

Giovanni Giorgini | Elena Irrera [Eds.]

God, Religion and Society in Ancient Thought



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Collegium Politicum

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Cover picture: Judges of the Dead - Rhadamanthys, Minos & Aeacus,
Apulian red-figure krater Ca4th B.C, Inv. 3296

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Foreword

The frequent employment of words like “god” (Greek *theos*; Latin *deus*), “the gods” (Greek *hoi theoi*; Latin *dei/dī*), and “the divine” (Greek *to theion*; Latin *divinum*) in several works of ancient Greek and Roman thought elicits a wide variety of philosophically problematic questions. In the first place, it is not entirely clear whether the theoretical accounts produced by poets and philosophers on the nature of the divine realm and its implications in the human world could be regarded as integral parts of a religious experience (either individual or collective). In the second place, it might be wondered whether it makes sense to speak of Greek and Roman religion as homogeneous and unitary phenomena and, if so, what their definitory traits would be. If we provisionally assume that religion involves a set of institutionalised practices, well-entrenched human attitudes, and recognition (intellectual, as well as attitudinal) of a non-human power, we might also ask how and to what extent these featuring elements could be either theoretically justified or, by contrast, critically challenged, by philosophical endeavours.

One last issue concerns the possibility for ancient works of natural theology and metaphysics to affect and shape – in virtue of the paradigms of divine perfection they offer – the underlying values of an ethically appropriate conduct in general, as well as those at the basis of wise legislative activity. In this regard, three main questions might be advanced: (1) how and on what grounds can gods and/or an abstract idea of the divine be viewed as paradigms of ethical (and not simply ontological) perfection? (2) How can a philosophical understanding of the divine be employed in the elaboration of specific institutional arrangements? (3) How can belief in the divine represent a guarantee of order and stability for the members of a political community?

The present collection of essays aims to investigate the interplay between philosophy, religion and society in the ancient world by examining how social structures and political institutions reacted to philosophical criticism. It spans from the ‘rationalization’ of the divine operated by early Greek philosophers to the notion of toleration one may find in Augustine. It features such authors as Plato (who uses for the first time in history the words ‘theology’ and ‘atheism’), and Aristotle, with his intellectualist view of god. The volume tries to show that, in Greek and Roman world, philosophical reflection in the domains of natural philosophy and

Foreword

theology can offer a promising approach towards a critical understanding of concrete political phenomena, religious institutions, and conceptions on virtuous political activity. From a purely disciplinary point of view, it hopes to contribute to a problematization of aims and methods of political philosophy in ancient times.

The project of a co-edited volume on the philosophical relationships between the divine, religion, and society has developed within the framework of a series of activities pursued by the members of the *Collegium Politicum*, an international research network for ancient political theory. The annual meeting of the *Collegium* organized in Bologna in May 2018 has represented a fruitful opportunity for a joint reflection on the topic. However, only some of the essays included in this book have been presented and discussed at the meeting, and an invitation to contribute to a written volume has been extended also to non-members of the *Collegium Politicum* with recognised expertise in the field.

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Bologna, 8th September 2022

Giovanni Giorgini and Elena Irrera

Eusebeia for the Gods as a Matter of Justice. Greek Popular Religion and Plato's *Euthyphro*

Elena Irrera

Abstract

This essay aims to analyse some uses of the word “*eusebeia*” in Greek classical antiquity, with a special focus on the way in which the corresponding notion helps to shape the goals and argumentative strategies of Plato's *Euthyphro*. Rather than indicating sheer formal correctness in matters of religious cult (i.e. an attitude which seems to be better expressed by the adjective “*hosios*”), Socratic *eusebeia* represents an invitation to adopt a critical attitude in ethically religious controversies. What is more, *eusebeia* can be understood as a source of acts of justice and civic respect in the domain of human relationships.

I. Introduction

In Greek classical antiquity, the word εὐσέβεια – being generally translated as ‘piety’,¹ ‘holiness’,² ‘religiosity’,³ and/or ‘proper respect’⁴ – is primarily employed with reference to a variety of human attitudes, activities, and beliefs concerning the gods and the most appropriate ways to worship them (e.g. prayers, sacrifices, ceremonies, oracle consulting, and divinatory practices). In particular, the use of εὐσέβεια is frequently attested in con-

1 See for instance Fowler (1966). Rabinowitz (1958) and Vlastos (1999) translate as ‘piety’ both ἡ εὐσέβεια/τὸ εὐσεβές and ἡ ὁσιότης/τὸ ὄσιον. Cf. Liddell-Scott-Jones (<http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lsg/#eid=46293>, last accessed 16/06/2021).

