Socrates’ Arguments Against Euthyphro’s Definitions of Piety

DEF 1 (5c – 6e): Euthyphro’s first proposal: “Piety is doing what I’m doing now: Prosecuting a wrongdoer, whether it be murder or temple robbery or anything else, whether the wrongdoer be your father, your mother, or anyone else; not to prosecute is impious.” (5d-e)

Socrates’ Argument (ARG 1):

1. Euthyphro claimed that his proposal concerning piety would be an account of what the Form of Piety is (5d).
2. Euthyphro’s proposal is (at best) an example of a pious action, but (i) There are other pious actions than what the proposal covers or mentions (6d) and (ii) Pious actions are not the same as the Form of Piety (which is “the form itself that makes all pious actions pious”) (6d).

DEF 2 (7a–8b): Euthyphro’s proposal here is that “What is dear to the gods is pious, what is not is impious.” (7a)

1. The gods disagree about the just/unjust, beautiful/ugly, and good/bad (but not about numbers, greater/lesser, larger/smaller, and heavier/lighter). (7b-d) So:
2. Since the gods disagree about justice, some of them like (love) certain actions and so those actions are just, and some of them dislike (hate) those same actions and so the actions are unjust. (7e-8a)
3. According to Euthyphro’s proposal, the same thing is loved (dear) and hated (not dear) by the gods. (8a)
4. The same thing is pious and not pious (8a) (and the pious is opposite of the impious). (7a)
5. It is not true that what is dear to the gods is pious.

DEF 3 (9c–11b): “What all the gods hate is impious, what they all love is pious” (9d)

1. Just as that which is being carried is being carried (which is one thing) because someone carries it (which is not the same thing), and that which is being led is so because someone leads it (and the same for that which is being seen, and coming to be), so that which is being loved is loved because someone loves it. (from 10a–c) So:
2. The pious is loved because it is pious and it is not pious because it is loved. (10d)
3. Because piety is being loved by the gods, it is being loved and is dear to the gods. (10d) But (because the pious is loved by the gods because it is pious):
4. The god-beloved is not the same as the pious, and the pious is not the same as the god-beloved. (10d) So:
5. It is not true that what all the gods love is pious.

One thing to notice is that Euthyphro is just giving a quality of piety, and not saying what the essence of it is. This is the “quality point”. Socrates says as much at 11a. If the gods love piety because it is pious (which Euthyphro agrees to), then piety already exists before they love it. This is the independence point. The examples of being carried show that for something to be in the process of being carried, someone must be doing the carrying, or that carrying causes something’s being carried. So, since Euthyphro grants that piety is loved by the gods because of its nature, it already exists independently of what the gods believe or whether or not they love it. Now, for Euthyphro to claim that they love piety doesn’t get us closer to knowing what its nature is. This is the gist of the argument. Both the “independence” point and the “just a quality” point were important to notice. Note too that this argument is Socrates’ rejection of
the Authority Theory or Divine Command Theory I lectured about (the view that whatever god commands is right). Also, in this argument is Socrates’ defense and description of the property theory. Remember that I told you in lecture that this is one of the positive things that Socrates tells us in the *Euthyphro*? Again, note that you cannot carry ARG 1 into this argument, and say that the gods still disagree about piety, so there is no agreement and Euthyphro’s proposal is wrong. Why? This is because they are both assuming for the sake of argument that the gods do agree on something. Let’s say they agree on 2+2=4. Then 2+2=4 is pious. If they don’t agree on anything, then there’s no piety (according to Euthyphro’s definition). Some of you said that this second proposal fails for the same reason as the first, which just isn’t true. Socrates’ point (whether or not he’s right) here is that even if the gods could agree on something, the Form Piety is independent of them, so their opinion doesn’t matter. Also, against that interpretation, it is never said that the gods still disagree, so that is some good evidence that that is not how the argument goes. Notice that in the ARG 1 above, someone can object by saying that there is only one God (or at least someone can question ARG 1 because of that and try not to beg the question, as some of you did), but that *this argument actually does not depend on there being many gods or one god*. That is why, in my opinion, this is the most powerful argument made in the Euthyphro.

**DEF 4 (12e-13b):** Euthyphro’s proposal: “Piety and godliness are the care of the gods” (13b)

1. Care = aiming at the good or the benefit of the thing cared for. (13b) So:
2. Piety is aiming at the good/benefit of the gods. (13c) But:
3. Doing something pious does not benefit the gods. (13c) So:
4. Piety is not the care of the gods. (13c-d) [Rejection of Euthyphro’s proposal]

“Hunting is the care of dogs” was definitely questionable as one of Socrates’ examples, but his main point was that if you care for something, you try to make that thing better, benefit that thing (or preserve it), and that remains true of his other examples, even if he gives one bad example. Of course, it could be that a hunter cared for his dogs back then too, so maybe we would have all agreed to this example had we lived back then . . . Other than that, if you didn’t have premise three, this argument really doesn’t go anywhere!

**DEF 5 (13d-14b):** Euthyphro’s proposal: “Piety is a kind of service to the gods” (13d)

1. Service to physicians achieves the goal of health (and shipbuilders achieve shipbuilding, house builders achieve house building). (13d-e)
2. Service to the gods tends to achieve “many fine things” (13e), but nothing in particular.
3. If service to the gods does not achieve a particular result, then piety is not a kind of service to the gods. (Assumed at 14a – 14b) ____________
4. Piety is not a kind of service to the gods.

This proposal is unacceptable because Euthyphro cannot say what it is that service of the gods achieves. E.g., generals achieve a fine thing, but more specifically, they achieve victory in war, farmers produce food, but what do gods achieve? And what will our service achieve for the gods?

**DEF 6 (14c-15b):** Euthyphro’s proposal: “Piety is a knowledge of how to sacrifice and pray” (14c)

1. Sacrifice = to make a gift to the gods; Pray = to beg/ask for something from the gods. (14d)
2. Piety is a knowledge of how to give to and beg from the gods. (14d)
3. To beg correctly = to ask of gods things that we need from them. (14d)
4. To give correctly = to give gods what they need from us. (14e) So:
5. Piety is a sort of trading skill of gifts between gods and men (where trading is giving what you don’t need to someone who needs that thing and getting from someone else what you need which is something that they don’t need) (14e)
6. The gods are not benefited by receiving our gifts of honor, reverence, and gratitude (15a), but these gifts are dear to the gods. (15b) So: ________________
7. What is dear to the gods is pious. (15b) But:
8. “What is dear to the gods is pious” has been refuted already and Euthyphro agreed that it was wrong (see ARG 1).

What’s tricky about this last argument was to see that based on what Euthyphro agreed to and proposed, they end up with a conclusion that is Euthyphro’s second proposal (what I’m calling ARG 1 in this answer sheet). So they’ve come full circle in the argument. (How cool is that? 😎) You also could have said that the argument works well because they have already agreed in ARG 4 above (and it’s implied in ARG 5 above) that the gods do not need anything from us, and, in the words of this argument, we cannot “give correctly.” So the gods do not need to trade anything with us, and our sacrifices will not benefit the gods.