

# The Euthyphro

By Plato

Written 380 B.C.E (*Before Common Era – AKA B.C., or Before Christ*)

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Excerpt, reprinted at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/euthyphro.html> from open source, public domain texts.

Annotated by Dr. Sally Parker-Ryan.

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Plato lived in Ancient Greece, from around 427 B.C. through 347 B.C. He was the student of Socrates and the teacher of Aristotle. Plato wrote about philosophical topics by means of *dialogues*. That is, like plays, he wrote scenarios in which characters (often including Socrates) have discussions – in Plato’s dialogues, the discussions are about philosophical issues. In the following text, the discussion focuses on the question of the *source* of moral (or ethical) goodness or rightness. That is to say, the question is “What is it that makes some action ‘right’ or some action ‘wrong’?” The question is put, in this text, in terms of ‘piety’. To be ‘pious’ is to be ‘morally good or right’ – generally, a ‘pious’ act is a morally or ethical right act. (‘Piety’, strictly speaking, means doing what your religious rules, or your spiritual leadership requires of you. But here, we can let ‘piety’ stand in for ‘justice’, ‘rightness’, ‘goodness’ – anything of value). Another way of thinking of the question is: what makes something ‘beautiful’? Is something beautiful because it is *thought* to be so by someone (i.e. because it is loved)? OR is something thought to be beautiful (or loved) because *it is* (already) beautiful? Think of, for example, a work of art: is its beauty to be found in *it*; or instead, is its beauty to be found in the fact that someone *thinks* it is beautiful? On the one hand, its beauty is ‘objective’, but on the other it is ‘relative’ (to someone thinking it to be so). Analogously: is goodness an objective feature of moral behavior? Or is it only “in the eye of the beholder” – only good insofar as someone (god, or some society or culture) *thinks or says* that it is right?

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## Euthyphro

***In this dialogue, Plato has Socrates in discussion with Euthyphro, outside the courts of law. Socrates is awaiting his own trial – the city of Athens has accused him of ‘corrupting the***

*youth', amongst other things. Euthyphro is a successful and wealthy Athenian man. He explains to Socrates that he is at the law court to prosecute his own father. Socrates is shocked – what could he be prosecuting his own father for? Euthyphro replies that his father had thrown a servant, who had killed another servant, in a dungeon to wait until the father could decide what to do with him. While he waited, the servant died. Thus, Euthyphro explains that he is prosecuting his father for the murder of this servant, because the same justice ought to apply to all. Socrates is impressed (or pretends to be), and exclaims that Euthyphro must know a lot about justice, in order to have made such a difficult decision about who ought to be punished here. Euthyphro is pretty impressed with himself, we should note, and tells Socrates that, yes, he is indeed an expert on all matter of justice, and what they refer to in this dialogue as 'piety'. Piety is to be 'pious' (as explained above) – this means, in a non-religious context, to behave according to moral laws, to behave well, to do the right thing. So, Socrates asks Euthyphro, being such an expert, to teach him all about piety, or being just. Socrates knows that he will lead Euthyphro into difficulties, because Euthyphro is so pompous about knowing what Right and Wrong are – but Socrates knows the answer to the question "What is Piety (Goodness, Rightness, Justice etc.)" is MUCH more difficult to answer than Euthyphro seems to think. This is an important part of Socrates' 'method' – he does not claim to know all the answers to these difficult questions, but he believes the wise person is one who understands that there are no quick and easy answers. To work out what the right thing to do is, in any given situation, hard work and requires honest reflection.*

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SOCRATES: And what is piety, and what is impiety?

*Euthyphro answers that piety, or the right thing to do, is just what he has done, i.e. hold responsible for murder, anyone who has killed unjustly (i.e. his father) – and that pious acts are "those of which all of the Gods approve". (Remember, this was before Christ, so no Christianity at this point: the ancient Greeks were pagans and believed in many, many Gods).*

SOCRATES: Well then, my dear friend Euthyphro, do tell me, for my better instruction and information, what proof have you that in the opinion of all the gods a servant who is guilty of murder, and is put in chains by the master of the dead man, and dies because he is put in chains before he who bound him can learn from the interpreters of the gods what he ought to do with him, dies unjustly; and that on behalf of such an one a son ought to proceed against his father and accuse him of murder. How would you show that all the gods absolutely agree in approving of his act? Prove to me that they do, and I will applaud your wisdom as long as I live.

*Euthyphro has claimed that what makes a certain action 'right' is that "The gods approve of it" and that what makes some action 'wrong' is that "The gods disapprove of it". But now Socrates asks, if this is so,*

*one would presume that the gods would have to AGREE on the matter – if what they approve of is what makes something good and /or bad. The problem is, with so many gods on mount Olympus, getting agreement is going to be tricky.*

*Notice how this might apply to us presently. Today, not many people are pagan anymore, and many, perhaps even most, believe in only ONE god. So, we might think, that solves our problem – we don't have to worry about the gods agreeing on what is good or bad. But if we think about it – it doesn't really solve our problem, or answer our question: 'What makes action X good or right, and action Y bad or wrong?' One might respond – "Well, what is right is what god commands, and what is wrong is what god forbids". But WHICH God? There are many, many different religions amongst humankind – and each thinks its own is right. If goodness or rightness is that which is commanded or approved by god, we still have a problem of disagreement: now it is disagreement amongst people that is the problem.*

EUTHYPHRO: It will be a difficult task; but I could make the matter very clear indeed to you.

SOCRATES: I understand; you mean to say that I am not so quick of apprehension as the judges: for to them you will be sure to prove that the act is unjust, and hateful to the gods.

EUTHYPHRO: Yes indeed, Socrates; at least if they will listen to me.