2 Mikalson (2010, p. 6) presents this as a possible translation for εὐσέβεια, although he criticizes it.

3 The substantive adjective τὸ εὐσεβές, cognate of εὐσέβεια, is translated by Burnet (1979) as “the religious”.

4 Cf. Norlin (1980), who translates the word “reverence”. Mikalson (2010, p. 9) suggests that ‘proper respect’ ought to replace translations as ‘piety’ and ‘holiness’ so as to avoid inappropriate connotations of the word ‘piety’ and focus on reverence for the gods (instead of respect for persons and things). Cf. Chantraine (1983, p. 831), who believes that εὐσέβεια is exclusively referred to respect for gods and rituals.

texts where a reverential, asymmetric respect towards the gods holds pride of place.⁵ The meaning of εὐσέβεια, however, cannot be confined to issues of sheer formal correctness in the performance of religious practices, as it also includes proper acts of justice and civic respect. Indeed (as I will try to show throughout this essay), several literary and philosophical Greek texts imply that various forms of lack of reverential respect towards the gods (ἀσέβεια) revolve around acts of injustice committed by some subjects towards their fellow-humans. What is more, reverential respect for the gods may generate a sense of moral obligation in the respecting subjects, as well as the awareness that any omitted, misguided or inappropriate care for divine authority may end up in charges of unrighteous ethical conduct towards gods and/or human beings.

In this essay I will explore some possible relations between worldly justice and human respect for the gods in ancient Greek culture, and show how a common-sensical view of piety can be addressed philosophically, i.e. in the context of a critical investigation of the nature of reverential respect for the gods and also of its implications in the domain of a distinctively human justice. To this goal, in the first part of the essay I will introduce some possible uses of ἡ εὐσέβεια in Greek orations, by focusing in particular on the occasional links that Isocrates establishes between religious reverence and a “horizontal”, human justice. Furthermore, I will investigate possible meanings of the words ἡ ὁσιότης/τὸ ὄσιον, and suggest that most references to those words denote the sense of a purely formal (and non-critical) abidance by rituals and practices concerning the gods.

In the second part of the essay, I will ask whether (and, if so, in what possible ways) the supposed relationship between human justice and holy respect for the gods (an issue widely entrenched in Greek culture and literature) is philosophically addressed by Socrates in Plato’s *Euthyphro* (to this goal, I shall devote special attention only to the first sections of the dialogue). The proposed question will give me the opportunity to inquire into some possible relationships between ἡ εὐσέβεια/τὸ εὐσεβές and ἡ ὁσιότης/τὸ ὄσιον and criticize the idea of a supposed interchangeability between them. In particular, I will suggest that τὸ ὄσιον and τὸ εὐσεβές (contrary to what *Euthyphro* seems to assume) are not treated by Socrates as synonyms. As I maintain, by employing the word τὸ εὐσεβές, Socrates betrays the intention to shift the discussion into a more critically

5 A similar form of respect can be qualified as “respect as honour”. For a contemporary theorization of this kind of respect and the accountability of the respecting subject towards the authority of the addressee(s) of respect see Darwall (2013).

informed, truth- and justice-oriented dimension. I will contend that Euthyphro's failure to meet the expectations of a proper critical discussion on reverence causes Socrates to give up his search for τὸ εὐσεβές, leading him to maintain the discussion in terms of τὸ ὄσιον.

II. Εὐσέβεια between justice and lawfulness. A comparison with ὀσιότης

Besides including the idea of a reverential respect for the gods, the semantic spectrum of the term εὐσέβεια also encompasses aspects of loyalty, admiration, and devotion towards qualities (like one's good physical aspect⁶) and/or human beings. If considered in relation to humans, εὐσέβεια can denote some sort of reverential respect towards family members – either “vertical”, like in a relation towards one's ancestors⁷ and parents,⁸ or “horizontal”, like in the case of relationships towards one's friends.⁹ In both cases, the word εὐσέβεια is employed within prescriptive contexts, i.e. as an ethical ideal to pursue. Literary evidence, however, exhibits a more widespread use of the word, which is most frequently introduced in relation to the idea of a reverential respect for the gods and a solicitous spirit of service towards them. By way of example, the phrases *πρὸς τοὺς θεοὺς εὐσέβεια* (cf. Isocrates, *Helen* 31.3, and *Busiris* 15.7; Plato, *Symposium* 193d3),¹⁰ *εὐσέβεια περὶ τοὺς θεοὺς* (cf. Isocrates, *Panathenaicus* 124.4) and *εἰς θεοὺς εὐσέβεια* (cf. Plato, *Republic* 10.615c2-3) convey the idea of recognition by human beings of a distinctively superior power. Furthermore, as is attested in the sphere of oratorical speech, εὐσέβεια is occasionally

6 Cf. Isoc., *Hel.* 10.58: εὐσεβεία καὶ προνοία χρώμεθα περὶ τὴν ιδέαν.

7 Cf. Isoc., *Plataicus*, 14.60: «You must [also] take some thought of your ancestors and not be negligent of the piety due to them (χρὴ δὲ καὶ τῶν προγόνων ποιήσασθαι τινα πρόνοιαν καὶ μὴ παραμελῆσαι μηδὲ τῆς περὶ ἐκείνους εὐσεβείας)» (tr. Norlin, 1980).

