

Socrates, God, and Piety

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In his trial as recorded in the *Apology*, Socrates is accused of “not believing in the gods in whom the city believes” (24b). It is possible to interpret this accusation as a charge of atheism and it is on this charge that Socrates is condemned to die. However, this interpretation is too narrow. The accusation is both negative and positive: his accusers see not only that he does not believe in the gods whom the city believes, but also that he does believe in “other new spiritual things” (*Apology* 24b). And they are right, for Socrates holds a dramatically different view of god than that of the typical Athenian: he believes god to be perfectly wise, moral and good. Furthermore, he believes that man would be like god if he were to emulate the god by doing the god’s work. Assisting in that work would be the ultimate form of pious worship, for the god’s work, Socrates believes, is to improve men’s souls. Thus, Socrates believes that man can become like god, if the man, like the god, works to improve men’s souls. This, for Socrates, is piety.

In order to demonstrate Socrates’ dramatically different view, we must first understand the typical beliefs of the Athenians, deriving from Greek mythology. In the beginning, as recorded by Hesiod, three major gods created the world: Chaos, Gaia, and Eros. Gaia had two offspring, one of which, Ouranos (or Uranus), became her husband. Together they had 315 children. Ouranos felt bitter towards his children because he saw their potential to overthrow him. Gaia did not agree with Ouranos; she gave her youngest child, Cronos a sickle to destroy his father. He castrated Ouranos. Aphrodite emerged when his seed fell to the sea; his fallen blood became the Fates, the Giants, and the nymphs. Cronos married his sister, Rhea, and had many offspring. Like his father, Cronos also feared that his children might overthrow him. He instigated a plan whereby he might be free of his worry: he would swallow each child at birth. Thus, they would not be able to destroy him. Rhea, like Gaia, did not agree with her husband’s plan. When Zeus was born, she gave Cronos a stone in swaddling clothes

and hid Zeus so that Cronos would not be able to swallow him. Zeus grew up and dethroned his father in a war. This was the beginning of the reign of the Olympian gods. They are numerous and fickle, even more so than their predecessors. Each Olympian god has a myriad of corresponding legends and each legend demonstrates childishness and deceit. This is the ancient Athenian idea of deity (“Greece”).

Socrates believes that an accurate perception of god is important. In his defense, he tells the jury that his life of philosophy had been “enjoined upon [him] by the god, by means of oracles and dreams” (*Apology* 33c). Gregory Vlastos explains that, “to dispel any doubt or mistaken ideas he may have had about the nature of those dreams, Socrates . . . had to ask himself, Do I have *reason* to believe that this is the work god wants done by me? Is he that sort of god? *What is his character?*” The argument continues that, “unless a man has engaged in the quest for moral truth, thus coming to a correct understanding (of God), he cannot correctly interpret signs of God” (200–232). Socrates had to determine for himself who the god was in order to know that he would send signs and, more importantly, to determine from those revelations the appropriate, or pious, action he should perform.

In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates questions Euthyphro, a supposed theological expert, as to the nature of piety. Euthyphro, at the time Socrates speaks with him, is in the process of prosecuting his father for murder. Although many, including his own family, accuse Euthyphro of impiety, he claims confidence in the “knowledge” that prosecuting his father is not an impious act, but a pious one. Socrates wants to know how Euthyphro knows that his act of prosecution is pious. Euthyphro’s definition of piety, Socrates seems to think, would show how he knew. Euthyphro first defines piety in this way: “What is dear to the gods is pious, and what is not is impious” (7a). Socrates responds, “Come then, let us examine what we mean. An action or man dear to the gods is pious, but an action or a man hated by the gods is impious” (7a). Socrates and Euthyphro here agree that piety is defined in relation to the gods, specifically according to what actions they hold dear. Having read Greek mythology we would be forced to ask, “exactly to what idea of god are you referring, Euthyphro?” While Cronos and Zeus might agree with you that harming your father is an appropriate act, should one eat children or trick one’s spouse as they did? Moreover, when we have a question, whom shall we follow seeing that the gods’ examples do not agree on an appropriate response? Rhea and Cronos did not agree that it was dear to eat their children and perhaps the gods would not agree in your case either. And, although Cronos felt it appropriate to murder his father, when Zeus dethroned him, he probably did not think it was appropriate. Fortunately, Socrates recognizes this

difficulty and deduces for Euthyphro—from Euthyphro’s own beliefs—that the gods differed as to what is dear and what is not. This is not to say that Euthyphro’s definition is completely preposterous, nor does Socrates mean that it is necessarily untrue. However, he does show Euthyphro that, with his current understanding of god(s) and according to his definition of piety, he cannot possibly know how to act. His perception of deity quickly reduced his model of what is pious to nothing more than an absurdity. His gods were unstable and confused, subject to human imperfections. And they were immoral.

