The End of the Euthyphro

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Most of the recent discussions of Plato's Euthyphro have concentrated either on the so-called "Euthyphro dilemma" (i.e. the problem of whether divine commands create moral values or presuppose independently existing values) or on the intricacies of the argument in 10a-11b in which a version of that problem is posed. The concluding section of the dialogue from 11b to the end, though much discussed by earlier writers, is virtually ignored in the modern literature. In this paper, I renew the discussion of this section of the dialogue, in the belief that some of the insights of the earlier generation of commentators may prove to have something to contribute to the problem of the unity of virtue in the early Platonic dialogues.

A resumé of the section in question will be helpful. At 11b it is agreed that Euthyphro's proposed account of to hosion as what is pleasing to all the gods has been refuted, since it has been shown (by the argument of 10a-11b) to lead to contradiction: accordingly, Socrates invites Euthyphro to suggest another account. But Euthyphro is now (not surprisingly) in a state of complete bewilderment, so Socrates volunteers (11e2-4) to help him out with a suggestion. "Think of this, now", he says, "doesn't it seem to you necessary that whatever is hosion is just?" (e4-5). Euthyphro agrees, whereupon Socrates asks whether he also thinks that whatever is just is hosion, or whether his view is that, while everything hosion is just, not everything which is just is hosion (11e6-12a2). On Euthyphro's failing to grasp the point, Socrates spells it out by means of another example (12a3-c9) and Euthyphro eventually settles for the thesis that everything hosion is just but not vice versa, i.e. that "The hosion is a part of the just" (c10-d3). In response to Socrates' question "Which part?" (d5-7), Euthyphro replies that it is that part which is concerned with the service (therapeia) of the gods, while the remainder of the just is that part which is concerned with the service of men (e5-8).

At this point a few words of elucidation are in order. Firstly, the subsumption of to hosion under justice should remind us that the subject of the dialogue is hosiotês as an attribute of persons and their actions. Of course, things of other kinds can be hosia, e.g. a grove or a temple, to which the Greek adjective hosios is as readily applicable as its English renderings "holy" and "sacred". The rejected account of to hosion as what is beloved of or pleasing to the gods has at least this to be said for it that it applies alike
to non-personal and to personal instances; the gods may love woods and rivers as well as men and their doings. But the opening of the dialogue makes it clear that agents and their actions are the primary cases: the quest for an account of to hosion arises out of the question whether it is hosion or anosion of Euthyphro to prosecute his father for homicide and Euthyphro’s first answer to the question “What do you say to hosion is?” is “It’s what I’m doing now” (5d6-9). The adjective hosios is treated as interchangeable with eusebes, meaning “well-disposed towards the gods”, “reverent” or “religious”: Socrates first asks Euthyphro for his account of to hosion in the words “What sort of things do you say to eusebes and to asebes are, in cases of homicide and in the other types of case?” (5c9-d1). To hosion is then the virtue of being properly disposed both in thought and action towards the gods: it is hosion for Euthyphro to prosecute his father if and only if so doing manifests the proper relationship to the gods, which is to say that it fulfils a religious obligation. No one English word conveys this sense exactly: “religious”, as applied (in a slightly archaic usage) to persons and their actions perhaps comes closest, while its opposite “irreligious” comes close to capturing the sense of asebes.

The suggested connection between hosiotês and justice is then straightforward. Justice (dikaiosunê) is the primary social virtue, the standing disposition to respect and treat properly all those with whom one enters into social relations. Human individuals have social relations, not only with other human individuals, but also with the gods. Hosiotês is then the name of that particular aspect of the basic social virtue which is directed towards the gods: every hosion act is a just act, i.e. a just act directed towards a god or gods (e.g. making a sacrifice, mentioning a divine name with respect) and to be hosios is simply to be just in one’s dealings with the gods. Hosiotês is then a kind of justice, viz. justice vis-à-vis the gods, just as parricide is a kind of murder, viz. murder of one’s father. On the position which Euthyphro finally adopts (12e5-8) justice towards other humans has no special name, being described merely as “the remaining part of the just” (i.e. what’s left when hosiotês has been distinguished); the term “justice” is treated as generic, the social virtue as such, exercised either towards gods or humans. Ordinary Greek idiom would naturally appropriate the term dikaiosunê as the name for the virtue of social relations with human agents, and it is in accordance with that usage that the good man is described at Gorg. 507b as one who would do right by men, i.e. justice, and by the gods, i.e. religion (lit. “concerning men he would do the fitting just things, and concerning the gods (the fitting) religious things”). It is unnecessary to suppose any difference of doctrine between that passage and the Euthyphro; rather the difference is to be accounted for by a natural shift in