
Reflections on Piety: Euthyphro as Modern Man

Phillip N. Goggans

Seattle Pacific University

Modernism is an ancient phenomenon. If prostitution is the world's oldest profession, then modernism is the world's oldest heresy. Modernism's essential features were already understood long before the era of modernity. Plato reveals them in his dialogue *The Euthyphro*. The character of Euthyphro is a prototype of modern man. In the dialogue Euthyphro is prosecuting his father for the murder of a slave who had gotten drunk and killed another slave. Euthyphro's father had bound the slave and thrown him into a ditch while he consulted the legal authorities about what to do. The slave died of exposure while they waited for a judgment.

*Modern man
a "parricide."*

After hearing Euthyphro proudly describe his role in prosecuting his father, Socrates sarcastically comments that only someone with a refined understanding of piety would dare do such a thing. Euthyphro readily agrees to the proposition that his understanding is exceptional. Accordingly, Socrates proceeds to examine Euthyphro concerning the nature of piety. He shows the frustrated and embarrassed Euthyphro that his action presumes an understanding of piety that he does not possess.

In *Ideas Have Consequences* Richard Weaver argues that modern man's offense is, in a word, impiety. He even calls modern man a "parricide."¹ Weaver is alluding to the fact that the human race as a whole is related to some things the way a child is related to his parents. All of us have parents in a biological sense. But parent-

¹ Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 170. It was Weaver who alerted me to *The Euthyphro's* insight into modernity.

hood is not merely biological. Sexual reproduction is simply one form of parenthood. There is some sense in saying that God is more a father to us than our earthly father. Earthly fathers participate in fatherhood *par excellence*, and to that extent they are icons of divinity. Parents in the true sense are those who bequeath life. And life in the true sense is not mere biological life; it is fullness of being. For human beings, to live is not merely to be alive. Not only all of their *bodily* organs must be employed in the activity of life, but all their distinctively human capacities must function in the proper way. So a truly human life, which is to say a true life for human beings, will employ the intellectual and emotional faculties in the way that is proper to them. Whatever makes this possible for us is a parent to us in the true sense, and is deserving of the veneration proper to parents. Thus we say that God is our Father most of all. Jesus even says that we should call only God "Father."² In the strict sense, only God is father; every other fatherly thing is a manifestation of divine fatherhood. But we show our reverence for God appropriately by appropriately revering his fatherly agents on earth, for example, our biological parents.

Weaver says that modern *man* is a parricide. Weaver, following the whole ancient tradition, is acutely aware that human beings are organic parts of a living species. Individual men are not self-sufficient. As with cells, their life is bound up with that of the organism to which they belong. Individual men are members of man. Just as the cells of our bodies die off and are replaced by new ones, so individual men die off and are replaced by new men. The primary life is that of *man*; individual men participate in and contribute to the life of the species. Individuals live fully when they participate most fully in the life of man.

Life in the fullest, for man, is civilized life. Civilized life employs the full range of diverse capacities of the human population: music, art, technology, literature and philosophy, to name just a few. Life for man is made possible by many things. These are parents in the sense aforementioned. The pious son honors his parents. He loves his family and seeks its good. He respects his place in the family. He undertakes to fulfill the responsibilities that devolve on him as son. The impious son treats his parents with contempt. He attempts to usurp their natural authority. He tries to use his family as a means to his own ends.

Life in the fullest is civilized life.

² Matt. 23: 9.

In a nutshell, modern man is impious. He is contemptuous toward the very things that have made the good life possible for him. He tries to control them and use them for his own ends.

An example relevant to Euthyphro's case is justice. Human society consists of a complex cooperative activity sufficient for life. There is a general pattern which this cooperation must follow in order to work. That pattern is called justice. For instance, the people in the society have to keep their contracts, pay their debts and tell the truth. Otherwise they will not trust one another. Without trust, the most basic needs will not be met. Consider the complex chain of events that makes clothes available: the gathering of the raw materials, the transportation, the manufacturing, the transportation again, the retailing. Without justice, none of this happens. Without justice, we don't eat. We don't have friends. Life without justice is, in Hobbes's words, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." So justice is a parent of our society and of man generally.

