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**Reason and Persuasion**

**Three Dialogues By Plato: Euthyphro, Meno, Republic Book I**

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The text is set in Hypatia Sans Pro.

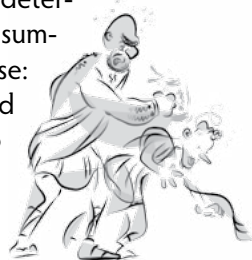
## Chapter 5

## Euthyphro: Thinking Straight, Thinking in Circles

### 1

PHILOSOPHICALLY, PLATO'S **Euthyphro** appears to consist of a series of failures by the title character to answer one of Socrates' signature **what is X?**-style questions. In this case, **what is holiness?** But let's start more practically.

Plato's **Euthyphro** is about a pending court case — two, actually. Socrates and Euthyphro meet because they both have business with the **archon basileus**. (I explain who this official is in section 13.) But mostly the dialogue focuses on the ethical implications of the title character's determination to prosecute his father for murder. Euthyphro summarizes what he takes to be the essential facts of the case: on their family farm a drunken servant assaulted and killed a slave. Euthyphro's father sent a messenger to Athens to get religious advice about what to do. Meanwhile, the servant was bound and thrown in a ditch, where he died of exposure. Euthyphro takes his father to be responsible for the man's death (3e-4e).



This seems bound to get complicated, despite Euthyphro's insistence that the matter is straightforward. But the dialogue is not about forensic investigation or criminal intentions. (What **was** dad trying to do?) The dialogue isn't even really about what should happen to the father now. The down-to-earth question, from which the philosophy takes flight, is: what should Euthyphro do about it? Of course 'do about it' depends on **it**, so all that other business comes right back. But the question that sends Socrates and Euthyphro down their **what is X?** path seems largely independent of all that.

Euthyphro insists that his father is guilty but is also standing up for a procedural principle (one wishes he were clearer about this.) If there is probable cause (as we might say) to think a man caused another's death, wrongfully, a trial should be held. If he did wrong, he should be punished. If not, his name will be cleared. The demand that the justice system handle such cases is independent of specific determinations of guilt or innocence. On the other side, we find Euthyphro's family insisting the father is innocent,

but also standing up for a different procedural point. Even if the father were **manifestly** guilty, it would not be Euthyphro's place to prosecute.

So guilt is disputed but is not the crux of the dispute.

So what is it? What are Euthyphro and his family fighting about?



## 2

Let me add a bit of biography and report a literary coincidence. Euthyphro was, it would seem, a real person. In another dialogue, **Cratylus**, set years earlier, Socrates refers to 'the great Euthyphro', apparently a self-styled expert on religious etymologies. He sees meaning in the names of the gods. ('Great' would seem ironic, since what Socrates is doing at this point in **Cratylus** is offering what he himself clearly knows are far-fetched etymologies.) So let's take a page from Euthyphro's book. Let's over-interpret his name. The primary sense of the root — **euthu** — is **straight**, either horizontally or vertically. It can also mean straight in a temporal or proximal sense: straightaway, direct. Add '**phron**', from **phronēsis**, which is **wisdom**. **Euthyphron** means **straight-thinker**; by extension, **right-minded**.

Now, the coincidence. Confucius' **Analects** contains a famous passage: "The Governor of She said to Confucius, 'In our village we have one Straight Body. When his father stole a sheep, he the son gave evidence against him.' Confucius answered, 'In our village those who are straight are quite different. Fathers cover up for their sons, and sons cover up for their fathers. In such behaviour is straightness to be found as a matter of course.'"<sup>1</sup> In another



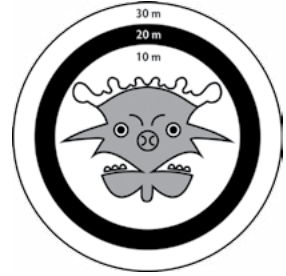
translation the son is 'nicknamed Upright-Kung' So we have two straight-up guys — straight mind, straight body — prosecuting their own fathers. Plato and Confucius have independently arrived at the conclusion that this is an important kind of case. So what's the common denominator of a stolen sheep and a dead servant in a ditch?

