

Myth and the Structure of Plato's *Euthyphro*

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ABSTRACT: Moving beyond the piecemeal approach to the *Euthyphro* that has dominated much of the previous secondary literature, I aim in this article to understand the dialogue as an integrated whole. I argue that the question of myth underlies the philosophical and dialogical progression of the *Euthyphro*. It is an adherence to traditional myth that motivates each of Euthyphro's definitions and that also accounts for their failure. The dialogue thus presents a broad criticism of traditional myth. But, as Socrates's references to Daedalus and Proteus show, myth can have a positive role and can be used for philosophical purposes.

OVER THE YEARS PLATO'S *Euthyphro* has come to occupy something of a preeminent position among Plato's aporetic dialogues, receiving far more attention than (for example) the *Laches* or *Charmides*. Perhaps this is so because of the unique setting of the dialogue, which connects us immediately to the *Apology* and to Socrates's trial (with all of the drama and pathos that this event calls to mind). Or perhaps it is because the main topic of the dialogue ("What is piety?") is one that does not receive explicit treatment in any other of Plato's works (with the exception of *Laws*). Whatever the cause, the dialogue has received a level of scrutiny that is almost inversely proportional to its length. Most of that scrutiny, moreover, has been directed toward a very specific set of questions and passages. Most notable among these is the so-called "Euthyphro dilemma": how we are to understand the logic of the god-belovedness argument at 10a–11b, and whether the argument is valid (and sound). Other issues that have received a good deal of attention include the "constructivism" debate—whether the dialogue presents a positive account of what piety is, as opposed to merely ending in failure—as well as the question of whether the *Euthyphro*'s account of virtue (according to which piety is a part of justice) is consistent with that of the *Protagoras* (according to which there is a unity of the virtues).¹

¹For analyses of the god-belovedness argument, see S. Marc Cohen, "Socrates on the Definition of Piety: *Euthyphro* 10a–11b," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 9 (1971): 158–76; David Wolfsdorf, "*Euthyphro* 10a2–11b1: A Study in Platonic Metaphysics and Its Reception Since 1960," *Apeiron* 38 (2005): 1–71; John Hall, "Plato *Euthyphro* 10a1–11a10," *Philosophical Quarterly* 18 (1968): 1–11; Richard Sharvy, "*Euthyphro* 9d–11b: Analysis and Definition in Plato and Others," *Nous* 6 (1972): 119–37; Thomas Paxson, "Plato's *Euthyphro* 10a to 11b," *Phronesis* 17 (1972): 171–90; A. Kim, "A Chiastic Contradiction at *Euthyphro* 9e1–11b5," *Phronesis* 49 (2004): 219–25; John Brown, "The Logic of the *Euthyphro* 10a–11b," *Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (1964): 1–14; Robert Amico, "Euthyphro's Second Chance," *Philosophical Inquiry* 18 (1996): 36–44; Albert Anderson, "Socratic Reasoning in the *Euthyphro*," *Review of Metaphysics* 22 (1969): 461–81; James Lesher, "Theistic Ethics and the *Euthyphro*," *Apeiron* 9 (1975): 24–30; Paul Thom, "*Euthyphro* 9d–11b," *Philosophical Inquiry* 1 (1978): 5–70; and Gregory Zeigler, "Plato's *Euthyphro* Revisited," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 61 (1980): 291–300. For the constructivism debate, see Mark L. McPherran, "Socratic Piety in the *Euthyphro*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 23 (1985):

What has been neglected, however, is a consideration of the *Euthyphro* as a *whole* and *unified* text, above and beyond the analysis of specific passages. It is this gap in our understanding of the dialogue that I wish to fill in this article. Instead of examining specific doctrinal issues or philological puzzles, I want to step back and take a more holistic look at the *Euthyphro*. Just what can we say about the overall structure and dialogical progression of the text? In what ways does it form a philosophical and dramatic whole?²

I will argue here that one of the main elements underlying the philosophical and dramatic structure of the dialogue is *myth*. Typically when scholars discuss the question of myth in Plato's dialogues they focus on works (such as the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*) that present extended eschatological narratives regarding the history and fate of the soul. I believe, however, that the question of myth—and the question of the broader contrast between *μῦθος* and *λόγος*—recurs throughout the corpus, including the shorter, aporetic works. Although the question of myth is never explicitly posed in the *Euthyphro*, it is embedded in the very fabric of the dialogue and forms an ever-present backdrop to the drama and arguments. In fact, much of the dialogical movement of the text is a direct result of Euthyphro's own reliance on traditional myth. Such reliance represents a mind-set of which Socrates is highly critical and to which he wishes to draw attention. At the same time, the *Euthyphro* shows us that Plato himself is unafraid to *use* myth, albeit for his own philosophical purposes. In both of these respects—both the criticism of traditional myth and the philosophical use of myth—the *Euthyphro* thus parallels Plato's approach in his longer, more explicitly mythical dialogues.

OPENING SCENE (2A–5D)

To appreciate the ways in which myth underlies the structure of the *Euthyphro*, I wish to examine the basic argumentative and dramatic movement of the dialogue

283–309; W. Gerson Rabinowitz, "Platonic Piety: An Essay Toward the Solution of an Enigma," *Phronesis* 3 (1958): 108–20; Roslyn Weiss, "Virtue Without Knowledge: Socrates' Conception of Holiness in Plato's *Euthyphro*," *Ancient Philosophy* 14 (1994): 263–82; Steven A. M. Burns, "Doing Business With the Gods," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 15 (1985): 311–25; Stephen Fineburg, "Plato's *Euthyphro* and the Myth of Proteus," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 112 (1982): 65–70; James Haden, "On Plato's 'Inconclusiveness,'" *Classical Journal* 64 (1969): 219–24; W. A. Heidel, "On Plato's *Euthyphro*," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 31 (1900): 164–81; T. F. Morris, "Plato's *Euthyphro*," *Heythrop Journal* 31 (1990): 309–23; David M. Parry, "Holiness as Service: *Therapeia* and *Hyperetike* in Plato's *Euthyphro*," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 28 (1994): 529–39; and C. C. W. Taylor, "The End of the *Euthyphro*," *Phronesis* 27 (1982): 109–18. For the *Euthyphro*-*Protagoras* relation, see Scott Warren Calef, "Piety and the Unity of Virtue in *Euthyphro* 11e–14c," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 13 (1995): 1–26 and William S. Cobb, "The Religious and the Just in Plato's *Euthyphro*," *Ancient Philosophy* 5 (1985): 41–46.

²The only other work that I know of which explicitly deals with the *Euthyphro* in this global and holistic way is Roland Garrett, "The Structure of Plato's *Euthyphro*," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 12 (1974): 165–183. But see also F. M. Cornford, "Plato's *Euthyphro* or How to Read a Socratic Dialogue" in *Selected Papers of F. M. Cornford*, ed. Alan C. Bowen (New York NY: Garland, 1987), pp. 228–29. It is curious that there has not been more attention paid to its dialogical structure, especially given all the recent talk in Plato scholarship of unifying form and content in interpretation. The present article should be regarded as an attempt to put such talk into practice.

as it unfolds. Myth is fundamentally a *traditional* medium, and in Greece it encompassed a complex tapestry of stories that were passed down orally from generation to generation (stretching back at least a millennium prior to Plato). The *Euthyphro* is interwoven with this traditionalism right from the start. In the very first sentence we learn that Euthyphro and Socrates have met in the portico of the King Archon, the chief religious magistrate in Athens who has oversight over all legal cases involving impiety and pollution. Yet it was also on this very portico that there stood the inscribed tablets that contained the laws of the city, such as the law code of Solon and the code of Nicomachus.³ The entire conversation of the dialogue, then, is literally set against a backdrop that vividly symbolizes—and embodies—the past history of Athenian law and religion.

Of course, Euthyphro and Socrates have not come to this porch for sightseeing or nostalgia but for the sake of their respective legal cases. For his part, Socrates has been indicted by Meletus on charges of corruption and impiety. Notice in particular the way in which Plato characterizes Meletus's charges here (3b): Socrates is said to be a "maker of gods" (ποιητὴν θεῶν), insofar as he "makes new gods" (καινοὺς ποιοῦντα) and does not believe in the "old" ones (ἀρχαίους), and "makes innovations in religious matters" (καινοτομοῦντός περὶ τὰ θεῖα). This wording is quite interesting, not least because *all* traditional poets and mythographers are "makers of gods" in the literal sense that they create images of the gods in words. In this broad sense, then, Hesiod is just as much of a ποιητής as Socrates is accused of being. The problem—at least in Meletus's eyes—is that Socrates is allegedly a ποιητής in a very different *sense*, namely, in the sense of *making up* false and non-traditional gods (such as his infamous *daimonion*).⁴ What is noteworthy here is that right from the outset of the dialogue Socrates emerges as someone who is critical of tradition (the "old"), including the traditional myths that are both the source and heart of that tradition. In fact, as we will see, this critical attitude toward tradition and toward myth is a recurrent theme in the dialogue as a whole, though as of yet we have not learned the reasons for it. What we do know is that it is precisely because Socrates holds such an attitude toward the accepted forms of god-making (such as Hesiod's *Theogony*) that he finds himself in legal trouble and that we find him in the present conversation with Euthyphro.

