

The Greek Philosophical Tradition in Philo's Ethical Teaching: Εὐσέβεια for the Service of God and Human Beings

It is well-known that the virtue of εὐσέβεια has a place in Greek philosophical ethical systems, and that Philo appropriates that understanding and applies it to his own view of εὐσέβεια in his ethical teaching about virtues. It is also known that instead of viewing εὐσέβεια as a subordinate virtue, as in the Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic traditions,¹ in Philo, εὐσέβεια receives a special prominence; he calls it, for example, “the highest and greatest of virtues” (*Abr.* 60), “the origin of all the other virtues” (*Decal.* 52), and “the most godlike of qualities” (*Somn.* 2.186).² What is significant about Philo is that he subsumes all the ethical commandments of the *Decalogue* under the greatest virtue of εὐσέβεια. He does that, however, without completely divorcing himself from his Greek philosophical tradition. One of the interesting aspects of the virtue εὐσέβεια is that in ancient Greek philosophy the understanding of the virtue went through a “transition,” from being understood almost indistinctly from the virtue of δικαιοσύνη to being understood as distinct from δικαιοσύνη. Therefore, in the Greek philosophical understanding of εὐσέβεια, there are “two traditions,” and both these traditions are represented in Philo's use of εὐσέβεια in his writings.

This paper will describe how the development of εὐσέβεια in the Greek philosophical tradition is shown in Philo's ethical discussion about virtues especially concerning the

¹ Plato, *Euthyphr.* 12E; 13B; 14D; Aristotle, *Virt. vit.* 5.1250b23; *SVF* 3.64.14-25; Chrysippus, from Stobaeus 2.59.4-60.2; 60.9-24; *SVF* 3.262, 264 (here piety is listed among the cardinal virtues); Theophrastus, from Diogenes Laertius, *The Vita Theophrasti* 5.50 (Stobaeus, *Anthology* 3.3.42). Also in the Peripatetic tradition (e.g., Pseudo-Aristotle, *Virt. Vit.* 1250b20-24 (5.2-3). Cf. William W. Fortenbaugh, et al., eds., and trans., *Theophrastus of Eresus: Sources for his Life, Writings Thought and Influence* (Leiden: E. J Brill, 1992), 343. Sterling, ““The Queen of the Virtues’: Piety in Philo of Alexandria.” *SPhA* 18 (2006): 103-123, esp. 120, footnote 10) notes that sometimes the Stoics also listed εὐσέβεια in the catalogue of virtues randomly, giving εὐσέβεια no special preference (*SVF* 2.304 16-31).

² Translations of Philo are from F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, *Philo* (10 vols.; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934-1962), sometimes slightly altered.

Decalogue. Philo's use of εὐσέβεια reflects two ways of understanding the virtue: prior to its transition, when εὐσέβεια is used almost *indistinctly* from δικαιοσύνη; and after its transition, when εὐσέβεια is sharply *distinguished* from δικαιοσύνη. That is, in the *first* tradition, εὐσέβεια and δικαιοσύνη are intertwined, in which the object is both God and human beings, and in the *second* tradition, εὐσέβεια is differentiated from δικαιοσύνη, in which the object of εὐσέβεια is only God. I will also suggest a reason why both traditions are present in Philo's use of εὐσέβεια in his ethical teaching about virtues.

The Two Traditions in Philo

When Philo speaks of εὐσέβεια in reference to the *Decalogue*, he tends consistently to highlight the privileged place of εὐσέβεια in his twofold structure of the ten headings or “summaries:” the first set of five commandments, duties concerning the service to God under the heading of εὐσέβεια and ὁσιότης, and the second set of five commandments, duties concerning the relationship between human beings under the heading of δικαιοσύνη and φιλανθρωπία (*Spec.* 2.63; *Virt.* 76; *Her.* 168).³

However, on three occasions, Philo departs from this structure and treats εὐσέβεια *without* making a clear distinction with δικαιοσύνη/φιλανθρωπία (*Virt.* 51, 95, and *Abr.* 208). In *Virt.* 51, Philo writes, “the next subject to be examined is love of humanity, the virtue closest to piety, its *sister* and its *twin* [ἀδελφήν καὶ δίδυμον].” He not only views the virtue εὐσέβεια very *close* to the virtue of φιλανθρωπία, but both virtues can be used interchangeably. In fact, in *Virt.* 95, he describes the virtues of εὐσέβεια and φιλανθρωπία as “*queens* of the virtues,” when he writes,

³ Scholars have already pointed out Philo's constitution of the ten headings. See Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), 2:200; Erwin R. Goodenough *An Introduction to Philo Judaeus* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962²; 1940), 123; Samuel, *Philo of Alexandria: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 114.

