Applications in the Philosophy of Religion: The Euthyphro Dilemma

I. Evans' Interpretation of the Explicit Euthyphro Argument

According to Evans, Socrates and Euthyphro are seeking not the *definition* of the Pious, but rather the *identity* of the Pious. At 9d, Euthyphro proposes the following (where "god-loved" is short for "loved-by-every-god"):

Euthyphro's Answer (EA): The Pious = the God-Loved.

It follows from this that "x is pious" and "x is god-loved" are necessarily coextensive, which in turn entails that "x is pious" and "The gods love x" are necessarily coextensive:

Coextension: Necessarily, x is pious iff the gods love x.

This leads Socrates to ask his famous question: "If x is pious, is it the case that [x is pious] obtains in virtue of [The gods love x], or is it the case that [The gods love x] obtains in virtue of [x is pious]?"

Socrates gets Euthyphro to concede to the latter:

Object Priority: If x is pious, then [The gods love x] \leftarrow [x is pious].

On Evans' reading, Socrates also gets Euthyphro to agree to the following:

Affection: If x affects y, then $[y \text{ is } x\text{-affected}] \leftarrow [x \text{ affects } y]$.

Active Love: Loving something is a way of affecting it.

Substitution: If the Pious = the God-Loved, then:

- (S1) if $[x \text{ is god-loved}] \leftarrow [\text{The gods love } x],$ then $[x \text{ is pious}] \leftarrow [\text{The gods love } x];$ and
- (S2) if [The gods love x] \leftarrow [x is pious], then [The gods love x] \leftarrow [x is god-loved].

Asymmetry: If $[p] \leftarrow [q]$, then not: $[q] \leftarrow [p]$.

Evans' reconstruction of Socrates' argument involves deriving a contradiction in two different ways from the combination of the above seven principles and the assumption that at least one thing is pious:

	1.	x is plous.	(Assumption.)	
	2.	The gods love x .	(From 1 and Coextension.)	
	3.	If the gods love x , then $[x \text{ is god-loved}] \leftarrow [\text{The gods love } x]$.	(From Affection and Active Love.)	
	4.	$[x \text{ is god-loved}] \leftarrow [\text{The gods love } x].$	(From 2 and 3.)	
	5.	[The gods love x] \leftarrow [x is pious].	(From 1 and Object Priority.)	
The Action Leg:				
	6.	$[x \text{ is pious}] \leftarrow [\text{The gods love } x].$	(From 4, EA, and Substitution.)	
	7.	Not: [The gods love x] \leftarrow [x is pious].	(From 6 and Asymmetry.)	
	8.	1	(From 5 and 7.)	
The Object Lear				

The Object Leg:

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9. [The gods love x] ← [x is god-loved]. (From 5, EA, and Substitution.)
10. Not: [x is god-loved] ← [The gods love x]. (From 9 and Asymmetry.)
11. ⊥ (From 4 and 10.)
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Since EA is the (supposedly) the least plausible of the seven principles used to derive these two contradictions, we should conclude that EA is false.

II. Defending the Explicit Euthyphro Argument

Evans replies to some common objections to Socrates' argument:

• *objection #1*: Affection is implausible.

reply: Let us concede the point. Doing so undermines the Action Leg of Socrates' argument, but it does not undermine the Object Leg. We may replace Affection with the following:

Identity: If x affects y, then [y is x-affected] = [x affects y].

Then we can offer a modified version of Socrates' derivation of a contradiction as follows:

1'.	x is pious.	(Assumption.)		
2'.	The gods love x .	(From 1' and Coextension.)		
3'.	If the gods love x , then [x is god-loved] =	(From Identity and Active Love.)		
	[The gods love x].			
4'.	[x is god-loved] = [The gods love x].	(From 2' and 3'.)		
5'.	[The gods love x] \leftarrow [x is pious].	(From 1' and Object Priority.)		
The Object Leg:				
6'.	[The gods love x] \leftarrow [x is god-loved].	(From 5', EA, and Substitution.)		
7'.	[The gods love x] \leftarrow [The gods love x].	(From 4' and 6'.)		
8'.	Not: [The gods love x] \leftarrow [The gods love x].	(From 7' and Asymmetry.)		
9'.	T	(From 7' and 8'.)		

• *objection #2*: Active Love is implausible: "the relation of loving ... does not seem to be active in the same sort of way that straightforwardly causal relations (such as the relation of carrying) are" (p. 14).

reply: "...we can deny that affecting something—in the way that matters for the overall argument—essentially involve altering that thing" (ibid.).

This is particularly clear once we move from Affection to Identity. The central claim is that *active facts* and *passive facts* (in the grammatical sense of these terms) are identical. For example, a relevant instance of Identity is [The coat is Jane-forgotten] = [Jane forgot her coat].

• *objection #3*: Substitution is implausible: it involves substituting co-referring terms within non-extensional contexts.

reply: Consider the following inference:

The Tone Inference

What it is to hit middle C = what it is to oscillate at 260 hertz.

The gods love that sound because it hits middle C.

The gods love that sound *because* it oscillates at 260 hertz.

If "because" here is the "because" of *rational basis* (as in "She believes it will rain *because* the weatherman said it would" or "I will do it *because* it is right"), the inference is invalid. However, if "because" here is the "because" of *metaphysical grounding* (as it is in Substitution), the inference is fine.

• *objection #4*: The "because" in Object Priority is the "because" of rational basis. So if "because" in Substitution is the "because" of metaphysical grounding, the argument equivocates.

reply: The "because" in Object Priority is the "because" of metaphysical grounding.

alternate reply (due to James Bondarchuk): Hold that the "because" of rational basis is a species of the "because" of metaphysical grounding. Maybe the following is contradictory: "Micha's post on Facebook was clever because [metaphysical grounding] he liked it, and he liked it because [rational basis] it was clever."