In these early pages Socrates also emerges as the figure familiar to us from the *Apology* and the other aporetic dialogues. He expresses disregard for public opinion and mockery (3c–d), a philanthropic desire to engage in philosophical conversation with others (3d), and a pointed concern for moral cultivation (2d). He further considers knowledge of the divine to be the "most important" thing, and hence repeatedly stresses an interest in becoming Euthyphro's "pupil" and "learning" from him (5a). The latter statements are clearly ironic, for almost as soon as he opens his mouth does Euthyphro show himself to be a thoroughly hubristic and un-self-aware individual—exactly the sort of person from whom Socrates would least be likely to

³Richard Klonoski, "The Portico of the Archon Basileus: The Significance of the Setting of Plato's *Euthyphro*," *Classical Journal* 81 (1986): 130–31.

⁴Of course, whether the historical Socrates was in fact guilty of such charges—in a legal and material sense—is another matter altogether, which I will not address here.

learn anything. Euthyphro has complete confidence in himself, claiming to possess “accurate knowledge” of piety (5a), touting with pride his abilities as a seer, and treating as a badge of honor the fact that others mock him in the assembly (3b–c). He also claims to be a fellow-traveler with Socrates whose talents are misunderstood by the majority, despite the fact that he utterly lacks the kind of self-knowledge that Socrates prized above all else.

It is this complete self-assurance that has led to Euthyphro’s being at the King Archon’s court. The details of the case are well known: Euthyphro is prosecuting his own father for murder, on the grounds that he tied up a household servant and left him in a ditch as punishment for killing a fellow slave, as a result of which the servant subsequently died.⁵ Again the way in which Plato frames his description of the case is noteworthy. For Euthyphro’s motive in pursuing the prosecution—and indeed his *sole* motive in doing so—is to remove the *pollution* (μίασμα) that he believes arose as a result of the murder. The concept of a μίασμα was an old one, according to which certain impious deeds—particularly acts of killing—caused the doer to become defiled and impure, incurring a kind of taint. This taint, moreover, could spread to anyone else who had contact with the killer and hence posed a danger for both household and city. The only remedy was to purify oneself through the appropriate ritual actions. In this sense, Euthyphro’s legal case does not arise out of any impartial sense of justice but rather from a simple desire to cleanse himself and his household, and he seems to regard the act of prosecution as a sufficient form of purification (4c).⁶

Euthyphro’s adherence to this traditional concept of pollution is significant, as it tells us something about his character and mind-set. For whereas Socrates is marked off by a certain skepticism regarding the accepted beliefs and myths, Euthyphro is already emerging as more of a traditionalist. And in fact it is *from* the traditional myths that his understanding of pollution no doubt derives. A number of Greek myths involve instances of gods and heroes who are contaminated and must purify themselves, including Apollo (who was polluted as a result of slaying Python) and Heracles (who was polluted as a result of slaying the son of King Eurystus).⁷ Right from the outset, then, Euthyphro is presented as someone who accepts the veracity and authority of myth, in contrast to the more critical attitude of his conversation

⁵For a further discussion of the legal aspects of the case, see Ian Kidd, “The Case of Homicide in Plato’s *Euthyphro*” in *Owls to Athens*, ed. E. M. Craik (Oxford UK: Clarendon, 1990), pp. 213–21; James P. Hoopes, “Euthyphro’s Case,” *The Classical Bulletin* 47 (1970): 1–6; John Burnet, *Plato’s Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates, and Crito* (Oxford UK: Clarendon, 1924), pp. 101ff.; R. E. Allen, *Plato’s Euthyphro and the Earlier Theory of Forms* (New York NY: Humanities Press, 1970), pp. 20–21; Richard Klonoski, “Setting and Characterization in Plato’s *Euthyphro*,” *Dialogos* 19 (1984): 130–31; and Mark L. McPherran, “Justice and Pollution in the *Euthyphro*,” *Apeiron* 35 (2002): 109.

⁶Weiss, “Virtue Without Knowledge,” pp. 264–65. It may also be that Euthyphro assumed that his legal case would be dismissed by the Archon, and hence took the mere act of filing the law-suit—demonstrating good intentions, as it were—to be sufficient for removing the pollution. Cf. A. E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work* (New York NY: Meridian, 1956), pp. 146–47; Robert G. Hoerber, “Plato’s *Euthyphro*,” *Phronesis* 3 (1958): 97–98. Whether the pollution actually existed, of course, is another matter (Allen, *Plato’s Euthyphro and the Earlier Theory of Forms*, pp. 20–21). For a further (and excellent) discussion of the concept of pollution, see McPherran, “Justice and Pollution in the *Euthyphro*.”

⁷William D. Furley, “The Figure of Euthyphro in Plato’s *Dialogos*,” *Phronesis* 30 (1985): 206.

partner. In the remainder of the dialogue Plato will use these two contrasting attitudes as the basis of a wider discussion of the nature and value of myth.

FIRST DEFINITION (5D–6E)

Euthyphro's complete self-assurance in divine matters leads naturally to the "What is piety?" question. As Socrates sees it, if Euthyphro does in fact *know* what piety is, then he ought to be able to *define* it.⁸ The rest of the dialogue is taken up with various attempts to provide a correct definition. The nature and logic of these definitions have already been the subject of a great deal of discussion in the secondary literature, and so my primary concern here is not to re-examine those issues. Rather, I wish to take an alternate—and generally neglected—approach: to consider the way in which Plato structures the series of definitions, and in particular the motives and assumptions that drive those definitions. A close examination reveals that it is, in part, Euthyphro's adherence to traditional myth that undergirds each definition and that also to a large extent explains the failure of each definition.

Let us then begin with his first definition.⁹ Euthyphro responds without hesitation that "the pious is to do what I am doing now," namely, to prosecute a wrong-doer regardless of who the wrong-doer is (5d–e). This is, of course, the way in which most of Socrates's interlocutors initially respond to his demands for definition, by pointing to some *specific* or *particular* thing that happens to have the quality in question (instead of offering a *general* definition). What is distinctive here is Euthyphro's *justification* for the correctness of his proposed definition. He claims to have a "great proof" (μέγα τεκμήριον, 5e3–4) that his actions are pious, in the form of several famous examples of gods who took strong action against their own fathers. He points to Zeus, who is said to have bound his father (Kronus) as punishment for swallowing his children; he also mentions Kronus himself, who castrated his father for likewise attempting to get rid of his children. We find this story recounted in Hesiod's *Theogony* as well as other sources.¹⁰ Thus Euthyphro's entire "proof"—his sole justification for the correctness of his definition—relies on a *myth* that he takes without question to be true. In fact, he claims that the myth proves not only that his definition is correct, but even further that the *law* (νόμου, 5e) is on his side.¹¹ The fact that he has *already* (ἤδη, 5e3) given this proof on other

⁸This is the so-called "priority of definition" assumption that Socrates makes time and time again. It is clearly present in the *Euthyphro*: at 4e Euthyphro claims to have "precise knowledge" of piety, and then at 5c–d Socrates subtly re-interprets this to mean that Euthyphro can therefore *tell* him the *kind* of thing that it is, i.e., the "one form" that it presents.

⁹There are different ways of counting the definitions in the *Euthyphro*, and I divide them as follows: the first (5e–6d) dealing with particularity, the second (6e–11b) dealing with god-belovedness, and the third (11e–15b) dealing with justice. The latter two definitions are further subdivided into several different phases.

¹⁰Hesiod, *Theogony*, 154ff. For a list of the other sources, see Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (Harmondsworth UK: Penguin, 1960), pp. 37–41.

¹¹Given his self-professed status as a seer with knowledge of the divine, this presumably refers to some notion of an unwritten divine law, and not to human or civic law (though it is unclear whether Euthyphro would himself be capable of making such a distinction). As Burnet notes (*Plato's Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates, and Crito*, pp. 112–13), Athenian (human) law at the time would likely have led to the conclusion that Euthyphro did not even have a case to begin with. Moreover, Euthyphro would have had no need

occasions suggests that he regards himself as something of an expert on myth and law and that he touts such expertise as a particular point of pride.