Later in the dialogue, Socrates again tries to show Euthyphro that his definition of piety presents a problem. He lists certain dichotomies (just/unjust, beautiful/ugly, good/bad) and asks, “Euthyphro, are not these the subjects you and I and other men fight about?” Euthyphro concedes. “And are not these also what the gods fight about?” Again, Euthyphro agrees (*Euthyphro* 7d–e). Socrates, by the *elenchus*, exposes information of great consequence. If the gods are unstable and confused as to what is good and what is evil (or, just and unjust), and man, in this case Euthyphro, is looking to the gods in order to know this very information, his consequent thoughts and actions would only be those of instability and confusion. Euthyphro is a prime example of the maxim that a man is confused if his gods are. He pompously claims himself superior to all men based on his accurate knowledge of what is pious and impious (*Euthyphro* 5a). Socrates shows Euthyphro that he is mistaken. The gods in whom Euthyphro believes are confused and so is his conception of them. He cannot, based on confusion, hope to possess an unconfused, clear understanding of right and wrong. Only obtaining a correct understanding of the nature of god would help. Just as Socrates, Euthyphro and any other person who desires to be pious must first correctly understand the nature of god. A person’s understanding of god (or lack thereof) affects her actions.

Socrates feels that his god is worthy to be followed for at least three reasons: 1) the god is wise, 2) the god is perfectly good, and 3) the god is rationally moral. Though it makes him unpopular, Socrates thinks that he must attach the greatest importance to the god’s oracles.”(10)

Socrates tells the men of Athens, “I will obey the god rather than you” (*Apology* 29b). His god is to be trusted and obeyed much more than a man should ever be specifically because “the god is wise and. . . human wisdom is worth little or nothing” (*Apology* 23a–b). Using Heraclitus’ words to express his own thought, Socrates makes an even stronger statement. He says, “the wisest of men is seen to be a monkey compared to god in wisdom” (*Greater Hippias* 289b). In these quotations, Socrates makes clear that—to him—man’s wisdom and understanding, especially when compared to his god’s, is insufficient. Whoever god is, he is better

than man and thus, more specifically, superior to Socrates. In Athenian tradition gods were human-like in knowledge and action. Their immortality and “powers” were the only differentiating factors. But Socrates’ god is to be trusted because he is wise.

In *Republic II*, Socrates asks, “Is not god truly good?” (397b). For Socrates, god is a truly good being. To be truly or perfectly good implies that one has only goodness in oneself, no evil. In other words, truly good is the same as perfectly good—there is no evil in a perfectly good thing. In reference to the god, Socrates states, “For surely he does not lie; it is not legitimate to do so” (*Apology* 21b). Robert J. O’Connell points out that the word used for legitimate to do so is “*themis*,” meaning the way of the god or how the god is to conduct himself (38). If Socrates is referring to an Athenian idea of god, lying is not only acceptable, it is expected. As Vlastos says, “They [the gods] have been lying since Homer” (173). Upon considering the previous examples of Greek gods, we cannot find even one whose story does not somehow entail a lie or deceitful operation. Yet, for Socrates, god is honest (see Vlastos 173). The god’s honesty is, in fact, part of a larger, more encompassing character trait. Socrates god is perfectly good.

When he speaks of wisdom, Socrates refers to moral wisdom (see Vlastos 164). His god is rationally moral. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates gives Callicles an argument for happiness, playing both his part and that of Callicles (506d–507d). “Surely,” he says, “we are good when some excellence comes to be present in us.” He continues: “the best way for excellence to become present in something is for it to exhibit organization. And when a thing, namely a soul, is in proper order, then that thing is good. Thus, virtue is of one form and that form is order. A soul that is in order is better than one in disorder and an orderly soul is self-controlled.” He concludes: “So a self-controlled soul is a good one” (*Gorgias* 507a). A self-controlled soul does what is appropriate to both god and human beings; to do what is appropriate to a human being is to do what is just to them. A self-controlled, orderly soul is a good one and “a completely good man . . . does well and admirably whatever he does” (*Gorgias* 507c). For man to be completely good, then, he is ordered and just, meaning he does what is good and best for others. Later Socrates also claims that “these character traits of orderliness and justice hold together heaven and earth, *and gods and men*” (*Gorgias* 508, emphasis added). Socrates, it seems, holds that god and men are both to be agents of goodness. God is not exempt from goodness; rather he is the ultimate agent of it. Thus, for Socrates, as Vlastos says, “Virtue by wisdom binds gods no less than men” (164). In fact, god is perhaps more bound by it. Socrates would reason that, “if knowledge of good and evil entails moral goodness in a man, it would entail the same

in a god" (Vlastos 165). God and man both, Socrates believes, are morally good in direct proportion to their knowledge of good and evil (Vlastos 164). If the god's wisdom is perfect so his goodness would be and, if his goodness is perfect his wisdom would be as well. His god is perfectly wise, perfectly good, perfectly, rationally moral.

