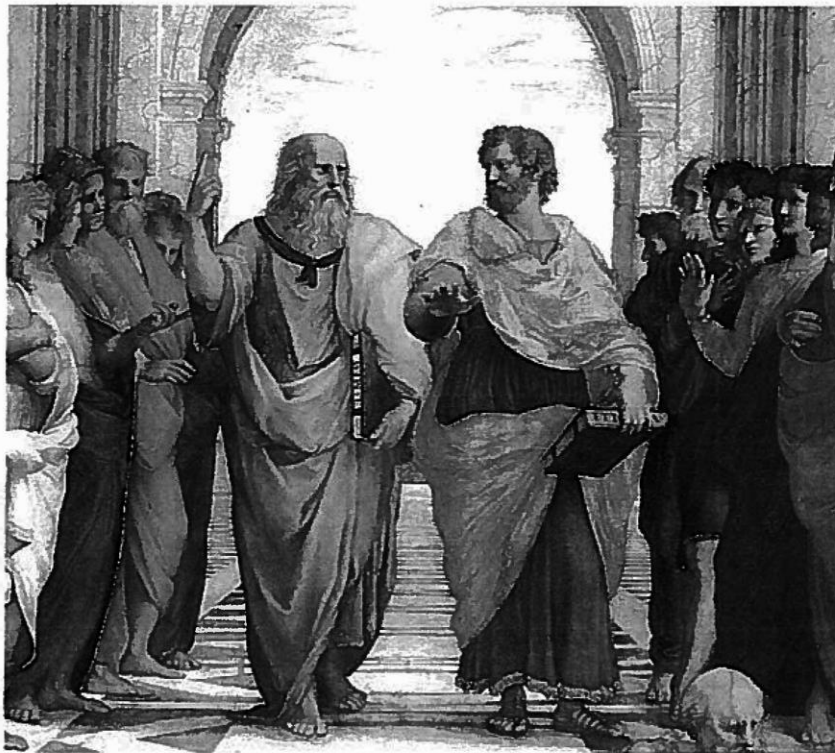


Candidate 3 evidence

'Piety is that which is dear to the gods':
How accurate was this view for Ancient
Greece?



Plato and Aristotle depicted in Raphael Sanzio's 'The School of Athens'
<https://mymodernmet.com/school-of-athens-raphael/>

Word Count: 4061

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Introduction

Plato's *Euthyphro* is still one of the most frequently referenced ancient texts when looking at questions of morality. It tells the story of Socrates and Euthyphro meeting outside the court of Athens, and discussing issues surrounding the topic of morality. During the discussion, Socrates asks Euthyphro to provide a definition of morality. Euthyphro answers 'Piety, then, is that which is dear to the gods, and impiety is that which is not dear to them.'¹ In this dissertation I will be looking at Euthyphro's definition of morality and concluding to what extent this statement was true for the Ancient Greeks.

The Ancient Greeks were a society of thinkers, filled with philosophers and writers. Yet we have very little evidence of Socratic characters of the time, who questioned the way the gods were approached and how human actions could affect that relationship. It is important to consider the Greeks relationship with their gods, and the Ancient Greeks beliefs about morality, as much of their society has shaped ours.

The question of morality is one still asked today. 'Euthyphro's Dilemma', as it has commonly been called, asks 'whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods?'² I have been asked this question in regards to my personal religious beliefs, and I know it is a question many struggle with.

In an increasingly secular society, not everyone can base their morals off a belief in God, causing questions as to where the modern idea of morality originates from. In Ancient Greece it seemed clear that morality was based on a belief in the gods, but there is question about what that looked like for the Greeks. Did the Greeks, for example, have a moral code from the gods that was strictly upheld? Perhaps they aimed to act as the gods themselves did, believing pious actions were those

¹ Plato, *Euthyphro*, Benjamin Jowett (trans.), 308 B.C. <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/euthyphro.html> 6e - 7a

² *Ibid.* 10a

which were reinforced by the gods? Or maybe the majority followed Euthyphro's logic – morality was based off of what was pleasing and valued to the gods.