The seriousness of Euthyphro's adherence to traditional myth is worth underscoring. For he does not simply accept the myths of Zeus and Kronus in a loose way but accepts them to be *true* (ἀληθῆς, 6b3; ἀληθῆ, 6c4). Incredulous, Socrates asks him directly whether he believes that there *really is* (τῶ ὄντι, 6b7) war and fighting among the gods, and Euthyphro readily answers in the affirmative. Euthyphro is therefore a literalist about the truth of the myths and does not merely attest to their truth in a weaker sense, such as through symbolism or allegory.¹² Moreover, the scope of his belief is quite wide, as it includes not only the Zeus-Kronus theogonical cycle but all “such things as are told by the poets” and all the “other sacred things embroidered by the good writers” (6b9–c1). So too does it include visual representations of the myths, such as are on the sacred robe which is part of the Great Panathenaea festival (6c2–3). Euthyphro then goes so far as to say—twice—that he has knowledge of “even more surprising things” of which the majority are ignorant (6b5–6) and “many other things about the gods” which will “amaze” even Socrates (6c6–7).¹³

This kind of wholesale acceptance of traditional myth represents a mindset of which Plato's Socrates is consistently critical, and we see here in the *Euthyphro*—perhaps for the first time in the dialogues—some of the reasons for his criticisms. One problem is that the myths frequently depict the gods in a way that is false, that is, in a way that does not correspond to the true nature of the divine. After all, if the divine is supposed to be wholly good, the gods would never engage in violence against one another (as Euthyphro assumes). Although this idea does not receive full articulation until the *Republic*—where Socrates explicitly criticizes both the *Theogony* of Hesiod and the battle of gods and giants depicted on the sacred robe of the Panathenaea festival¹⁴—he does broach the issue here in the *Euthyphro*. Socrates is so taken aback that he asks Euthyphro not once, but twice whether he “really” believes the traditional stories to be true. This skeptical attitude suggests that those stories are not to be fully trusted. (This point will become more explicit when we consider Euthyphro's second and third definitions of piety, both of which

to offer a proof of what Athenian law was. Cf. Ian Walker, *Plato's Euthyphro* (Chico CA: Scholars Press, 1984), pp. 66, 68.

¹²Edwards claims that Euthyphro is in fact an allegorist, on the grounds that although Euthyphro does accept the truth of the myths, nonetheless he also distances himself from what “men believe” (5e5) about the gods. See M. J. Edwards, “In Defense of Euthyphro,” *American Journal of Philology* 121 (2000): 215. I believe that such a view involves a misreading of the relevant passage. What Euthyphro says is not simply that “men believe” in the truth of the Zeus-Kronus myth, but that *these men themselves* believe in it (note the αὐτοί, which Edwards does not translate). In other words, Euthyphro is simply trying to show that those who criticize him are—on their own terms—already in agreement with the rightness of his actions. Euthyphro does not therefore imply that he does not share their underlying beliefs; on the contrary, he does.

¹³What exactly these “other” things are is an open question. If they truly are unknown to the masses, then it likely does not include anything narrated explicitly in myth. Some have suggested that Euthyphro may have belonged to a fringe religious sect (such as Orphism), or that he was at least familiar with the sacred texts of such sects (Burnet, *Plato's Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates, and Crito*, pp. 115; Walker, *Plato's Euthyphro*, p. 70). However, there is simply no evidence in the *Euthyphro* to know one way or the other.

¹⁴*Republic* 377e–378e.

fail because of their reliance on a myth-based conception of the gods.) Indeed Socrates is quick to point out that he himself has a “hard time” accepting these things about the gods (δυσχερῆς ἀπολέχομαι, 6a8). The term *δυσχερῆς*—as Burnet notes—literally means “hard to take in hand” or “hard to grasp” and can also refer to a person who is fastidious and who does not like to “soil” his hands.¹⁵ There is thus a twofold implication: Socrates has a philosophical sense that the myths present an image that does not correspond to fact and hence are “hard to grasp” (i.e., they do not square with what he knows through philosophical inquiry to be true). In addition, he may be worried about the moral and theological implications of the myths—saying something false about the gods—and hence wishes to avoid “soiling” himself with something impious. Add to this, too, the fact that myths deal with events from a distant and unobservable past—lying outside of the scope of rational proof—and we can readily understand why the epistemically self-aware Socrates would remain skeptical.

Indeed the broader issue at stake concerns the *kind* of thing that myth is and its relation to philosophical methods of inquiry. In the most basic sense, to accept the veracity of myth—as Euthyphro does—is to rely on an external authority for one’s understanding of the world. Yet this is problematic for Socrates since true learning cannot come about through passive osmosis but instead requires active questioning, dialogue, and inquiry. Euthyphro’s language again illustrates the problem. He says that he can “narrate” (διηγῆσομαι, 6c7) things that are “even more wondrous” (θαυμασιώτερα, 6b5) and that will “amaze” (ἐκπλαχῆσθαι, 6c7) Socrates. Euthyphro’s emphasis here is on a kind of dazzling presentation that will awe his conversation partner into immediate and unquestioning acceptance, and indeed it is no coincidence that he uses some of the same terms (such as the verb *ἐκπλαχῆναι*) that are prominent in the context of religious mystery-cults. That he offers to “narrate” these things is significant as well, as it suggests a discourse that will be unbroken and story-like in its style. What Socrates is seeking, however, is not narration but dialogue—not wonders, but truths. Instead of a speech that leaves him awed, Socrates desires a mutually cooperative inquiry that will leave him knowledgeable. In a very elemental way, then, we find here in the *Euthyphro* an intimation of the *μῦθος-λόγος* polarity that permeates so many of Plato’s other dialogues. On the one side of the equation stands the rather uncritical Euthyphro, and on the other stands the philosophical Socrates.

SECOND DEFINITION (6E–11B)

Thus Socrates’s explicitly stated reason for rejecting Euthyphro’s first definition—that it lists one particular action that happens to be pious instead of pointing to the “one form” through which *all* pious actions are pious (6d–e)—does not tell the whole story. For the failure of the first definition is a result not merely of formal flaws (the particular versus the universal) but also of the *questionable source* (myth) that Euthyphro uses to justify it. That is, Euthyphro’s first effort fails both as a (non-)

¹⁵Burnet, *Plato’s Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates, and Crito*, p. 114.

definition and as a product and example of non-philosophical and uncritical thinking. In fact, this same problem recurs with respect to the second definition.

According to Euthyphro's new definition, "what is dear to the gods is pious, what is not [dear to the gods] is impious" (7a). Socrates's refutation of this definition is fairly clear-cut. From what Euthyphro has already agreed to, it follows that the gods are often in disagreement with one another, and in particular that they disagree about value judgments (the just, the beautiful, the good, etc.). But that means that one and the same thing will be both loved (considered "good" or "just") by some gods and hated (considered "bad" or "unjust") by others. Hence again the definition is a formal failure, for if one and the same thing can be both pious (loved) and impious (hated), then we have failed to discover any sort of essence or characteristic to distinguish the former from the latter.¹⁶

But the problems with Euthyphro's claim are not simply a matter of logical inconsistency, for we must also ask what *motivates* the new definition. Substantively speaking, at the heart of the definition is a conception of the gods as the sorts of beings who can love, hate, and have disagreements with one another. In other words, Euthyphro uncritically endorses the traditional Greek view of the gods as anthropomorphic beings who experience the very same kinds of emotions and mental activities as humans. Indeed in the course of the passage running from 7a to 8a, Euthyphro reaffirms his commitment to anthropomorphism no fewer than four times.¹⁷ Such a conception of the gods, however, is ultimately derived from myth—stories such as Hesiod's *Theogony* that depict the gods doing and feeling the sorts of things that are familiar from the human experience. Hence, again, the failure of Euthyphro's definition is not simply a logical one—failing to demarcate the class of X's from not-X's—but also a substantive one, for he continues to rely on an external and unverified source of information (myth) to support his claims. In this sense, it is myth that is the *ultimate* cause of the failure of the definition (given that the logical inconsistency hinges on his prior commitment to anthropomorphism).¹⁸

Part of the implication here is that the traditional conception of the gods is false. Although it is only in other dialogues (like the *Republic* and *Phaedrus*) that we find an explicit rejection of traditional anthropomorphism, already in the *Euthyphro* Socrates is laying the foundation for that rejection. For if the gods do indeed disagree about what is just and good, then that means that at least some of the gods are mistaken, and hence are intellectually deficient. Like humans, the gods too can be ignorant about the true nature of the good. Moreover, as Socrates insists elsewhere in the dialogues, since one cannot truly *be* virtuous without also *knowing* what virtue is,

¹⁶Cf. Allen, *Plato's Euthyphro and the Earlier Theory of Forms*, pp. 33–34.

¹⁷At 7b5 he again agrees that the gods are in a state of discord with one another; at 7e5 and 8a3 he agrees that the gods have differing value judgments; and at 7e8 he agrees that the gods experience love and hate, and base those emotions on assessments of value.

¹⁸Weiss is one of the few commentators who appreciates the role of Euthyphro's anthropomorphism in the failure of his definitions. See Roslyn Weiss, "Euthyphro's Failure," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 24 (1986): 437–52. However, she does not ask *why* Euthyphro holds such a view, i.e., what his justification is—a matter that brings us to the question of myth.

this means that the gods are also morally deficient (a fact that is already apparent from their violence against one another). The implication is that the sorts of gods in which Euthyphro believes are not in fact worthy of serving as moral examples, nor are their fickle loves and hatreds worthy of serving as the basis of piety.¹⁹ This explains why Socrates is quite careful in the present passage not to commit himself to the truth of Euthyphro's claims. In the course of the discussion Socrates takes pains to emphasize that it is *Euthyphro's* view that the gods disagree ("according to *your* argument," 7e2; "as *you* say," 7e9). Likewise, his argument nowhere states that the gods *do* disagree. This point only follows through the implications *if* in fact they disagree (note the εἰπερ in 7d8, 8d9, and 8e6).