## 3

We are going to have to abstract away from the bloody, woolly details to something more general and universal. Suppose you meet a strange person who subscribes to a moral theory expressible in terms of three principles:

1 Confucius: *The Analects*, 2nd ed., trans. D.C. Lau (Chinese University Press, 2000), XIII.18, p. 127.

- 1) In any dispute, side with anyone who is within 10 meters of you.
- 2) If no one is within 10 meters of you, side with anyone within 20 meters.
- 3) Take no sides in disputes involving parties all of whom are at least 30 meters from you.



There are three problems with this odd view:

It is potentially **incomplete**. There are things you might need to know that it doesn't tell you. What about time and change? People move. Am I supposed to switch sides or once I have settled do I stick where I am?

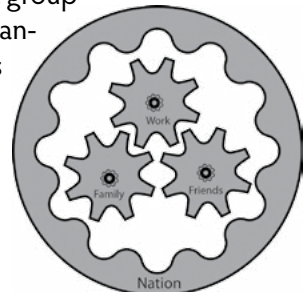
It is potentially **inconsistent**. Suppose both parties are within 10 meters of me. What am I supposed to do? Take **both** sides?

It is **crazy**.

The thing to do in a dispute is take the **right** side. Spatial proximity to me is not a reliable index of right and wrong. It's not even a half-decent rule of thumb. (Nothing special about this one spot of earth I'm holding down.) To subscribe to any form of this theory would be absurd, even if you patched up 1 and 2 to the point where the game was playable, which it does not appear to be as it stands.

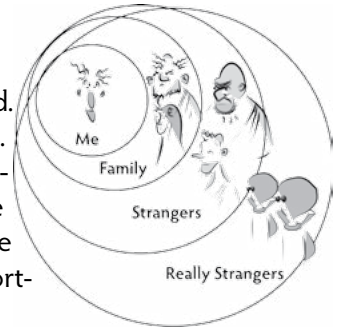
And yet: we all think like this very strange person. So we must all be crazy. We decide **what should I do?** in (we're going to need a name for a big class of cases) 'circular' style. When questions of right and wrong arise, we side with those in **our** circle; with those closer, not necessarily in space, but along more social axes. We think we owe family more than we owe friends and neighbors. We think we owe fellow citizens more than citizens of other countries. In anthropological terms, we side with our in-group against any out-group. Family, nation, race, economic class, religion, tribe, clan, club, party, neighborhood, team, association, school. Family values is a broad category.

Up to a point we may be able to impose concentric tidiness. But life is complicated. If my mom is fighting with dad, whose side do I take? At some point we are likely to find ourselves wondering which group commands our primary loyalty. The philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre considers the case of the son who wants to go fight for the French resistance, who knows this will mean neglecting his aged mother. The novelist E.M. Forster declares: "If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country." Maybe



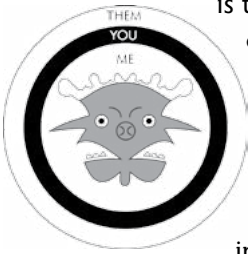
you hope you would have the guts to betray your friend. Opinions differ, but the style is the same. Circles **matter**.

These examples make it all sound tragic and life-wrenching, which it may be. But in little ways these problems crop up everyday. They complicate office politics, start fights between friends, lead to uncomfortable silences around the dinner table.



Let me generalize the pattern one circle further — in, that is.

The one closest to me is: **me**. I owe it to **myself** to be self-interested. 'Egoism' is the standard name for this view. It may look like the very opposite of group loyalty but, in a sense, is just an instance: tribalism for a tribe of **one**.



In **Republic**, Book 1, Socrates argues with Thrasymachus, who advocates pure egoism, so we will be hearing more about this view. For now, let me simply note that adding this possibility fits many more familiar types of ethical dilemma into this circular template.