III. Evans on the Tacit Euthyphro Argument

This leaves one major objection to be replied to. According to this objection, Euthyphro should have endorsed the following instead of Object Priority:

Subject Priority: If x is pious, then [x is pious] \leftarrow [The gods love x].

Socrates' lack of an explicit argument against Subject Priority is widely seen by commentators as a major lacuna in the Euthyphro argument.

Evans, however, insists that some über-subtle syntactic similarities between two questions Socrates asks suggest the following Tacit Argument against Subject Priority:

Explanation: There is some property F such that if x is pious, then [The gods love x] \leftarrow [x is F].

Foundation: If Explanation is true, then one such property is the property of being pious.

So, Object Priority is true: if x is pious, then [The gods love x] \leftarrow [x is pious].

Note that this connects Socrates' argument to the modern way of presenting the Euthyphro dilemma, since to deny Explanation is (according to Evans) to take the gods' love to be *arbitrary*.

Why Euthyphro should accept Explanation:

"Were [Euthyphro] to reject this claim, he would be unjustified ... in making the various judgments he so confidently makes about whether the gods love what he, his father, and Socrates have been doing lately" (p. 26).

Why Euthyphro should accept Foundation:

If there is some property F other than being pious such that we have $[x \text{ is pious}] \leftarrow [\text{The gods love } x]$ and $[\text{The gods love } x] \leftarrow [x \text{ is } F]$, then by transitivity $[x \text{ is pious}] \leftarrow [x \text{ is } F]$, so the gods' love is not the ultimate grounds of an act's being pious.

slight worry: Now we seem to have shifted from searching for the identity of the form *the Pious* to searching for the ultimate grounds of [x is pious].

According to Evans, Socrates considers Explanation uncontroversial because earlier in the dialogue he made clear that he accepts the following (where "good" is short for "good, beautiful, or just"):

Intellectualism: For the gods to love x is for them to believe $\langle x |$ is good \rangle .

Sapience: For the gods to believe $\langle x | \text{is good} \rangle$ is for them to know $\langle x | \text{is good} \rangle$.

Evans takes Intellectualism and Sapience to entail Explanation because he assume that [S knows $\langle p \rangle$] is always partially grounded in [p].

• *objection*: This way of arguing for Explanation undermines Foundation, since it entails that we have [The gods love x] \leftarrow [x is good], which is compatible with [x is pious] \leftarrow [The gods love x].

reply #1: [x is pious] = [x is good]. Then the Tacit Argument might not establish Object Priority when that thesis is interpreted in terms of full grounding, but it at least establishes that thesis when it is interpreted in terms of partial grounding.

(If Evans is using the "or" of identity when he writes "piety (or goodness)" on the bottom of p. 29 and the top of p. 30, then this is his reply.)

reply #2: We can reformulate the Tacit Argument so that it doesn't actually appeal to Foundation, but instead uses transitivity to show that [The gods love x] is not the ultimate grounds of [x is pious] if Explanation is true.

IV. Generalizing the Euthyphro Argument

Evans interprets the idea that "excellence in belief is a matter of conforming mind to world" as follows:

Objective Regulation: S's belief that p is correct if and only if, and because, p.

Let us say that the property of being F is *belief-grounded* just in case, for any x, the following holds:

(*) If x is F, then $[x \text{ is } F] \leftarrow [x \text{ is correctly believed to be } F]$.

(Note that this leaves open who is to do the correct believing.)

Objective Regulation, together with the transitivity and irreflexivity of grounding, entails that there are no belief-grounded properties.

Evans thinks this shows how the true target of the Euthyphro Argument is not the view that normative facts are grounded in "someone's prescriptions, commendations, stipulations, decrees, or whims" (p. 29), but rather its true target is the following view:

Constructivism: The facts about what we should think, feel, and act in response to things are

grounded in our best beliefs about how we should think, feel, and act in response to

things.

Evans endorses the Euthyphro Argument, as he has interpreted it, as a good way of arguing against Constructivism.

worry #1: The Explicit Euthyphro Argument is not actually doing any work in this argument against Constructivism.

worry #2: In fact, the Tacit Euthyphro Argument isn't needed to argue against Constructivism in the way Evans sketches, either. All we need is Objective Regulation (plus transitivity and irreflexivity).

worry #3: To argue against Constructivism by appealing to Objective Regulation, we need the additional assumption that bestness of belief is partially grounded in correctness of belief.

worry #4: Most modern-day constructivists either drop the "best" in their formulation of Constructivism, or they provide a way of glossing what bestness of belief comes to which doesn't make it partially grounded in correctness.

Can a similar argument also be offered against the following variant of Constructivism?

Neo-Constructivism: The facts about what we should think, feel, and act in response to things are

grounded in the non-cognitive attitudes our epistemically ideal selves take (or

would take) toward things.

(This is the analogue of trying to resist Socrates' Tacit Argument by denying Intellectualism, thereby taking loving to be a non-cognitive attitude.)

Evans thinks we can find in Plato's other dialogues the resources to extend the argument against Constructivism into an argument against Neo-Constructivism as well.

In particular, he thinks Socrates endorses the following in the *Protagoras*, the *Meno*, and the *Gorgias*:

(L1) There are no non-cognitive attitudes (because all our motivationally effective attitudes are, at bottom, beliefs).

And he thinks Socrates endorses the following in the Republic, the Symposium, the Phaedrus, and the Philebus:

(L2) There are some non-cognitive attitudes, but all of them are, like belief, objectively regulated.