Euthyphro attempts to circumvent the problem of divine disagreement by claiming that, with respect to *his* case, *all* the gods agree that his father unjustly killed his household servant, and hence deserves punishment (8b, 9a). Naturally Socrates wants some sort of *proof* (τεκμήριον, 9a2) and "clear sign" (τί σαφές, 9b1–2) of the veracity of this claim—and sure enough Euthyphro believes that he can provide it. Yet just as Euthyphro is about to offer this demonstration (ἐπιδειξαι, 9b5)—warning that it will be "no small task"—Socrates stops him from doing so. Why? The stated reason is that, *even if* it is true that all the gods approve of *this one* action, nonetheless, it still does not provide a general *definition* of what piety and impiety are. In other words, the truth or falsity of Euthyphro's claim is irrelevant, given that it is still formally flawed and is a non-definition. So, any "proof" that Euthyphro might offer would simply be besides the point.

Most commentators have taken Socrates's remark here at face value.²⁰ I believe, however, that there is more going on in Socrates's dialectical move than simply a desire to avoid time-wasting irrelevancies. For we must ask: just what, exactly, would Euthyphro's "proof" consist in? No doubt he would repeat the method already displayed in his first definition, namely, an enumeration of instances in the traditional myths where the gods can be seen condemning the sort of thing that his father did and praising the sort of thing that he is now doing. Indeed, that the method of proof is based in myth helps to explain why it would be "no small task," for it would require an exhaustive review of the hundreds and hundreds of extant myths dealing with cases of murder as well as an interpretation of their meaning.²¹ No wonder, then, that Socrates wishes to cut off Euthyphro before he can begin. Not only would this be a tedious process, but from Socrates's point of view it would not even constitute a genuine "proof" in the first place. Socrates emphasizes that it is antithetical to the spirit of philosophical inquiry to merely accept someone else's claim at face value and to "let it pass" (ἐίμεν, 9e5). Instead, it is incumbent upon us to subject all claims to a process of *examination* (ἐπισκοπόμεν, 9e4; σκπτέον, 9e7, e8). Such is the method of *elenchus* that he practices time and time again, and such is the only genuine means of proving a statement. Yet to accept traditional

¹⁹Cf. Weiss, "Euthyphro's Failure," p. 441; Weiss, "Virtue Without Knowledge," pp. 263–4; Hoerber, "Plato's *Euthyphro*," p. 102.

²⁰See, e.g., Burnet, *Plato's Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates, and Crito*, p. 124.

²¹Cf. *Phaedrus* 229c–230a, where Socrates criticizes the allegorical interpretation of myth, on the grounds that it devolves into an endless and intractable task.

myth as true (as Euthyphro does) is precisely to avoid this examination, since one is relying on an external authority, and indeed “letting it pass” simply on the basis of its culturally sanctioned provenance. By refusing to allow Euthyphro to proceed, Socrates is thus implying a criticism of the sort of method that Euthyphro would use in the first place.

Nonetheless, Euthyphro’s suggestion—that all of the gods approve of his present action—serves as a basis for modifying his second definition. Instead of simply defining piety as “what the gods love,” he now proposes defining it as “what *all* the gods love” (9d–e). This leads, of course, to the paradox that is the most famous part of the dialogue. As Socrates immediately asks, “Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?” (10a). The logic and structure the resultant argument have already been the subject of much detailed analysis, and so it is not my intention here to add anything further to that discussion.²² Let us simply note the main lines of Socrates’s refutation. In response to Socrates’s question, Euthyphro chooses the former option, that the pious is loved *because it is pious*. The problem with this, however, is that—once again—it does not amount to an actual definition of what piety is. For if the gods love the pious because it is pious, then that means they love the pious because of what it is, i.e., because of its intrinsic set of characteristics. Yet we still are wholly uninformed as to what those characteristics are—what it is, in other words, that distinguishes the pious from the impious and that thereby makes it worthy of being loved. Being loved by the gods, then, is an accidental property and not an essential one. As Socrates puts the point, Euthyphro has identified only a *πάθος* (quality) of piety, and not its *οὐσία* (nature).

Once again, then, Euthyphro’s modified definition fails on a formal level. At the same time—and echoing what we have seen thus far—it is not merely a formal failure. After all, Euthyphro could have avoided Socrates’s refutation by affirming the latter option of the paradox, that the pious is such *because it is being loved*. Yet he does not do so. Why? Curiously, few commentators on the dialogue have asked this question.²³ Admittedly, it would be a bold claim on Euthyphro’s part, for it would amount to a version of theological voluntarism (a kind of “divine command theory”)—the idea that the content of morality is determined solely by an act of divine will (in this case, an act of divine love). Even so, it would at least provide a clear definition. So, why does Euthyphro demur? The answer, I believe, is that such a view stands in direct conflict with his traditional, mythologically based conception of the gods. Nowhere in the traditional myths are the gods represented as the sorts of beings who definitively establish the nature of right and wrong (or pious and impious) simply through a decree or fiat. True, there are numerous instances of divine capriciousness and willing, with the result that humans must be ever mindful of their place in the scheme of things. But nowhere do we find the suggestion

²²For an overview of the main lines of scholarly interpretation over the years, as well as a detailed bibliography on the subject, see Wolfsdorf.

²³Allen, *Plato’s Euthyphro and the Earlier Theory of Forms*, p. 45 suggests that it is “the strong pull of common sense” that leads Euthyphro to reject this view. While that is no doubt true to some extent, it is still worth asking *why* “common sense” militates so strongly against such a view.

that the gods themselves are the sole source or essence of morality. For example, in Hesiod's *Theogony* (the very text that Euthyphro himself cites) there is clearly a moral order and sequence of fate that is independent of the gods and one to which the gods are therefore subject. Ouranus is described as "evil" (ἀτασθάλου, 164), and his imprisonment of his children is described as an act of "evil outrage" (κακὴν λώβην, 165) and as "ugly behavior" (ἀεικέα ἔργα, 166); Kronus's own imprisonment of his children is motivated by fear since he learned that it was "fated" (πέπρωτο, 464) for him to be defeated by his own child. The Titans are eventually punished with being bound in Tartaros as a result of their being "over-spirited" or "proud" (ὑπερθύμους, 719). These moralistic descriptions of the gods' actions as "cruel" and "ugly" and "proud" would make little sense if (as theological voluntarism would have it) divine will *defined* what was right.²⁴ Thus Euthyphro *cannot* accept any kind of theological voluntarism, for he has already committed himself to a view of the gods that precludes it. Once again, then, the failure of his definitions is due in large part to his myth-based theology.

It is worth noting, incidentally, that even if Euthyphro were to affirm theological voluntarism, it would still lead to a host of problems. For one thing, divine willing (or loving) could serve as a reliable basis of piety only if the gods themselves were wholly reliable and based their love on a rational assessment of the nature of things. Yet we have already seen that Euthyphro's gods are intellectually and morally deficient, and so from Socrates's view their conflicting assessments could in no way serve as the basis of virtue.²⁵ This points to a broader problem with theological voluntarism, one that will receive full articulation only *vis-à-vis* the Theory of Forms. To wit: the nature of piety, justice, and all the other virtues is eternal, and hence cannot be created by anyone, be it god or man. Indeed in other dialogues Socrates explicitly notes that the Forms are logically and ontologically prior even to the gods themselves.²⁶ Thus, even if Euthyphro were to have the courage to challenge the traditional views, it would not have helped him to provide a better definition.

INTERLUDE (11B–E)

By this point in the dialogue several of Euthyphro's efforts to define piety have failed. They have failed, moreover, as a direct result of his uncritical attachment to traditional myths. We thus reach the quintessential moment of *aporia* that is characteristic of so many of Plato's dialogues. In this case, Euthyphro laments that he has "no way of telling you [Socrates] what I have in mind" regarding piety and does not know how to proceed (11b). It is at precisely at this moment of dramatic pause that *Socrates himself* refers to a myth (that of Daedalus) and appears to use it with all seriousness as a way of responding to Euthyphro. But *why*, exactly, does Plato

²⁴There is also the fact that Zeus *marries*—and does not create—the goddess Themis, as we recall that θεμις means that which is "customary," "lawful," or "right." It is from their union that Eunomia ("Lawfulness"), Dike ("Justice"), and Eirene ("Peace") are born, whose function it is to *tend* or *take care of* (ὑπεύουσι, 903) human works, i.e., with reference to a prior standard and not by way of divine fiat.

²⁵Weiss, "Euthyphro's Failure," pp. 445–46.

²⁶See, e.g., *Phaedrus* 247d–e and 249c.

have Socrates introduce a myth at this point, when the implication of everything said thus far has been to underscore the *problems* inherent in myth? To answer this question, let us take a closer look at the aporetic interlude.

Euthyphro complains that every proposal that they put forward “goes around” (περιέρχεται) and “refuses to stay put” (οὐκ ἐθέλει μένεσθαι) where they attempt to establish it (11b). Socrates agrees, noting that in this respect Euthyphro’s definitions seem to belong to Socrates’s own “ancestor” Daedalus, who is said to have created statues that could move themselves.²⁷ Euthyphro in turn accuses Socrates of being the Daedalus and of preventing the definitions from staying put.

