

Lesson Plans 12: Argument and Piety in the *Euthyphro*
The Civic Knowledge Project: Winning Words

Time: 1 hour

Abstract: Students will read the *Euthyphro*, examine Socrates’s argumentation, and discuss the matter of piety.

Review of *sophist* (5-10 minutes)

Ask students to refer to notebooks in order to provide a class definition for *Sophist*. Ask students to recall some “big questions” (justice, fairness, etc.)—would arguments made by Sophists be useful for asking questions about “big ideas”? Why or why not? What would Socrates say about that, and why?

Reading the *Euthyphro* (25+ minutes)

If students are old enough, have them read the slightly colloquialized edition of the *Euthyphro* by Holbo and Waring in the book *Reason and Persuasion*. Otherwise, use the more simplified excerpts below (see other accompanying document for a hand-out-formatted set of the same excerpts). Remind students that if they are confused about a line, they should say so right away, and they will be able to hear it repeated.

Before reading, remind students that when Socrates and the other character Euthyphro use the word “piety” in this dialogue, they mean “hosion,” or, “doing the right thing.”

Setting: *Socrates and a priest named Euthyphro meet while they are waiting to go inside the home of the most powerful judge in Athens, who is called the “King Archon.”*

Euthyphro: Socrates! How are you doing? What are you doing out and about today, and why are you waiting outside the home of the King Archon? Surely you can’t be having any legal trouble!

Socrates: Someone is going after me in a court case, Euthyphro.

Eu: What?! I cannot believe that someone is prosecuting you in a court case, Socrates! Who is it?

Socrates: A young man named Meletus. He has accused me of a very serious crime, and if he is right, he will be a very good man for having gone after me. He says that someone is corrupting the young people. He must be a wise man if he has figured this out, and since I am the opposite of a wise man, he has decided to accuse me of corrupting the young people. The state, and the court, will decide if this is true. Clearly, Meletus is trying to be a good citizen by watching out for the young people of Athens.

Eu: I hope that he is a good man, Socrates, but I suspect that the opposite is true, and he is doing a very bad deed by going after you, because you haven’t done anything wrong. But anyway, how does he say you corrupted the young people?

Soc: He makes a very surprising accusation against me: he says that I have invented new and fake gods, and that I deny that the real gods exist. This is what he says I have done. Anyway, what are you doing here?

Eu: You see, Socrates, I am accusing a man of a very serious crime. You will think I am crazy, though, if I tell you who I am accusing.

Soc: Why do you say that?

Eu: I am accusing my father!

Soc: Your father?! My good man! Why? What are you accusing him of?

Eu: Murder.

Soc: My goodness! He must have murdered someone very important to you—a family member, perhaps—if he deserves to be prosecuted in court by his own son.

Eu: I am surprised that you would say that Socrates. It should make no difference whether the murdered person is a family member or a stranger. The real question is this: is it fair that he was murdered? If it was fair and just that he was murdered, then it is my duty not to do anything. But, if he was murdered unfairly and unjustly, then it is my duty to go after the man who committed the crime, no matter who he is. Even if the murderer lives under my roof in my home, and eats at my table. Here is what happened: a man who worked for my family got drunk and killed one of our farm workers. My father was upset, and tied up this man's hands and feet, and threw him in a ditch. He then left him there in the ditch and went into town to ask a priest for advice on what to do next. Meanwhile, the man in the ditch died from cold and because he had no food to eat. Some people have told me that it is impious and wrong for a son to prosecute his own father. But whoever says that clearly knows nothing about the gods!

Soc: Good heavens, Euthyphro. You are such a good priest and an expert about the gods, that I suspect you have some reason to believe that you are not doing the wrong thing by going after your father like this. Since you are such an expert, let's talk about this more. Maybe it will help me when it is my turn to defend myself against this Meletus fellow who accuses me of corrupting the young people.

Eu: Sounds good, Socrates. What do you want to know?

Soc: Let us talk about the nature of piety, and what it means to do the right thing. Isn't doing the right thing always the same? Also, isn't doing the wrong thing always the opposite of that?

Eu: Certainly, Socrates.

Soc: And what *is* doing the right thing? What *is* the wrong thing?

