EUTHYPHRO, PHILOSOPHERS, AND UNCERTAINTY

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Presidential Address

On one hand, there is the type of uncertainty that comes from what might, in general terms, be thought of as a *state of confusion*. Call it *naïve uncertainty*. For instance, one may read Plato's *Euthyphro* for the first time and be uncertain about the answer to the question of what piety is. I will have plenty more to say about this below. Or, one may be uncertain about various other states of affairs in the world such as what time it is, how airplanes work, or whether or not one is properly following the instructions for a recipe. But I mean this connection to a state of confusion loosely. A person with a certain brain disorder, for example, may be unable to recognize their surroundings or unable to identify their spacio-temporal location and would, thus, literally be in a state of confusion. But this is a pathological sense of confusion and does not bear on a rational understanding of uncertainty. Rather, in this general sense, I mean a form of perplexity that blocks one's epistemic access to the world such that one is unable to confidently make truth claims.

On the other hand, there is a type of uncertainty pertaining to possibility. Call it *epistemic uncertainty*. Consider a committed fundamentalist, *S*, about reality. *S* strictly believes that there is a fundamental level to reality and that that level is the level of quantum fields and *S* is committed to this belief. For *S*, then, there are no other possibilities regarding the way reality is structured. Now consider *T* who is agnostic regarding the structure of reality. For all *T*'s understanding of the world, reality could be one of several possibilities. However, since *T* has no better reasons to believe any alternative over any other, *T* is uncertain as to which, if any, is correct and, hence, *T*'s agnosticism. The difference that I am interested in is that if *T*s beliefs are wrong, i.e., if they are not somehow representative of reality, then, given *T*s committed belief that there is a fundamental level, *S* would conceivably be unaware of the fact that she was wrong, or perhaps would not care, whereas, given *T*'s agnosticism, *T* has access to a larger set of alternative possibilities and, thus, would be a better candidate for discovering truth, if such there be.

I confess that I do not have a thoroughgoing conception of certainty. But I suppose that some comments are nevertheless in order. There are many notions of certainty.[1] The backdrop by which I wish to discuss the *Euthyphro* concerns *psychological certainty*. (Though the lessons from the *Euthyphro* will concern both psychological as well as epistemic uncertainty.) Psychological certainty is simply the view that when one is certain about some state of affairs, one is "supremely convinced of it" (Reed). Presumably it is the case that one's being supremely convinced of something is the reason for one's claim to certainty. I take this as an assumption.

This notion of certainty can show up in a variety of ways. Consider practical matters. In this world there are problems to solve. This is also a world of instant gratification and immediate solutions, or at least the pretense thereof: a world where "you're either part of the solution or you're part of the problem." This type of thinking and expectation of certainty is pervasive in the advertising world. A can of Edge Gel reads, "You want ultimate closeness and ultimate comfort with your next shave? The solution is in your hand." A T-shirt reads, "Because Results Matter," because, well, results matter, don't they? The growth of the internet has made the acquisition of information nearly instantaneous. Everything from a synopsis of Kant's *Groundwork* to how to prepare crème brulee is a URL or two away.

The worlds of political and religious orthodoxy foster notions of certainty, often with the explicit injunction to avoid critical inquiry which, of course, invites naïve uncertainty. Recall the 2010 mid-term elections where candidates like Sharron Angle and Carl Paladino refused to answer questions and/or threatened to punish those who would criticize their views or actions. Finally, this is Paul's advice to the Romans: "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who create dissensions and obstacles, in opposition to the teaching that you learned: *avoid them* (Rom. 16:17. My emphasis.)." What a marvelous way to circumscribe uncertainty—just ignore it.[2]

Part of my motivation, here, is the consideration that students sometimes leave the classroom, friends and family turn away, neighbors shun, etc., when faced with criticism and uncertainty: reform is resisted, and revolutionaries reviled. In a world where solutions and certainty matter, contradicting orthodoxy and the confutation of ideology is too often seen as a part of the problem. And in such a world of solutions and also hate, greed, and convenience, those who teach uncertainty or whose ideas invite uncertainty of the naïve type are often prohibited by politicians, bureaucrats, and administrators from effectively engaging their students on an intellectually respectable level because students are not here, after all, for such matters.