“the first-born of oxen and sheep ... are to be regarded as first fruits, that this accustomed on the one hand to honor God and on the other to refrain from taking all things as gain, they may have the ornaments of those *queens of the virtues* [ἀρετῶν ἡγεμονίσιν], piety and love of humanity.” Philo identifies the law on the first fruits as “a lesson” not only of piety, but also of love of humanity (cf. *Mos.* 1.254; *Spec.* 1.78, 248; *Legat.* 316). Indeed, for him, the person who is εὐσεβής towards God is also φιλόανθρωπος/δίκαιος towards human beings and *vice versa* (cf. *Virt.* 97).⁴

In the important work, *On Abraham*,⁵ the *indistinct* treatment of εὐσέβεια and δικαιοσύνη is more clearly depicted:

These examples must suffice for our treatment of Abraham’s piety [εὐσεβείας] ... for the nature [φύσεως] which is pious [εὐσεβῆ] is also kindly [φιλόανθρωπον], and the same person will exhibit *both* qualities, holiness [ὁσιότης] to God and justice [δικαιοσύνη] to human beings (*Abr.* 208).

In this passage, Philo describes the Patriarch’s pious behavior. It is Abraham’s piety (εὐσέβεια) that makes him exhibit his φιλοανθρωπία, and *both* his holiness to God and his justice to other human beings. At first glance, it may appear that Philo is differentiating εὐσέβεια from δικαιοσύνη; but, looking more closely at the passage one sees that he views εὐσέβεια *indistinguishably* from ὁσιότης, δικαιοσύνη and φιλοανθρωπία. The virtue of εὐσέβεια in its own nature is a form of holiness, justice, and love of humanity; for Philo, the one who is pious is also holy, just, and loves others. In a sense, the virtue of εὐσέβεια is indirectly depicted as the *source* of ὁσιότης, δικαιοσύνη, and φιλοανθρωπία. Philo does not write “piety to God,” but “holiness to

⁴ Walter T. Wilson, *Philo of Alexandria, On Virtues: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Philo of Alexandria Commentary Series 3; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 161-62.

⁵ Philo treats his work *On Abraham* in the same way as he does the *Decalogue*: Abraham’s piety, his relationship to God (*Abr.* 60-207), and Abraham’s possession of the four cardinal virtues (prudence or practical wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance), his relationship to human beings (*Abr.* 208-276). Cf. Sandmel, *Philo of Alexandria*, 59, 65.

God.” Why? One reason, and an important one, I would suggest, is that he wants to single out εὐσέβεια as the *primary virtue* in his ethical teaching about the *Decalogue*, and he does that by making an indirect distinction between the virtues of εὐσέβεια and ὁσιότης. This argument may surprise readers since the structure of the two sets of the commandments of the *Decalogue* (the ten headings), has both virtues (εὐσέβεια and ὁσιότης) as a heading for the ethical commandments dealing with the service of God;⁶ in fact, they are called the “queen” (ἡγεμονίδος) among all the virtues (*Spec.* 4.135).⁷

There are two passages, however, in which Philo makes a clear *distinction* between the virtues of εὐσέβεια and δικαιοσύνη. In *Who is the Heir*, he writes regarding the meaning of the fifth commandment:⁸

This commandment was graven on the borderline between the set of five which makes for piety [εὐσέβεια] to God and the set which comprises the prohibitions against acts of injustice [ἀδικημάτων] to our fellows (*Her.* 172).⁹

In this passage, Philo does not include either ὁσιότης or φιλανθρωπία. Also, the virtue of justice (δικαιοσύνη) is not mentioned, but it is taken from the context because of the word injustice (ἀδικημάτων), which is the opposite of the virtue justice. This text provides a fundamental distinction that Philo makes between the ethical character of the virtues of εὐσέβεια and δικαιοσύνη. The commandments related to God fall under the virtue of εὐσέβεια, and likewise, the commandments related to human beings under the virtue of δικαιοσύνη. For Philo, both are

⁶ Cf. Sandmel, *Philo of Alexandria*, 65.