*Justice a
parent to be
honored.*

Plato's *Republic* is subtitled "concerning justice." It begins with an allusion to a torch relay race on horseback. In the context it is clear that the torch stands for the order of justice in a society. One generation lives a civilized life because its members inherited an order of justice from those who went before them. The present generation duly honors justice itself by respecting its particular incarnation and trying to preserve it. The highest form of respect, for Plato, is to seek to know justice itself, to understand it and conform to its ways. For Plato, justice was a benevolent parent. He rallied to the aid of justice in a time of rebellion against it. The Sophists said evil things about justice or denied its existence altogether. Plato stood up for it.

The ancient view was that justice is something to be loved. We should try to understand her ways and submit to her. We cannot change her. She is always and everywhere the same. She cares for us. She makes the good life possible for us. We should reciprocate by honoring her. The new view says that justice is our creature and servant. We devise a morality that will do our bidding.

For Weaver, *The Euthyphro* applies most obviously to modern man's impiety toward nature. This is dramatically illustrated in the thought of Francis Bacon. According to Bacon, knowledge is power. We understand Nature so that we can manipulate her to get what we want. In former times man saw himself as part of a natural order that was fundamentally good. He cooperated with

it and tried to understand his place in it. He didn't seek knowledge of nature in order to exploit her, but, rather, to submit to her laws. That we manipulate the natural environment to achieve certain ends is, of course, part of the natural order. Nature provides goods for man, but at the same time prescribes means for achieving them. Modern man accepts no limitations. He aims to be ultimate master of everything in nature. He demands nature's unconditional surrender.

The Euthyphro is an analysis of that perennial sin, impiety. A look at Euthyphro's disastrous mistake will allow us to understand our own situation. How did Euthyphro err so badly? The answer, in a word, is ignorance. Like Oedipus, Euthyphro does not know his parents. Knowledge, for Plato, is more than just a state of mind; it's a state of being. It involves the whole person: the intellect, the emotions, and the appetite. Thus, for Plato, to know the good is not simply to believe certain true propositions and be able to show that they are derivable from more obvious ones. It is to be in a relationship with the good. It is to have a kind of unity with it. Again, people don't know each other simply by knowing a lot of facts about various individuals. They must be in relationship. Those I know best are those with whom I am most intimate. It is important that Plato says that the philosopher must know the Good—not know that such-and-such is good or that such-and-such is the case; he must know the Good. Knowledge of the Good, the highest kind of knowledge, will have the character of a relationship with the Good. One might say that this knowledge is *relational* rather than *propositional*. In this sense, Euthyphro does not know his parents. By parents, of course, we mean not just his biological father who figures in this story, but those things which make a good life possible for him. The parent who figures chiefly in this dialogue is piety itself.

Knowledge of persons relational rather than propositional.

Three aspects of Euthyphro's ignorance will shed some light on the impiety of modern man. Euthyphro is ignorant because his mind is fragmented, because it is shallow, and because it is controlled by popular opinion. Fragmentation, shallowness, and enslavement—these characteristics of Euthyphro's mind are interrelated; they feed off one another.

Consider first his fragmented understanding. He focuses on one part of piety, "Prosecute the wrongdoer." He has no understanding of the whole of which this is a part. This results in an

*Knowledge of
parts instead
of wholes.*

obsession and an imbalance. One fragment of piety or justice fills up his mind. He does not respect the other relevant maxims that would check his course of action, for example, "Do not harm your parents." He therefore carries his principle to a fanatical extreme. In this respect he is an ideologue.

