

(portion of)
THE EUTHYPHO

By Plato
 Written 380 B.C.

Persons of the Dialogue

S O C R A T E S
 E U T H Y P H R O

Scene

The Porch of the Archon.

Note on 'holiness', by the translator:

The term 'holy' translates the Greek term '*hosion*', which means something like 'required by religion' or 'permitted by religion', but which was also very widely used as a term of commendation that was felt to have independent ethical content. The English word 'sin' is a good parallel for this kind of word. 'Sin' has strong religious connotations; it is a term hardly used at all by non-religious people; yet everyone can easily understand the claim that 'to do such and such *would be a sin*' — whether they hold any religious views or not. The word has a perfectly clear ethical implication. '*Hosion*' works in the same way, but as a positive rather than negative term, meaning something like 'in accordance with religion' but also 'morally right'.

Almost all terms of religiously-grounded ethical approval or disapproval, in all cultures, acquire this dual role as terms with ethical content *and* religious content. Religious terminology, whatever else it does, expresses ethical ideas, and always has done (and always will) entirely regardless of whether the cosmological and theological beliefs behind it are true, or false. It is exactly that feature, that mixing of ethical and religious thought that is the subject of the dialogue. The dialogue asks this central question:

How can any concept be both a religious concept and a (human) ethical concept at the same time? How can the idea that something is right, or wrong, come both from outside us (from some supernatural source) and from inside us, at the same time?

EUTHYPHRO: Why have you left the Lyceum, Socrates? What are you doing here in the Porch of the Archon? Don't tell me you're involved in a law-suit, like me?

SOCRATES: Not in a law-suit, Euthyphro; "indictment" is the word the Athenians use.

EUTHYPHRO: What? I assume someone is prosecuting *you*; because I can't believe you'd be prosecuting someone else.

SOCRATES: Certainly not.

EUTHYPHRO: Someone's accusing you, then?

SOCRATES: Yes.

EUTHYPHRO: Who?

SOCRATES: A young man who isn't very well known, Euthyphro. I hardly know who he is myself: his name is Meletus. Do you know a Meletus with long straight hair, a wispy beard, and a long nose?

EUTHYPHRO: No, I don't know the man, Socrates. But what's the charge?

SOCRATES: What's the charge? A very fine one. It's very impressive for a man so young to have figured out something so important. He says he knows how young people are corrupted, and he knows exactly who's corrupting them. Me! I reckon he must be a very clever man, and he's noticed I'm pretty stupid, and so he's gone running to the courts, like a little boy running to his mother, to tell on me for corrupting all his friends. Frankly, I admire him. Of all our politicians, he's the only one who seems to me to have started off his political career in the right way, with the question of *how to make our young people as good as possible*; like a good gardener, he's making the young shoots his first concern, and he's clearing out the old weeds, like me, who are messing up the young sprouts. And that's just the first step; next he'll attend to the older plants too; and if he goes on the way he's started, he's bound to do our city a lot of good.

EUTHYPHRO: I hope so; but I suspect, Socrates, that the opposite will turn out to be the case. If you ask me, he's harming our city, right from the outset of his career, by trying to harm a man like you. But tell me, why exactly would he think that you 'corrupt' young people?

SOCRATES: His accusation is very unusual: he says that I am a *maker of gods*: that I make up new gods, and that I deny the existence of the old ones.

EUTHYPHRO: I understand; he's attacking you because of that "divine voice" that occasionally comes to you. He thinks you've invented some new-fangled religion. He knows that an accusation like that is easily swallowed by the public,

as I've found out myself all too well: whenever I speak in the assembly about religious matters, and predict the future, using my prophetic powers, everyone laughs at me and thinks I'm mad. But every word that I say is true! They're just jealous of people like us, Socrates. We should just ignore them. I bet the whole affair will end in nothing, and that you'll win your case; and I think I'll win mine.

SOCRATES: So what's your case, Euthyphro? Are you the prosecutor or the defendant?

