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PLATO'S *EUTHYPHRO* AND THE MYTH OF PROTEUS*

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At the end of the *Euthyphro* (15d) Socrates points out to Euthyphro that the argument has come full circle because Euthyphro has asserted the same definition of piety that he did in the beginning. Therefore, Socrates urges, they must begin again and ask what holiness is. "Now tell me the truth, Euthyphro," says Socrates, "for you know if anyone does, and just like Proteus, you are not to be let go until you speak." The reference to Proteus is an allusion to the fourth book of the *Odyssey* in which the hero, Menelaos, must hold fast to Proteus, while the old sea deity, attempting to escape, transforms himself into a variety of wild beasts, into water and into a tall green tree. But at last when he sees that Menelaos will not be put off, Proteus returns to his original form, and reveals to the hero all that he wished to know.

Here Socrates has cast himself as Menelaos and Euthyphro as Proteus. Euthyphro's argument has gone through as many transformations as the old sea god, and Socrates has held on as tenaciously as Menelaos until Euthyphro and his definition of piety have resumed their original form. At this point, if the Homeric paradigm were fully applied, Socrates would have the definition of holiness he has been seeking. But just at this point, Euthyphro makes his excuses for departure against a loudly protesting Socrates, and the dialogue ends. Yet despite this unhomeric turn of events, I believe that we are not left without an answer. I shall argue that the Homeric paradigm, read in the dramatic context in which it is set, points to the definition of holiness that seems, on the surface, to elude Socrates if not most of his modern commentators. Socratic piety, I shall suggest, is not measured by Homeric or Sophistic standards of material or social success as these are embodied in Euthyphro's ambitions and unreflective

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actions, but by internal standards applied by Socrates to the pursuit of wisdom.[1]

The essential point on which Euthyphro's notion of piety founders is that he posits a relationship between men and gods of mutual benefit. Socrates challenges this position by pointing out that if the gods can really benefit from men then they are imperfect. If the gods want anything they are in need and so lacking and imperfect. If on the other hand they need nothing, then how, Socrates argues, can man be said to benefit them, or for that matter even to please them? No, Socrates implies, the relationship between men and gods is not a business deal (14e).

Euthyphro attempts to respond to this objection by reiterating what he had said earlier, that men give the gods "honor, praise and gratitude" (15a). "Honor, praise and gratitude" are offered, we may infer, because they are not advantageous to the gods or needed by them, but merely pleasing. Socrates seizes upon this distinction between what is advantageous and what is pleasing when he reformulates Euthyphro's definition. He says: "Then it is what is *gratifying* that is holy and not what is useful or loved" (15b). Socrates is attempting to substitute the notion of what is "gratifying" for what is "loved." The subtlety of this distinction emerges from a careful look at the precise terms of Euthyphro's final definition and Socrates' reformulation.

"Honor," γέρας, "praise," τιμή, and "gratitude," χάρις, says Euthyphro, are what one gives the gods (15a); Socrates replies, "Then it is what is gratifying that is holy and not what is useful or loved." Socrates' word for "gratifying" is κεχαρισμένον, the participle from the same root as χάρις; the word for "loved" is φίλον. To define the holy as "god-loved," θεόφιλον, was shown to be inadequate in the earlier part of the dialogue: the gods do not love piety because they love it, but because of some quality belonging to piety itself (10e). Thus there is something more essential to the definition of piety than divine love (11a–b). Second, whatever the essential characteristic of piety may be, it cannot represent something that is actively desired by, needed by, or beneficial to the gods, because that would imply imperfection in heaven. The reason that Socrates seizes upon χάρις in Euthyphro's final definition, is that χάρις, as I shall argue, satisfies the conditions set out in the dialogue for a definition of piety without implications of need, advantage or love on the gods' part. But before we can understand how χάρις functions in such a Socratic definition of piety we must establish the dramatic context in which the definition is formulated.

By his own example in the *Euthyphro*, and in the closely related *Apology*, Socrates suggests a definition of holiness that refutes the notion of economic interdependence of men and gods that Euthyphro posits.

[1] At *Republic* 4.427c–445e (especially 443c–444a), justice, of which piety is a part (Socrates suggests it at *Euthyphro* 11e–12e), is also defined as an essentially internal state.