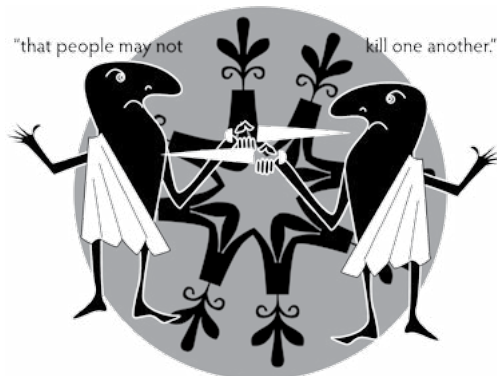
I want to do one thing. My family/friends/boss wants me to do something else. Which circle commands my true loyalty?

If that sounds hard to decide, what's the alternative?

Thinking ... straight?

An upright person sets personal ties aside. Good judgment is impartial. A man has been killed. "It is ridiculous, Socrates, that you think it makes a difference whether the victim is a stranger or a relative" (4b).

Euthyphro doesn't do much to develop this. But it sounds good as it stands. The great Greek orator Demosthenes asks: "what should we all most earnestly pray shall not come to pass, and in all laws what end is most earnestly sought?" He gives a simple answer: "That people may not kill one another" (D.20.157-8).





Impersonal, sure; but that sounds good in this connection. Justice is blind, after all, not because she doesn't know the relevant facts of the case but because she doesn't let herself see any irrele-

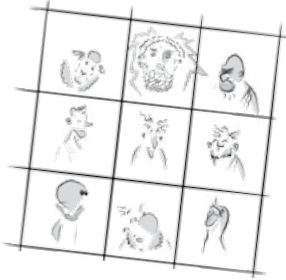
vant facts. She doesn't see father, mother, friend. She sees, for example, one who has killed another.

Killing **anyone** is bad.

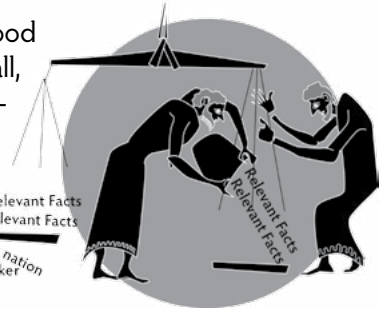
On the other hand, sometimes killing is **justified**. That's relevant!

So what is justice?

Maybe we can't say, but it seems like its portrait won't be a family portrait of **my** family. It will be a picture of everyone — but in which everyone appears to be no one in particular. (Does that look about right?)



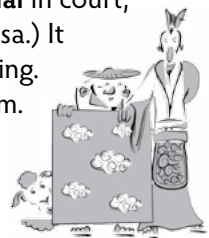
Relevant Facts  
Relevant Facts  
friends family nation  
race co-worker



#### 4

Let's hear a rebuttal. That **some** circular schemes are silly or ethically insane does not prove **all** such schemes are. Impartiality isn't everything. As Confucius says, uprightness may be a matter of partiality. Ethics is a function of attachments to family, friends, community, country. These ties that bind are the very things that make life meaningful. Justice cannot mean cutting all such ties. Abstracting up and away into an imaginary ideal world in which everyone is no one in particular is idiocy, not insight. Treating parents or children as if they were 'equal' — if that means regarding them as no different than strangers — would be morally monstrous. You **aren't** everyone. You're **you**. Surely there is no more relevant consideration, for purposes of answering **what should I do?** than **who am I?**

Maybe it has occurred to you that you aren't prepared to give up either of these ways of thinking. You want judges to be **impartial** in court; children to be **partial** to parents at home (and vice versa.) It can't be a matter of purging either of these ways of thinking. Rather, they must be combined. But you see the problem. Superimpose a straight grid on a set of concentric circles. Looks like a great way to get your wires crossed.





Be it noted: my metaphors of straight and circular are not really views at all. A number of different theories or views, any number of justifications for them, could be 'straight' or 'circular', maybe both, depending how you look at it. I've dropped a few hints about likely arguments, but the point of the schematic cartooning is not to guide your life, let alone ground your reasoning, but to give you an intuitive sense of a characteristic type of difficulty that promises to crop up in all sorts of contexts. The advantage of 'circles vs. straight', so far, is not how much but how **little** it says. To repeat: we have two pictures we like. They aren't going to fit together coherently. We don't really know what it means if they don't fit. Probably: trouble. What to do? What to think?