To appreciate the full import of this exchange, let us first review the basics of the Daedalian legend. According to traditional myth, Daedalus, whose name δαίδαλος means “cunningly wrought,” was a master architect and builder said to have invented many tools and arts and to have produced works of exceptionally fine craftsmanship.²⁸ Most famously, he created an immense labyrinth at King Minos’s urging in order to imprison the Minotaur, the latter’s son. The labyrinth was so complex that Daedalus himself could not find a way out when he and his son Icarus were themselves put there by Minos (as punishment for helping Minos’s wife mate with a bull). In order to escape, Daedalus used thread and wax to join some feathers together to make wings. He and his son then used the wings to fly away, but Icarus, ignoring his father’s warnings, flew too high in the sky, causing the wax to melt, and so fell into the sea and drowned.²⁹

The myth of Daedalus thus calls up a number of themes and ideas, and in the present context Plato wishes to appropriate them for his own purposes. For example, the motion motif—the Daedalian statues that move themselves—serves to reaffirm the deep contrast between Socrates and Euthyphro as interlocutors. Euthyphro refuses

²⁷Why, exactly, Socrates claims to have this ancestry and “kinship” is unclear. Traditionally this has been taken to refer to the (alleged) fact that Socrates’s father (like Daedalus) was a marble-worker. McPherran thinks that it is a case of literal ancestry and that Socrates is referring to some sort of “inherited Daedalian trait.” See Mark L. McPherran, “The Aporitic Interlude and Fifth Elenchus of Plato’s *Euthyphro*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 24 (2003): 6n16. Given the paucity of evidence about Socrates and his family, however, I do not think that the matter can be resolved one way or the other.

²⁸According to the ancient sources, Daedalus invented carpentry, a number of woodworking tools, the mast and yard of a ship, and “images” (this last item no doubt referring to his making of lifelike statues). Among the famous works that he produced were the following: a magic sword that made its possessor victorious in battle; statues that seemed to be alive and to move themselves (including one that fooled Heracles into attacking it, and another that fooled a bull into mating with it); an elaborate dancing floor that rivaled the one made by Hephaestus; a water reservoir; and a city atop a hill that was impregnable to attack. Pausanias (II.4.5) says that although his works are not sightly, they are all “inspired” (ἐνθεον). Most commonly Daedalus is referred to as an “architect” (ἀρχιτέκτων), and his works are known as “Daedaleia.” The ancient sources: Apollodorus, *Library*, III.1.4, III.15.8; Diodorus Siculus, I.97.6, IV.30.1, IV.76.1–3, IV.77.2–4, IV.78.1–5; Ovid, VIII.159; Homer, *Iliad* XVIII.590–92; Pliny, *Natural History*, VII.56.198, VII.56.209; Hyginus, 40; Bacchylides, 26; Palaephatus, 21; and Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* IV.

²⁹The myth of the Labyrinth and the flight with Icarus can be found in Apollodorus, *Library*, III.1.4, III.15.8, *Epitome* 1.12–13; Diodorus Siculus, IV.77.4–9; Ovid, VIII.152–259; Strabo, 14.1.19; Arrian, *Anabasis*, VII.20.5; Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI.14–33; Palaephatus, 12; and Hyginus, 40. For further details regarding all of the relevant myths as well as the ancient source material, see Graves, pp. 311–18, and Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth* (Baltimore MD: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 260–62, 273–75. The myth of Daedalus and his moving statues also occurs in *Meno* 97d–98a.

to take ownership of his definitions and instead refers to them using the royal “we” (“that which *we* put forward” [11b7]; “wherever *we* attempt to establish it” [11b8]). Adhering to this impersonal way of talking, Euthyphro blames the definitions themselves for “going around” and “refusing to stay put.” When Socrates refuses to play along with this kind of talk—reminding Euthyphro that these are “*your* statements” (σοί, 11c1; σαί, 11c4)—the latter strikes back by saying that it is in fact Socrates who is “the Daedalus” and that it is Socrates’s fault that their words do not stay put. What this exchange reveals is not only Euthyphro’s frustration with the conversation but also his shirking of his dialogical responsibilities. Philosophical inquiry (at least as Socrates conceives of it) requires the participants to state what they themselves truly believe, to subject those beliefs to examination, and to revise (or abandon) those beliefs if necessary. In addition, it requires a spirit of cooperation in which the search for truth replaces *ad hominem* attack. By hiding from his own statements and by blaming Socrates for the insufficiencies of the previous definitions, Euthyphro has failed on both counts. He thus shows himself to be unwilling to engage with Socrates as a cooperative dialogical partner and proves to be a flesh-and-blood instantiation of the very Daedalian slipperiness that he criticizes.

In addition to highlighting Euthyphro’s deficiencies as an interlocutor, the Daedalus myth also provides Socrates—within the dramatic frame of the dialogue—with a way of responding to those deficiencies. In this dramatic moment of *aporia*, Euthyphro is ready to give up. Socrates thus offers several exhortations to his companion, urging him to “eagerly” (προθύμως, 11b4) define piety and not “give up” (μὴ προαποκάμῃς, 11e4). Socrates also criticizes him for “being soft” (τρυφόν, 11e2, 12a5) and tells him to “pull himself together” (σόντιενε σαυτόν, 12a6). Parallel to these explicit exhortations, however, the use of the Daedalus myth serves as an additional nudge. After all, Euthyphro has already shown himself to be thoroughly enmeshed in the world of traditional mythology. What better way, then, for Socrates to get his attention than by appealing to that which Euthyphro knows best? In this sense, that Socrates would himself introduce a myth is quite appropriate, given that it responds to the needs and the limitations of the interlocutor who now stands before him. Potentially it could very well encourage Euthyphro to “pull himself together” in a way that other admonishments might not.

On a further level, the introduction of the Daedalus myth allows Plato to draw attention to broader issues of philosophical method. Like Daedalus’s statues, which move themselves, Euthyphro’s definitions lack a kind of stability and reliability; and like the hapless Minotaur, Euthyphro now finds himself hopelessly lost within a dialectical labyrinth. On the surface both Euthyphro and Socrates seem to share the same goal, as they both express a desire for greater stability in their search (11c8–d2, 11d7–e1). But in reality they have quite different motives. If it were up to Euthyphro, the previous λόγοι *would* remain “as they were” (ἔμενεν ἄν ταῦτα οὕτως, d1–2). This implies that Euthyphro would be perfectly content to have his definitions stand, *regardless of whether they were correct*—a simplistic desire for dialogical stability and one that is no doubt motivated by a desire to preserve divine sanction for his present actions in the courtroom. By contrast, Socrates says that having unmoving λόγοι would be more valuable than either the wisdom of Daedalus or the wealth

of Tantalus. It is thus the λόγος itself to which Socrates is committed—the truth regarding piety—and not any one person’s attempt to articulate that truth.

Underlying these contrasting motives are two different conceptions of *how* one might attain an unmoving and stable λόγος. For Euthyphro the stability of belief derives from traditional myth, which—he believes—provides a solid foundation for understanding and practicing piety. Yet it is precisely because of this uncritical acceptance of myth that Euthyphro’s definitions do not stay in one place, for he lacks the perspective with which to anticipate objections and inconsistencies. (It is also ironic that Euthyphro finds stability in the traditional stories since Greek mythology—with its endless variations across regions and generations—is anything but static.) In reality the only true way of attaining the stability of knowledge is by way of dialogical inquiry. We can therefore see the ways in which Socrates does and does not resemble the figure of Daedalus. Like Daedalus, Socrates too practices a type of craft (τέχνη, d4, d6), albeit one that produces works *in words* (τὰ ἐν τοῖς λόγοις, c3) and not in marble or stone. But unlike the mythical figure—and contrary to what Euthyphro thinks—Socrates does not design his product (his λόγοι) with the express purpose of entrapping others in a labyrinth. For, if anything, the *elenchus* seeks to help us *escape* from the labyrinth of inconsistent and unstable beliefs.³⁰

There is, finally, an interesting invocation of a father-son motif in Plato’s use of the Daedalus myth.³¹ Icarus ignored his father’s warnings, flew too high in the sky and as a result met his fate. His is therefore an act of hubris, both because he defies his father and because his reaching toward the heavens represents an encroachment on the gods’ sphere.³² But Euthyphro too is a kind of Icarus. In the most obvious sense, Euthyphro too is something of an impetuous youth who defies his father’s authority, not to mention the wishes and entreaties of other family members. Even more damning, though, is that Euthyphro—like Icarus—is blatantly encroaching upon the gods’ sphere. By claiming to have *precise* knowledge of piety and by asserting the right to

³⁰Cf. McPherran, “The Aporetic Interlude,” pp. 11–14. As McPherran notes, by drawing a link between the *Euthyphro* and the *Meno*, beliefs and λόγοι are “Daedalian” if they are not adequately tied down by rational understanding. Socrates believes that his τέχνη allows his interlocutors to *discover* such instability (as well as its source). Ironically, even if it were Socrates’s express intention to imprison others in a dialectical labyrinth, it would follow that he himself—like Daedalus (under Minos’s punishment)—would ultimately become trapped by his own creation. Perhaps this is a way of re-casting Socrates’s oft-repeated claims to ignorance and his assertions that he himself does not know the answers to his own questions.

