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## SOCRATES, PIETY, AND NOMINALISM

### INTRODUCTION

The argument used by Socrates to refute the thesis that piety is what all the gods love is one of the most well known in the history of philosophy. Yet some fundamental points of interpretation have gone unnoticed. I will show that (i) the strategy of Socrates' argument refutes not only Euthyphro's theory of piety and such neighboring doctrines as cultural relativism and subjectivism, but nominalism in general; moreover, that (ii) the argument needs to assume much less than is generally thought, and finally that (iii) while Socrates' argument, properly understood in its full force, appears to be inconsistent with the goal of his own inquiry, his own 'Platonic' position escapes the inconsistency.

Socrates questions Euthyphro about the nature of piety, looking for a definition that will tell him what makes an action or person pious. He refutes a number of definitions of piety suggested by Euthyphro. Of special interest is Euthyphro's definition:

**(D1)** The pious = whatever all the gods love.

That such a definition can be refuted is intriguing to philosophers. But, beyond our interest in the nature of piety, Socrates' refutation, as is sometimes noticed, extends to a whole class of similar definitions, including this monotheistic definition of piety:

**(D2)** The pious = whatever God loves,

and also the cultural relativist's definition of justice:

**(D3)** Justice = whatever a society approves,

and, as well, the subjectivist's definition of morality:

**(D4)** Morality = whatever the individual chooses.

#### NOMINALISM ALSO REFUTED

What has not been noticed is that the class of definitions refuted by Socrates' strategy is the entire class of nominalist definitions of this form: for any property, signifier, and mode of signification,

**(NM)** The property = whatever the signifier signifies as such.

Written in the form of **NM**, referring as it does to 'the property', the nominalist's characteristic refusal to admit the existence of abstract objects is not obvious. But it is also characteristic of nominalism "to regard abstractions as fictions or manners of speaking." The nominalist hopes "to find a method whereby all ostensible reference to abstract entities can be explained as mere shorthand for a more basic idiom involving reference only to concrete objects (in some sense or other)" (both quotes from Quine, 1951:121). The formula **NM** in effect provides such a method, for it identifies properties solely in terms of particular spatio-temporal objects. Moreover, **NM** enables the nominalist to resist the Platonic one-over-many inference, an inference made explicit at

*Parmenides* 131e-132a (“I imagine your ground for believing in a single form in each case is this. When it seems to you that a number of things are large, there seems, I suppose, to be a certain single character which is the same when you look at them all; hence you think that largeness is a single thing), but anticipated at *Euthyphro* 6d (“There is one ideal form . . . by which all holy things are holy”). The nominalist method **NM** allows us to speak of many pious (or, in general, *P*) things and at the same time allows us to explain why they are all called such: not in virtue of one pious abstract object shared by the many pious things, but rather in virtue of concrete acts of signification. (There are other problems with this nominalist strategy, but I leave them aside here. See Penner, 1987:20-24.) Once we see that Euthyphro’s definition encompasses a powerful nominalist method, Socrates’ argument takes on even greater range of impact than has been noticed.

#### THE ARGUMENT’S ASSUMPTION

There is no controversy among interpreters (see e.g. Jowett, 1893; Friedländer, 1964; Irwin, 1979) that Socrates’ argument requires only one premise:

**(P1)** The gods love something because it is pious; it is not the case that something is pious because it is loved by the gods (*Euthyph.* 10d).<sup>1</sup>

Notice that premise **P1** sees the gods as like lawyers: they have knowledge of what the “laws” or standards of piety are, and can advise or approve accordingly. But they are

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<sup>1</sup> There has been controversy over the interpretation of the examples by which Socrates establishes **P1**. The *locus classicus* is Geach, 1968, but see also Brown, 1964; Rose, 1965; and Hall, 1968. Those interpretive problems were largely settled by Cohen, 1971.

unable to change the law according to their pleasure or “love.” It was a feature of the traditional religion of the time to see the gods as subjects to fate and necessity; hence it was natural for Euthyphro to accept **P1**.

Given **P1**, here is how the refutation works.<sup>2</sup> Euthyphro’s definition **D1** is an identity statement; hence it licenses us to substitute expressions of the form ‘the gods love *X*’ and ‘*X* is pious’ one for the other. When we make these substitutions in **P1**, the result is:

**(P2)** Something is pious because the gods love it; it is not the case that the gods love something because it is pious.

But **P2** is in direct contradiction to **P1**! Indeed, it doubly contradicts it: the first clause of **P2** contradicts the second clause of **P1**, and the second clause of **P2** contradicts the first clause of **P1**. Since Euthyphro’s definition **D1** leads to contradictions (upon our accepting premise **P1**), it is refuted.