8 Cf. Pl., *Lg.*, 4.717a2-d3, where the unnamed Athenian claims that the “mark of piety” (τοῦ τῆς εὐσεβείας σκοποῦ; 717a6-b1) is achieved not only through worship to gods, daemons, and heroes, but also through the honour paid to living parents. Cf. *Rep.* 615c2-3: εἰς δὲ θεοὺς ἀσεβείας τε καὶ εὐσεβείας καὶ γονέας. Reverential respect for parents is also mentioned by the sophist Gorgias (*Funeral Oration*, fragment VS 82 B6), although he speaks in terms of ὀσιότης (πρὸς τοὺς τοκέας).

9 See the above mentioned Gorgias, VS 82 B6: εὐσεβεῖς πρὸς τοὺς φίλους. For a later use of εὐσέβεια towards human, see Dio Cassius (155-235 AD), who speaks of εὐσέβεια πρὸς ἀδελφόν (i.e. towards one's brother; D.C. 48.5).

10 Cf. *περὶ τοὺς θεοὺς θεραπεία* in Isocrates 11.24.1-2.

introduced in conjunction with the ideal of *φιλανθρωπία*, i.e. "love" and/or regard by human beings towards their fellows.

A telling example in this respect is offered by Demosthenes in the speech *Against Meidias*, where he presents himself as the victim of a series of outrages perpetrated by the Athenian rich man Meidias – the most serious of which was a slapping during the holy celebrations of the Great Dionysia. Demosthenes had voluntarily taken on a *choregia* in 348 BC, paying for equipment and the maintenance of the chorus of the Pandionis tribe (Martin 2009, p. 15). Meidias, who had tried to obstruct the chorus' activity, was only the addressee of a *προβολή*, namely a preliminary accusation brought by the orator before the *ἐκκλησία*. Nevertheless, Demosthenes seems to stress the legitimacy of a public accusation for religious impiety (*γραφὴ ὕβρεως* or *γραφὴ ἀσεβείας*) with regard to the case at issue (Martin 2009, p. 16). By speaking publicly to his fellow-citizens, Demosthenes stresses the fact that, in the same days in which Meidias had committed offences that called for the severest punishment, the Athenians themselves had all risen to such a height of benevolence towards human beings (*φιλανθρωπία*) and reverence towards the gods (*εὐσέβεια*) that they had suspended the exaction of penalties due for past offences (*Ag. Meid.*, 12.2). Despite Demosthenes' inclination to use religious and ethical references for rhetorical purposes,¹¹ philanthropy and reverence for the gods (which we might refer to as "religious" reverence) are here presented as distinct, but at the same time as complementary qualities in a speech which is meant to emphasize the idea of good ethical conduct in general.

A similar approach is kept by Isocrates, whose rhetorical strategy is generally thought to advance specific civic, political and pedagogical purposes.¹² In the *Panathenaicus*, the orator sings the praises of the ancestors who ruled the city of Athens in the most excellent manner. While extolling their superiority in moral excellence over the governors of other cities, he

11 Cf. Martin (2009), who argues that Demosthenes' (and other Athenian orators in the fourth century BC) references to religion is simply part of a rhetorical strategy, especially in public trials (although less in the assembly and in private trials). With regard to the *Against Meidias*, Martin argues that religious aspects are introduced by Demosthenes only gradually, and also that they enforce the moral and political reasons for the trial advanced in the first sections of the speech (2009, pp. 19-48).

12 See Garver (2004), who argues that Isocrates believes to have reconfigured the relation between philosophy, rhetoric and practical wisdom, situating its work in an intermediate position between the Sophists and Plato, and qualifying it as a matter of civic education as a distinct endeavour from both rhetoric and pure philosophy.

praises their εὐσέβεια in relation to the gods and their justice (δικαιοσύνη) towards human beings (*Panath.* 124, 3-4). Likewise, in the speech *On the Peace* Isocrates dwells on the good qualities which, if possessed by human souls, enable people to acquire the advantages of which they stand in need (32-33). Isocrates admits that he would be surprised if people thought that those who practice εὐσέβεια and δικαιοσύνη remained steadfast in these virtues simply because they expect to have less advantages than the wicked.

It is remarkable that the ideal portrait of human excellence sketched out in Greek oratory, although considering reverence for the gods and justice among human beings as conceptually separate virtues, does not exclude significant relations of reciprocal determination and influence between them. Indeed, several pieces of oratory show that justice and love for humanity can be regarded not only as definitory components of religious piety towards the gods. Reverence towards the gods is not exclusively (nor necessarily) expressed in acts of pure formal abidance by rituals (prayers, purifications, divinatory practices and rules, etc.). To the contrary, respect for a divine order and the gods (understood as the authoritative depositories of that order) surfaces through acts of justice and respect directly addressed towards human beings – acts for which no conventionally established performative pattern is made available.