Eu: Doing the right thing, or **piety**, is doing as I am doing. This means that doing the right thing involves going after anyone who is guilty of murder, or any other serious crime—no matter who they are. For instance, think about Zeus. He is known as the most powerful and righteous of gods. It is known that Zeus punished his own father, Cronos, for doing bad things. Also, Cronos had punished *his own father*, Uranus, for doing bad things, too. And yet, for some reason, people are angry with me. How silly.

Soc: I want a more careful and exact answer, Euthyphro. You only said that piety was doing as you are doing. Surely there are other “right things” to do, though. I do not want some examples. What I want to know is this: is there one idea shows us why wrong things are wrong and why right things are right? If we knew this one idea, we could use it to measure all other situations and determine if the people involved did the right or the wrong thing.

Eu: All right. How about this: Piety is what is dear to the gods, and impiety is what is not dear to them.

Soc: Very good, Euthyphro. Just the sort of answer that I wanted to hear. But I have a question: even in your example, Zeus had one opinion and Kronos and Uranus had different ideas. They are all gods, but they disagreed. This ruins your definition of piety. If some gods think a thing is right and others think that same thing is wrong, how will we know which is correct?

Eu: This is true, Socrates.

Soc: Plus, there is another problem. You still haven’t helped me understand what “right and wrong”—“pious and impious”— actually *mean*. Do you agree that we can avoid the first problem by saying that things that what ALL the gods love is pious and good, and what they ALL hate is impious and bad?

Eu: This is much more agreeable, Socrates. Yes. It is true.

Soc: I wonder this: which of these is true: that pious things are pious because they are loved by the gods, or that the gods love certain things BECAUSE they are pious?

Eu: I don’t get it. What do you mean?

Soc: Let me explain. We say that someone is carrying their backpack, and we also say that “the backpack is being carried.” We say that someone is “seeing a movie,” and we also say that the movie is “being seen” by a person. Do you see the difference?

Eu: I think so... Keep explaining.

Soc: If somebody said that a backpack was “being carried,” what makes this true?

Eu: Of course, it would be because somebody was carrying the backpack. If somebody is carrying it, that means that it is a true fact to say that the backpack is “being carried.”

Soc: Exactly. In the same way, if something is happening to something or someone, then they are in a certain condition. Think of it this way: someone can be described as in a condition of “suffering” because something is making them suffer. Right?

Eu: Sure! I get it. The condition that someone or something is in means that something *happened* to create that condition.

Soc: Right. Now think of this: If something is “right” because it is in a condition of being loved by the gods, doesn’t that mean that the gods must have first *loved* it? In other words, doesn’t the condition of being loved come AFTER the act of loving?

Eu: Sure it does.

Soc: Didn’t you say that piety, or “right things,” are in a condition of being loved by the gods? Wasn’t that your definition?

Eu: Yes, it was.

Soc: But, it cannot be the case that the gods love something because it is loved by them. If we say that, we would go on forever. The gods love something because it is loved by them because they love it because it is loved by them... forever and ever! They have to love it for some reason, and that reason cannot be that they already love it. So we still have a problem: we need to know what it is that makes good things good and bad things bad. We still haven’t figured this out, and the one answer that you tried saying—that things are good because the gods love them—didn’t work out in the end.

Discussion

Lead students to highlight three things that tie in with previous course content. First, ask the students to locate an example of *induction*. Second, ask students to categorize the “goals” of Socrates and Euthyphro: is Euthyphro a *Sophist*? What is Socrates’s problem with him? What is Meletus’s goal? Third, have students locate some bad arguments, and explain why they are bad.

Divine precedent (10-15 minutes)

This dialogue provides a useful opportunity to substantively address an issue that has been raised frequently in past classes and will likely come up in future discussion and debate, particularly when students argue about deeply held beliefs. Is citing God (or gods, as the case may be) a good way of proving something? The answer is no, for the simple reason that “wisdom” as we mean it in philosophy is based on facts that are “true,” and “true” things are true to everyone. Therefore, in a religiously pluralistic environment, citing one’s personal beliefs, no matter how sincerely felt, cannot be used to convince others of an idea’s truth. Making this clear to the students is important, and it is worth mentioning that Socrates’s point about inter-god disagreement in the *Euthyphro* is an expression of

an analogous problem. Inviting discussion about this point was very fruitful in my class, and you may find it similarly useful. Invite students to present knowledge about different religious conceptions of piety based on the actions of gods.

Closing

Inform students that next week, they'll be put to work on final presentation content.