But this much is clear. **Circles vs. straight** is why Plato writes about a dead man in a ditch; why Confucius is worried about a stolen sheep. Or maybe: why Plato makes a point of **not** writing much about a dead man in a ditch. Instead, he spins us round and round **what is holy**? Euthyphro stumps for a straight-up straight view. Socrates mock-innocently tosses this straight man curve after curve. Is that because he's trying to convert him to the circle view? He doesn't say so. "Hercules! I imagine, Euthyphro, most men don't know how things ought to be. I don't think just anyone would be able to do what you are doing. This is a job for one far advanced in wisdom!" (4a). Does the dialogue make such advances?

## 5

In Chapter 4 I invited you to imagine a friend at your door, seeking advice. 'I think dad may have murdered someone. What should I do?' Obviously you would sit down with your friend, pull down the dictionary, and attempt to build up a definition of 'holiness'.

No, **not** obviously. Obviously **not**. But if no one in their right mind turns first to the dictionary for advice about life, why presume that answering some Socratic-style **what is X?** question will help Euthyphro figure out what to do with his life? If your car won't start, you need a mechanic not a dictionary entry for 'car'. It seems strange to assume ethics will be more definition-based, even if we grant the potential existence of ethical expertise.

Second, why this specific X? The Greek is **hosion**, translated **holy** or **pious**. Wouldn't it make as much sense, maybe more, to ask what is right or just or even just legal? It is unsurprising that Euthyphro — a **mantis** (no, not a bug; see section 16) — is quick to suggest religious answers to ethical and



even legal questions. Certainly it isn't unusual for people to think their religion informs their ethics. Still, isn't it assuming a lot, putting all the weight on holiness in this case?

We can answer the first question at least to some extent by diving right in. The second will have to wait, but eventually the dialogue implies an answer, even if it is not stated in so many words. (Yes, it probably would have made more sense to ask one of those other questions instead, or in addition.)

## 6

How does Euthyphro **know** he is right and everyone else is wrong? The specific ethical issue concerns an alleged duty of filial piety. Prosecute dad or not? Euthyphro says he knows he is right because he understands what piety is all about. He is a holy man.

So we are, from the start, on the semantic track we stay on. It's a religious question because it's about how to relate to father figures claiming authority.

In English a linguistic accident makes it easy to migrate from family feud into theology without noticing how we got here. Ask anyone what piety is all about and they will say: religion. But the piety in 'filial piety' is not religious. We don't think it is important to respect parents because they are **gods**. (Do we?) Why **do** we call it 'filial piety'? Because 'piety' once meant **duty**. The term is a time-capsule, preserving ancient notions of how far duty extends: to god(s) and kin. Ancient practices of ancestor worship made it easy to conflate parents and gods in ways that seem extreme to modern minds; even modern religious minds; even the modern minds of religious people who really respect their parents and think of God as a father-figure.

In response to Socrates, Euthyphro says what he is doing, and things like what he is doing, are holy. In prosecuting his father for wrongdoing, he is like Zeus, who punished his father, forcing him to cough up five unjustly swallowed siblings. (Rather harsh to compare your own dear dad to Kronos!)

Socrates objects that a few examples do not a definition make. But first he makes a slightly different point, having to do with the wild, violent character of the myth:





So you believe that the gods really go to war with one another, that there are hateful rivalries and battles between them, and other things of this sort, like the ones narrated by the poets, or represented in varied ways by our fine artists — particularly upon the robe that is carried up to the Acropolis during the great Panathenaic festival, which is embroidered with all these sorts of designs? Should we agree these things are literally true, Euthyphro? (6b-c)



### Robe carried up to the Acropolis?

A bit of background: the highlight of the Panathenaic festival — **the** major religious event in Athens — was a procession. An embroidered **peplos** was carried up the Panathenaic Way on its way to the temple.