⁷ It is worth noting that this is the only time that Philo treats εὐσέβεια and ὁσιότης as being *one* by labeling them “queen” (ἡγεμονίδος), a singular form. Philo places both virtues, εὐσέβεια and ὁσιότης, together in *Opif.* 172; *Cher.* 94; *Plant.* 35; *Ebr.* 92; *Her.* 123; *Congr.* 98; *Abr.* 198; *Somm.* 2.186; *Decal.* 110, 119; *Spec.* 1.30, 54, 186; 2.63, 224; 3.127; *Mos.* 1.198, 307; 2.142, 270; *QG* 2.47, 83, 115.

⁸ *Decal.* 51, 106-111; *Spec.* 2.223-241. For Philo, the fifth commandment has a special status in the *Decalogue* because it stands on the borderline; that is, it is the last commandment of the first set of five as well as it is the first commandment of the second set of five. For Philo, parenthood assimilates human beings to God, in that, parents’ ability to procreate or beget children assimilates to God, who is the Creator.

⁹ See also *Her.* 168.

equally and ethically significant to “win virtuous life” (*Decal.* 108-110). Human beings are exhorted to be both pious toward God and just toward human beings.

The distinction between the virtues of εὐσέβεια and δικαιοσύνη, including ὁσιότης and φιλανθρωπία, is also found in Philo’s treatise, *On the Special Laws* 2. Describing the importance of the Sabbath for exercising the soul in virtue and philosophy, Philo writes:

One duty to God as shown by piety [εὐσεβείας] and holiness [ὁσιότητος], one duty to men as shown by love of humanity [φιλανθρωπίας] and justice [δικαιοσύνης], each of them splitting up into multiform branches, all highly laudable (*Spec.* 2.63).

James W. Thompson rightly points out that Philo in the *Decalogue* distinguishes εὐσέβεια/ὁσιότης from δικαιοσύνη/φιλανθρωπία, when Thompson writes, “Philo speaks of two main principles of the law: duty toward God in the form of piety (*eusebeia*) and holiness (*hosiotēs*), and duty toward humankind expressed in love for humankind (*philanthrōpia*) and justice (*dikaiosynē*).”¹⁰ In *Spec.* 2.63, Philo presents four virtues upon which the ethical principle of the commandments of the Mosaic Law are structured. The four virtues (εὐσέβεια, ὁσιότης, δικαιοσύνη, and φιλανθρωπία), however, are *not* the four Greek cardinal virtues (prudence or practical wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice) as represented in the Platonic and Stoic catalogue of virtues.¹¹ Rather, Philo takes over two intellectual Greek virtues (εὐσέβεια and ὁσιότης), one cardinal or practical virtue (δικαιοσύνη), and love of humanity (φιλανθρωπία)¹² and places them as the two main “heads” of the *Decalogue*.

¹⁰ James W. Thompson, *Moral Formation according to Paul: The Context and Coherence of Pauline Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2011), 39.

¹¹ E.g., Plato, *Resp.* 427E-435C, 441C-443C; *Phaed.* 68D-69B; *Prot.* 329C-330B, 333B, 349A-C, 361B; *Min.* 73E-74A, 78E; *Lach.* 199D; *Leg.* 630A-B, 631C; 963C-964B; cf. 688A-B; Chrysippus, from Stobaeus 2.59.4-60.2; 60.9-24 (*SVF* 3.262, 264); Pseudo-Andronicus of Rhode 2.61.4-5; Plutarch, *Stoic. Rep.* 1034C-E, 1042E-F (*SVF* 3.85); *Virt. mor.* 440E-441B; Arius Dydimus, *Epitome of Stoic Ethics*, 5b1-4; Stobaeus 2.58.5-15 (*SVF* 3.95); 2.60.9-15; 2.63.6-24 (*SVF* 3.280); Diogenes Laertius 7.92; Seneca, *Ep.* 113.24, 120.11; Cicero, *Off.* 1.15-17.

¹² Φιλανθρωπία is an important virtue for Philo. In ancient Greek ethics, however, φιλανθρωπία is not listed as a virtue (e.g., Diogenes Laertius 3.98); at least, there is no evidence that it was considered a virtue. See Wolfson, *Philo*, 2:219-20; Colson 8. xi n. b.