Second, Euthyphro has a shallow understanding. There are two main reasons. First, he loves appearance rather than reality. He is overly concerned with his opinion of himself and with others' opinion of him. He does not want to *be* just; he wants to impress everyone, including himself, with how just he is. He does not care about really doing the right thing; he cares about *thinking* he has done the right thing. He does not want to know, as witness his eventual flight from Socrates; he wants to *think* he knows. His life is directed to creating a certain view of himself. The fact is that Euthyphro cares nothing about prosecuting the wrongdoer; what he really cares about is his image. This is evident from the very first line: "Surely you are not here to prosecute someone before the king-archon, as I am." Why is he proud to be prosecuting his father? It shows that *his* commitment to justice and equality knows no bounds. Why, he'd sacrifice his own father if justice required it. Of course it was traditionally thought that to denounce and prosecute one's father for accidentally killing a murderous drunken slave would be immoral. But traditional thinking is wrong. Euthyphro's understanding is superior. His prosecution of his father thus confirms in his own mind his claim to moral and intellectual fame.

If Euthyphro cared about knowing piety itself, his concern would not be to seem pious but to *be* pious. Knowledge of piety in the full sense, for Plato, involves taking on the character of the thing known. No one understands goodness who is not good, justice who is not just, piety who is not pious. Euthyphro's concern is not with being but with seeming.

The second reason for his shallow understanding is that he denies that piety is incarnate. He does not believe that piety is embodied in the ways and beliefs of his culture. He does not look to his ancestors to understand what piety is. On the contrary, as we have seen, he thinks their beliefs are irrelevant. Piety, for Euthyphro, is something completely abstract. He thinks one cannot learn anything about the ideal by looking at the actual. The actual has nothing to teach us. When Plato wishes to teach us

about piety, he does not give us an abstract definition; he gives us a particular incarnation of it, viz., Socrates. Knowledge, for Plato, is remembering, and we are reminded of things by their visible, tangible appearances. We must seek the reality through its appearance. We learn about piety by observing its earthly, imperfect manifestations.

*Socrates an
incarnation of
piety.*

Euthyphro's denial that his own tradition has anything important to teach him accentuates his imagined intellectual superiority. He thinks: "I am not bound by any ties to the past. I judge what is right for myself, and act on that." He does not need the authority of his ancestors and of tradition to help him decide. He is a cut above those who rely on outside authority. He is intellectually independent.

The truth is just the opposite. Euthyphro's idolatry of intellectual freedom leads him to intellectual servility. Euthyphro's thoughts are controlled by popular opinion. Euthyphro, it can be seen, is the victim of fashionable opinion. The value most in vogue in his democratic society was equality. In fact, there was a passion for equality. The best people were those who loved equality the most. Consider what Euthyphro is doing: prosecuting his father on behalf of a slave. Here is someone who does not discriminate! "One should only watch whether the killer acted justly or not; if he acted justly, let him go, but if not, one should prosecute, even if the killer shares your hearth and table" (4bc). Could anyone possibly be more committed to equality? Relatives, strangers, father, slave—it does not matter. Everyone is equal. Euthyphro is simply taking the views of his day to their revolting conclusion. In attempting to make himself independent of all authority, Euthyphro has unwittingly allowed his beliefs about the most important things to be determined willy-nilly by the multitude.

In this respect Peter Singer is a perfect Euthyphro in our day. He says that one's obligations to family members are no different from one's obligations to people in remote parts of the world. Richard Neuhaus, in a *First Things* article about an encounter with Singer, reports that Singer is rather embarrassed about the thousands of dollars he spent to take care of his mother in her dying days. He has to rationalize his failure to abide by his own principles. As Neuhaus commented, "It is a cockeyed ethical theory that is embarrassed by a son's caring for his elderly mother."³

³ "A Curious Encounter with a Philosopher from Nowhere," February 2002.

Intellectual fragmentation, shallowness, and servility—these cause modern man to be impious.

Again, modern man is intellectually fragmented. Consider this quotation from G. K. Chesterton:

The modern world is not evil; in some ways the modern world is far too good. It is full of wild and wasted virtues. When a religious scheme is shattered (as Christianity was shattered at the Reformation), it is not merely the vices that are let loose. The vices are, indeed, let loose, and they wander and do damage. But the virtues are let loose also; and the virtues wander more wildly, and the virtues do more terrible damage. The modern world is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad. The virtues have gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone. Thus some scientists care for truth; and their truth is pitiless. Thus some humanitarians only care for pity; and their pity (I am sorry to say) is often untruthful.⁴

Surely C. S. Lewis was influenced by Chesterton when he penned these words about the *Tao*, or traditional morality.