Each of these possibilities were considered when selecting a title for this dissertation. I looked at many aspects within the topic of morality and the gods. I decided a plausible conclusion would be discussing about how the Greeks believed it was behaviour that was pleasing to the gods that determined moral behaviour. While researching this topic I discovered the play '*Euthyphro*' by Plato, which covered this issue in great depth and provided an ideal basis for the title of this dissertation.

Morality was not the first topic I considered when beginning to plan for this dissertation. Initially I considered looking at the relationship between Ancient Greek religion and the Bible, with the potential title of 'What is the potential connection between Ancient Greek mythology and the Bible?' Despite this being a topic of great interest for me, it was difficult to evaluate and I did not want personal religious beliefs to affect my objectivity when faced with a topic. Thus, I veered away from biblical connections and looked instead at morality.

As well as using Plato's '*Euthyphro*' as a key source when researching this topic, I also looked in depth at different representations of the gods and the Greek society, including the works of Homer, Greek mythology, and accounts of Greek writers and philosophers. All of this was used to come to a conclusion as to whether Greek piety was that which is dear to the gods, as Euthyphro suggests.

Euthyphro

In Plato's play, *'Euthyphro'*, the issue of morality is discussed in great depth between the two characters, Socrates and Euthyphro. The story goes that Euthyphro and Socrates met outside the court of Athens. Socrates is being charged for impiety, as he has been considered to be creating new gods and in turn forgetting about the old ones. Euthyphro is condemning his father for unintentionally murdering his hired hand, who was considered murderous. Socrates, assuming Euthyphro must therefore be knowledgeable on morality and religious practices, requests that he teaches him about piety to help him with his case. Euthyphro claims to know all there is to know about religion and piety, so Socrates starts to question him.

Socrates insists on being provided with a clear and simple explanation of what piety is. Euthyphro is able to provide clear examples of what can be called moral, and what cannot. However, these answers are insufficient for Socrates, and he continues to enquire. Eventually, Euthyphro gives an answer, saying 'Piety, then, is that which is dear to the gods, and impiety is that which is not dear to them.'³

Socrates, however, is not convinced by this definition. He points out, with Euthyphro's agreement, that different gods have differing opinions on what is good and what is not. He states that 'what is acceptable to Hephaestus but unacceptable to Here, and there may be other gods who have similar differences of opinion.'⁴ It is clear that, from how Plato represents the gods, either morality could not have been that which pleased the gods, or there were many behaviours which could have been considered both moral and immoral.

Religion, and religious practises, clearly played a large part in morality at that time. The fact that Socrates was being charged with impiety for disregarding the gods showed the way in which you treated divine beings did play a part in morality. However, the question arising from Plato's play is to

³ Plato, *Euthyphro*, Benjamin Jowett (trans.), 308 B.C. <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/euthyphro.html> 6e - 7a

⁴ *ibid.* 10a

what extent is religion important to morality. Euthyphro's initial argument suggests it is of pinnacle importance – it is divine beings who decide what is moral. Yet when presented with Socrates' counter-argument, questions are posed as to the truth in Euthyphro's statement.

Euthyphro is still regularly discussed in conversations on morality. Socrates' question to Euthyphro has become the basis for arguments both for and against divine command theory, which is the idea that God's will is the basis of ethics.⁵ It seems that even in modern times, we are yet to come up with a satisfactory definition of what morality is. Those who follow a religion may hold views similar to those of Euthyphro, that morality is based on the god or gods of that religion – they may potentially believe that morality is what is dear to those gods. Others may come from a similar viewpoint as Socrates, where there is uncertainty as to where morality comes from.