Socratic piety implies divine independence. The oracle which Socrates takes as a divine injunction has, in fact, asked for nothing, and the δαιμόνιον, mentioned specifically by Euthyphro (3b) as Socrates' special divinity, only forbids. For recall what Socrates says of the oracle in the *Apology* (21a–b). The oracle, he tells the Athenians, made an assertion, that no one was wiser than Socrates, a simple statement and not a command. And what is more, it was not delivered to Socrates himself, but to a friend. Socrates had it second hand. It was Socrates who transformed this oracle into a divine command (23c; cf. 29d). And similarly the δαιμόνιον never urges Socrates to do anything but only holds him back from what he is thinking of doing (31c–d). Like the oracle, the δαιμόνιον neither asks for nor gains anything from Socrates, at least not in the covetous way Euthyphro believes that the gods seek mortal devotion.

But Euthyphro is more than the ignorant and pompous figure he presents in the dialogue. Like Meno's famous slave, or any Socratic interlocutor, Euthyphro is an unknowing repository of the truth. Socrates does not offer the successive definitions of holiness nor the concept of χάρις, crucial, as I shall argue, to the correct definition. The definitions, however imperfect, are Euthyphro's, and χάρις was mentioned first by Euthyphro (14b; cf. 15a), not Socrates. Socrates merely examines and reformulates what his interlocutors already seem to have in their possession. As Socrates himself so colorfully puts it in the *Theaetetus* (148e–151d), he is merely a dialectical midwife. And so it is that Socrates, in the same spirit of challenge with which he confronts the enigmatic oracle, promises to follow Euthyphro wherever he may lead (14c). Socrates' devotion to Euthyphro is at once comic and serious.

However, the Delphic oracle and the δαιμόνιον, with their apparent indifference to taking a positive role in human affairs, do not complete the Socratic pantheon. Beyond these stands Socrates' intuition of Euthyphro's hidden truth, the vision of which leads the multiplicity of Euthyphro's responses toward a unified definition of holiness. Plato terms this vision ἰδέα or εἶδος (5d, 6d), when he asks Euthyphro for some one, all-inclusive characteristic through which holiness is holiness. Thus, in addition to the oracle and the δαιμόνιον, there is a third, though silent, presence that guides Socrates through the argument, and when we look once more to the Homeric paradigm of Menelaos and Proteus we find this enigmatic presence there as well. For in the fourth book of the *Odyssey* Menelaos does not find Proteus or even know of him unaided. He is directed through the waves by a sea goddess who takes pity on him because he is unable to return home without direction. Homer calls the goddess Εἰδοθέη, "Divine Beauty," or equally suitable to the Platonic context, "Divine Form" (*Od.* 4.366).

With these three Socratic deities before us then, we are in a position to elaborate the quality of χάρις upon which the Socratic definition of piety is formed.

For Euthyphro χάρις means no more than "thanks," gratitude for services rendered or anticipated. But such a view makes χάρις, like "honor," γέρας, and "praise," τιμή, the currency of a social barter system. One recalls that it is honor, γέρας, about which Agamemnon and Achilles quarrel in the opening scenes of the *Iliad* (1.117, 119), and that γέρας in that context is inseparably tied to material possessions. As for τιμή, "praise" or "esteem," though the term is not tied to material objects, it does have its root in commerce. τιμή means essentially the "cost," "price" or "worth" of a thing. In a more developed sense, τιμή can mean simply "praise" or "esteem," which is what Euthyphro means here; but as is the case with the Furies in the final scene of the *Oresteia*, you do not give up one source of such esteem, τιμή, without having another in return.[2] It is a matter of exchange.

But such a business arrangement between men and gods, whether the medium of exchange is material or social, has been rejected by Socrates, and that is why he seizes upon χάρις in Euthyphro's final definition. For χάρις, as Socrates uses the term, retains a sense etymologically and logically more primary than merely "thanks," a sense having nothing to do with what is earned or owed.[3] An example of χάρις in this primary sense is found at *Odyssey* 2.12 where it means "beauty": in this specific instance, the beauty bestowed by Athena, a goddess, on Telemachus, a mortal.[4] And if we may look beyond the fourth century to the *New Testament*, χάρις is there the word for the unsolicited "grace" of God.[5] Although such gratuity may prompt thanks in return (χάρις in the secondary sense), that thanks is extraneous; for the initial χάρις implies no expectation. The beautiful object may have no sense of the one perceiving it, and the one perceiving may well have no effect whatever on the beautiful object of its devotion. Like beauty, χάρις, in the primary sense in which Socrates means it, suggests giving gratuitously, perhaps even indifferently. And so it is with Socratic deities. Although they inspire Socrates' devotion, they ask nothing of him; they are changed in no sense by his attentions.

[2] *Eum.* 624, 747, 845, 879, 894 (cf. 1037 of the offerings themselves).

