

# 1 Euthyphro

*Overview: Euthyphro claims to know all about piety and impiety and also the meaning of pious and impious. So sure of himself is he, that he is prosecuting his own father for the murder of a murderer. When challenged by Socrates he is unable to explain his beliefs. Instead, he talks about prayer and sacrifice to The Gods and about whom and what The Gods love. All his boasting of knowledge comes to naught. It appears that he fears some imagined displeasure of The Gods that he would not have to endure if he prosecutes his father.*

*We notice that throughout the dialogue, the main line of any inquiry by Socrates is “what is.” He wants a defining answer to his questions. Euthyphro was unable to answer Socrates’s question. Maybe Plato is trying to tell the reader that piety is a person’s ability to become morally as good as possible and not any ability to please The Gods.*

Socrates and Euthyphro run into each other near the Athens magistrate’s office. Euthyphro appears to be confused and surprised, asking Socrates if some one is indicting him or the other way round. Socrates says that, indeed, a young Athenian by the name of Meletus is indicting him for corrupting the young and for creating new Gods while not believing in the existing Gods, and therefore of impiety towards The Gods, whose displeasure will then fall upon the city. Socrates asks Euthyphro what brings him to the magistrate’s office? Euthyphro replies that he is prosecuting his own father for murder, which is a pollution and therefore displeasing to The Gods. Socrates inquires whether the victim of this crime was a friend, a relative or a stranger. Euthyphro answers that the relationship was not important; it only matters if the killer acted justly or not. Euthyphro explains that the victim had killed one of his father’s slaves while working on the family farm. Euthyphro’s father had gotten very angry and had the victim bound and thrown into a ditch. The father then sent a messenger to Delphi to ask what should be done next. However, before the messenger returned, the victim died. Now, all of Euthyphro’s relatives are angry with him because he is suing his father even though the victim was a murderer and his father had not deliberately killed him. Furthermore, they point out, it is impious

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to prosecute one's father. Euthyphro feels that his relatives' ideas of piety are wrong. His father is responsible for the victim's death, and this should be avenged to please The Gods.

Socrates and Euthyphro then discuss how The Gods constantly fought amongst themselves as portrayed in the epic Greek sagas and poems of old. They talk about Zeus, the most just amongst The Gods. Euthyphro reminds Socrates that Zeus pursued his father and castrated him because he unjustly swallowed his sons, but now some people are upset that he, Euthyphro, is prosecuting his own father.

Socrates then asks that, as Euthyphro knows so much about the pious and the impious, whether he can explain what a person should do in such a situation. Euthyphro says that his action in suing his father is the pious thing to do, and that it does not matter that he is his father's son. Socrates says that he, too, finds some of the conflicting things said about The Gods to be confusing. He says that such confusion may be the reason why Euthyphro is prosecuting his father. Socrates then inquires about what makes an action pious or impious. Euthyphro answers that what is dear to The Gods is pious and what is not dear is impious. Socrates rephrases the statement, saying that actions or persons dear to The Gods are pious and the opposite are impious and Euthyphro agrees to this interpretation. Socrates then reminds Euthyphro that they had agreed earlier that The Gods often disagreed with each other. Therefore, the two of them should try to figure out what causes those disagreements. Here Socrates concludes that what some Gods consider beautiful others find ugly and that different Gods find different things good or bad. Similarly, The Gods are discordant about justice and injustice, furthermore, some Gods hate or love other Gods. By this thinking, Euthyphro's punishing his father may be pleasing to Zeus but displeasing to Cronus. Other Gods may have differing views on this matter.

Euthyphro then adds that no person or God says that someone who has done wrong should not be punished. Rather, both man and The Gods agree that the first thing to be determined is who has done wrong. The matter centers on whether the deed in question was just or unjust. Socrates asks Euthyphro to show him if any of The Gods would call his father's action unjust, Euthyphro agrees that this is a difficult question but then asserts that piety is what all The Gods love and the converse, namely impiety, is what all The Gods hate. Socrates turns this definition around and asks whether that which is pious is loved by the Gods because it is pious or it is pious because it is loved by The Gods. Euthyphro is unable to answer this question and Socrates gives more

examples of this paradox. There is a difference between something carried and something carrying, something led and something leading, something seeing and something seen. Socrates adds that something loved is different from something loving. Hence, we would say that an action is loved because it is pious but not pious because it is loved. Socrates argues that what The Gods love does not make action pious, nor does being pious imply being loved by The Gods. After this round of circular reasoning, Socrates again asks what piety is. He asks whether all or some of that which is just is pious, or whether all or some of that which is pious is just?

Here Socrates digresses a little and quotes an ancient poet who said that “where there is fear there is shame.” Socrates notes that he disagrees with the poet, explaining that men fear illness or poverty but that there is no shame in this fear. Someone who feels shame or embarrassment fears a ruined reputation. So shame is the more encompassing. Where there is shame there is fear, but the reverse is not true. Socrates is trying to show that where there is piety there is also justice, but that where there is justice there is not always piety. Euthyphro adds that the godly and the pious are part of the just who are concerned with the care of The Gods, while the care of man is the human part of justice. Socrates asks Euthyphro to explain what he means by the concern of The Gods and adds that so far Euthyphro has failed to explain what piety is. Euthyphro replies that man knows how to say what is pleasing to The Gods by prayer and sacrifice. These are pious actions, pleasing both to The Gods and to the state. Socrates replies that prayer is begging from The Gods and sacrifice is giving gifts to The Gods. Hence, piety would mean, having the knowledge of how to give to The Gods and how to beg from them. Socrates calls this piety a kind of give and take trade with The Gods. In such trade, men receive blessings from The Gods in return for piety. This definition means that piety is what is pleasing to The Gods, not necessarily what is beneficial to them. Socrates bemoans the fact that he has not yet learned what piety is. He adds that Euthyphro has no clear knowledge of what is piety and impiety but that, if he had such knowledge, he would not have tried to prosecute his own father. It is on his fear of The Gods and the risk of offending them and not piety, that he has based his decision to prosecute his father. Euthyphro should have a clear knowledge of what piety is if he intends to prosecute his own father. At this point, to escape further questioning, Euthyphro claims a prior engagement and departs.