The Two “Traditions” in the Greek Philosophical Tradition

In Greek philosophy, the first tradition, when εὐσέβεια is understood as both right relationship with God and with human beings, appears in Plato’s *Republic*, *Euthyphro*, and *Protagoras*. In the *Republic*, Plato speaks of εὐσέβεια in connection to both God and parents (*Resp.* 615C); and in *Euthyphro*, discussing the true definition of ὁσιότης and εὐσέβεια, Plato has Socrates define ὁσιότης (the synonym of εὐσέβεια) as δικαιοσύνη (*Euthyphr.* 12E).¹³ Plato’s Socrates defines *holiness* (or piety) as justice, when he asserts that “all holiness is just” (*Euthyphr.* 12A).¹⁴ In the dialogue with Euthyphro, Plato’s Socrates speak of the virtues of εὐσέβεια (in the form of ὁσιότης) and δικαιοσύνη almost without distinction, when he states that “if wherever justice is, there is holiness as well, and wherever there is holiness, there is justice too” (*Euthyphr.* 12D; cf. *Apol.* 28B-29B, 35C-D). Likewise, in *Protagoras*, Plato has Socrates claim that “justice is pious” and “piety is just” (*Prot.* 331A-C; see also *Euthyphr.* 11E), implying that one could possess both virtues by having just one or the other virtue. This shows that in the Platonic tradition both virtues δικαιοσύνη and εὐσέβεια were not strongly distinguished.¹⁵

Sometime during the fifth century B.C.E., εὐσέβεια came to be understood *differently* from δικαιοσύνη. For example, in Plato’s dialogues we encounter this second tradition.¹⁶ In *Euthyphro*, Plato has Socrates define “holiness as a part of justice” (*Euthyphr.* 12D), and

¹³ For a discussion, see Mark L. McPherran, “Piety, Justice, and the Unity of Virtue.” *JHP* 38 (2000): 299-328; Frederick Rosen, “Piety and Justice: Plato’s *Euthyphro*.” *Philosophy* 43 (1968): 105-116.

¹⁴ Translations of Plato’s works are based on Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *Plato: the Collected Dialogues Including the Letters with Introduction and Prefatory Notes* (Bollingen Series LXXI; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), sometimes slightly modified.

¹⁵ Michael Cormack, *Plato’s Stepping Stones: Degrees of Moral Virtue* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 59; cf. Jon D. Mikalson, *Honor Thy Gods: Popular Religion in Greek Tragedy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 178.

¹⁶ This tradition is also found in non-philosophical authors, such as the Greek historian Xenophon (430B.C.E.-354 B.C.E.) and especially the Greek rhetorician Isocrates (436 B.C.E.-338 B.C.E.): Xenoph. *Mem.*, 4. 8.11; Isocrates, *Speeches* 12.124.

Euthyphro comments in reply that “the part of justice which is religious and is holy is the part that has to do with the service of the gods; the remainder is the part of justice that has to do with the service of human beings” (*Euthyphr.* 12E).¹⁷ Although, εὐσέβεια is viewed as *a part of* the virtue δικαιοσύνη, a clear distinction between both virtues is also established. That is, Socrates depicts εὐσέβεια *prior* to its transition, when εὐσέβεια is used almost indistinctly from δικαιοσύνη; and Euthyphro defines εὐσέβεια *after* its transition, when εὐσέβεια is strongly distinguished from δικαιοσύνη.¹⁸ This distinction between εὐσέβεια and δικαιοσύνη is also reflected in the Stoics, who define εὐσέβεια as justice towards the gods (*SVF* 2.304.22; 3.165.41), or “the knowledge of the service of the gods” (*SVF* 2.304.18-19),¹⁹ in the Roman philosopher Cicero (*Nat. d.* 2.253), and later in the Stoic Marcus Aurelius (7.54; 11.20). These examples show the understanding of εὐσέβεια *after* its transition, in which both virtues (εὐσέβεια and δικαιοσύνη) are clearly distinguished in a way that it implied that one could possess one of the two virtues without the other.²⁰