EUTHYPHRO: I'm the prosecutor.

SOCRATES: Who are you prosecuting?

EUTHYPHRO: You'll think I'm crazy when I tell you.

SOCRATES: Who is it?

EUTHYPHRO: My own father.

SOCRATES: Your own father! You're kidding!

EUTHYPHRO: No.

SOCRATES: And what's the charge?

EUTHYPHRO: Murder, Socrates.

SOCRATES: By the gods, Euthyphro! People must be shocked that you're prosecuting your own father! You must have an extraordinarily profound knowledge of right and wrong, to have had the confidence to bring such an action.

EUTHYPHRO: I do, Socrates, I do.

SOCRATES: I assume the man your father murdered was one of your relatives — obviously; because if he'd been a *stranger* you'd never have dreamed of prosecuting your own father for his sake.

EUTHYPHRO: That's a funny thing to say, Socrates. What difference does it make whether he was a relative of mine? Surely the pollution is the same in either case, if you knowingly associate with a murderer, when you ought to making yourself clean, by prosecuting him. The only relevant question is whether the man was killed *lawfully*. If it was a lawful killing, then you can leave the matter alone; but if it was *wrongful*, then even if the murderer is a member of your own family, it's your religious duty to prosecute him. Now as it happens, the man who was killed worked for us as a hired-hand on our farm in Naxos. One day, in a drunken rage, he got into a quarrel with one of our slaves, and killed him. So my father tied him up, hand and foot, and threw him into a ditch, and then sent word to Athens, to ask the authorities what he should do with him. Meanwhile he didn't bother about him, and didn't look after him, since he was a

murderer, and he thought it didn't really matter if he died anyway. And that's just what happened. He died. He died from the cold, and from having nothing to eat, and from being tied up, so that before the messenger returned from the magistrate, the man was dead. And now my father and family are angry with me for "siding with the murderer" and prosecuting my father. They say that he didn't really *kill* him in the first place, and that even if he did, the man was a murderer, and I shouldn't care about him, and that for a son to prosecute his own father is *against religion*. Which shows, Socrates, just how little they know what the gods think about duty, and sin!

SOCRATES: Amazing, Euthyphro! And is your own knowledge of religion, and of what our religious duty is, and what's sinful, so exact, that, given that the circumstances of the case are as you say, you're not afraid that you may be doing something sinful *yourself*, in bringing a law-suit against your own father?

EUTHYPHRO: Ah, well; that's exactly what distinguishes me from the crowd: my expert knowledge on all religious matters.

SOCRATES: That's wonderful, Euthyphro. In that case, can I be your student? That way, before my trial with Meletus, I'll tell him that since he's started accusing me of having strange delusions and making weird innovations in religion, I've enrolled as your student! "Meletus," I'll say to him, "you agree that Euthyphro here is an expert on religion; well, if you approve of his views, you must approve of mine, since I'm merely his student; so don't prosecute me. And if you *disapprove* of my religious views, then it's *Euthyphro* here you should be prosecuting, not me; because he's my teacher; so prosecute *him*, for having unorthodox religious views, and corrupting *old* people like me. And if Meletus won't listen, and goes ahead, and won't switch the charges from me to you, I'll say exactly the same thing in court.

EUTHYPHRO: By all means, Socrates; and if he tries to prosecute me I'll soon show him who's boss. He'll be the one on trial, not me.

SOCRATES: I don't doubt it. That's why I'm so keen to be your student. Because I've noticed that no one ever seems to pay any attention to you — not even Meletus; yet for some reason his keen eyes have spotted me almost immediately, and he's indicted me for being *anti-religious*. So, please — in the name of Zeus and all the gods! — tell me all about this idea of "religious duty", and "sin" (which you said just now you know all about); and I don't mean just in connection with murder. I mean *in general*. Because, after all, isn't the religiousness, or holiness of an action the same thing in every case? I mean, doesn't the same thing make

every holy action holy? And can we treat sin as a single thing too: whatever it is that makes *every* sinful action sinful?