As teacher, as philosopher, as whatever, what can one expect from his or her craft if what is delivered is uncertainty? I do not think it too far of a step to see Paul as psychologically certain, or to see the politician as psychologically certain. Further, it does not seem too far of a step to see ourselves as psychologically certain. But does rational inquiry not have some objective as Aristotle suggests in the opening of his *Ethics*? Do we not teach logic and argumentation with a sense of hopeful expectation that someday someone may take the lessons seriously and use their rational capacities for suitable moral and political ends? Perhaps this is a hopeful monster of sorts. After all, the people who are in most need of the benefit of rational inquiry are precisely the ones who ward it off the most vigorously. Recently, David Gal and Derek Rucker

have shown that the more one's beliefs and confidence are shaken, the stronger one advocates for those beliefs regardless of any evidence to the contrary.[3]

In this address, I would like to promote and further the idea that at least part of the goal of philosophy, that part of what is prudent for philosophers to foster, is the very notion of naïve uncertainty that make so many so uncomfortable and so uneasy. And when one is naïvely uncertain, one may be lead to a state of epistemic uncertainty. And it is this notion that allows for discovery, critical inquiry, and the very idea of being rational. I would like to illustrate this with a brief discussion of Plato's *Euthyphro*.[4]

Socrates and Euthyphro encounter each other outside of the court of King Archon. Socrates is surprised to see Euthyphro and asks what his purpose is. He is there, of course, to prosecute his father for the murder of one of his slaves who himself had apparently murdered someone. Euthyphro is known as a religious expert and a seer; he is the go-to-guy in matters regarding the gods and, on this occasion, it is his expertise on piety which is of interest. He tells Socrates that his family thinks that he is acting impiously as "a son is impious who prosecutes a father;" but, according to Euthyphro, that shows "how little they know of the opinions of the gods about piety and impiety" (68-69). This is of particular interest to Socrates since he is there to defend himself on charges of impiety and for corrupting the minds of the youths of Athens. With this we have Euthyphro's first definition of piety: "Piety is doing as I am doing; that is to say, prosecuting anyone who is guilty of murder, sacrilege, or of any other similar crime—whether he be your father or mother, or some other person…and not prosecuting them is impiety" (70). Euthyphro defends this position by referencing Zeus who had punished his father, Cronos, who had himself punished his father, Uranus. To this Socrates replies that Euthyphro is only giving examples of piety and has not furnished any sort of definition regarding the essence of piety.

Euthyphro replies with his second definition: "Piety is that which is dear to the gods, and impiety is that which is not dear to them" (72). But do the gods not have their differences, asks Socrates. And, do such differences not arise due to the difficult nature of matters such as honor and justice that are not easily settled? The answer is affirmative. Considering, then, that some actions are both loved and hated by the gods, Socrates asks Euthyphro how he would show "that all the gods absolutely agree in approving of his act" (75). But this is a seemingly moot point, for even if it were true that "what all the gods love is pious and holy, and the opposite which they all hate, impious" (76), a point to which Socrates and Euthyphro both assent to (Socrates for the sake of the argument), Socrates still wishes to know "whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods" (77).

Socrates explains that some states of affairs are necessarily antecedent to others such as in the case of love where the act of loving is antecedent to the state of being loved (78). In light of this, Euthyphro agrees that "that which is dear to the gods is dear to them because it is loved by them" (78) and, thus, the act of loving is antecedent to the state of being dear to the gods. But a moment earlier Euthyphro had agreed that an act is loved because it is holy.

This, of course, spells trouble for Euthyphro who wishes to maintain that piety or holiness is identical to being dear to the gods, as his second definition declares; for if

being holy is identical to being dear to the gods, then something is holy because it is loved by them and not the other way around since, as noted a moment ago, if the act of loving is antecedent to the state of being loved and given that the state of *being loved* is akin to the state of *being dear to*, then something's being holy or dear to the gods cannot be antecedent to the act of being loved. Thus, not only has Euthyphro only given the attributes of piety, e.g., acts and states of being loved, he has refuted his own claim that some act is loved because it is holy.

Euthyphro's third definition of piety turns to the notion of justice and attentiveness to the gods: "Piety or holiness, Socrates, appears to me to be that part of justice which attends to the gods, as there is the other part of justice which attends to men" (81). But here Euthyphro seems to equivocate the term "attending" as it cannot have the same meaning in both cases. Attending to men, dogs, and gardens, for example, somehow makes them better such as in the case of better health, fecundity, or productivity. But surely the gods cannot get better in this sense and so Socrates asks, "And about this art which ministers to the gods: what work does that help to accomplish?" (83). Euthyphro dodges this question by simply saying that the works are too many to be detailed. Of course, even if he did list the many works to be accomplished, he would still only be giving examples and not a definition or answer that addresses the nature or essence of piety.