Plato's 'Euthyphro' does not reach a conclusion of the definition of morality, and over two millennia later we still struggle to provide a satisfactory definition. However, this dissertation is looking at what the Ancient Greeks would have considered pious and impious. There are only two characters within 'Euthyphro', making it difficult to comment on an entire society based on this text alone. However, the text does provide us with possible viewpoints which can be explored further. It may be that many Greeks followed Euthyphro's view, it may be that many saw the flaws Socrates did, or it may be that there was an entirely different definition that was a common viewpoint.

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Tim Holt, *The Euthyphro Dilemma*, Philosophy of Religion, <http://www.philosophyofreligion.info/christian-ethics/divine-command-theory/the-euthyphro-dilemma/> [Accessed 28/03/19]

Morality of gods

There are many different accounts talking about the morality of the Greek gods. Many popular accounts portray the Greek gods as completely immoral, especially by our standards today, but others claim that this is not the case.

Homer is perhaps the most popular portrayal of Greek gods we have today. His accounts of the Trojan War, told through his epic poems '*The Iliad*' and '*The Odyssey*', show an Olympiad of gods interacting with Trojan and Greek soldiers. These poems are still widely read and adapted, and it is from Homer that much of the modern view of the Greek gods comes from. The gods of Homer's poems are heavily involved in human life. They intervene during many key scenes, and protect those they favour. However, the gods in Homer do not always act morally. They are selfish, often cruel, and their behaviour is consistently inconsistent. Naoko Yamagata claims that 'the Homeric gods do not appear to be interested in morality or justice in the human world.'⁶ Even in examples where at first glance the gods do seem to act morally by our standards, a closer look shows them to be less moral than they initially seemed.

The way the gods interact with humans is hard to analyse as a whole. Their treatment depends both on which god you are referencing, and which mortal they are interacting with. It is implied that the gods of Homer had favourites. Each divine being had mortals that they favoured, but also tended to have mortals that they disfavoured. In many cases they have a reason for their particular feelings towards this human, though whether that reason and their actions following that are justified, is very subjective. Athena had a fondness for Odysseus. When Odysseus is being held captive by Calypso, Athena repeatedly fights for his rescue. She says to Zeus 'my heart aches for Odysseus, wise but ill fated, who suffers far from his friends on an island deep in the sea.'⁷ Though it is never stated why Athena chooses for Odysseus to be the mortal she supports, there are a few indications

⁶ Naoko Yamagata, *Homeric Morality*, (Köln: Brill, 1993), p3

⁷ Homer, *The Odyssey*, A. S. Kline (Trans.), 5.44-95
<https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PI/TBR/Greek/Odhome.php>

throughout Homer's texts. After Paris chose Aphrodite over Athena and Hera when asked by Zeus,⁸ Athena chooses to support the Greeks, such as Odysseus and Achilles, over the Trojans, of which Paris is a part of. Odysseus is portrayed to have many traits approved, or also held, by Athena. His cunning mind is what allows him to succeed, and he is renowned for his sharp thinking. Upon discovering the Trojan horse, Laocoon comments on 'Ulysses' being known for his tricks.⁹ As Athena is the goddess of wisdom and battle strategy, it makes sense that she should take a liking to Odysseus.

This raises the question, however, of how moral is it for the gods to have favourites based off such trivial reasons? It is not as if Odysseus was the most moral of the Greek soldiers, nor the most pious or devout to the gods, so it seems unjust that he should get so much protection and care. Athena's reasons come across as petty and selfish. She is upset at all Trojans because one said the goddess of beauty was more beautiful than her. It is clear that the way the gods treated mortals, according to Homer, was inconsistent and unjust.