EUTHYPHRO: Of course, Socrates.

SOCRATES: All right then, so, *what is* holiness, and *what is* sin?

EUTHYPHRO: Well, holiness means doing exactly what I'm doing now: prosecuting a man who's guilty of murder, or any other crime — whether he's your own father or mother, or whoever (it doesn't make any difference); and *not* to prosecute a murderer is a *sin*. And here's a very solid evidence for my claim that a criminal, whoever he is, should never be left unpunished. Don't people regard Zeus as the very best of all the gods? The god who sets us the clearest example of what's right? And *everyone* knows that he imprisoned his own father, Kronos, for eating his children, and that Kronos had punished his own father for a similar crime. And yet when I try to prosecute my own father, they get angry with me!

SOCRATES: I wonder if *that's* why I'm being charged with impiety. I always find those stories about the gods pretty hard to swallow. Maybe that's my crime. But since you know all about these things, and evidently believe the stories, I'll obviously have to defer to your superior knowledge. What else can I do, given that I freely admit that I know nothing about any of it? But tell me, Euthyphro — I mean, seriously — do you really believe all the stories about the gods?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, Socrates; and lots of other even more amazing things that most people don't know anything about.

SOCRATES: So you really believe that the gods fight, and are constantly falling out with one another, and having terrible arguments and brawls, and so on and so forth, the way the poets say? Are all those stories about the gods really *true*, Euthyphro?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, they are Socrates; and, as I said, I can tell you lots of other things about the gods that would totally amaze you.

SOCRATES: Yes, I'm sure they would; but let's leave that to some other time, when I've got nothing to do. For now, I'd much rather get a more precise answer out of you to my question, 'What is holiness?' So far you've only said that it's doing exactly what you're doing now: prosecuting your father, for murder.

EUTHYPHRO: And what I said was true, Socrates.

SOCRATES: No doubt, Euthyphro; but you agree that there are lots of *other* holy actions, too?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Well, remember, I didn't ask you just to give me a couple of *examples* of holiness. I wanted you to explain *the general form of holy actions*: what it is that makes *all* holy actions holy. Don't you remember we said there was *one feature* that made sinful actions sinful, and holy ones holy?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, I remember.

SOCRATES: Well, I want you to tell me what that basic feature is. That way I'll have a *standard* to refer to, something I can use to judge people's actions, — yours, or anyone's — and say that any action that's like that is holy, any action that isn't like that, isn't holy.

EUTHYPHRO: All right, sure. I can do that, if you like.

SOCRATES: Well, go ahead.

EUTHYPHRO: All right, then: here's what holiness is: holiness is *anything that the gods love*, and sin is *anything that the gods hate*.

SOCRATES: Fantastic, Euthyphro! Now you've given me exactly the kind of answer I wanted. Of course, whether or not what you say is *true*, I have absolutely no idea; at least, not yet — although I have no doubt that you'll be able to go on and show me that you're right.

EUTHYPHRO: Of course.

SOCRATES: Come on, then; let's think hard about what we're saying here. "Anything that gods love is holy, and anything that gods hate is sinful." And those two things are total opposites of one another. Correct?

EUTHYPHRO: That's right.

SOCRATES: So, are you quite sure about that?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, Socrates, one hundred percent.

SOCRATES: And we said, just a moment ago, Euthyphro, that the gods are always *fighting* about things, and getting angry at each other, and bickering?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, we did.

SOCRATES: So, what sort of disagreements causes that kind of anger? I mean, imagine, for example, that you and I disagreed about how many pebbles there were in a jar; would a disagreement like that make us enemies, and cause us to start beating each other up? Wouldn't we just work out the answer, by *counting* them, and that would be the end of the disagreement?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Or suppose that we disagreed about how big something was, couldn't we just settle the disagreement by measuring it?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And we could end an argument about how heavy something was by getting a pair of scales?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Well what kinds of disagreements *can't* be settled that way? What kinds of disagreements make people angry, and make them quarrel with one another, and become enemies?

