DISCUSSION NOTE

The Figure of Euthyphro in Plato’s Dialogue

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Probably the most influential, or at least most widely consulted, English language commentary on the *Euthyphro*, that of Burnet in 1924, has some very odd things to say about Euthyphro, which need correcting, in my opinion. Burnet argues against the traditional view that Euthyphro is a kind of “docteur en théologie traditionelle” (M. Croiset¹), in favour of an interpretation which sees Euthyphro as a “sectary of some kind” (p. 5), someone on the fringe of conventional Athenian society, parallel to the Pythagorean Telauges with whom Socrates converses in a dialogue of Aeschines, someone who receives ridicule for his religious position at the hands of the Athenians (p. 5), in short as a “kindred spirit” (p. 6) to Socrates in the matter of the latter’s alleged invention of new gods. Clearly this view has far-reaching implications for the way we read the dialogue, if true.²

In particular, it bears on two questions: (1) One main charge against Socrates was ‘inventing new gods’; how far are we to see Euthyphro as a defender of the old? (2) Connected with this, Plato introduces what looks like a precursor of the fully-fledged theory of Forms as an argumentative strategy when Euthyphro talks of many holy things instead of The Holy (6 D 9-10: έξειναι αύτό το είδως, ibid. μία ηδέα τά τε άνάσαι άνώσει είναι καί τά δόσια δόσια. Also, 6 E 2-5). If Euthyphro is a representative of the old anthropomorphic religion, then we see Plato’s ambition for the Forms; if he is a religious innovator himself, as Burnet and others seem to think, then the theory of Forms is demoted to the position of one among other equally new-fangled alternatives.

History does not help us a great deal in identifying Euthyphro’s position in the religious spectrum current at Athens. Plato appears to mean the same Euthyphro in

¹ M. Croiset, Platon, Oeuvres Complètes, Tome I, Paris 1920 p. 179.
² J. Burnet, Plato’s *Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates*, and *Critio*, Oxford 1924. That Burnet’s view is not an isolated freak can be seen in A. E. Taylor’s words (Plato, London 1926 p. 147): “As to the main purpose of the dialogue, again, I think Burnet is clearly right. As both Plato and Aeschines represent, Socrates had lived in association with religious ascetics and mystics of the Orphic type; everyone also knew that he had been formally convicted of some kind of religious innovation. The natural inference would have been that he was himself a sectary much of the same type as Euthyphro . . .”. Likewise we find Taylor’s position on this point being taken up by R. G. Hoerber, Plato’s *Euthyphro*, Phronesis 3, 1958, p. 96: “Is Euthyphro representative of the populace of Athens? Grote, Jowett and Cornford, for example, answer in the affirmative; A. E. Taylor objects . . . We tend to agree with Taylor . . .”.

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the *Cratylus*, whom Socrates attributes with expertise in etymology, divine inspiration (ἐνθουσίασις) and divine wisdom (διδακτικὴ σοφία), albeit ironically, in his favourite manner.3 We learn from our dialogue that Euthyphro was a μάντης (3e3), one who was very sure of his interpretation of divine will with respect to Athenian law (4e4-5a1); we hear that he has resided on Naxos, where his father held lands. Presumably they were ἀναγονίσται, holders of land apportioned by (Athenian) lot;4 now the Athenian land-holdings of this sort had to be relinquished in 404 B.C. This gives us a time lapse of at least four years between the act for which Euthyphro is prosecuting his father and the dramatic date of our dialogue.5 We know further that Euthyphro appeared publicly before the Athenian Assembly in his capacity as seer (3c1). Plato makes him totally ignorant of the charge to be brought against Socrates by Meletus when the two meet outside the office of the Archon Basileus, though he knows Socrates well, and is apparently a fervent admirer of him as a man (3a6-8).

The historical evidence is sketchy enough, but Burnet uses it to try and button-hole Euthyphro. Naxos, he writes, is close to Paros, which was a hot-bed of Pythagoreans; some of their crankiness is therefore likely to have rubbed off on Euthyphro; Naxos was famous for its cult of Dionysus. This, insinuates Burnet quite unjustly, makes it likely that Euthyphro became imbued with a religion foreign to the Athenians.6 Likewise he was an "authority" on Uranus and Cronus, as evidenced by both our dialogue and the mention in the *Cratylus*. Taylor has taken this last point up and written: "It was a duty of piety to his (Socrates') memory to make it clear that his views on religion were very different from those of a sect who found the 'deep things of God' in stories like those of the binding of Cronus and the mutilation of Uranus — tales which had nothing to do with the official worship of Athens and were repulsive to the ordinary Athenian."7

Since Euthyphro's fondness for the tale of Zeus' treatment of Cronus has been used as the main evidence against his being a traditional Athenian theologian, we had better examine the charge.8 Euthyphro is conducting a suit against his elderly father for the accidental manslaughter of a member of his work-force, who was himself a murderer awaiting trial. Euthyphro's friends and relations are incensed by his intention of prosecuting his own father on such murky grounds, but Euthyphro tells them, as he now tells Socrates (5e2-3), that there is a compelling divine precedent (τεχνητήν 5e2) for his action: Zeus himself, whom men hold to be the highest and justest of gods, bound his father Cronus, because the father had swallowed his children unlawfully: ὅτι τοὺς ἅγια κατέμαχεν οὐκ ἐν δίκῃ (6a1). Euthyphro tacks on the similar action of Cronus before him against his father Uranus, for good measure.

3 396d2-397a1.
4 Burnet 1924, p. 25.
5 Burnet's explanation (1924, p. 25) that the revision of Athenian laws following the restoration of democracy in 403 B.C. was responsible for the delay in Euthyphro's law-suit, seems plausible. Hoerber (1958, p. 97) prefers to think Euthyphro had waited that long before prosecuting his father.
6 Burnet 1924, p. 5-6.
7 Taylor 1926, p. 147.
8 Hoerber 1958, p. 96 writes: "Euthyphro's implicit faith in militant Olympians reflects Orphic beliefs rather than popular tenets."