Xenia, an ancient Greek word meaning 'guest-friendship', is a further example of inconsistent morality amongst the gods. It held a place of great importance in Ancient Greece. It was imperative for the ancient Greeks to uphold the unwritten laws of hospitality, because the gods were thought to look out for and protect strangers. It was considered the just thing to punish those who did not uphold the laws of *xenia*, and reward those who did.¹⁰ However, when the Phaeacians welcome Odysseus to their home and provide for him in many ways, showing respect to the Greek ideas of hospitality, Zeus does not respond as expected. The Phaeacians help Odysseus return to Ithaca. This angers Poseidon, who expresses his feeling to Zeus, and is granted permission to punish the Phaeacians. Poseidon strikes their ship, turning it to stone.¹¹ This brings the gods' morality into

⁸ *Apollodorus, The Library*, Sir James George Frazer (trans.), 1.3.2, <http://www.theoi.com/Text/Apollodorus1.html>

⁹ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, A. S. Kline (trans.), ll.1-56, <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Virgilhome.php>

¹⁰ Nigel Willson (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece*, (Routledge, 2013) p370-371

¹¹ Homer, *The Odyssey* 13.1-158

question, as by following the Greek idea of morality, an act of *xenia* should be rewarded not punished, and so Poseidon seems to be acting immorally by the standards that the gods themselves put into place.

Homer's depiction of the Greek gods shows an Olympiad of immoral and selfish beings, far from what our modern perceptions of a god would be. Homer is not alone in his representation of the gods however, as the gods of Greek mythology are also difficult to describe as moral.

Even in widespread Greek Myths, the gods can be seen to possess poor moral judgement. Arachne was the daughter of a shepherd, and a talented weaver, who claimed her weaving abilities were better than those of Athena. Her pride and arrogance angered Athena, who thus appeared to Arachne as an old lady, claiming that Arachne could not compare to the gods. Arachne then challenged Athena to come down herself, so she revealed her true form. From there, a contest started. Arachne created a tapestry depicting the way in which the gods mistreat and abuse mortals. As well as being offensive to the gods, Arachne's tapestry was also described to be better than Athena's, adding more fuel to Athena's already blazing fire. Athena then ripped up Arachne's tapestry, and hit her on the head three times. Arachne then hanged herself, and Athena caused Arachne to turn into a spider, so she could continue to weave.¹²

There are several aspects of Athena's behaviour that do not fit with the idea of a moral being. For one, she is jealous of Arachne, and resents her for her ability, showing a childlike sense of stubbornness. This causes her to tear up Arachne's tapestry and hit her. Vandalism and violence are also very corrupt behaviour, throwing more doubt over the principles of the gods. Even once she has led Arachne to hang herself, she then takes it further by turning her into a spider. Although Arachne did disrespect the gods, Athena's response seemed to stem from more than just her insolence, and

¹² P. Ovidius Naso, *Metamorphoses*, Brookes More (trans.) Book 6
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0028%3Abook%3D6%3Acard%3D1>

her actions went past what could and should have been justified. She was acting from personal vengeance, not moral consequences.

Even the king of the god's morality was flawed. Zeus has a reputation for enjoying the company of people who are not his wife. Numerous myths involve Zeus pursuing someone, Hera getting jealous, and some kind of punishment or unfortunate situation following. The story of Zeus and Io is a classic example of this. Io, a princess of Argos, caught the eye of Zeus so he seduced her. However, Hera was suspicious and came looking for her husband, so Zeus turned Io into a cow. Hera requested to be given the cow as a present, so Zeus gave Io to Hera. Hera made sure the cow was watched over at all times by Argus Panoptes, who had one hundred eyes. Zeus sent Hermes, disguised as a shepherd, to go and steal Io back. Hermes lulled Argus to sleep, and then killed him, setting Io free. Hera sent the mother of all gadflies to sting Io, and she was haunted by the ghost of Argus, so she wandered the world until she reached the river Nile where Zeus returned her to her human form and she gave birth to a child.¹³

Zeus' actions were clearly selfish and unjust. It was his desire for Io that meant she was punished – she would not have been able to turn down the king of the gods, yet she had to take the punishment for Zeus' actions. Hera also acted unfairly, by putting Io, and anyone else Zeus slept with, through such hard times. Hera would have known the power Zeus had over all mortals, so would have known that they were not responsible for Zeus' actions, yet they still were forced to suffer for what Zeus did to them.