Conclusion

Philo’s understanding of the virtue εὐσέβεια in his ethical teaching suggests that he is not only aware of the two traditions, but he is also being influenced by them. These two ways of understanding εὐσέβεια are present especially in Philo’s treatment of εὐσέβεια as the service of God and human beings. The examples (*Virt.* 51, 95, and *Abr.* 208) demonstrate that Philo knows

¹⁷ See also *Euthyphr.* 13B; 14D; *Epin.* 989B; *Def.* 412E. Aristotle’s notion of justice, a *Mean*, included not only the right service of gods and human beings, but also deified spirits, one’s country, parents, and those departed (*Virt. vit.* 5.1250b22-23). Similarly, Diogenes Laertius writes, “there are three species of justice: one is concerned with *gods*, another with *men*, and the third with the *departed*” (3.83).

¹⁸ See also *Euthyphr.* 14A-B. However, it seems that Euthyphro assents to Socrates’ view that piety is a part of justice, when Euthyphro responds to Socrates, “I think that you are clearly right” (*Euthyphr.* 12D).

¹⁹ See also *SVF* 3.67.11; 3.157.11-12; 3.157.25-26.

²⁰ Cf. K. J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 247.

the early Greek use of εὐσέβεια as Plato's Socrates does. Philo depicts the virtue of εὐσέβεια as a manifestation of *both* ethical behaviors towards God and towards human beings. Likewise, Philo shows the development of εὐσέβεια as distinct from δικαιοσύνη in his presentation of the twofold division of the ten headings of the *Decalogue* (*Her.* 172 and *Spec.* 2.63). But, why does Philo keep both traditions? Plato's *Euthyphro* may provide us with a clue. In the discussion concerning the true definition of εὐσέβεια, Socrates and Euthyphro manifest the existence of both traditions. That Socrates and Euthyphro in the dialogue failed to give a "satisfactory" definition (at least for Plato's Socrates) reveals that either the understanding of εὐσέβεια *before* its transition continued to be prevalent, or *after* its transition a tension regarding the "true" meaning of εὐσέβεια was created between both traditions. Plato's *Euthyphro* shows that tension. Philo's writings about εὐσέβεια may also reflect that tension, since he was very much influenced by Plato's writings. Writing in the first century C.E., it would make more sense if Philo's understanding of εὐσέβεια would reflect *after* its transition, as it is shown in *Her.* 172 and *Spec.* 2.63. In fact, he is generally *consistent* treating the ethical commandments of the Mosaic Law according to the twofold division of the *Decalogue*, under the two main virtues of εὐσέβεια and δικαιοσύνη. But, as we have seen, this is not the case.

The continued presence of the first tradition in Philo may lie on the fact that the understanding of εὐσέβεια *prior* to its transition highlights the place of εὐσέβεια. Philo is interested in depicting εὐσέβεια as a *central* virtue in his teaching about the *Decalogue*. So, he adopts this view, but the privileged place he gives to εὐσέβεια moves beyond that of the first tradition when he identifies εὐσέβεια, not only as a cardinal virtue, like δικαιοσύνη, but also the *source* of the other virtues (*Abr.* 208; *Decal.* 52, 100; *Det.* 72).²¹ Whereas εὐσέβεια holds a place

²¹ *Abr.* 60; *Spec. Decal.* 119; 4.97, 147; *Virt.* 95; *QG* 1.10; *QE* 2.38a.

in the Greek philosophical tradition, in Philo, εὐσέβεια is identified as the “greatest” of all the virtues (*Spec.* 4.97). Although Philo is not altogether consistent in his attribution of εὐσέβεια as the “greatest” of all the virtues—in the sense that he also ascribes similar qualities to two other intellectual virtues, faith (*Her.* 91, “the most perfect virtue;” see also *Virt.* 216; *Abr.* 270) and godliness (*Opif.* 154, “the greatest of the virtue”), and a cardinal virtue, prudence or practical wisdom (*Leg.* 1.66, “the “most approved” virtue)—undeniably, for Philo the privileged place of εὐσέβεια as the central virtue prevails. In fact, it is the *only* Greek virtue that receives the quality of divinity, when he calls it “divine piety” (*QE* 2.15b; cf. *Spec.* 1.30; *QG* 1.10; 4.19). In Philo, εὐσέβεια is intentionally associated with the Divine, in a way that both are in harmony: as God is the origin of all that exists, εὐσέβεια is also the origin of all the other virtues (*Decal.* 52).