³¹I am indebted to McPherran (“The Aporetic Interlude,” pp. 14–17) for this insight.

³²The ancient sources are somewhat vague as to *why* exactly Icarus ignored his father’s warnings. They suggest a combination of impetuosity, exhilaration, and recklessness. Apollodorus refers to Icarus as ψυχαγαγωγούμενος (*Epitome* I.12), an intriguing word that conveys the idea that his soul was being “allured” or “led” astray. Diodorus blames it on the ignorance of youth (νεότητα, IV.77.9), and Arrian likewise blames his “folly” (ἀνοίας, *Anabasis* VII.20.5). Lucian mentions a ‘high-minded’ ambition (ὑψηλὰ ἐφρόνησαν, *Gallus* 23), while Ovid focuses on the “joy” that Icarus felt while aloft and the “temptation” of the wide open sky (VIII.223–225). Any of these could be an apt description for Euthyphro, be it his high-mindedness, his youthfulness—which, as is noted several times, contrasts with the old age of both his father (4a4, 15d6) and of Socrates (12a4)—or the thrill that he no doubt felt at being self-consciously iconoclastic (as he himself makes clear at 3b–c). Clearly, though, Euthyphro’s youth—like that of Icarus—is a liability, as indeed Socrates chides him several times for his laziness and effeminacy in the inquiry (e.g., at 11e–12a).

do *exactly* as Zeus and Kronus did, Euthyphro demonstrates an hubristic attempt to place himself on the level of the gods. This amounts to a lack of self-knowledge in the Socratic sense (not knowing one's ignorance and limitations) as well as a complete lack of awareness of one's place in the scheme of things.

Plato's use of the Daedalus myth is thus both dialogically and philosophically motivated. On a dialogical level, it serves to highlight the contrasts between Socrates and Euthyphro as interlocutors as well as to remind us of the latter's hubristic tendencies. It is also an appropriate tool for Socrates to use, given that it fits well with the pre-existing belief-set of his interlocutor. On a philosophical level, it serves to bring the question of dialectical method to the fore and to have us reflect on the status of the present inquiry. Such a focus on method is strategically positioned, given that it arises at a dramatic moment of *aporia* when we are most apt to reflect on where we have been and where we are going. And, once again, we find an underlying a contrast between *μῦθος* and *λόγος*. That Plato himself is willing to *use* a myth, however, shows us that this contrast is not to be understood simply in black-and-white terms. A myth can serve philosophical ends even if it is ultimately subordinate to the dialogical inquiry in which it is set.

THIRD DEFINITION (11E–15B)

With Socrates's mythic exhortation in place, the search for the nature of piety resumes. The basis of the third (and final) definition is the notion—put forward by Socrates and readily agreed to by Euthyphro—that “piety is a part of justice” (12d). The justification for this claim is itself interesting. Relying on his trademark use of arguments by analogy, Socrates considers the parallel case of fear and shame. For just as shame is a part of fear and not vice versa (given that there are some fearsome things like diseases that are not shameful), so too is piety a part of justice and not vice versa. Notice, however, that Socrates goes out of his way to *contrast* his view with that of an anonymous mythic poet. According to this poet, whose quoted verse concerns Zeus the creator, fear is a part of shame (12a9–b1), which is precisely the view that Socrates now declares to be false. So here we have, in a very brief way, yet another criticism of the authority and veridicality of myth and poetry.³³

The question that then takes up the remainder of the dialogue is about *which* part of justice piety is. At first Euthyphro suggests that piety is the part of justice concerned with care (*θεραπεία*) of the gods (12e). This definition founders, however, on the fact that care implies that the object of one's care can be benefited. But this cannot be the case with the gods, who could in no way be made better by human effort. So Euthyphro suggests, secondly, that piety is a kind of service (*ὑπηρέτικῆ*) to the gods, i.e., an activity that—with the gods' direction—results in some sort of good or excellent product (13dff.). But this raises the further question: *what*, exactly, is the “great product” (*τὸ πάγκαλον ἔργον*, 13e10–11) that our service yields? To this Euthyphro answers that it amounts to a knowledge of prayer and sacrifice,

³³Aside from its relevance to the part-whole discussion, why does Socrates cite *this* particular verse? No doubt the reference to Zeus the creator plays well to Euthyphro, and also fits with the earlier references to the *Theogony*.

through which we do and say what is pleasing to the gods (14b2–7). On this view, then, piety becomes a kind of “trading skill” (ἐμπορική τέχνη, 14e6) of giving to and asking from the gods. What the gods seek are such things as honor, reverence, and gratitude (15a9–10). But Socrates objects once more by claiming that this view merely reiterates the earlier notion of god-belovedness—doing and saying what the gods love—and hence is not really a new definition.

As was the case earlier in the dialogue, so too here the engine that both drives Euthyphro’s answers as well as accounts for their failure is his adherence to a mythically based, anthropomorphic conception of the gods. The very notion of *θεραπεία*, for instance, implies that Euthyphro considers the gods to be the sorts of needy and imperfect personalities who would indeed require “tending” or “care.” Yet such is precisely the image that we receive of the gods from Homer, Hesiod, and the other mythic poets. The shift to a notion of ὑπηρετική fares little better, and indeed may only make matters worse, for now Euthyphro is explicitly conceiving of the relation between the human and the divine on the model of a commercial transaction. The gods have their needs, and we humans have ours, and so we engage in a kind of *quid pro quo*. And again, each element of this conception of piety—that we are “servants” (ὑπηρέταις, 13e11) to be used at the gods’ disposal; that what the gods seek are honor and gratitude (15a9–10); and that the best means of doing so is specifically through prayer and sacrifice (14b3–4)—derives directly from traditional Athenian ritual and myth. Indeed Greek myths are filled with numerous examples of slighted gods who wreak havoc on individuals for failing to make the proper offerings as well as countless examples of mortals who go out of their way to make elaborate offerings so as to receive divine favor in some specific matter.³⁴ Euthyphro thus does not invent any of this but instead relies on a pre-existing model as the basis for his final set of definitions.

As others have noted, this view of piety as ὑπηρετική is both materialistic and self-serving.³⁵ It is materialistic insofar as it revolves around the giving and receiving of specific tangible goods. It is self-serving insofar as the individual worshiper has as his primary motivation the securing of his own personal advantage. Euthyphro himself is a case in point, as he fears being polluted by his father, and so seeks to please the gods and thereby derive their personal protection.³⁶ That Socrates rejects this whole way of thinking is clear. While awaiting a further elucidation of the “great product” (τὸ πάγκαλον ἔργον) which Euthyphro’s “service” to the gods yields,

³⁴Here are a few examples: (1) Prometheus’s eternal punishment resulted from the fact that he deceived Zeus into receiving the less choiceworthy parts of animal offerings. (2) Deucalion, who survived the primeval flood, made the proper sacrifice to Zeus, and as a reward was granted the favor of re-populating the earth. (3) Oineus failed to sacrifice to Artemis, and as a result was punished with a savage boar who ravaged his land. (4) At the onset of the Trojan war, Agamemnon had to sacrifice his daughter to appease Artemis’s wrath. (5) King Minos failed to sacrifice a special bull to Poseidon, with the result that Poseidon caused Minos’s wife to mate with the bull and to give birth to the Minotaur. Also cf. Furley, pp. 206–07, who notes that the pattern of “prayer and sacrifice” is quite common in the *Iliad*.

³⁵Harry Neumann, “The Problem of Piety in Plato’s *Euthyphro*,” *Modern Schoolman* 43 (1966): 267–69; Hoerber, “Plato’s *Euthyphro*,” pp. 105–06; Weiss, “Virtue Without Knowledge,” p. 266.

³⁶In principle Socrates would agree that piety involves doing what is pleasing to the gods; he simply has a very different notion of what is *truly* “pleasing.” I will say more on this point below.

Socrates becomes increasingly frustrated, for he feels that he has not yet learned the true nature of piety. But Socrates agrees to continue the conversation to the end, for “the lover of inquiry must follow his beloved wherever it may lead him” (14c3–4). These words are quite telling, suggesting that it is Euthyphro—with his anthropomorphism and adherence to myth—who has largely set the terms of the discussion and who therefore bears the greatest responsibility for its misdirections and inconclusiveness. As someone who is committed above all to the *λόγοι*, Socrates is quite willing and eager to follow along. Yet this does not imply an actual *approval* of the direction of the conversation. Far from agreeing with Euthyphro’s notion of a commercialized ὑπερηλική, Socrates’s already-stated skepticism regarding myth suggests just the opposite. So, with his programmatic remark at 14c, Plato is in effect offering the reader a kind of meta-narrative warning: review the present dialogue and learn from it what you can, but realize that it is not the final word and that a better path—one that is *not* so heavily interwoven with myth—is yet to be found.