[3] The etymology of χάρις points to an original meaning of "pleasure" (verbs from the *khar*-root, "to have pleasure") (Emile Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society* [Miami 1973] 160–61). χάρις as "pleasure," a simple emotional state, connotes no reciprocity. Thus, χάρις as "thanks" or as "kindness expecting kindness in return," would seem a later development (cf. Benveniste 161–62).

[4] So Pindar uses the term (e.g., *Ol.* 1.18 ff. and 2.76). See C. M. Bowra's discussion in *Pindar* (Oxford 1964) 29–31.

[5] In Pindar's Second Olympian the Charites bestow victory wreaths on two brothers equally. It is this impartiality, presumably, that earns them the epithet, κοιναί (line 50). If "impartial" is indeed the correct translation of κοιναί, then it would seem that, like the Grace of the *New Testament*, the Charites as early as Pindar offer their gifts to all indifferently. This is not to say, of course, that all equally receive what is offered.

This Socratic conception of divinity is as distinct from that of Euthyphro as the goddess Εἰδοθέη is from the violent and quarreling Olympians to which Euthyphro looks early in the dialogue to justify his actions (5e–6c; 7e–8b). Euthyphro's gods, unlike the gracious deities that guide Socrates, are projections of Euthyphro's own ambition. Euthyphro desires to distinguish himself for his piety, as he admits early in the dialogue (4a), and analogously his gods want "honor, praise and thanks." Socrates on the other hand recognizes that the gods must be indifferent to his responses, and demonstrates a devotion that, like divine χάρις, is no more than an expression of what he is.[6] Socrates acts under the primary impulse of his love of wisdom in that unique sort of interaction between gods and men that seeks neither to give nor to receive in the ordinary sense, but only to satisfy the mortal longing to know what is lasting and ordered in the evanescent moment of dialogue.[7] Hence, piety is not what Euthyphro is doing as he claims it is (6d), but what Socrates is doing, questioning and answering. This questioning and answering is guided by the oracle that indirectly challenged Socrates to discover what he knew. It is guided by the δαιμόνιον that forbade Socrates to follow the ambitious course of Euthyphro's pretensions to knowledge (recall that Euthyphro's prophetic powers are vitiated by his speculations on the outcome of Socrates' trial, 3e). And finally it is guided by the vision of some unifying characteristic that could reduce the multiplicity of phenomena within the scope of knowable limits.

When Aeschylus said, "the gods abandon those who trample the χάρις of inviolable things" (*Agam.* 371), he meant by χάρις, as one commentator puts it, "the grace or charm, almost the spell" belonging to the holy things.[8] This notion of χάρις had not been lost in the fifth century, but it had become ominously imperiled. It was Socrates' mission

[6] One of my anonymous referees raises the pertinent point that none of the instances of χάρις which I call primary refers to the character of things offered by men to gods (as do the instances of κεχαρισμένον meaning "well pleasing," "acceptable," cited in John Burnet's commentary (*Plato's Euthyphro* et al. [Oxford 1924] 28), but only to what is offered by gods to men.

Although I cannot provide a direct parallel, I would refer to A. P. Burnett's analysis of the *Alcestis*, "The Virtues of Admetus," *CP* 60 (1965) 240–55. If Burnett is correct, Euripides was promoting an idea of human χάρις quite like that which I ascribe to Socrates. Burnett says:

> A man who understands what Heracles taught [in the *Alcestis*] will not argue always from *dike*, but will be free to perform the uncalculated act of graciousness [χάρις], and such a man may attract the favor of the gods, who know how to be gracious in return. (253–54)

[7] *Eros* in the *Symposium* is a δαίμων μέγας (202d–203a) responsible finally for philosophy as the highest manifestations of mortal service to the divine (cf. 210c–212a).

[8] D. L. Page, *Euripides' Medea*, revised ed. (Oxford 1952) 105 (the commentary on line 439).

to revive it.[9] His method was to speak in a conspiracy of indirection, drama and allusion, for he spoke to such as Euthyphro and Meletos, and his δαιμόνιον recommended caution. In the *Euthyphro* the argument takes its life from the drama of Socrates' own trial and impending death, from the peculiar piety that brought it all about, and from Socrates' identification with a Homeric hero whose story includes a goddess, Εἰδοθέη. She guides Menelaos as the εἶδος guides Socrates. Her name, in the language of Homer, suggests a graceful and alluring beauty as do the εἴδη, the "forms," of the Socratic dialogue. Neither giving nor receiving, this beauty works its spell on Socrates, commanding his devotion, merely because of what it is.

[9] Euripides' interest in promoting the sense of χάρις which I call primary (see note 6 above) is a point in evidence for the currency (however limited) of such usage in the latter part of the fifth century.