[*Euthyphro looks blank.*]

Maybe the answer isn't hitting you. Let me make a suggestion: don't people only get angry like that, and start fighting, and bickering with each other, when they're disagreeing about what's *right* and *wrong*, or what's *good* and *bad*? Isn't it when we have disagreements about those kinds of things, and can't settle the disagreements, that we fight, and become enemies?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, Socrates, you're right; those are the kinds of things we're usually disagreeing about when we quarrel.

SOCRATES: So, these quarrels between the gods, Euthyphro, when they occur, must about the same sort of thing?

EUTHYPHRO: Of course.

SOCRATES: So that means they must disagree, according to you, about what's good and bad, right and wrong: otherwise there wouldn't be any quarrels among the gods — would there?

EUTHYPHRO: That's right.

SOCRATES: Now, doesn't everyone — including the gods — *love* whatever it is that they think is right and good, and *bate* whatever they think is bad, and wrong?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: But, according to you, the gods often disagree about what's right and good. So that means the *same* things are thought right by some gods, and wrong by other gods — and that's why they bicker, and squabble, and fight about them?

EUTHYPHRO: True.

SOCRATES: So that means the same things must be both hated by gods *and* loved by gods?

EUTHYPHRO: True.

SOCRATES: Which would apparently make the same actions, Euthyphro, simultaneously holy *and* sinful?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, I suppose so.

SOCRATES: Well, now I'm really confused. It looks like you haven't answered my question after all. Because I didn't ask you to tell me what sort of action is both holy and sinful at the same time! But it looks as if whatever is "loved by gods" (loved by *some* of them) may also be hated by gods (hated by *some* of them). Just think about it, Euthyphro: in prosecuting your father you may be doing something that Zeus likes, but that Apollo doesn't like, or maybe Hephaestus is happy about it, but it annoys Athena — and maybe other gods are frantically disagreeing about what you're doing, too.

EUTHYPHRO: No, Socrates. I think all the gods would agree that it's right to punish a murderer: There wouldn't be any difference of opinion about *that*.

SOCRATES: All right, Euthyphro, in that case explain to me how you can be so sure that *all* the gods think that the hired-hand who murdered your father's slave and then died of exposure when your father tied him up and left him in a ditch was *wrongfully* killed; and that a son ought to prosecute even his own father over a man like that. How can you be sure that all the gods agree in endorsing your action? Prove to me that they do, and I swear I'll never stop telling everyone how wise you are, as long as I live.

EUTHYPHRO: Well, I *could* explain the whole thing in detail, if you really want me to; but it might take a fair while.

SOCRATES: Oh, I see; so you're saying I'm too stupid to understand? Aren't I at least as smart as the jury? And I assume you'll have prove to *them* that what your father did was wrong, and that all the gods hate that kind of thing.

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, Socrates, beyond a shadow of a doubt; at least, if they listen to me.

SOCRATES: Well, they will listen, if they think that you're a good speaker. But listen — something's just occurred to me: even if you *do* prove to me that all the gods see the death of the farm-hand as wrongful, what good will that do us? What will that tell us about what holiness is? We still won't have our *general* definition, because we've already shown that "whatever the gods love" won't do as a general definition. So forget about that, Euthyphro: let's assume, if you like, that all the gods think that what your father did was wrong, and hate him for it. Why don't we treat this new idea that just came up as our *new, improved* definition: that whatever *all* the gods hate is sinful, and whatever *all* the gods love is holy? Shall we make that our new definition of holiness, and sin?

EUTHYPHRO: I don't see why not, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Well, I don't see why not either, but that's not the point. *You've* got to decide, Euthyphro, if *you* like the new definition, and if it's going to help *you* in explaining things to me. That's what you promised.

EUTHYPHRO: All right; I'll say that whatever *all* the gods love is holy, and that whatever they *all* hate is sinful.