By way of example, in the already mentioned *Panathenaicus*, Isocrates expresses a steady condemnation of the Ephors, i.e. the highest Spartan magistrates, who used to inflict death arbitrarily and with no previous trial. Isocrates stresses the fact that, in other Greek cities, their behaviour would have been regarded as a crime against the gods – and not simply against men (181-182). Isocrates wonders whether those who praise the deeds performed by the Spartans are also inclined to praise as “pious” (εὐσεβεῖς) and honourable those acts of injustice perpetrated against common people (182). In saying so, the orator highlights the idea that human injustice can be framed in terms of human lack of recognition of the gods’ authority. Likewise, a way to respect divine authority is to act virtuously towards human beings. In his view, the kind of excellence that the Spartans claim to possess is the one that develops in human souls alongside piety and justice (μετ’ εὐσεβείας καὶ δικαιοσύνης; 183.6) – the same kind of excellence he praises as the core of his own ethical teachings (183.6-7). In the light of his speech, those excellences will no longer appear as distinct pieces of a puzzle composing a supposed idea of “complete virtue”. Conversely, human justice towards human fellows can be viewed as the normative content of εὐσέβεια, and also as its *ratio essendi*. This idea is explicitly illustrated in Isocrates’ speech *To Nicocles*. In paragraph 20 of the oration, Isocrates addresses Nicocles, king of Cyprus, with the intention

of showing him the duties of a sovereign. In clarifying the nature of the greatest “service to the gods”, he explains that the highest form of it is not detached from human justice. On the contrary, justice towards human fellows can be seen as the greatest service to the divine:

In the worship of the gods (τὰ μὲν πρὸς τοὺς θεοὺς), follow the example of your ancestors, but believe that the noblest sacrifice and *the greatest devotion is to show yourself in the highest degree a good and just man* (my italics) (ἡγοῦ δὲ θῦμα τοῦτο κάλλιστον εἶναι καὶ θεραπείαν μεγίστην, ἂν ὡς βέλτιστον καὶ δικαιοτάτον σαυτὸν παρέχῃς); for such men have greater hope of enjoying a blessing from the gods than those who slaughter many victims. Honor with office those of your friends who are nearest of kin, but honor in very truth those who are the most loyal (tr. Norlin).

As the passage above suggests, human justice represents an indispensable requirement and, all the same, the content itself of an authentic respect for the gods. Devotion for the gods is generally related to the human search for solutions of stability in the field of human relations. The human quest for divine favour, then, will express itself not only in formal and institutionalized acts of reverence towards ontologically superior entities, but also in the urgency and the moral necessity to establish conditions of justice in the domain of human relationships.

The idea that *εὐσέβεια* towards the gods can be a way to the acquisition of benefits for the human life (such as survival, material prosperity and preservation of social stability) is well-exemplified also in Isocrates’ *Busiris*. In that speech, Isocrates critically addresses the orator Policrates, who was supposed to defend the Egyptian King Busiris from charges of impiety levelled against him (well-known was Busiris’ habit of sacrificing foreigners as a form of devotion to Zeus). On his view, Policrates has failed at emphasizing Busiris’ active contribution to an efficient administration of his kingdom. What he might rather have highlighted is the king’s use of *εὐσέβεια* towards the gods as a means of protection and defence of people and territories (just like the art of war).

As Isocrates suggests, the favour of the gods is a source of benefits for the human life. This is the reason why Busirides had established the presence of a professional group of people appointed for priestly service, alongside other arts:

So Busiris thus began, as wise men should, by occupying the fairest country and also by finding sustenance sufficient for his subjects. Afterwards, he divided them into classes: some he appointed to priestly

services, others he turned to the arts and crafts, and others he forced to practise the arts of war. He judged that, while necessities and superfluous products must be provided by the land and the arts, the safest means of protecting these was practice in warfare and reverence (*εὐσέβεια*) for the gods (15. Tr. Norlin).

Throughout the whole speech, the author's call for a sense of responsibility and moral bindingness towards the gods appears related to the expected positive consequences of reverence in matters of human prosperity and social stability. What is more, reverential respect for the gods seems to possess an eminently pedagogic function. As he suggests, a consolidated habit of respect for the gods enables the members of a certain political community to acquire the discipline and respect needed in the field of reciprocal interaction between fellow-humans, as well as a sense of moral obligation stemming from fear of punishment. This idea is confirmed in paragraph 25 of the oration:

[F]or actually those who in the beginning inspired in us our fear of the gods, brought it about that we in our relations to one another are not altogether like wild beasts. So great, moreover, is the piety and the solemnity with which the Egyptians deal with these matters¹³ that not only are the oaths taken in their sanctuaries more binding than is the case elsewhere, but each person believes that he will pay the penalty for his misdeeds immediately and that he will neither escape detection for the present nor will the punishment be deferred to his children's time.

A sense of justice and responsibility for one's behaviour, being generated by repeated activity in matters of promise-keeping and the payment of penalties, is influenced by what Isocrates names "practices of *όσιότης*":

And they have good reason for this belief; for Busiris established for them numerous and varied practices of piety (*ἀσκήσεις τῆς όσιότητος*) and ordered them by law even to worship and to revere (*σέβεσθαι καὶ τιμᾶν*) certain animals which among us are regarded with contempt, not because he misapprehended their power, but because he thought that the crowd (*τὸν ὄχλον*) ought to be habituated to obedience to all the commands of those in authority.