Rather, Euthyphro offers his fourth definition: "piety is learning how to please the gods in word and deed, by prayers and sacrifices. That is piety, which is the salvation of families and states, just as the impious, which is unpleasing to the gods, is their ruin and destruction" (84). Piety, Euthyphro agrees, is a "sort of science of praying and sacrificing" (84) and that it is "an art which gods and men have of doing business with one another" (85). But as before, and Socrates and Euthyphro are agreed on this point, the gods clearly cannot receive any benefit from such pious actions since the gods presumably cannot become any better. If benefits are not the object of piety, then Euthyphro contends, it is honor and what is pleasing to the gods. This is, of course, Euthyphro's first definition repeated. And since that definition, as well as all of the subsequent definitions, was clearly defeated by Socrates, it appears that Euthyphro's reasoning is circular and his concept of piety empty. Having, then, demonstrated this fault in Euthyphro's reasoning, Socrates endeavors to ask the question anew, what is piety? At this point, Euthyphro makes a rather hasty retreat.

It is a matter of speculation as to whether or not Euthyphro remains psychologically certain. If we assume that the trial of his father continues, then it is a fair assumption that he does. Socrates is surely neither psychologically nor epistemically certain. The whole point of his questioning stems from his very uncertainty. As I have described it, Socrates appears to be both naively and epistemically uncertain. He is seemingly unable (or unwilling) to make a confident truth claim as to what piety is and, as is characteristic of Socrates, unable to claim any knowledge on the subject. Or so it would appear.

What is piety? We are left without a clear answer to this question. If one is looking for an answer to what piety is and reads the *Euthyphro*, a piece dedicated to the subject, one might be very disappointed. If one already has an idea about what piety is and reads the *Euthyphro*, especially if that idea comports to any of Euthyphro's, then one

may find one's self naïvely uncertain and unable to make a confident truth claim about the matter. So what is one to do in light of such uncertainty? There are a few standard answers to this.

First, Euthyphro is frustrated that he is unable to answer Socrates' demand for a cogent definition and analysis of piety and, hence, he leaves. This being the case, the obvious relevant conclusion to be drawn is that Euthyphro should not be prosecuting his father on the basis of piety since Euthyphro himself does not know what piety is.

Beyond Euthyphro's case, the implication is a normative one for the rest of us: one should not engage in activities where one does not know or cannot explain the reasons for one's activities. If you are going to accuse someone of a crime, then you had better have good evidence and reasons for doing so. Similarly, if you are going to be handing out medals and awards of honor, then you had better have good evidence and reasons for doing so. Of course, Euthyphro's and Socrates' trials apparently do go on as do our own uninformed activities; perhaps, though, some should not.

Another standard lesson is that one learns the Socratic Method from such a piece. This may seem an inconvenience to some, or an annoying precondition for being awarded a degree, or a mere philosopher's eccentricity—something to be tolerated and then forgotten. Socrates and Plato nevertheless influenced the course of history. Understanding Socrates' method not only bestows a moderate amount of skill in engaging the world at large and problem solving, it also imparts an insight into human endeavors—the degree of one's state of knowledge, one's understanding of a particular problem or state of affairs, one's ability to conceptualize, one's willingness to engage in discovery, correcting claims in light of evidence, and one's commitment to truth. It is also this insight which leads to my main point.

The *Euthyphro* spells trouble for the psychologically certain in that it reduces, or should reduce, the confidence one has in one's claims to truth and falsity. But with the fact that the dialogue ends without a definition of piety, not even a tacit inkling as to its meaning, the work has the double effect of leaving us epistemically uncertain. Not only is one's confidence regarding an answer or past answers reduced, one has, at the point the dialogue ends, seemingly no claim of knowledge regarding piety at all.

But, perhaps, this is not quite the case. The real philosophical importance, the force of the *Euthyphro* for human reasoning comes, I think, from understanding what something or other is *not* whether it be piety, love, friendship, honor, or any of the myriad of concepts we employ during our lives. Socrates' chief concerns were questions regarding human well-being and the development of the soul and justice. This was not just the major theme of the *Republic* it was a current running through the four dialogues surrounding Socrates' trial and death—the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*. In the *Euthyphro*, by stripping away less and less putative definitions of piety we arrive not at the austere concept, the clear and distinct notion that is unlikely to ever appear, but at a better understanding of what piety or any other concept may be. And, for Socrates this understanding of the uncertainty of our claims to knowledge is the very process which develops the soul and compels one to become just.