SOCRATES: But they will be sure to listen if they find that you are a good speaker. There was a notion that came into my mind while you were speaking; I said to myself: 'Well, and what if Euthyphro does prove to me that all the gods regarded the death of the serf as unjust, how do I know anything more of the nature of piety and impiety? for granting that this action may be hateful to the gods, still piety and impiety are not adequately defined by these distinctions, for that which is hateful to the gods has been shown to be also pleasing and dear to them.' And therefore, Euthyphro, I do not ask you to prove this; I will suppose, if you like, that all the gods condemn and abominate such an action. But I will amend the definition so far as to say that what all the gods hate is impious, and what they love pious or holy; and what some of them love and others hate is both or neither. Shall this be our definition of piety and impiety?

EUTHYPHRO: Why not, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Why not! Certainly, as far as I am concerned, Euthyphro, there is no reason why not. But whether this admission will greatly assist you in the task of instructing me as you promised, is a matter for you to consider.

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, I should say that what all the gods love is pious and holy, and the opposite which they all hate, impious.

*So: Euthyphro has now defined 'piety' (or 'justice', 'goodness' etc.) as "what the gods love". But now, Socrates will show Euthyphro that this definition will not do either – it leads us to a 'dilemma' (a dilemma is a situation which has only two outcomes).*

SOCRATES: Ought we to enquire into the truth of this, Euthyphro, or simply to accept the mere statement on our own authority and that of others? What do you say?

EUTHYPHRO: We should enquire; and I believe that the statement will stand the test of enquiry.

SOCRATES: We shall know better, my good friend, in a little while. The point which I should first wish to understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods.

EUTHYPHRO: I do not understand your meaning, Socrates.

SOCRATES: I will endeavor to explain: we speak of carrying and we speak of being carried, of leading and being led, seeing and being seen. You know that in all such cases there is a difference, and you know also in what the difference lies?

EUTHYPHRO: I think that I understand.

SOCRATES: And is not that which is beloved distinct from that which loves?

EUTHYPHRO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Well; and now tell me, is that which is carried in this state of carrying because it is carried, or for some other reason?

EUTHYPHRO: No; that is the reason.

SOCRATES: And the same is true of what is led and of what is seen?

EUTHYPHRO: True.

SOCRATES: And a thing is not seen because it is visible, but conversely, visible because it is seen; nor is a thing led because it is in the state of being led, or carried because it is in the state of being carried, but the converse of this. And now I think, Euthyphro, that my meaning will be intelligible; and my meaning is, that any state of action or passion implies previous action or passion. It does not become because it is becoming, but it is in a state of becoming because it becomes; neither does it suffer because it is in a state of suffering, but it is in a state of suffering because it suffers. Do you not agree?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Is not that which is loved in some state either of becoming or suffering?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And the same holds as in the previous instances; the state of being loved follows the act of being loved, and not the act the state.

EUTHYPHRO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And what do you say of piety, Euthyphro: is not piety, according to your definition, loved by all the gods?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Because it is pious or holy, or for some other reason?

EUTHYPHRO: No, that is the reason.

SOCRATES: It is loved because it is holy, not holy because it is loved?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And that which is dear to the gods is loved by them, and is in a state to be loved of them because it is loved of them?

EUTHYPHRO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Then that which is dear to the gods, Euthyphro, is not holy, nor is that which is holy loved of God, as you affirm; but they are two different things.

EUTHYPHRO: How do you mean, Socrates?

SOCRATES: I mean to say that the holy has been acknowledged by us to be loved of God because it is holy, not to be holy because it is loved.

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: But that which is dear to the gods is dear to them because it is loved by them, not loved by them because it is dear to them.

EUTHYPHRO: True.

***And now Socrates has led Euthyphro to agree to BOTH propositions: that piety (or goodness) is loved because it is good AND that piety (or goodness) is good because it is loved. But these two propositions are distinct: they mean quite different things.***

SOCRATES: But, friend Euthyphro, if that which is holy is the same with that which is dear to God, and is loved because it is holy, then that which is dear to God would have been loved as being dear to God; but if that which is dear to God is dear to him because loved by him, then that which is holy would have been holy because loved by him. But now you see that the reverse is the case, and that they are quite different from one another. For one (theophiles) is of a kind to be loved cause it is loved, and the other (osion) is loved because it is of a kind to be loved. Thus you appear to me, Euthyphro, when I ask you what is the essence of holiness, to offer an attribute only, and not the essence—the attribute of being loved by all the gods. But you still refuse to explain to me the nature of holiness. And therefore, if you please, I will ask you not to hide your treasure, but to tell me once more what holiness or piety really is, whether dear to the gods or not (for that is a matter about which we will not quarrel); and what is impiety?

EUTHYPHRO: I really do not know, Socrates, how to express what I mean. For somehow or other our arguments, on whatever ground we rest them, seem to turn round and walk away from us.

***So, Euthyphro is finally frustrated enough with the conversation – he leaves. But let us think about what Socrates was getting at here. There is a dilemma: either something is Good because loved; OR it is loved because it is Good. Socrates has shown that Euthyphro is not at all clear as to which he believes is true of ‘piety’ or justice. But if he believes that, e.g. some action is right or just because it is loved – then according to Socrates, he hasn’t properly explained the NATURE of rightness or justice at all. If all it takes for some action to be the right thing to do is that it is ‘loved by god’, say, then that doesn’t tell us WHY that action is good or right. It just tells us that the action has an attribute of being loved or approved of by god. Socrates seems to be aiming at having us think about the idea that something’s being good, or being the right thing to do is more that just being loved by god, or by some group – it is to do with the fact that the thing or action REALLY IS GOOD OR RIGHT – in and of itself, regardless of what anyone, anywhere believes.....What do you think?***