, Socrates argues that universal

definitions of good/holy/pious are uncommon in gods just as they are among men and therefore there can never be an absolute definition of piety.

References

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