“Obsession with isolated parts” leads to madness.

What purport to be new systems or (as they now call them) ‘ideologies,’ all consist of fragments from the *Tao* itself, arbitrarily wrenched from their context in the whole and then swollen to madness in their isolation, yet still owing to the *Tao* and to it alone such validity as they possess.⁵

Weaver also, in a chapter entitled “Fragmentation and Obsession,” says “Modern man is suffering from a severe fragmentation in his world picture. This fragmentation leads directly to an obsession with isolated parts.”⁶

Some common objects of obsession nowadays are equality, freedom, and material pleasure. Ours, of course, is not the only age when these things have been desired intemperately. Weaver means that there was once a unified worldview in which these things were accorded proper value in relation to other things. That worldview now shattered, there is little to counteract obsession with the fragments.

Secondly, modern man is ignorant because his worldview is shallow. True, our understanding of nature has increased exponentially. But this would not have impressed Plato. Consider the prisoners in the parable of the cave. There they sit in chains, learning

⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane Co., 1908), 52-53.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 28-29.

⁶ Weaver, *op. cit.*, 59.

the order of the passing shadows. They have contests and prizes for those who can tell the most about the shadows. The point is that those who merely understand physical reality do not know the way the world is in its essential respects. They do not know the things that are by nature knowable. Most importantly, they do not know their place in the world. What good is the ability to manipulate physical reality if you don't know what to do with it? Modern man is like a child playing with a gun.

Understanding physical reality insufficient.

In morals, we are an age in love with appearance. It's not really living a good life that's important now; it's thinking that one is living a good life. In fact, if one thinks one's life is good—that is, if one is content with it—then it *is* good. The best life is the life that *seems* good to the one who lives it. So it is common to think of the good life as a happy life, with happiness understood as satisfaction or contentment. This has always been the view of most people, probably. So said Plato and Aristotle of people they knew. But in our age this view reigns supreme.

A blatant instance of settling for appearance over reality is individual moral relativism. Here, the individual says, "Whether an action is right for me depends on whether I think it is right." The relativist, in typical sophistic fashion, denies a reality behind the appearance.

Another reason for modern man's intellectual shallowness is his disbelief that truth is incarnate. He no longer seeks the truth in the Western legacy of ideas and institutions. On the contrary, he treats his ancient heritage with contempt. It is fashionable nowadays to do or say things to demonstrate the depth of one's contempt. Several fawning doctoral dissertations have been written about Madonna's "deconstruction" of this or that institution or more. Most today are familiar with the Academy's assault on the West. Modern man does not realize that the Western heritage is not his oppressor, but his father.

The standard picture is this: the legacy of the West is a nasty combination of slavery, exploitation, domination, sexism, ignorance, and superstition. Modern man has put all that behind him. Euthyphro, we saw, cared nothing about the dead slave or about prosecuting the wrongdoer. What he really wanted to do was demonstrate his intellectual superiority and independence. Trashing the West serves a similar purpose. By belittling the West, modern academics congratulate themselves on their intellectual supe-

riority. They also demonstrate to their own satisfaction their intellectual liberation.

I do not argue that we should “turn the clock back.” The last five hundred years have seen many substantial improvements on a number of fronts. In many respects, man is doing much better than he was. But our advances are not the result of a break from the Western tradition. Alan Kors has argued persuasively that social and scientific advances were natural developments of the Western tradition.