13 Literally: "the Aegyptians behaved in such a holy and solemn way (*ἀγίως περὶ ταῦτα καὶ σεμνῶς*)..."

Although the Greek word *ὀσιότης*, being here translated as piety, may be taken as a synonym of *εὐσέβεια*¹⁴, it is not unreasonable to suppose that – at least in this passage – it specifically expresses some form of uncritical acceptance of rituals and cults¹⁵. This idea would find confirmation in Isocrates' reference to a mass (*τὸ ὄχλον*) who needs to acquire lawfulness as a habit rather than a sophisticated intellectual awareness on the nature of the divine and its relations to human morality.

The issue of the proper meaning of *ὀσιότης* and the possible contexts for its employment are notoriously a matter of controversy among scholars. The range of the word at stake spans from sheer lawfulness in religious practices (in particular to those that require pure obsequious obedience to rules and institutions) to a more general and critically informed attitude of reverential respect for the gods. What is more, given the semantic ambiguity of both *ὀσιότης* and *εὐσέβεια*, it is extremely difficult to establish proper conceptual distinctions between the two, as well as possible points of contact and overlaps. Broadie, for instance, has proposed that *τὸ εὐσεβές* applies to both persons and performed acts and has a more positive value, whereas *τὸ ὄσιον* applies to actions which are nothing more than 'not religiously forbidden' (Broadie 2003, p. 54, footnote 1). What Broadie's classification neglects, in my opinion, is the fact that, on several occasions, *ὀσιότης* is also used as either a distinctive virtue of character (cf. *Pl., Prot.* 329c5; *Men.* 78d3; *Lg.* 2.661b5 and 4.717a2; *Isoc., Evag.* 51.1) or as a quality of a virtuous life (cf. *Pl., Lg.* 2.663b2; 2.663d3; 12.959c1). Broadie's belief that *ὀσιότης* is specifically associated to "non-unlawful" acts is probably derived from the idea that lack of piety involves the transgression of a moral or institutional order. However, to judge from the uses of the word in classical Greek literature and philosophy, the idea of a holy life does not necessarily exclude either a positive attitude of reverence for the gods – one that transcends pure abstention from injustice and unlawfulness – or (as we shall see in the case of *Euthyphro* in the homonymous Platonic dialogue), initiatives that would be regarded as socially and traditionally inappropriate.

It is worth noting, however, that the word *ὀσιότης* frequently conveys the idea of a human attempt to establish a bond with the divine realm through the performance of conventionally established religious practices – such as offerings to the gods and public sacrifices (*Pl., Lg.* 6.782c4-5), li-

14 The idea that the two words are synonym is held by Burnet (1979).

15 Cf. *Bus.* 28, where the *ὀσιότης* of the Egyptians is specifically related to sacrifices and ceremonial purity.

bations and hymn singing (7.799a6-b4), appropriate behaviour at sacrifices and prayers (7.821d1-3), and technical activities like the construction of temples and other religious buildings (6.778c7-d4). It seems that a purely technical and ceremonial abidingness by conventional rules, however, fails to account for a fuller sense of human justice and reciprocal moral obligation between humans.

Despite its being conducive to the acquisition of morally righteous habits, sheer “technical” piety, i.e. the one expressed through obedience and the performance of conventional rituals and practices, cannot be properly identified as “εὐσέβεια” – especially if εὐσέβεια is referred to a sense of moral responsibility that transcends sheer “non-unlawfulness”. As I propose to show in the following sections of this essay, a distinction between a purely formal and uncritical piety and a critically informed sense of reverence towards the gods is needed in view of an appropriate ethical solution to specific cases of justice, just like the ones that see respectively Euthyphro and Socrates as protagonists.

III. Does religious reverence differ from justice? Εὐσέβεια and ὁσιότης in Plato’s Euthyphro

Plato’s *Euthyphro*, one of the early Socratic dialogues, is centred on the nature of piety and its supposed interdependence with justice between human beings. Since the very first lines of the dialogue, Socrates’ discussion with the priest Euthyphro gets structured within the framework of a comparison between two distinct judicial events. The first one is represented by Euthyphro’s initiative against his own father, whom he accuses of murder. As Euthyphro himself explains, his father had thrown one of his slaves into a pit, leaving him with his hands and feet bound as a provisional punishment for the murder of a fellow-servant in a condition of drunkenness. The enchained slave had died out of starvation, just at the time at which his master was consulting an oracle to get advice on the most appropriate and definitive punishment to inflict on him (4c3-d4). The second legal case addressed in the Platonic dialogue is represented by the well-known public accusation brought against Socrates by Meletus and Anitus – a charge for which Socrates himself, at the moment of his meeting with *Euthyphro*, is preparing to appear in court. Both Euthyphro’s and Socrates’ conduct, although expressing problematic cases of justice between human beings,

are ideally presented by Plato as potential violations of traditional religious piety.¹⁶

As Socrates remarkably points out at the beginning of the conversation with Euthyphro, the procedure used by his accusers to formalize the indictment is not a private action, but a *γραφή* (2a4), i.e. an accusation whose content is presented as highly destabilizing for the public, social and cultural order.¹⁷ Socrates' clarification on the difference between the two judicial cases seems to prefigure in a symbolic and programmatic way the elaboration of two different visions on justice: on the one hand, the one entertained by Euthyphro, who remains anchored to his own biographical experience, without realizing that his indictment can be framed as a matter of public justice; on the other hand, Socrates' view, which presents and defends his public activity as a form of reverence for the divine.

