

Background Information on the *Euthyphro*
by Chris Kuipers

Dear fellow HumCore instructors:

Since I am supposed to be a subject expert on Plato, writing part of my dissertation on the Phaedrus, and in the spirit of all the help that has already been circulating on the list, I will offer some general thoughts about Plato's dialectic as represented by Euthyphro, the dialogue on which I cut my teeth in Greek. Perhaps I only have one Greek tooth; but I am happy to pass it around--like the three Old Gray Women in the myth do--if someone will pass me that one shared eye at some point. I expect the classicists on the list may have clarifications or additions.

For questions classical generally, whether or not you have time for it with the Euthyphro, I would refer you to The Oxford Classical Dictionary (3rd ed., 1996), which has well-written entries that are accessible for non-specialists. In the entry on Plato, for example, you will find a number of salient facts about dialectic (for which there is also a separate entry): the philosophical purpose of the dramatic dialogues is to distance Plato's own position from what is being argued. Plato seems to differ from Socrates in three key ways: he did not take on the democratic duty of marrying and raising a family; he founded a philosophical school; and he wrote copiously: Socrates famously refused to do either of the latter two. So, I believe, one of the first tasks in teaching Plato is to point out the historical relationship of and the philosophical differences between "Plato" (b. 427 BC[E]) and "Socrates" (d. 399). The particular contradiction of putting the dialogue form into writing is well-known to us (Plato's pharmacy etc.), but this probably needs a light touch for our students, ideally after they have gotten to an idea (much less than Idea) of what Plato's dialectic is, at least to the cognate connection with "dialogue."

Dialectic is a tough nut. Basically, it is a talking fix: driving at something new by interlocution or interposition. Obviously I am trying to encompass more than Plato's dialectic in this definition. The oppositional form of Xeno's paradoxes led Aristotle to attribute dialectic to him. Socrates certainly had a somewhat one-sided method that we memorialize in any catechism that has loaded "Q." and "A." But Plato seems to have invented the term, and certainly developed the method more wholistically. In the first sentence of the Rhetoric, Aristotle calls rhetoric the counterpart to dialectic. Likewise (?) in the medieval trivium, dialectic is a synonym for "logic." And then there is Hegel's version, the famous triad: thesis, antithesis, synthesis. And Marx's dialectical materialism, where social and economic forces, rather than speakers or logical propositions, are interposed. And thereby Bakhtin's and many others' literary version, dialogism (double-voicing, polyphony), where texts are in dialogue with social settings, or more often contain dialogical oppositions (carnival).

But back to Plato. The standard work on the subject is Plato's *Earlier Dialectic* by Richard Robinson (2nd ed., 1953), another tooth to be passed around: the *Euthyphro* falls into this earlier phase, which Robinson finds characterized by elenchus and definition. The former term is perhaps easier to define than dialectic. You may not want to burden students with another term, but here any drawn difference between Plato (dialectic) and Socrates (elenchus) could pay off: "elenchus' in the narrower sense is a form of cross-examination or refutation. In this sense it is the most striking aspect of the behaviour of Socrates in Plato's early dialogues. He is always putting to somebody some general question, usually in the field of ethics. Having received an answer (let us call it the primary answer), he asks many more questions. These secondary questions differ from the primary one in that, whereas that was a matter of real doubt and difficulty, the answers to all these seem obvious and inescapable. [. . .] [Finally,] [p]ropositions to which the answerer feels he must agree have entailed the falsehood of his original assertion" (Robinson 7).

So while elenchus seems more what we might call deconstructive, dialectic is more positive, at least the way Plato wants it. He always opposes (good) dialectic to sophistry and "eristic," the mere "art of quarreling" (this is the Greek word used for example to describe Agamemnon and Achilles' exchange at the opening of the *Iliad*). I will probably be supplying this term to my students as well, because it helps divide up "argument" along a line of contradiction that is noticeable in some of the discussion questions we have: "argument" to us is both eristic, "a verbal fight" ("When was the last time you won an argument?") and also "formal and polite position-taking" ("academic argument"). Now, those in the know may notice that I am touching on two important parts of Plato's *later* dialectic, the opposed processes of "collection" into genres and "division" into species (so wonderfully performed in the *Phaedrus* for example). This is an off-topic nicety, but you may find that your students will profit from considering "definition" as itself a joining of these opposed processes of collection and division. The classic definition (see any dictionary) is a broad phrase and a qualifier: "Plato: a Greek philosopher/who argued Forms."

On the *Euthyphro*: the title character's name means "straight-minded." ("Meletus" means "careful, diligent one.") Here we can start to talk about "Socratic irony," which boils down to Socrates' being a lot smarter than he looks or purports to be, especially in his exaggerated deference to the interlocutor's intelligence. The "what is X?" question of definition looks so easy to *Euthyphro*, but it's not for Socrates, who is looking for a perfect equivalent, not a simple synonym: "X is and only is Y." This *Euthyphro* is not able to supply. But the larger question, which some students may start to feel, is that the Socratic method itself seems somehow impious. Elenchus, in fact, may be translated as "disgracing, putting to shame"; here again there is the narrow line between dialectic and eristic.

I hope that there is something of use here for you, and that any of my

confusions will be clarified by the lectures or others on the list.