The parade will pass within a few meters of the spot where Euthyphro and Socrates are now sitting, in fact.<sup>2</sup> A **peplos** is a one-piece, belted robe worn by women. Possibly there were two different festival robes: a more or less regular-sized one for the yearly festival, suitable for dressing a certain statue of Athena. And a big one — big as a sail, hung from the mast of an actual trireme rolled along the road. This would have been for the greater festival, celebrated only every fourth year, which attracted visitors from all over the Greek world. No fewer than three other Platonic dialogues are incidentally framed by the Panathenaic festival, which gives some sense of how civically significant this event was (or how much it meant to Plato.) The title character of **Ion** has come to compete in the music competition. In **Parmenides** the title character is in town for the festival. The debates in **Timaeus** take place during the festival.

Getting back to the peplos: it will be embroidered with depictions of **gigantomachy**, war between the gods and giants. What's the story?



2 An excellent source is Jenifer Neils (ed.), **Goddess and Polis: The Panathenaic Festival in Ancient Athens** (Princeton University Press, 1993).

The giants — vaguely Thracian, barbarian lot — start lobbing boulders and torches up Olympus, protesting against the Olympian overthrow of the Titans, their kin. (So this story is tied into the whole Zeus-punishes-Kronos narrative: divine intergenerational strife.) The gods need Hercules' help, due to a peculiar rule that these giants can only be killed by a mortal. Hercules is hampered by the fact that the giant's leader springs back up if killed on his own land, so Hercules has to drag him across the border before clubbing him properly. (Arbitrary rules about spatial proximity again!) The Fates themselves — who you might think would watch from the sidelines — get in the mix, swinging pestles, cracking giant skulls. Not the least dramatic tactical contribution is made by Athena, who defeats Enkelados by throwing Sicily on him. Yes, **that** Sicily. (I'll bet she had the advantage of surprise!)

By some accounts, Enkelados is the spirit still grumbling beneath Aetna, the volcano. (Others say that is Typhon, the hundred-headed one. Or Briareos, the hundred-handed one. And it was Zeus who buried ... whoever it was. Heads, hands? Who can keep it straight?) Oh, and there's an invisibility helmet and an invulnerability herb. There's a funny bit where Eros shoots a giant with a love arrow so that, instead of trying to kill Hera, at least he's only trying to have sex with her.

None of these festival robes survive. None of the surviving, ancient representations of gigantomachy feature Enkelados looking up in amazement as Sicily falls on his poor head. Even so, "Yes, Socrates, and even more astonishing things as well — things that most people don't know" (6b) is rather rich. (Euthyphro has maybe heard some story about a giant buried under **two** Sicilies? Some titan with **200** heads or hands?)



One wonders whether being a sincere literalist about myths was common in Euthyphro's day. In another dialogue, **Phaedrus**, Socrates remarks that it is fashionable to explain away myths as allegories of natural events. The god of the North wind kidnapped and raped a mortal, Orythia. Maybe, Socrates suggests, she just got blown off the rocks — hence 'taken by Boreas.' But just because it was fashionable for the smart set to debunk or naturalize stories like this doesn't mean it wasn't considered a bit scandalous, even impious.



Sophisticated intellectual fashion's no fun if there aren't old-fashioned folks to get their peplos in a knot, as it were.

The point is this. Given Euthyphro's penchant for citing myths to rationalize his ethical position, it seems he ought to be more sensitive to how rationalism can corrode religion. It ought to cross his mind that maybe the rational thing to do is suspect that — just maybe! — it **didn't** literally happen. But the tall-tale quality of the gigantomachy is not even its worst feature, for Euthyphro's purposes.

Suppose it all **did** happen, crazy as it sounds. Now suppose you ask the average Athenian on the street what the point is — robe as rigging, theater-ship on rollers, the whole rigmarole. This citizen will most certainly say the point is piety. How not? But how so? For a person to become pious is presumably for that person to acquire an increased capacity to do what is holy, not what is unholy. Doing the right thing need not be **just** a matter of knowing. Still, you need to know what you're doing. How is looking at pictures of gods fighting giants supposed to make me better? Even if it all really happened?