Notably, both Socrates and Euthyphro appear well-aware that their deeds, choices, and initiatives significantly challenge the ethical sense of their fellow-citizens and hypothetical external observers in matters of morality and religious sentiment. Euthyphro, on the one hand, expressly declares that his intention to bring an accusation against his father can be widely interpreted as an expression of madness (4a1). Socrates, instead, describes himself as addressee of a charge and a victim of slander. As he says, his tendency to engage in dialogical interaction with common people has misled his fellow-citizens into thinking that he lavishes his knowledge on anyone, especially by introducing novelties in the sphere of divine things.

In the introductory part of the dialogue, both Socrates and Euthyphro seem inclined to address the issue of impiety mainly in terms of human justice. Socrates himself emphasizes the purely legal dimension of the just by asking Euthyphro what he charges his father for (Euthyphro's answer being "murder, Socrates") (4a9; tr. Fowler). Socrates' alleged astonishment for the idea that a father might be the object of a charge from his son (4a6: "Your father, my dear man?"), who immediately (and perhaps already ironically) does not entail straightforward moral condemnation. Unlike the members of a hypothetical majority, who might believe that Euthyphro's

16 See McPherran 2000, p. 301, who explains that the traditional conception of piety which is questioned throughout the whole dialogue contemplates the conflation of 'religion' and human justice.

17 The legal procedure known as *γραφή* was used for disputes and crimes of public import. The word *dike*, instead, often (although not exclusively) denotes private suits. Cf. Cohen (2005), especially pp. 195, 206 and 212.

conduct is reproachable with no further right of appeal, Socrates makes room for the possibility of justifying him (4a10-11):

[H]eracles! Surely, Euthyphro, most people do not know where the right lies; for I fancy it is not everyone who can rightly do what you are doing.

Despite such an initial display of open-mindedness, Socrates (perhaps ironically), wonders whether the killed man belongs to his own family, given that, as he points out, nobody would accuse his father of killing a stranger. By so doing, Socrates seems to sketch out the fundamentals of a traditional morality, one for which the limits of justice and injustice find articulation and binding limits in relation to a net of family attachments. By reacting against a similar ethical and judicial scenario, Euthyphro explains that the death of his father's slave, which he qualifies without hesitation as a case of murder, should be judged not on the basis of the familiarity between the accuser and the victim, but only on the ground of the possible reasons of the killer:

It is ridiculous, Socrates, that you think it matters whether the man who was killed was a stranger or a relative, and do not see that the only thing to consider is whether the action of the slayer was justified (*ἐν δίκῃ*) or not, and that if it was justified one ought to let him alone, and if not, one ought to proceed against him, even if he share one's heart and eat at one's table (4b7-c1).

As the following lines of the dialogue reveal, Euthyphro's appeal to a supposed idea of reasonableness does not betray considerations of public justice totally detached from traditional religious customs. As he explains, the main reason to charge a father is to avoid contamination by an unjust man:

[F]or the pollution (*τὸ μίασμα*) is the same if you associate knowingly with such a man and do not purify yourself (*ἀφοσιῶς σεαυτόν*) and him by proceeding against him (4c1-2).

Euthyphro, who argues that justice can sometimes be incompatible with religious piety, presents himself as a staunch defender of an unconventional morality. His reference to fear of contamination, however, brings to light ethical convictions that markedly fail to uplift the idea of reasonableness to a more critical level. In this sense, Euthyphro's approach to justice might be virtually situated in an intermediate position between a philosophically informed morality, i.e. the one endorsed by Socrates, and a

totally uncritical one.¹⁸ From a different point of view, his lack of a critical, inquiry-based approach of investigation to events and ethical convictions might cause readers to fully identify Euthyphro's ethical outlook with the traditional one he attempts to challenge.¹⁹

The flows and weakness of Euthyphro's beliefs start to emerge when he claims possession of the attitude of the deity²⁰ about the ὄσιον and the ἀνόσιον – a form of knowledge that, as he says, most people ignore (4e1-2). In the attempt to question Euthyphro's knowledge, Socrates shifts the focus of attention to the specific issue of the nature and meaning of the values at issue, thus expressing the need to look for a general idea of the two concepts able to account for specific cases of justice/injustice and piety/impiety:

[N]ow in the name of Zeus, tell me what you just now asserted that you knew so well. What do you say is the nature of piety and impiety (ποιόν τι τὸ εὐσεβές φης εἶναι καὶ τὸ ἀσεβές), both in relation to murder and to other things? Is not holiness (τὸ ὄσιον) always the same with itself in every action and, on the other hand, is not unholy (τὸ ἀνόσιον) the opposite of all holiness, always the same with itself and whatever is to be unholy possessing some one characteristic quality? (5c3-d3).

Notably, in the passage above Socrates sets out his investigation of piety in terms of τὸ εὐσεβές, not of τὸ ὄσιον (although he uses the latter word in the following line of the text). We might therefore wonder whether he treats the two words as synonym and, if he does not, what kind of message he is trying to convey by introducing the word τὸ εὐσεβές.