And he has a purpose.

A perfectly good thing, as we have already established, has, by definition, no evil in it. Thus, it follows that it cannot cause evil, only good. The god, if he is a perfectly good being, cannot cause evil, he can only cause good. If he did cause something, something good, what would that good thing be? Whatever the good thing might be, it would be the standard of piety. Socrates, by reason, believes that the god has a purpose, or something he works to cause. Euthyphro states in the *Euthyphro* that people to gods are as slaves to masters, performing a sort of service for the gods. "Tell me then, by Zeus, what is that excellent aim that the gods achieve using us as their servants?" Socrates asks in response to Euthyphro's claim.

"Many fine things, Socrates," Euthyphro replied.

"So do generals, my friend. Nevertheless, you could easily tell me their main concern, which is to achieve victory in war, is it not?"

"Of course."

"The farmers too, I think, achieve many fine things, but the main point of their efforts is to produce food from the earth."

"Quite so."

"Well then, how would you sum up the many fine things that the gods achieve?" (*Euthyphro* 14a)

Here Euthyphro evades the question and, although he submits to Euthyphro's change of direction, Socrates makes an extremely important comment: "If you had given that answer, I should now have acquired from you sufficient knowledge of the nature of piety" (*Euthyphro* 14b). The nature of piety in Socrates' mind is based on the following conclusion: that the god has something he works to achieve. Whatever that work is, man's contribution to its success or achievement would be pious. Thus, piety would be man's doing the work the god does. What is that work?

Socrates believes that gods work is to better men's souls, to make them good *like him* (the god). This standard of action would be his standard of piety. Socrates sees this work in his god and imitates it. For him, the greatest evil that could befall a man is to be deceived into thinking that his (the man's) knowledge is greater than it actually is, to think falsely that he knows something when, in reality, he does not. It is a greater

good for oneself to be delivered from the worst thing there is. “I don’t suppose there’s anything quite as bad as having a false belief about [justice, fitness of soul, truth]” (*Gorgias* 458a). The worst thing for a man’s soul is to maintain a false belief. He reiterates this idea in the *Apology*: “And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know” (29b). In the *Gorgias*, Socrates explains to Callicles by way of a myth that each evil action a man performs leaves a scar on his soul. The body, when it dies, retains evidence of all things that happened to it. If it had long hair, it will still have long hair. If, as a result of good care, the body looked well in life, it would continue to look well upon death. And, if it had been maltreated, abused, or anything of the like, it would continue to bear those scars and injuries even after death. Just as the body retains evidence of its life experiences, so does the soul (*Gorgias* 524b–525a). If a soul is an unjust soul, performing “acts of perjury and injustice,” it would bear and continue to bear the scars of that lifestyle (*Gorgias* 525a). This, in his mind, would be detrimental to a person’s post-mortal experience. Though it is debatable what, if anything, Socrates believes of the afterlife, it is completely clear he recognizes that actions have lasting consequences and that those consequences are of the same nature as the action. If our actions are good, then ultimately good things will follow. Likewise, if our actions are evil, ultimately evil consequences will follow. “To arrive in Hades [the next life] with one’s soul stuffed with unjust actions is the ultimate of all bad things” (*Gorgias* 522e). Why would anyone, then, do something evil knowing that the consequences would be evil? That is just it; “they don’t know,” Socrates explains further, “that a person acts unjustly because everything is warped as a result of *deception* and pretense, and nothing is straight, *all because the soul had been nurtured without truth*” (*Gorgias* 525a, emphasis added). Thus, if a man mistakenly thinks that something is good, deceived into believing that his thought is correct knowledge, he will act unjustly, thus damaging his soul. Why, as Socrates held, is doing what’s unjust “actually the worst thing there is” (*Gorgias* 469b)? Because by doing what is unjust, what is evil, a man would be less good, thus moving away from becoming like god, who is perfectly good. Mark L. McPherran points out, “After all, if all evil is the result of ignorance, the greater ones ignorance the more likely it is that one will be (and do) evil” (522). Maintaining false beliefs, then, causes a person to do evil, removing him from becoming like god in two ways: while the god is perfectly wise and perfectly good, he becomes less wise and less good. Is there a way to prevent this deterioration of wisdom and morality, so that one is more wise and good like the god?