The gigantomachy doesn't sound silly only because I narrated it briefly. Robert Graves writes that "the farcical incidents of the battle are more characteristic of popular fiction than myth."<sup>3</sup> But aren't myths popular fiction? Well, never mind — you see his point. This story seems more fun than fundamental. What, then, do we make of the fact that the ceremonial focus of the most important religious festival in Athens is a robe featuring pictures of gods fighting giants?

Festivals are **supposed** to be fun! They have to be spectacular, otherwise people won't come from all over Greece. Stands to reason! Yes, but how does spectacle make us more likely to act rightly, less likely to act wrongly?

## 7

Socrates pushes the point:

I asked what essential form all holy actions exhibit, in virtue of which they are holy. For you did agree all unholy actions are unholy and all holy actions holy in virtue of some shared form ... Tell me then what this form is, so that I can pay close attention to it and use it as a paradigm to judge any action, whether committed by you or anyone else. If the action be of the right form, I will declare it holy; otherwise, not. (6d-e)

3 Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths: Complete Edition*. (Penguin, 1993), p. 131.

At this point Euthyphro might have been better off promising to provide better examples — stories later scholars might certify as ‘properly’ mythic. But he doesn’t, and that line would have its own problems. Myths that teach moral lessons usually do not try to teach us complicated, surprising, subtle truths we’ve never thought before. (The exception that proves the rule may be Plato’s own brand of obscure myths.) Myths are not for intellectual fine-tuning or original investigation; rather, they are for conventional reinforcement. It’s easy to tell a story about why murder is bad. **In the end, the murderer was punished by Zeus!** It’s not so easy to come up with a myth about why a complicated legal case should be decided in such-and-such a way. Myths that teach, teach simple truths. So if your only ethical tool is the hammer of Thor, as it were, every ethical problem starts to look like a nail — simple, that is. Euthyphro’s problem, his case, his family situation, is not simple. So it looks like he’s got the wrong tool for the job (and/or he is the wrong tool.)

Socrates’ signature demand for an answer to a **what is X?** question is starting to look a bit more reasonable. How so? Sometimes you can teach by example. You say ‘this is a chair, and other things like this are chairs.’ That seems to work most days (not that Plato admits it. But it’s true.) People pick up the concept. But ‘this is holy, and other things like this are holy’ actually doesn’t work. People still fight about it. So we need, not a handful of examples plus a fancy robe, but a reasonable procedure for resolving serious, complicated, deep-seated religious-legal-moral disputes.

Yes, but does the procedure need to be a definition?

## 8

Let me be a bit absurd about it, but there will be a point. At the start of the dialogue, Socrates says what brings him before the **basileus** is that he stands accused of ‘fabricating gods.’ (The Greek says **make**, but it seems appropriate to translate with a term that splits the difference between technology and fakery. Socrates isn’t being charged with unlicensed manufacture of **authentic** divinities.) Euthyphro sees this as a charge of religious innovation.

So let’s get innovative! Here on the Socratic factory floor we have designed and prototyped a **Hosionotron** — a device for sorting the contents of the universe into two piles: **holy, not-holy**. People, gods, actions, trees, days of the week, events, character traits, animals, artifacts, rituals, books, ideas. You name it! Toss it onto those holy rollers, which convey every item into the brain of the machine, where they are worried about rigorously. One of those two lights goes on. **Holy. Unholy.** Your answer! Wonderful!

But how do you fabricate a **Hosionotron**?

That's tough, but this much seems right. We can't just wrap it in a robe. We need to program its innards. There needs to be some property Y that the machine's various detectors detect, or fail to. Every X exhibiting Y goes in one pile. Everything not-Y goes in the other. So what we need is a precise, technical expression of Y.



I can see you are starting to look doubtful. Does all this sound like a great deal of bother, at best? But look at it this way: do you have any idea how hard it is to embroider an extra-large robe with nice pictures of gods fighting giants? No one said the best things in life would come easy or cheap.



But what if there just **isn't** any such Y — to say nothing of further engineering difficulties we are sure to encounter?

Then we can't construct our wonderful **Hosionotron**, alas.

Isn't that the likeliest outcome, after all?