To answer this question, we might look at other Platonic dialogues, where Socrates uses the adjectives (and the expressions deriving from) τὸ ὄσιον and τὸ εὐσεβές quite casually. In the final sections of the *Apology of Socrates* (which can be related to *Euthyphro* in terms of both biographical events and themes), Socrates, who has already been condemned, professes his willingness to avoid either begging the jury for absolution or proclaiming himself guilty, so as to escape death penalty. In so doing, he claims

18 See McPherran (2002), pp. 111-112, who describes Euthyphro's morality as a composite of two paradigms: one of retrograde traditionalism and one of non-traditionalist, religious innovation. Cf. Benson (2013), pp. 123-124.

19 See Furley (1985), p. 205, who describes Euthyphro as a defender of the same conventional dogma that inspires the charge of impiety moved against Socrates.

20 Here I follow Burnet's translation of τὸ θεῖον (1979, p. 107). Fowler, instead, translates "the divine law".

that acting contrary to the truth would not be a way of ‘acting piously’ (εὐσεβεῖν; *Apology*, 35c5). In the following lines, however, he addresses the Athenians by saying that a similar conduct would be tantamount to acting in a way that he considers not only not right, but not even sacred (πράττειν ἄ μήτε ἡγοῦμαι καλὰ εἶναι μήτε δίκαια μήτε ὄσια; 35c6-d1).

A similar form of coherence between a sense of justice, love of the truth and piety can be identified in the *Crito*, where Socrates, who confirms his decision to face his death-sentence despite his innocence, stages a virtual dialogue between himself and the Laws of Athens. The Laws point out that escaping from prison by avoiding punishment and doing violence to one’s country and laws is “not holy” (οὐχ ὄσιον), and lack of respect for the laws is even more despicable than disrespect for one’s father or master (51c1-3). The idea of piety that emerges out of the Laws’ speech appears to enforce the idea of a reverential respect grounded primarily (or even exclusively) in a superior authority – one which is primarily aimed at avoiding transgressions of the social order – and, more specifically, to abidance by rules (either critical or uncritical). By stressing the importance of obedience towards one’s father, country, and laws, the Laws appear to defend a form of public morality (expressed in terms of τὸ ὄσιον) that can be compared to the same one challenged by Euthyphro in the homonymous dialogue. The Laws’ attitude, in this respect, might not reflect Socrates’ view on escaping from prison (cf. Harte 1999), and the use of the word τὸ ὄσιον instead of τὸ εὐσεβές might contribute to enforce Socrates’ critical position towards the Laws’ argument.

An example of Socrates’ use of the ideal of εὐσέβεια as a critically informed form of reverence is instead offered in the *Philebus* by reference to its opposite, namely ἀσεβεία. Being committed to a joint investigation on the nature of the best life, Socrates, Protarchus and Philebus agree that such a life consists in a mix of pleasure and intelligence. After establishing that the notion of pleasure belongs to the sphere of the unlimited, Socrates wonders whether thought, intelligence and sciences ought to be included in the category of the limited or in that of the unlimited (28a1-6). Interestingly enough, Socrates says that lack of a careful treatment of the issue could prompt them not only to find the wrong answer to the question, but also to act impiously (28a4: νῦν θέντες οὐκ ἂν ἀσεβοῖμεν). Philebus’ answer “Oh Socrates, you worship your own god” (σεμνύνεις γάρ, ὃ Σώκρατες, τὸν σεαυτοῦ θεόν; 28 b1) might point to the idea that religious reverence can be nourished by a distinctively philosophical search for the truth.

If we admit that the same use of εὐσέβεια can be identified in the Euthyphro, why should Socrates immediately give it up in favour of the basis of τὸ ὄσιον? Keeping aside the hypothesis of a supposed interchangeability

between the two terms, one possibility is that Socrates is already aware that Euthyphro would fail to notice a difference between the two and its philosophical (not to mention its practical) implications. It is not perhaps a chance that Euthyphro offers a first definition of τὸ ὅσιον, and also one which centers on specific – and supposed – cases of justice:

[W]ell then, I say that holiness is doing what I am doing now, prosecuting the wrongdoer who commits murder or steals from the temples or does any such thing, whether he be your father, or your mother or anyone else, and not prosecuting him is unholy (*Euthphr.* 5d6-e1).

As we see, the first definition he supplies is premised on his own personal case. What is more, it includes a cluster of specific situations which he does not refer to a unitarian semantic paradigm (as Socrates instead would have expected). So conceived, the idea of τὸ ὅσιον as “prosecuting whoever commits injustice” rules out a plurality of alternative forms of virtuous human conduct – for instance, acting respectfully towards others and/or worshipping the gods” – forms which not only the defenders of a traditional morality, but also Socrates would positively assess.