If ignorance is the greatest evil, it stands to reason that wisdom would be the greatest good (hence, virtue is knowledge). And if “vision

(understanding) of what is good is warped because the soul is nurtured without truth,” then vision (understanding) could be clarified, and souls could be perfected, by pursuing truth (*Gorgias* 525a).¹ Hence, eliminating false beliefs brings a person closer in two ways to becoming like god: as the god is perfectly wise and perfectly good, the person becomes wiser and more virtuous. Socrates gradually begins to understand that, in saying that no one is wiser than Socrates, the oracle means that only the god is perfectly wise: “What is probable, gentlemen, is that in fact the god is wise and that his oracular response meant that human wisdom is little or nothing” (*Apology* 23b). Man would be wise to realize he lacked wisdom and humbly pursue true knowledge (O’Connell 38). As Socrates explains, his role is to show men their error (*Apology* 23b). Although Vlastos acknowledges this idea (see Vlastos 175), McPherran explains it. “The message of the oracle is not just that the Athenians lack knowledge and thus virtue. The real problem is that they are unaware of their lack of knowledge” (McPherran 543). If a person does not know he holds a false belief, how can he ever replace the false belief with a true one? He cannot. He must first recognize his ignorance, his “blind arrogance” as McPherran called it, and attain a certain humility, much like Socrates’ humble disavowal of knowledge (545). If the Athenians did not realize they lacked knowledge, how could the god ever hope to teach them and help them become perfectly good like him? First, someone would have to show them their ignorance. As McPherran so brilliantly observes, the Athenians will not accept the direct assertion, “You are ignorant.” Someone working for the god would have to *show* them their ignorance (see McPherran 543, *Apology* 38a). This would help them to better their souls and become like god; it would help them to act in a pious manner.

For this purpose, Socrates plays the role of a gadfly for the great and noble horse called Athens. He works for the god, by way of philosophy and the *elenchus*, to show the Athenians their ignorance. He sees himself as one that “the god had placed in the city” to “rouse the lazy and sleepy horse to care for the best possible state of [its] soul” and to “understand that the soul is ultimately the most important thing” (*Apology* 30e, 30a-b). “His mission to [spare] them from erring is from the god” (O’Connell 42). The greatest good is for a man to “discuss virtue every day . . . conversing and testing . . . for the unexamined life is not worth living for men” (*Apology* 38a). Socrates’ ultimate goal, it appears, is to “be and to live as a very good [virtuous] man, and when [he died], to die like that” (*Gorgias* 526e). In

1 For more on perfection by pursuing truth, see McPherran 546.

this way, he would live piously, pleasing the god. Furthermore, he “call[s] on all other people as well . . . to this way of life” (*Gorgias* 526e). Socrates himself acknowledges this work and the importance of it. “I think there is no greater blessing for the city than my service to the god. For I go around doing nothing but persuading . . . you not to care for [anything else] as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul” (*Apology* 30a-b). This work of calling on all other people to examine their lives and become good is a commandment from god (see Vlastos 172). Thus, by obeying the commandment and helping the god to achieve his purpose, Socrates acts piously. The god could achieve his purpose of making men good, like him, through Socrates. If the Athenians were to see their lack of knowledge by Socrates’ working for the god, they would then be free to pursue correct beliefs. They could then *be* happy and *be* good rather than merely think they were or seem to be so (see *Apology* 36e, *Gorgias* 528b). And by *being* virtuous rather than falsely thinking they were, they would be more like the god. Moreover, Socrates recognizes that his own soul also needed improvement; he openly admits that his work is to examine both himself and others (*Apology* 29a). As he states in the *Apology*, numerous times in the *Gorgias*, and at least once in most dialogues, his concern is to make sure that he is never unjust or impious. If he were to perform an unjust act, he would be showing disobedience and disrespect to the god he knew he should obey, harming his own soul and the souls of others as well (*Gorgias* 507a-b, *Apology* 29a). Thus, he would be acting impiously. Socrates’ service to the god is his life of piety, his “rendering [of] religious service: to be just, *like* the god, as an assistant to the god in improving all souls” (O’Connell 38).

The Athenians had certain beliefs concerning deity. Socrates also believes in deity, but his conception is completely different from the typical Athenians. While to the Athenians gods are human-like and confused, Socrates believes god to be perfectly good and perfectly wise. His god is rationally moral. His god also has a purpose. This purpose is to better men’s souls, to make them become perfectly good, as the god is. Man, to be pious, works as a servant to god. Socrates, in an effort to serve the god and be like the god, assists the god in his purpose. He examines his own life as well as the lives of others, showing them that their wisdom is insufficient and that they ought to humbly seek to be virtuous. God is perfectly good and man, at least in this way, could become like god. Thus, for Socrates, piety is to be like god.

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