FINAL SCENE (15B–16A)

In fact, the concluding scene of the dialogue makes this very point explicitly and so provides a characteristically self-aware way of winding down the inquiry. As he did earlier in the aporetic interlude, so too here Socrates himself *uses* myth to make his point. Socrates begins by reprising the figure of Daedalus by asserting once more that it is Euthyphro—whose definitions do not stay put and who has now brought us in a full circle (back to the notion of god-belovedness)—who is the true likeness of the mythical craftsman (15b–d). Socrates then compares Euthyphro to another mythical figure, the prophetic sea-god Proteus and says that he (Socrates) will not let his interlocutor escape without defining piety. How and why is Plato using these myths here and what is their philosophical import?

As was the case in the aporetic interlude, one of the purposes of these concluding myths is to reaffirm and highlight the character contrast between Socrates and Euthyphro. Proteus was a sea-god who could change his form and shape at will. For example, he is said to be able to transform himself into various animals, plants, and even material elements like water and fire. He was also a prophet with knowledge of all things in the past, present, and future. However, he did not share this prophetic wisdom willingly but did so only upon being captured and bound.³⁷ Proteus is therefore a most apt reference for Socrates to use as a basis for comparison. Like Proteus, Euthyphro is (or claims to be) a prophet. Like Proteus, Euthyphro is an elusive and slippery interlocutor, someone whose Daedalian *λόγοι* constantly change forms and do not stay in one place. Moreover, Euthyphro is very resistant to being “held fast” within the constraints of a dialogical inquiry, as he does not wish to have his views subjected to others’ scrutiny (and so must be forced to do so). It is thus that—as we

³⁷The main ancient sources for the Proteus myth are *Odyssey* IV.82–570 and Virgil, *Georgics*, IV.387–528. Aeschylus apparently wrote a play—now lost—called *Proteus* that explored the Menelaus episode in greater detail. In Homer’s version it is Menelaus who seeks to capture Proteus, whereas in Virgil’s version it is Aristaeus who seeks to do so. In both versions Proteus is caught as a result of being taken by surprise during his noontime nap among the seals, though not without a fight in which he changes forms numerous times.

have already seen—Socrates must offer a number of exhortations to his companion, to criticize his “laziness” (11e, 12a) and to prevent him from giving up.

At the very end of the dialogue Euthyphro quite literally escapes when he suddenly refuses to answer any more of Socrates’s questions and hurries away (15e). But the flight reflex also emerges more subtly, as throughout the dialogue Euthyphro displays an accommodationist tendency that reminds us of the sophists.³⁸ When backed against a wall, Euthyphro is inclined to tell his audience what he thinks they want to hear rather than what is true. Early on, for instance, he responds to Socrates’s demand for a general definition by saying: “If that is how you want it, Socrates, that is how I will tell you” (6e7–8). Towards the end, Euthyphro agrees to characterize his view of piety as an ἐμπορική τέχνη, for no other reason than that Socrates “prefer[s] to call it that” (14e8). Such is the easy way out, offering agreement merely for the sake of hastening the conclusion of the conversation. To refer to Euthyphro as a Proteus is therefore a general way of pointing to his repeated attempts to escape from his philosophical pursuers.

Following the tradition of the original (Homeric) myth, this would make Socrates into a kind of Menelaus, the king and Trojan war hero who successfully bound Proteus long enough for the latter to reveal his prophetic wisdom. And this comparison, too, is apt. After all, the context of Menelaus’s capture of Proteus was his attempt to find his way *home* after being blown off course. Metaphorically speaking, the “home” that Socrates seeks is the true λόγος, the one form (εἶδος) of piety through which—as he says—he can both combat Meletus’s charges and live a better life (15e–16a). To get there Socrates uses tenacity and persistence to attempt to hold fast his protean interlocutor and get him to join the search. Socrates is the “lover of inquiry” who will follow the argument wherever it leads (14c). He is “concentrating his mind” on the matter at hand (14d) and will not give up voluntarily (15c). He repeatedly states his desire to *learn* and to become Euthyphro’s *student* (5a–c; 6d; 9a; 9d; 11e; 12e; 14c). Thus when Socrates refers to his “great hope” of learning what piety is (15e), there is no doubt some irony in his words, given the patent shortcomings of his interlocutor, but so too is there a genuine desire to discover the nature of piety.

In addition to highlighting the character contrast between Socrates and Euthyphro, the Daedalus and Proteus myths also serve a metanarrative role, for they call attention to the status and limits of the present inquiry. There is again the suggestion that it is Euthyphro’s λόγοι that are Daedalian since they move around and do not stay put (15b8). But Socrates now adds a new note by claiming that Euthyphro is in fact much *more* skillful (τεχνιώτερος) than Daedalus, since his words do not merely move but have now *gone around in a circle*. The basis of this remark is the fact that Euthyphro’s final definition—relying on the idea that piety provides prayer and sacrifices to the gods, which are *dear* (φίλον) to them—once again returns us to the earlier notion of god-belovedness. The implication, of course, is that Euthyphro still has not defined the nature of piety but has merely resorted to already-discredited

³⁸This reminder is no accident, and in the *Euthydemus* (288b) Socrates explicitly refers to Proteus as a sophist (McPherran, “The Aporetic Interlude,” p. 31).

concepts. This calls to mind the image of the Labyrinth, the “maze of winding ways” that “confused the passage out” (as the ancient mythographer Apollodorus describes it).³⁹ The inquiry thus far has indeed been twisting and turning, and without any apparent exit in sight. It is no wonder that we have arrived at the same point from which we began. The question then becomes: how *can* we escape the dialectical labyrinth and *aporia*?

Socrates broaches an answer in the next passage. *Either* our previous statements are incorrect *or* our present statements are incorrect; accordingly, we must *again investigate the matter from the beginning* (ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἄρα ἡμιν πάλιν σκεπτέον, 15c11). This brief remark is vital for our understanding of the dialogue as a whole. Socrates and Euthyphro end their conversation in a continued state of *aporia*, for they still do not know what piety is. True, there have been a number of suggestions along the way, some of which might very well contain a kernel of truth. But the fact is that, at present, they do not *know* which of the previous points (if any) are reliable. Hence the need to start the inquiry again, from a fresh set of ideas and operating assumptions. No doubt much of the need for this fresh start stems from the fact that the inquiry has been utterly shaped—and tainted—by the mythically-based conception of the divine that Euthyphro has brought to the table. What is needed, then, is not simply a tweaking of this or that thesis, but (potentially) a wholesale reconsideration of the matter. This provides a pointer to the reader as well: if *we* wish to grasp the nature of piety, we too must “again investigate the matter from the beginning.” This will require us, on the one hand, to re-examine the just-completed dialogue, both on the level of individual arguments and on the level of the dialogical whole. Doing so should in turn provoke us to move *beyond* this very dialogue as we begin to recognize its limitations and so seek out a higher-order inquiry that is not tainted by mythical assumptions.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

It has been my aim in this article to offer a holistic examination of the *Euthyphro*, in contrast to the piecemeal and fine-grained approaches of much of the secondary literature. Having now laid out the main argumentative and dramatic progression of the *Euthyphro*, I hope to have made it clear that the dialogue is, in fact, an integrated and unified whole. Specifically, I have argued that myth plays a recurring and important role throughout the dialogue as a whole, both as a topic of interest

³⁹Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Robin Hard (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), III.1.4 (also cf. III.15.8); also cf. Diodorus Siculus, IV.77.4 and Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VIII.159–68. Each of these descriptions of the Labyrinth emphasize the *winding* nature of the passage-ways as the key feature that prevents one from finding the way out.

⁴⁰In saying this, I disagree with those commentators who read Socrates’s remark at 15c as pointing us toward some *specific* spot in the text as containing a true account of piety. For example, Parry (“Holiness as Service,” p. 531) focuses on the discussion of *θεραπεία* and *ὑπερηλική* after the interlude, while Cornford (“Plato’s *Euthyphro* or How to Read a Socratic Dialogue,” pp. 231–34) sees the discussion of god-belovedness in the second definition as the “central point” of the dialogue. Yet such approaches are problematic, for Socrates clearly urges us to investigate again from the *beginning*, and not simply to extract individual passages of interest. Meaning, then, is to be found in the whole and not merely the parts.

and as a form of discourse that Plato himself uses. On a structural level, myth occurs at the beginning (6a), mid-point (11b), and end (15b–d) of the *Euthyphro*. On a dialogical level, a mythically-based conception of the gods is one of the main motivations for each of Euthyphro's definitions. It is the basis of his conviction that his present actions in the courtroom are justified (the first definition). It undergirds his acceptance of the idea that the gods are the sorts of beings who love and hate, and it undergirds his rejection of theological voluntarism (the second definition). It is the basis of his conception of a *quid pro quo* bartering relation between gods and men (the third definition). At the same time, this adherence to myth is also a key reason for the failure of each of those definitions. Thus Plato clearly wishes to put the issue of μύθος in the foreground and to have us reflect on it. But why do so in this context, where the ostensible topic of discussion is piety? And just what exactly is the overall message that Plato is trying to convey?⁴¹