No, because — allegedly — we've **got** one. Behold, the **Euthyphrobot 399!**

Perhaps you've seen this fantastic tool, the latest model (to hear it tell the Holy/not-Holy tale.) If you agree a general algorithm would be needed to detect holiness, then it must be possible to have such an algorithm because, to repeat, we've got it. "If you did not know precisely what is holy, and what unholy, you would never have undertaken to prosecute your aged father for murder on behalf of a servant" (15d). Yet here he is! If the Euthyphrobot were not programmed to test for a reliable criterion of holiness, surely it would behave like the useless **Socratic Daemoninator**; which, as you may know, only ever spits out one answer: **invalid input, abort procedure**.

But surely Euthyphro isn't 'well-programmed'. Bit of a fool, isn't he?

Probably. But even bad programming has to run some way. The question of how people **do** think may be as interesting as the question of how they **should**. Put the point this way: it's all well and good to point out that if your car won't start, you need someone who understands how cars **work**, as

opposed to a dictionary definition of 'car'. A good mechanic is not the one who can sort all the contents of the universe into two piles: **car**, **not-car**. That's asking for not enough, also for too much. But the word 'holiness' **is** a device for sorting all the contents of the universe into two piles: **holy**, **not-holy**. A car goes from A to B. A word sorts A's from B's. So to ask what the word means **is** just to ask how this practical unit of sorting work is accomplished.

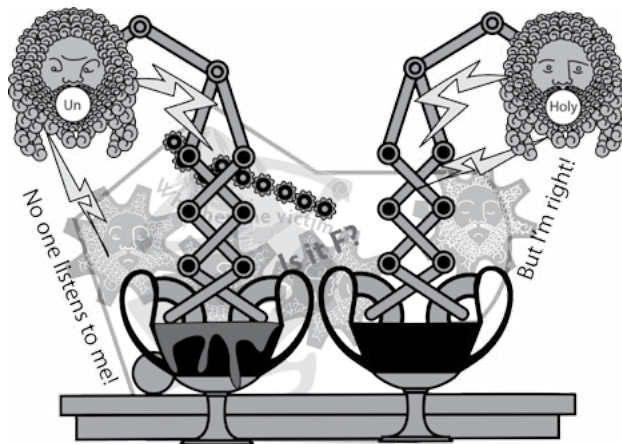
So how do people work, who are, seemingly, doing this work?

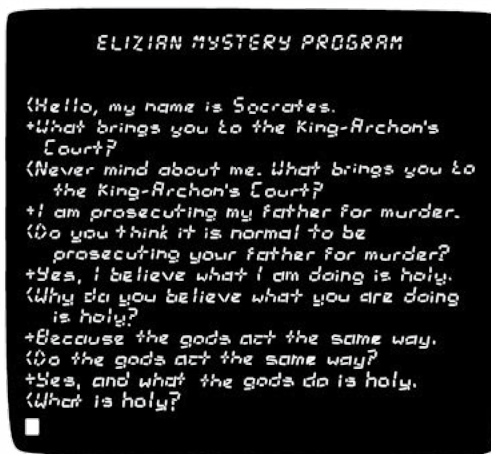
If **you** know how to construct a functioning **Hosionotron** — or even a malfunctioning **Euthyphrobot** — without coding in a holiness algorithm, we'd all love to see the plans. Because, admittedly, we are running into a few ... complications.

Shifting away from silly robots, the better to see the serious point: it does seem possible, admittedly, that we might theorize the nature of linguistic meaning and the nature of conceptual content in ways that work around any demand for strict, verbal definition. Maybe people who use the word 'holy' on a regular basis aren't following any rule, **per se**; let alone consciously applying a verbal formula. But it is not obvious how regular behavior that isn't 'encoded' as a rule is possible; or why, if the machine (person) isn't following a rule, we should trust its operation. So it may be best to start by at least trying to come up with an ideal rule, which will basically be a definition.

Let me say it again: neither Plato nor Socrates is the least bit interested in constructing divine robots — fabricating gods, whatever that means. What I have just done is present what is basically a very simple idea: to use the word 'Y' is to grasp a concept **Y**, is to possess something like a general rule (paradigm, call it what you will) for picking out Y's.