What a more liberating, sincere, and responsible place to be in! It is liberating because one is freed from the confines of sloppy reasoning, habits of though, and obedient consent and free to explore alternative possibilities. It is sincere because there

is no longer the psychological need for the pretense of certainty—one is allowed to be uncertain or even wrong while holding out for the prospect of clarity. Finally, it is responsible because, insofar as one is committed to truth and understanding the world, claiming that one has the answers without having considered alternative, albeit sometimes undesirable, possibilities is to neglect the possibility that one might be wrong. That one ends up correct might as well have been the result of a lucky guess.

There are obvious problems with these ideas, of course. For instance, being too liberated in one's thoughts could lead to broad acceptance of any claim whatsoever. Not only do there seem to be no clear benefits to this, the mistake seems to be the same as that of the fundamentalist attitude—there is no commitment to the discovery of truth while fostering the deliberate limitation of inquiry and knowledge.

Another problem stems from the idea of being sincere in our claims about the world. On the one hand, it is not apparent why I should be sincere in my claim about what, say, piety is. If my claim one way or the other is correct, then what point is there being sincere about it? I would be right whether I was sincere or not. On the other hand, given that there is some putative reason for being sincere in one's claims, one can easily think of counter examples showing why it is sometimes desirable to be insincere with regard to one's claims. I may tell my friend and her family that the dinner they prepared for me was excellent when my sincere thought is that it was not if only to maintain strong bonds. And, as far as responsibility and truth are concerned, and in sheer practical terms, it seems to be equally a mistake to ask that people be concerned with "the truth" about the world. That's what philosophers and scientists are for; there are more practical matters to deal with for everyone else.

One obvious response to these criticisms to my claims is to say that people who have no such commitments are flawed in some way. In the preface to his book, *Truth Without Paradox*,[5] David Johnson, for example, advances such an idea when discussing metaphysics, what he calls the "fundamental things":

> In practical terms, one might say that the "fundamental things" are the things concerning which there would be *rather something wrong* with someone who had no interest in them. If you have no interest in aardvarks, then, fine, you have no interest in aardvarks; but if you have no interest in logic, or in morality, then there is something wrong with you. (vii)

My claim in a moment will be that Johnson's remarks are too strong, here. There is not necessarily something wrong with you if you have no interest in logic or morality. However, for the time being, I think that there is no misunderstanding his point. Understanding or attempting to understand the nature of rationality and reasoning seems to be an important part not just of human activity, but of human flourishing. Understanding inferences, implication, and contradictions leads to a better ability to understand, interpret, and act in the world. Imagine if Edward Jenner (1749-1823) or Elie Metchnikoff (1845-1916) had paid no heed to the rational principles of inference and implication; we may well wonder what the state of human flourishing would be without the concept of immunology (Jenner) and an understanding of the cellular mechanisms of immunization (Metchnikoff). If one were psychologically certain, for

example, that the devastating spread of small pox was God's divine wrath, then one need not bother looking for a way to manage or cure the disease beyond prayer and sacrifice. This would be a dim outlook for humanity, indeed.

And we can certainly understand Johnson's point regarding moral issues. One does not escape moral situations. From questions about what one should do with one's life to cost benefit analyses that are used to make decisions about the value of human lives and property, being a member of society brings with it the complicated mess of moral inquiry. Moral inquiry, judgment, and decision are normal facets of human experience. To ignore it is to ignore the questions of rationality itself and to ignore a huge part of what it means to be human. And, encountering someone who is fine with this is strange.

But Johnson's claim is too strong. Disregarding the fact that understanding the ecology of aardvarks is crucial to a greater understanding of the ecology of our world, there is nothing necessarily wrong with you if you don't spend your time worrying about moral conundrums or the structure of logic and human reasoning. One might even be tempted to argue for versions of rationality that involve paraconsistency, or arguing for a three-valued logic, thus, denying the Law of the Excluded Middle, or by allowing for relativism about truth within a framework or artificial language.[6] The point is that whether dialetheism is true or not, or whether one simply does not care about what is and what is not true, one can seemingly live a life worth living. And while it's true that, as Robert Nozick[7] puts it, "Rationality provides us with the (potential) power to investigate and discover anything and everything; it enables us to control and direct our behavior through reasons and the utilization of principles" (xi), it is not true that if one does not participate in this type of behavior, then one is some sort of malfunctioning human being. On some level, it would be strange to say that there is something wrong with my neighbor who has no interest in the structure of arguments.

Another response might be to say that someone who is not concerned with a commitment to truth and logic and morality is simply missing out on something important to the human experience—that our lives are enriched by such experiences and contemplations. This is undoubtedly true. But this would be true of many, many other things as well. My life would be enriched if I had the chance to see the Statue of David, hear the London Philharmonic, grow a garden, or learn how to sign. But I need not accomplish these or any number of activities in order to claim a eudaimonious human life. No. These demands are too strong and Johnson is wrong in demanding them. But they do indicate, I think, an interesting aspect regarding an opportunity to affect human reasoning.