SOCRATES: So, shall we carefully look into that new definition too, Euthyphro, and try to work out if it's right? Or shall we just forget it, and go home? Should we just accept whatever we, and other people, happen to believe? What do you think?

EUTHYPHRO: We should look into it. But I think we've got it right, this time.

SOCRATES: We'll soon have a clearer idea about that. Now, ask yourself this:

Do the gods love what's holy because it's holy, or is it holy simply because the gods love it?

EUTHYPHRO: I don't understand what you mean, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Let me try to explain more clearly. Look, we talk about things that carry, and *things that are carried*, things that see and *things that are seen*, things that bump, and *things that are bumped*. You understand the difference, in each case?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, I think I understand.

SOCRATES: And similarly, there's a difference between things that love, and *things that are loved*?

EUTHYPHRO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: So, tell me, is something that's *carried* a 'carried' thing *because someone's carrying it*, or for some other reason?

EUTHYPHRO: No; that's the reason.

SOCRATES: And something that's *bumped* is a 'bumped' thing because someone bumps it; and a *seen* thing is a 'seen' thing because someone sees it?

EUTHYPHRO: Right.

SOCRATES: So, it's *not* the case that people see things because they're 'seen'. It's the other way around. Things are 'seen' because people see them. And people don't bump things because they're 'bumped'; they're 'bumped' because people bump them. And people don't carry things because they're 'carried'; they're 'carried' because people carry them. Am I making myself clear, Euthyphro? Do you see what I'm saying?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, I do.

SOCRATES: And the same goes for things being 'loved'; people don't love something *because it's a loved thing*. It's a loved thing *because people love it*. Right?

EUTHYPHRO: That must be right.

SOCRATES: So, what are we claiming about holiness, Euthyphro: isn't the claim that what's holy is anything that's *god-loved*, i.e. loved by all the gods?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And do the gods love it *because* it's holy?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, that's why they love it.

SOCRATES: So the gods love it because it's holy? We're quite sure about that? It isn't the other way around — holy because the gods love it?

EUTHYPHRO: Apparently not.

SOCRATES: But it's certainly 'god-loved' because the gods love it?

EUTHYPHRO: Obviously.

SOCRATES: So that means that what's holy can't be the same thing as what's god-loved. They must be two different things.

EUTHYPHRO: Why do you say that, Socrates? I'm a bit confused.

SOCRATES: Well, because we're agreeing that the gods love what's holy because it's holy; which means that it isn't the other way around; it isn't holy *because the gods love it*.

EUTHYPHRO: Correct.

SOCRATES: But what's god-loved certainly *is* god-loved *because the gods love it*.

EUTHYPHRO: True.

SOCRATES: Well, they're not the same then. Look Euthyphro, if what's holy were *exactly and precisely the same thing* as what's god-loved, then it would follow that

if the gods love what's holy because it's holy, then they must also love what's god-loved *because* it's god-loved — which they don't,
and

if what's god-loved is god-loved merely because the gods love it, then what's holy should also be holy merely because the gods love it — which, according to you, it isn't.

So in fact, they apparently work in opposite ways, and must be two quite different things. One of them (what's 'god-loved') is what it is merely on account

of the fact that the gods love it, whereas in the case of the other one ('what's holy'), the gods love it *because of what it is*, and it is what it is independently of the fact that they love it.

So I think you've just been playing games with me, Euthyphro. I asked you to tell me what holiness really is, and it seems you've sneakily refused to tell me what essentially makes holy actions holy, and instead you've just toyed with me, and told me something that happens to be a *property* of holiness, namely, that the gods love it. But you haven't told me what it *is*. So stop holding out on me! Go back to the beginning and tell me again, from the top, what holiness is, and what sin is (whether they're loved by gods, hated by them, or whatever the hell the gods feel about them — we don't need to talk about that).

EUTHYPHRO: Socrates, I don't know any more how I can explain what I think. Somehow or other our ideas, as soon as we set them down, seem to keep getting up, and scampering away from us!