It is clear that the gods were not depicted as moral beings in mythology. It is difficult to take any guess at what moral code they could potentially be following. The most likely is as Euthyphro suggested, that they are honouring what is dear to them and punishing what is not.¹⁴ However, this

¹³ Apollodorus, *The Library*, 2.1.3

¹⁴ Plato, *Euthyphro*

is not the case in every myth, and in the case of Io, by pleasing to Zeus she was displeasing Hera, and to please Hera she would have gone against Zeus, so there was no moral action for her to take.

Although the writings of Homer and mythology are two of the main sources we have depicting the Greek gods, not everyone believes they are an accurate representation of how the gods were actually viewed at the time. Xenophanes, an ancient Greek natural philosopher¹⁵, claims that Homer's accounts of the gods present a different account of the gods than how he personally viewed them. He claimed that Homer 'sang of numerous illicit divine deeds' including 'theft, adultery and mutual deceit.'¹⁶ Xenophanes believes that the gods of the Greeks are above and separate from human morality, in a way that Homer and mythology did not.

In modern day times, we would expect a god to be moral. For example, the Christian God is believed to be omnibenevolent and to want the best for all his people.¹⁷ Therefore, it is logical to believe a moral code could come from a God, as their precedent would be something worth following.

From the examples presented, it is clear that the depictions we have of the gods offer no clear definition to morality. Io is punished for actions beyond her control, the Phaeacians are punished for following the god's law, Athena favours the often immoral Odysseus, and Athena's treatment of Arachne goes beyond moral consequences for her actions. However, when looked at in reference to Euthyphro's definition, there are elements of truth in his statement. Odysseus' character was dear to Athena, meaning it is likely his actions were to. The Phaeacians' behaviour was displeasing to Poseidon, despite morally being fair. Arachne greatly disrespected and displeased the gods, Athena in particular, and Io's mere existence, and the way she caught the attention of Zeus, meant Hera was displeased by her. This does not seem just, but it does make sense. The gods seem to punish those

¹⁵ James H. Lesher, *Xenophanes of Colophon: Fragments : a Text and Translation with a Commentary*, (University of Toronto Press, 2001)

¹⁶ Ibid. Fragment 12 p23

¹⁷ *Holy Bible*, New International Version, Psalm 145:17

whose behaviour is not dear to them, and reward those whose behaviour they value. It is a corrupt method of jurisdiction, but it seems the only coherent moral code to be presented.

Ancient Greek Society

The society of the Ancient Greeks provides us with an insight into the relationship between the Greeks and the gods. From how they worshipped the gods, how they lived their lives, and how they spoke about the gods in their writings, we can evaluate how they viewed morality in reference to the gods, and how their belief in the gods affected the decisions they made.

Religion was a key aspect of the society of Ancient Greece. They based their entire lives off their beliefs. They believed that regular worship to the gods was extremely important, as having a good relationship with the gods held you in good favour. There were several different methods of worship practised in Ancient Greece, for different situations, and which sent different messages. These included formalised sacrifice, prayer, offerings, and multiple festivals.¹⁸

It is clear from the efforts put in to worshipping the gods, and the amount of time spent dedicated to the gods, that it was important to the Greeks to please them. Holding a festival, or even saying a prayer or having a sacrifice, required time, effort, and patience as all religion was very formalised.¹⁹

It is unlikely that a society would dedicate so much of themselves to something if they did not believe it was of pinnacle importance.

They may have done this from fear of punishment to the gods. In Homer and mythology, we see there are repercussions to angering or displeasing the gods. Xenophon describes an altar with a plaque explaining that the requests of Artemis are not carried out as she has said, she 'the goddess will look to it.'²⁰ It is clear that the Greeks believed the gods had the power to punish them, and that the gods had a certain way they wanted things to be done, hence the formality of the

¹⁸ Jon D Mikalson, 2011. *Ancient Greek Religion*. Hoboken: Wiley.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 5.3.13 [4th Century BC]
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Xen.%20Anab>.

religious procedures, so it is therefore likely that the Greeks may have tried to please the gods simply because they were scared of what would happen otherwise.

