CHAPTER 16

An Introduction to Strauss’ “An Untitled Lecture on Plato’s *Euthyphron*”

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One could be forgiven for supposing a conversation with so unpromising an interlocutor as Euthyphro could not settle much. He thinks he possesses divine wisdom and knows what piety is, but he contradicts himself readily, cannot always understand Socrates’ basic questions (much less answer them adequately), sometimes forgets what has been established, and seems unfazed by his incoherence. Utterly in the dark about Socrates’ true gifts, he enters the conversation imagining that he and Socrates are kindred spirits.¹

It is no surprise, however, that Strauss’ lecture on the *Euthyphro* understands it not only to address a subject of great importance but also to be unusually radical in the way it does so (¶19, p. 19; ¶1).² This said, it should be borne in mind that Strauss never published his lecture and that he begins it by declaring that the *Euthyphro* presents only a “half-truth”: it is not Plato’s complete teaching on piety (¶1). Hearers or readers of the lecture must therefore resist the temptation to take it as representing either Strauss’ or Plato’s last word on the subjects it raises, but all this is perfectly compatible with its being a lecture from which there is much to learn. I will here try to show how its provocative main arguments help to bring out the perhaps surprising power of this short Socratic conversation with a young man whose convictions are strong but incoherent.

Before turning to a more patient look at the lecture as it unfolds, let me call attention to its main theme or question.

The lecture’s most memorable declaration is perhaps the following: “Whether the Bible is right or philosophy is of course the only question which

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¹ The passages behind this overview include *Euth.* 10a1–5, 4a11–b3, 4d5–5a2, 11b6–d2, and 3b5–c4.

² Parenthetical references are first to paragraphs of Strauss’ lecture, of which there are 21. I will add page numbers when it helps to do so, and, sometimes, the letters “t, m, b” to indicate the top, middle, or bottom of the page. References are based on Strauss (1996).
ultimately matters” (¶21). Although the word “philosophy” never appears in the *Euthyphro*, Strauss features it prominently. His lecture is not about piety in the abstract; it is especially about piety in relationship to philosophy or knowledge more generally, and it typically treats them as incompatible alternatives. Strauss implies we might prefer to find a compromise than to confront piety and philosophy as starkly opposed alternatives, but we cannot “eat the cake and have it” (¶21, p. 21t). A related set of opposed alternatives guides the discussion especially in paragraphs 14–17: Are the primary beings gods or ideas? (¶17, p. 17t). If they are ideas, knowledge may be possible; if they are gods, knowledge is not possible, for there is nothing permanent for the knower to know. Strauss calls the alternative between gods and ideas “so extreme that one would be very glad if it could be evaded” (¶15, p. 16t). He even experiments with a way of evading this extreme alternative, but he appears to deem it unsuccessful (¶16). Strauss returns frequently to this theme: the *Euthyphro* teaches that we face a choice or tension between stark alternatives, gods or ideas. The most apt response to the former is piety, to the latter philosophy.

But there is a second prominent candidate for the most memorable conclusion of the lecture, one that presupposes but goes beyond the point just made. It is that one of these two extreme alternatives is superior to the other, at least on the basis of the *Euthyphro*, which teaches “that piety is superfluous and that the gods are superfluous except for the many” (¶20, p. 20m). If we heard above that the ideas (and philosophy) and the gods (and piety) are alternatives, this passage dismisses the gods and piety as superfluous. As we shall soon see, it does so in favor of the ideas. Several other important passages also have philosophy and piety not as alternatives of equal rank but with the former in a position superior to the latter. If Socrates is pious, for example, piety is a virtue (¶2). If he is not, it is not. Strauss also says that Socrates “transcends the dimension of the ordinary arts and virtues” in the direction of philosophy, whereas Euthyphro does so in the direction of “spurious knowledge” (¶11, p. 13t). But how does Socrates’ position establish itself as the superior one? How does philosophy earn the right to judge between “gods or ideas”? Does

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3 See especially ¶2–4, 9–11, and 21. It makes sense that Socrates would not mention philosophy to Euthyphro, who understands Socrates to be a diviner like himself. Euthyphro knows where Socrates conversed but not in what manner he did so (*Euth*. 2a1–3).

4 In addition to these two formulations of sharp oppositions (philosophy and piety [¶2–7, 19, 21] and gods and ideas [¶14–17]), consider also the philosopher and the city (¶8 and 18) and philosophy and poetry (¶15).

5 See also ¶13–14, and note the calls for thinking and Socratic wakefulness, which both begin the lecture and bring it to a close.