[W]e err grievously in our assumptions of what it is that requires particular explanation in the world. We understand the defaults; what should astonish us is the ability to change them. Rousseau and the postmodernists have it all backward in this domain. It is not aversion to difference, for example, that requires historical explanation, for aversion to difference is the human condition; rather, it is the West’s partial but breathtaking ability to overcome tribalism and exclusion that demands explanation. Anti-Semitism is not surprising; the opening of Christian America to Jews is what should amaze. It is not the abuse of power that requires explanation—that is the human condition—but the Western rule of law. Similarly, coerced religious conformity should not leave us groping for understanding, but the forging of religious toleration. It is not slavery that requires explanation because slavery is one of the most universal of all human institutions; it is the values and agency by which the West identified slavery as an evil and finally abolished it. Finally, it is not relative pockets of poverty in the West that should occasion our wonder, for we termed almost infinitely worse absolute levels of poverty as simply “the human condition”; rather, what is extraordinary are the values, institutions, knowledge, risk, ethics, and liberties that created such prosperity that we even notice such poverty at all, yet alone believe it is eradicable.

We are surprised, in a failure of intellectual analysis, by all of the wrong things, and as a tragic result we lose our wonder at the accomplishments and aspirations of our civilization. Depravity never should startle us; rather, the identification and naming of depravity should amaze us, and the attempt, frequently successful, to contain it should fill us with awe. Indeed, that attempt has been so successful in the West, relative to the human condition, that the other world fantasized by the multiculturalists seeks entrance, again and again, at our doors, and the multiculturalists are not riding leaky boats to the otherness of the Third World.⁷

⁷ Alan Charles Kors, “The West at the Dawn of the 21st Century: Triumph Without Self-Belief,” lecture for the Foreign Policy Research Institute, November 13, 2000, abridged in *Watch on the West: A Newsletter of FPRI’s Center for the Study of America and the West*, 2: 1 (February 2001). www.fpri.org.

The genuine achievements of the last five hundred years, then, are for the most part fruits of the ancient tradition. Modern man did not succeed by running from the past. On the contrary, he merely stood on the shoulders of the giant that is the West.

The West, therefore, is indeed a father rather than an oppressor. And like good children, we should look to our father as an example and source of wisdom. We will find truth in his ways and his thoughts.

Another dimension of modern man's ignorance is his servility to popular opinion. It's easy to see this at the level of the individual who prides himself on his intellectual independence. Concerning the judgments that he makes supposedly on the basis of his own self-sufficient reason, consider what really goes on. He finds that he believes a certain way. In his mind, that's the judgment of his reason. But why does he believe that way? His views are more or less the product of all the influences that his family and society have put into his head. Not being aware of its origins, he attributes his belief to an insight of pure reason. Tocqueville saw that everyone accepts some intellectual authority.⁸ Those who aspire to complete intellectual independence are the most intellectually servile. They surrender their minds to the influence of the views around them. And these are the very ones who pride themselves on their liberation from authority. The truth is that rightful authority is the safeguard of intellectual liberty.

To put the matter in Tocqueville's terms, everyone submits to intellectual authority of some kind outside himself. Those who think otherwise deceive themselves. Inevitably, their views on the most important matters in life will be cast about on the seas of mass opinion. The trick is to have an authority that you can understand and respect and believe in.

Those who are fortunate enough to know such an authority acknowledge a truth that is both transcendent and incarnate. This truth is, in a sense, beyond what they actually observe, but it is embodied in what they observe. It is not identical with what men have done and thought, but it appears in their deeds and thoughts. The fortunate ones see, or, at any rate, get an inkling of, a unified body of truth in their diverse heritage. They discern it amid a world of accident.

⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, II, i, 2.

If there is no truth in history, then we are thrown back on our own private judgment. We have no standard higher than ourselves. And if truth is seen as abstract, far removed from the actual life of man, then there might as well be no ultimate truth at all. Truth has to be present to us in the world in which we live and act. We submit to rightful authority when we acknowledge a transcendent reality that is historically incarnate. Hence we respect our cultural legacy. We submit to the truth that is immanent therein though not in pure form.

At the end of *The Euthyphro*, a bewildered and flustered Euthyphro flees from Socrates. He might have summoned the courage to admit his arrogance and presumption and turned away from his impious act. To his misfortune, he did not. Unfortunately, we must expect, given the historical record, that modern man will emulate Euthyphro in this respect also.