But what if we do not accept premise **P1**? It is standard for interpreters to think that a consistent Euthyphro could escape the argument by denying **P1** (see e.g. Allen, 1970, and Guthrie, 1975). Rather than see the gods as like perfectly knowledgeable lawyers, we might see them as like perfectly absolute monarchs. Just as an absolute monarch’s will determines what becomes law, we might see the gods’ love as determining what is pious. This view of God or the gods is a position taken often enough in the history of philosophy to have a name: theological voluntarism. Hence Euthyphro, by denying premise **P1**, might appear to escape Socrates’ argument.

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<sup>2</sup> I simplify the structure of the argument. For an accurate account of the details, see Kim 2004.

Looked at more generally, we might expect that perhaps some nominalists will admit that their view of properties gets cause and effect backwards, and accordingly abandon their nominalism. But, even today, we can find nominalists who insist they have the correct view of cause and effect: such are ‘social constructivists’ and perhaps even ‘post-moderns’ in general. In modern times, this revision of the order of cause and effect follows Kant’s celebrated “Copernican revolution” (in the Preface to the second edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason*). Such views will also deny versions of **P1** and escape the Socratic argument.

But, although I know of no interpreter who sees that the argument does not need so strong an assumption as **P1**, neither the theological voluntarist nor the nominalist in general can so easily escape Socrates’ argument. Consider first the theological voluntarist. According to that doctrine, the gods’ love determines what is pious. That is, something is pious because the gods love it; it is not the case that the gods love something because it is pious. This statement, of course, is exactly what premise **P2** says. But once again the proposed definition **D1** licenses us to substitute expressions of the form ‘the gods love *X*’ and ‘*X* is pious’ one for the other. Now when we make these substitutions in **P2**, the result is **P1**, and once more we get a (double) contradiction. Obviously, this problem generalizes to nominalism in general.

#### THE THREAT OF INCONSISTENCY

Socrates’ argument depends on the fact that the following form of definition **D** and premise **P** are inconsistent:

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- (D) The pious = being *X*.
- (P) (a) Something is pious because it is *X*; (b) it is not the case that it is *X* because it is pious.

The threat is that the inconsistency between **D** and **P** will infect Socrates' own inquiry. For the goal of his inquiry is to find the definition of piety, namely, in his words, "the characteristic that makes something holy" (6d10-11). Call this characteristic, whatever it is, *being X*. Then, by Socrates' own account, *being X* is what makes something holy. That is -- just as in the first clause **a** of **P** above -- something is holy because it is *X*. And Socrates appears to accept the second clause **b** of **P** as well, taking it as a corollary of the first clause (cf.10c). If so, then he appears as guilty of inconsistency as Euthyphro or, in general, nominalists of any sort.

My claim is that Socrates' Platonism -- if you allow the anachronism -- will avoid the contradiction. For Socrates, unlike nominalists of whatever species, distinguishes at *Euthyphro* 6de between the one pious itself, i.e. the form and the many pious things, i.e. particular actions and persons. And he emphasizes the non-identity of this sort of cause and effect ("you understand how in all such cases the things are different from each other [*hetera allēlōn*] and how they are different?" 10a7-8). We ought not identify form and particulars, once we have drawn this distinction. Hence one may not be substituted for the other. The one pious itself, referred to in **D**, is the cause of the particular pious thing (referred to in **P**) being pious. So the substitution cannot be made.

Aristotle (*Met.* 1.6) suggests that while Socrates looked for universals, it was left to Plato to make (what Aristotle considers) the mistake of separating the universal from the particular. My interest here is not in the speculative matter of identifying Socratic as

opposed to Platonic dialogues. Nonetheless, if we assume, as is standardly done, that the *Euthyphro* is ‘Socratic’ as opposed to ‘Platonic’, then, I have shown, Socrates in a way separated the universal.

A final question arises: is Socrates playing fair with Euthyphro? It might seem that Socrates’ refutation is a mere trick, a sophism, which Socrates gets away with only because Euthyphro does not detect it. Euthyphro himself, it must be remembered, agreed to the Socratic distinction between one form and many particulars. So for Socrates to insert into Euthyphro’s account a contradiction, which Euthyphro as well as Socrates can avoid, seems a nasty trick.

But, as we have seen, Euthyphro’s definition of piety as what the gods all love is essentially nominalist (just as cultural relativism and subjectivism are). And the nominalist doctrine, by its very nature, is incapable of the distinction needed to avoid refutation. According to this doctrine of piety, there is no inherent feature that makes something pious. Piety is conferred on the particular by a particular pronunciation of a name, act of choice or approval. So the contradiction is not the result of an easily corrected oversight; it goes to the very heart of Euthyphro’s definition.

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