Another possible reason that the Greeks strived so hard to please the gods may be because they knew no other way of living. In ancient Greece, religion was entirely engrained within their society, to the point where there was not a specific word for religion as it did not require a separate entity from day-to-day life²¹. The Greeks would then have been brought up with these religious procedures, that had always been done in such a way, that they did not know how else to live.

The Greeks also believed in an afterlife. How your life after death shaped out was very much dependent on your actions during your life. If your life was average, then you would go to the Asphodel fields. If you were a demi-god, a hero, or had been particularly good, you would be sent to the Elysium fields, and if you had committed a great crime, you would be sent to Tartarus. Who judged how well you lived and how good your actions were was Minos, Aeacus and Rhadamanthus.²² What's interesting however, is what they considered to be good and what they considered to be bad. Many examples of people we are told were sent to Tartarus are there because they have greatly offended the gods, and purposefully chosen to go against them.²³ If this is what is seen as the worst possible action, it would therefore suggest that the best possible action would be to please the gods and suggests that morality was based off of what pleased the gods. This may also have been another reason they tried so hard to please the gods, as they did not want to end up being punished for all eternity in the afterlife.

Potentially, the Ancient Greeks may have worked to please the gods because they thought that morally it was the right thing to do. In each society, it is clear the majority work towards doing the 'right thing', despite what is considered right varying from culture to culture. The Ancient Greeks

²¹ A.W.H. Adkins and John Richard Thornhill Pollard, "Greek Religion," Encyclopaedia Britannica, February 12, 2019, , accessed March 24, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Greek-religion>

²² Robert Garland, *The Greek Way of Death*, (Cornell University Press, 2001) p60

²³ Ibid. p50-51, p60

certainly acted as if they were constantly trying to please the gods, which suggests that pleasing the gods was considered morally right at that time and displeasing them was seen as wrong. The society at the time tried to honour the gods, and would punish anyone who did not, suggesting that potentially ancient Greek morality did stem from the preferred behaviour of the gods.

Conclusion

It is difficult to form a conclusion, due to the amount and variety of beliefs about the gods and about morality that we have today. However, by taking information displayed or portrayed by the majority, we can come up with some kind of answer to this question.

Plato's *Euthyphro* shows that the debate over morality has been happening since Classical times, making this question an important one to look into. Euthyphro seems to represent the majority of views at that time, a blind faith that seemed to say if the gods like it, then so do I. Socrates represents a more reasonable, more cynical view. He refuses to just accept what Euthyphro says, but instead questions the idea of morality, showing it is not as black and white as Euthyphro would like to believe. Socrates questions shape some of the questions we still face about morality today.

From Homer and mythology, we see that the gods are not depicted as moral, by any possible definition. They punish unfairly, reward undeservingly, and let their own desires shape how they treat mortals. If pushed to give a definition to the moral code the gods are following, the answer Euthyphro provides is probably the best possible answer, explaining that what pleases the gods is seen as good, and what displeases the gods is immoral. However, this arises the problems identified by Socrates: what pleases one god will not please another, making it difficult or even impossible to do the right thing in some cases, as seen by the myth of Io.

When looking at the Ancient Greek society, it is clear the Greeks aimed to please and honour the gods, through their intense and continual worship. This could come down to fear of punishment, belief in afterlife, not knowing any other way, or it could be that they genuinely believed it was the right thing to do.

It can be concluded that the Ancient Greeks did view piety as what is dear to the gods. We are aware, as Socrates pointed out and Io reminded us, that this is a flawed definition of morality, but

given the society of Ancient Greece, it can be assumed that they followed the same ideologies of Euthyphro and acted according to that mentality.

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