Equally flawed is Euthyphro’s attempt to buttress his definition by introducing a τεκμήριον, i.e. a resolute evidence for his case, which draws on the sphere of mythology, on generally shared beliefs, and also on a supposed epistemic authority of those deities who had dared to punish their father. As Euthyphro’s declares, Zeus himself, the best and most righteous of the gods, had killed his father Cronus, who had in turn devoured his children. By comparing his own situation with that of Zeus, he points to the lack of coherence in those who criticize him while approving at the same time divine behaviour (5e5-6a4). In the following sections of the dialogue, Socrates is committed to demolish the paradigm of a piety that appeals to the authority of the gods without any reference to the properties that make an action pious or impious. By expressing doubts on the mythological evidences offered by Euthyphro, Socrates does not invoke Zeus who killed Cronus or Zeus used as interlayer in the phrases Δία and πρὸς Διός (4b2, 4e3, 5b7), but “(Zeus) protector of friendship” (ἀλλά μοι εἰπέ πρὸς Φιλίου: 6b3). What he asks is whether the things described in mythology really happened. It is possible that, by invoking a ‘new’ Zeus, Socrates means to stress the possibility of a critical questioning of facts in a spirit of authentic friendship, which is to say, one in which persons committed to a joint investigation try to dismantle prejudice and falsehood. In that case, Socrates’ religious reverence would prove compatible with the need to create better conditions for a search of the meaning of εὐσέβεια.

IV. *The missed co-extensiveness between justice and religious reverence.*
Conclusive Remarks

The continuation of Socrates and Euthyphro's discussion in terms of τὸ ὅσιον proceeds parallel to a difficulty in establishing the relationship between justice and reverence for the gods. In the first place, as Socrates does not fail to point out on many occasions across the dialogue, sheer abidance by a supposed divine authority does not account for the existence of a disagreement among different gods in matters of value and justice. In this respect, doing what is "dear to the god" might hypothetically lead to different courses of action.

Equally unsuccessful is Socrates' attempt to frame the relationship between justice and religious reverence in terms of a relation between a limited part and a whole. Although the idea of a supposed co-extensiveness between justice and reverence is introduced as a possibility at *Euthyphro* 11e5 (ἄρ' οὖν καὶ πᾶν τὸ δίκαιον ὅσιον;), Socrates immediately directs the discussion towards the idea that τὸ ὅσιον is a restricted part of τὸ δίκαιον. That move, being accepted by Euthyphro, will lead him to propose a definition of τὸ ὅσιον in terms of a specific and exclusive service towards the gods (τὸ περὶ τὴν τῶν θεῶν θεραπείαν; 12e5-6) – one which cannot find any intersections or overlapping with human justice. Socrates, in his turn, will refute such an idea of τὸ ὅσιον by applying his craft-analogy to the idea of religious reverence, and by trying to stress the implausible implications of the idea of a craft designed to either ameliorate the condition of its addressee (i.e. the gods, which are by definition blessed and immortal) or to benefit and/or gratifying him/her by way of a particular form of care and devotion (a form of gratification which, being pursued for the human benefit, would reduce piety to a vile form of trade between human beings and gods). It is interesting that, while introducing the issue of the relationship between justice and religious reverence, Socrates uses once again the word τὸ εὐσεβές – this time alongside τὸ ὅσιον:

[N]ow try in your turn to teach me what part of the right holiness is, that I may tell Meletus not to wrong me any more or bring suits against me for impiety, since I have now been duly instructed by you about what is, and what is not, pious and holy (τά τε εὐσεβῆ καὶ ὅσια καὶ τὰ μὴ) (12e1-3).

The same association of words is accepted by Euthyphro, who replies:

[T]his then is my opinion, Socrates, that the part of the right which has to do with attention to the gods constitutes piety and holiness (τὸ

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μέρος τοῦ δικαίου εἶναι εὐσεβές τε καὶ ὄσιον), and that the remaining part of the right is that which has to do with the service of men (τὸ περὶ τὴν τῶν θεῶν θεραπείαν).

As I believe, the joint use of τὸ εὐσεβές and τὸ ὄσιον confirms Socrates' intention to give up his original attempt at setting the basis for a serious discussion of religious reverence purely in terms of εὐσέβεια.

Besides the lack of a proper distinction between the two words, another notable flaw in the remainder of the dialogue is represented by Socrates' unwillingness to pursue the path of an investigation into the supposed co-extensiveness between justice towards men and reverence towards the gods. A detailed analysis of the second part of the *Euthyphro* goes beyond the limited scope of this essay. What is worth stressing, however, is the fact that Socrates, by following the path of a separation between justice and piety/holiness, loses the opportunity to offer a critical investigation of an important aspect that, as we have seen, many pieces of Greek oratory had brought to the fore: the educational value of religious reverence and its implications in the development of a sound sense of justice. It is the lack of a proper inquiry into the possible relationships and reciprocal benefits of the two forms of virtuous conduct that causes common people to follow uncritically traditional paths of religious behaviour. What is more, a missed investigation risks to produce intellectually and ethically inappropriate judgments on specific cases of human justice, just like the one which ends up in Socrates' sentence to death. It is in this respect that, as we might surmise, the Socrates portrayed by Plato in the *Euthyphro* prefigures the tragic outcomes of the trial in which he is involved.

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