I mentioned earlier the pitfalls of being a fundamentalist regarding the certainty of our claims and of being overly accepting of propositions. I also mentioned the world we live in is a place where we are inundated with the rhetoric of a need for solutions and definite answers. The *Euthyphro* reminds us of who we are in that world: *we* are Euthyphro—the average, ordinary person who makes very definite and important claims about the world, but who does so unreflectively, albeit sincerely. The character Euthyphro reminds us of the absurd positions we can find ourselves in regarding our claims to knowledge (not to mention character!) if we assume too much certainty about our claims and when we accept a wide array of claims about any given subject.

Euthyphro, not any less than ourselves, does both.

My point here has been to suggest that contrary to our initial intuitions, it is the very state of uncertainty in both forms that brings us closer to what is and what is not true. One need not be vexed by philosophical inquiry, or lose sleep wondering about the nature of rationality, or be resolute in discovering what piety is. However, when we understand that being uncertain is not just an acceptable but an intellectually responsible position, we begin to see that although we may not know for certain, either psychologically or epistemically, what something or other is, we can begin to say what something or other is not. And if this is the state of our knowledge, then so be it. The alternatives leave us with a far dimmer perspective on human intellectual, moral, and emotional development.

I would like to close this talk by reading a paragraph from Bertrand Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy*.

> The value of philosophy is, in fact, to be sought largely in its very uncertainty. The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation or consent of his deliberate reason. To such a man the world tends to become definite, finite, obvious; common objects rouse no questions, and unfamiliar possibilities are contemptuously rejected. As soon as we begin to philosophize, on the contrary, we find … that even the most everyday things lead to problems to which only very incomplete answers can be given. Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom. Thus, while diminishing our feeling of certainty as to what things are, it greatly increases our knowledge as to what they may be; it removes the somewhat arrogant dogmatism of those who have never travelled into the region of liberating doubt, and it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect.[8]

Thank you.

Notes

1. See "Certainty" by Baron Reed concerning the following discussion. http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/certainty/. See Baron Reed, "Certainty," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta (ed.), web, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/certainty/>.

2. It has been suggested that I am using this quote out of context and that Paul wouldn't seriously suggest that his audience members shouldn't engage in free thought. I shall let my audience decide for themselves. Consider, however, the following: There are several instances in Paul's letters which instruct his audience to beware of false teaching to which I refer to shortly. Paul's assumption is that his teachings are correct; thus, his audience would be correct in believing Paul. For we moderns, the lesson is identical; the gospel (including Paul's teachings) is correct and, thus, we would be correct in believing Paul. Although a very real possibility, it is highly unlikely that, from the perspective of a truly sincere religious person, Paul would delib-

erately mislead his audience by telling them as true stories that he knew to be false. Assuming this charitable interpretation, then if it is Paul's job to proselytize and if he is indeed correct, then it seems only reasonable that he should warn his audience of those who would confute his orthodoxy, i.e., the truth. So, for instance, in 2 Cor. 11:12-15 Paul warns of "false apostles" and "deceitful workers" masquerading "as apostles of Christ." In Gal. 1:6-9 Paul says, "if anyone preaches to you a gospel other than the one that you received, let that one be accursed," and, thus, closing the door on an alternative possibility. (See also: Gal. 6:12-13; Phil. 3:2-3, 18-19.)

3. David Gal and Derek D. Rucker, "When In Doubt, Shout! Paradoxical Influences of Doubt on Proselytizing," *Psychological Science* 21 (October 13, 2010).

4. All citations to Plato refer to Benjamin Jowett, *Works of Plato*, Vol. 3 (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1937).

5. David Johnson, *Truth Without Paradox* (Lanham, Maryland: Littlefield and Rowman Publishers, 1973).

6. For a discussion of this see, esp., Chapter 5 of Maria Baghramian, *Relativism* (London: Routledge, 2004) and Chapter 2 of Paul O'Grady, *Relativism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002). Of course, one must read Graham Priest, "What is so Bad about Contradictions?" *Journal of Philosophy* 95.8 (1998): 410–26. See also; "Dialetheism" by Garham Priest and Francesco Berto, "Dialetheism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, web, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/dialetheism/>.

7. Robert Nozick, *The Nature Of Rationality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

8. Bertrand Russell. *The Problems of Philosophy*. (London: OUP, 1959. Ch. XV).