Part of the point is methodological and epistemological. Plato is establishing here—albeit in a rudimentary form that is not fully developed—a contrast between μύθος and λόγος that will become increasingly prominent in other dialogues. If what I have argued here is correct, the problems faced by Euthyphro's various definitions are not merely formal or logical (as many commentators have supposed) but also substantive, for the definitions rely on a source of authority that Socrates considers illegitimate. On Euthyphro's view, the gods fight, love, hate, and demand to be placated by prayer and sacrifice. This conception of the gods remains prevalent throughout the dialogue, and it is one with which Socrates profoundly disagrees. After all, such neediness and instability imply that the gods are morally and intellectually deficient (and, so, are hardly worthy of the name θεῖός). But the falsity of Euthyphro's theology should also lead us to cast doubt upon its source in myth. In other words, any tradition or medium that represents the gods in an inaccurate way cannot be relied upon as a source of information. From a purely methodological point of view this critique of myth makes sense. Socrates insists that piety be defined with reference to the *one form* (6d) through which it is pious. Yet the traditional myths, with their endless variety across time and place, could hardly provide any one form of anything.⁴²

This critique of myth can in turn help us to understand whether or not the *Euthyphro* presents a positive account of piety; that is, whether the question “What is piety?” remains unanswered at the end of the dialogue, or whether it receives some sort of (perhaps implicit) reply. A great deal of ink has been spilled trying to resolve this issue, without any conclusive results.⁴³ We can, I think, use the question of myth as a way of approaching the matter. If what I have argued here is correct, part of Plato's point in the *Euthyphro* is that we cannot obtain stable knowledge of

⁴¹As a general matter, I take it that “form” and “content” are interwoven and interdependent in Plato's dialogues. Hence, when we discuss the structure of the *Euthyphro*, we must also ask about the philosophical implications and significance of that structure.

⁴²For any given myth there were always multiple versions, as can be seen in a review of the surviving ancient sources. In other dialogues Socrates will articulate this criticism in a metaphysical vein: given that myths are particulars, they could not articulate the true nature of reality, which is a universal (the Form of Justice).

⁴³For some of the references, see n1 above on the constructivism debate.

piety via myth. Yet as Socrates states many times in the dialogues—including the *Euthyphro*—someone who does not *know* what virtue is cannot *be* virtuous (and hence someone who does not know what piety is cannot be pious).⁴⁴ Thus someone who relies on myth as a source of knowledge on piety cannot hope thereby to become pious, given that he is relying on a faulty medium. What is it, then, that *would* make us pious—or more precisely, how would we *discover* what it would take to make us pious? Socrates's answer is that we need a method of inquiry that is *not* based in myth, and the *Euthyphro* points to just such a method: philosophical dialogue and Socratic *elenchus*. In order to become pious, then—for which obtaining knowledge of piety is a necessary precondition—we must engage in philosophical inquiry, which is exactly what Socrates has been urging Euthyphro to do throughout their conversation.⁴⁵

In addition to providing some insight into Socrates's positive conception of piety, the issue of myth also helps shed some light on the use of Euthyphro as a character and interlocutor. There has been a fair amount of debate in the secondary literature as to just what role Euthyphro plays in the dialogue. Does he represent mainstream and orthodox Athenian religious belief, such that he is a symbolic extension of the culturally conservative Meletus? Or is he a more iconoclastic figure who holds decidedly unconventional and non-traditional views?⁴⁶ When addressing this question, it is helpful to be specific as to the exact sense in which Euthyphro might or might not be "orthodox." Clearly, if we are considering only his present *actions*—specifically, his prosecution of his father—then he is a rather unorthodox figure. For his legal case shocks his own family and friends, and it also seems to run counter to both the law in Athens as well as the patriarchal family structure of the *polis*.⁴⁷ But the deeper (and

⁴⁴At 15d Socrates says that Euthyphro would not have prosecuted his father—an action that he believes to be pious—if he did not have "clear knowledge" (ἡδιστα σαφῆς) of piety and impiety. The implication is that, in order for one's action actually to *be* pious, one must have the relevant knowledge.

⁴⁵This is not exactly a radical conclusion, and thus was perhaps to be expected all along. It also accords with the conclusions of those "constructivist" scholars who have taken Socratic piety to consist in the philosophical life and the tending of one's soul, including Fineburg, McPherran in "The Aporetic Interlude," Parry, A. E. Taylor, and C. C. W. Taylor. Unlike those scholars, however, I am not making a first-order claim about what (in Plato's view) piety *is*; rather, I am making the second-order claim about how we can potentially *discover* what piety is. Furthermore—and again in contrast to a number of the constructivists (such as McPherran in "The Aporetic Interlude," Parry, Rabinowitz, Cornford, and A. E. Taylor)—I do not believe that there is any *one* particular definition or passage in the *Euthyphro* that reveals a positive account of piety. Many of these commentators focus on the third definition and believe that the hidden key lies in finding the unidentified πάγκαλον ἔργον that our service to the gods produces. But I think that we must consider what the dialogue as a *whole* has to tell us, and not just any one argument or passage. Cf. n40 above.

⁴⁶Those who regard Euthyphro as an unorthodox figure include McPherran in "Justice and Pollution," Burnet, A. E. Taylor, Klonoski in "Setting and Characterization," Neumann, Hoerber, Edwards, Hoopes, and Frederick Rosen in "Piety and Justice: Plato's *Euthyphro*," *Philosophy* 43 (1968): 105–16. Those who see him as a more mainstream and orthodox figure include Furley; P. T. Geach, "Plato's *Euthyphro*: An Analysis and Commentary," *Monist* 50 (1966): 369–82; Heidel; George Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates* (London UK: J. Murray, 1888); Romano Guardini, *The Death of Socrates* (Cleveland OH: Meridian, 1948); B. Jowett, *The Works of Plato* (New York NY: Tudor, 1937); and Nicholas J. Moutafakis, "Plato's Emergence in the *Euthyphro*," *Apeiron* 5 (1971): 23–32.

⁴⁷On the tenuous legal status of Euthyphro's case, see n5 above; on the patriarchal aspect of Greek culture, see Hoopes.

more interesting) question, I think, is whether Euthyphro is unorthodox in his *beliefs* and his general mindset. After all, unorthodox actions could very well be motivated by quite orthodox beliefs. And in fact—based on what I have argued in this paper—Euthyphro is quite orthodox in this latter sense, given that he is wedded to a set of myths that are thoroughly *traditional* and *commonly accepted*. The justification for his legal case and the justification for his attempted definitions are not some set of novel theological or philosophical views but the very stories embedded in all aspects of contemporary Athenian life. In at least this one respect, then—his unquestioning and uncritical acceptance of traditional authority—Euthyphro is indeed “orthodox” so long as we understand that term to refer to a particular mindset. This is the case even though Euthyphro himself would not want to admit it.⁴⁸

Finally, the *Euthyphro* shows that, despite whatever limitations or problems are inherent in myth, it is nonetheless open to a philosophical writer to *use* myth. Plato himself does so in this dialogue in at least two ways. On the one hand, the references to Daedalus and Proteus serve to highlight some of the character differences between Socrates and Euthyphro, which in turn frames a whole series of dichotomies of philosophical importance (such as inquiry versus authority, or narrative versus dialogue). At the same time, Plato uses myth in a much broader and meta-narrative way, so as to draw our attention to the very inquiry that we are witnessing. Each of the times that Plato uses myth in the *Euthyphro* he does so at key moments of aporetic pause (the mid-point and the end). The result is that we take a step back to reflect on where the discussion has gone and—more importantly—where it has gone off track. Perhaps there was never any real hope that Euthyphro would help lead us to a full understanding of piety, but neither has he been a wholly unfruitful interlocutor. By re-tracing his steps—by being Daedalian and “investigating again from the beginning” (as Socrates says)—we can pick up where he and Socrates left off, and we can avoid the pitfalls to which he succumbed. In so doing, we may learn to leave behind the very myths in question and so learn something about the piety that eluded Euthyphro.

⁴⁸Euthyphro goes to great lengths to emphasize how (in his own mind) he sees himself as having affinities with Socrates, given that both of them are set apart from and ridiculed by the masses (3b–c). Clearly, though, this is a consummate case of a lack of self-awareness, for the remainder of the dialogue shows just how different they really are. Some have claimed (e.g., Klonoski, “Setting and Characterization”) that Euthyphro holds a number of unorthodox religious beliefs, such as his belief in the danger of pollution or the importance of the Ouranus-Kronus myth. Yet, as Furley has conclusively shown, historical evidence reveals that both such beliefs were in fact widely held. Others have claimed (e.g., McPherran, “Justice and Pollution”) that Euthyphro holds an unorthodox view of justice since he is willing to prosecute his own father. Yet, even if this is true on a superficial level, nonetheless it is undermined by the fact that the *motivation* for this alleged pursuit of justice is ultimately self-serving (the removal of pollution, which—again—was a commonly held belief). The issues here are obviously more complex than I can hope to cover within the scope of this paper.