

Socratic Piety and Justice

1. *Euthyphro* ends in *aporia*: we do not really know what piety is. Yet, there are a few hints to how Socrates understands piety. The key passages begin where Socrates starts to lead Euthyphro at 11e. This is where Socrates introduces the connection between piety or holiness and justice.

2. *Justice*. The words *δίκαιος* (*dikaios*) and *δικαιοσύνη* (*dikaiosyne*) can be translated as ‘just’ and ‘justice’; but given their ethical, rather than legal, connotations, ‘right’, ‘doing right’, or ‘moral’ is apt too. Plato’s *Republic* is a study of justice. (More below, ¶9.)

3. *Euthyphro* develops this idea to the point that piety is a sort of care or looking after (*θεραπεία*, *therapeia*; see 13a). Socrates thinks this is a good answer, and the suggestion of ‘therapy’ is developed into the central idea, which appears at 13d: piety is defined as a sort of service (*ὑπηρετική*; *hypêretikê*) to the gods. Socrates asks three times about the aim or product of this service, but Euthyphro just points to prayers and sacrifices; yet he also says that piety saves the private and public well-being (14b). The passage ends with Socrates pointing out how close they were to an answer (14c). This is crucial for understanding Socrates’s piety.

4. *Academic Definitions*. The suggestion of service is consistent with a work attributed to the Academy (but not Plato himself), which lists central philosophical definitions. “Piety: justice concerning the gods; the ability to serve the gods voluntarily; the correct conception of the honour due to gods; knowledge of the honour due to gods.”¹ And, “Holy: service to a god which is agreeable to the god”²

5. *Popular piety*. Socrates’s positive and innovative idea contrasts with common views of piety and holiness. First, in 5th-century Greece, there is no word for *religion*.³ All aspects of daily life had an integrated ‘religious’ dimension. Thus, to be pious is to act consistently with, and observant of, traditional norms of the relation between the gods and humans. Mainly, this means worship, i.e. performing prayers and sacrifices. (Note Euthyphro’s appeal to prayers above.)

6. *Criticism*. This view came under pressure by the rise of natural philosophy, e.g., by Xenophanes (c. 570–475 BCE: religious anthropomorphism; perhaps monotheism), Anaxagoras (c. 500–428 BCE: things do not come and cease to be, they mix and re-mix; perhaps panpsychism), and Protagoras (c. 490–20 BCE: man is the measure of all things: moral relativism). Socrates also criticises unreflected traditions. At the start of *Republic* (331ff.), e.g., he challenges the traditional view of justice in terms of receiving what one deserves and returning what one owes.

7. *Socratic Piety*. “Piety is that part of justice that is a service of humans to gods, assisting the gods in their primary task to produce their most beautiful product.”⁴ Since the gods are wise, good, and virtuous, this divine *pankalon ergon* (*πάγκαλον*

1 Cooper, J. M. (ed.) *Plato. Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett (p. 1680).

2 *Ibid.*, p. 1684.

3 See McPherran M. L. (2006). Platonic Religion. In H. H. Benson (ed.), *A Companion to Plato* (pp. 244–59). Oxford: Blackwell.

4 McPherran, M. L. (2010). Socratic Religion. In D. R. Morrison (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates* (p. 118). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

ἔργον)—the gods’ ‘marvellous work’—is virtue or excellence (*ἀρετή*, *aretê*). This can be humanely brought about not by libations, but exclusively by ‘looking after’ one’s own soul, or by improving one’s own soul.

8. How can we look after our souls or improve them? Self-examination and relentless elimination of false or incoherent beliefs and groundless opinions (i.e. the mere semblance of knowledge). Hence the a dramatic passage in the *Apology*, where Socrates says his duty to god and to doing philosophy is greater than to the court, and he shall thus never stop asking questions and thereby perfecting the soul (29c–30b).

9. The result of this perfection is the balanced and hence the just soul. According to the *Republic*, the just life is the psychologically harmonic life, where aspiration, desire, and reason work ‘symphonically’ together (do their jobs; have their pleasures). This harmony constitutes the flourishing of individuals and the society. (Euthyphro has a point, then; ¶3.) Just as the political leaders need to understand the Good (*ἀγαθόν*, *agathon*) in order to rule for the good of all (i.e. to rule well); individuals, in order to live well, must also keep an eye on their ‘inner society’ (*ἐν αὐτῷ πολιτείαν*, *en auto politeian*).⁵

10. The key idea: justice is intrinsically linked to our psychic harmony and to flourishing or happiness—and hence *an inner state*. Happiness is something we can achieve; nothing that ‘just’ happens to us (e.g., whether others treat us ‘fairly’). If we develop our inner psychic balance and order; and in particular, develop reason (inner ‘guardian’), then we can forge a virtuous or good life—a well-lived life, as Socrates famously says at *Apology* 38a.

11. *Looking After God*. A service to the gods that consists in promoting their aims by doing philosophy; to examine oneself and others is the most pious activity. This is why in the *Apology* (34c ff.), addressing the court in a flood of tears would be at odds with Socrates’s religious duty: it would promote injustice. That Socrates is on a divine mission is a dominant theme throughout the *Apology*: ‘spokesman for the oracle’ (22e); ‘assist the god’ (23b); ‘when god appointed me’ (28e); ‘god has assigned me to this city’ (30e). This view is revisionary and so dangerous, for it ‘psychologises’ piety as a state or activity internal to the individual, rather than as a public or external show.

12. *Socratic Ethics*. This relates to two key themes in Socrates’s ethics. (1) Nobody does wrong intentionally (cf. *Apology* 24d ff.). If we act immorally, this is because of a lack of knowledge or understanding; i.e. ignorance. The virtuous person is then the one who acts rightly or justly. (2) It is better to suffer an injustice than to do an injustice (see *Gorgias* 469c). This too is revisionary: it goes against the retribution dominated trend of the traditional view of (divine) justice.

5 See especially *Republic* 427e, 441, 581e–583a, 586a–e, 590c–591e. Note too that according to Plato, the soul has three ‘parts’ or functions. (1) Reason (*λογιστικόν*, *logistikon*): planning, learning, reasoning, searching for truth, increase knowledge, intellectual desire. (2) Spirit (*θυμοειδές*, *thymoeides*): love of honour, ambition, aggression and pride, power, success, fame—in short, perhaps, the *passions*. (3) Desire or Appetite (*ἐπιθυμητικόν*, *epithymetikon*): natural drives: thirst, food, sex, greed. An individual is just insofar as the three parts of the soul perform their proper functions (*Republic* 441d–e; 443b–d)