The point of thinking about robots is that you already are one, in effect. Your thinking works some way, for better or worse. What **is** that way?





9

Having accepted Socrates' challenge to provide a general account of holiness — a definition, in effect — Euthyphro proceeds to set up three candidates, which Socrates bats down with ease. Much of the dialogue is devoted to Socrates' efforts in this regard. The logic is mostly rather straightforward, so I will be fairly brief.

### First Definition: Holy = what is loved by the gods

And what the gods hate is unholy.

The problem is the gods fight, and not just with giants. Zeus loves turning himself into a bull and seducing mortals. Hera, his wife, hates that. Poseidon and Athena fought over who got to be divine patron of Athens. Athena won. Poseidon is still sore. Euthyphro says Zeus will love anyone who does as Zeus did when he punished his father. Kronos might disagree. Lots of things are shaping up to holy **and** unholy. Euthyphro admits this is awkward. He opts to modify his definition.



But it is worth pausing to ask: holy **and** unholy? Is this an **absurd** result?

Greek mythology is a great place to get stuck between a divine rock and a hard place. Maybe that's the answer. Later in the dialogue (9d) Euthyphro accepts, at least in passing, that things might be both holy and unholy, if loved and hated by different gods. But here at the start he shifts ground instead.



### Second Definition: Holy = what is loved by all the gods

This is supposed to fix the trouble. Trouble is: it isn't obvious **all** the gods would agree about any of the cases concerning which we might bother to consult them. Euthyphro says all gods will be against murder. The question is whether his father is guilty, not whether murder is bad. The point made above about myths and morals applies again. Myths can be tools for reinforcing simple notions like **don't murder**. They are not obviously instruments for investigating what ought to count as murder.

By this point modern readers who are themselves religious may feel a bit frustrated, thinking that, with friends like Euthyphro, religion doesn't need enemies, whether Socrates is one or not. Stipulating that all the Greek gods agree is Euthyphro sticking a band-aid on a fatal flaw in his whole outlook. Modern readers who believe in God don't believe in any colorful, soap opera superhero cast of Olympians. When we want to see an action hero fighting a big villain, we have our own version of a big-screen peplos. Our people call it 'going to the movies'. Whether we are religious or not, we don't confuse going to church with taking in a summer blockbuster.

Modern readers aren't ancient Greek polytheists. If they are religious, they are likely to be subscribers to a monotheistic religion: Christianity or Islam or Judaism. But let's not forget Hinduism and Buddhism. That's more than a billion living counter-examples. Don't write off non-monotheist religions as relics! But maybe Plato is driving at the conclusion that monotheism makes sense. If there is only one God, there is no problem with gods fighting; no risk of the gods handing down an inconsistent command structure, thereby crashing the moral program.

### 10

But the next stage of the dialogue between Socrates and Euthyphro pushes past these problems to a more fundamental one. The initial problems stand revealed, in retrospect, as symptoms. The real problem is an incoherent order of explanation.

S: Consider this: is the holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?

E: I don't know what you mean, Socrates.

S: Let me try to explain more clearly. We speak of something carried and of a carrier; of something guided and a guide; of something seen and one who sees. You understand that, in every case of this sort, these things are different from one another, and how they are different? (10a)

Socrates' examples sound odd and may, in fact, make things **less** clear (in part this is a problem with translating things that run more smoothly in Greek.) The full passage is recommended to the interested reader as an exercise in verbal disentanglement. But let me try to state, plainly, what the point is; why it matters.

It's a chicken-and-egg puzzle. **Do the gods love it because it is good; or is it good because the gods love it?** This is a famous hinge in the dialogue, often called 'Euthyphro's Dilemma'. Why Euthyphro's, in particular? He wants to justify prosecuting his father. He does so by elevating a standard of impartial justice over family loyalty. (Grid vs. circle.) He justifies this stance by asking, in effect, WWZD: **what would Zeus do?** (Let's leave the other gods out, for simplicity.)

Zeus, he claims, favors impartial justice. But, supposing so, why — in what way — should we care? To explain, Euthyphro needs to solve the chicken-and-egg puzzle. No solution satisfies. Let's examine our options.

Suppose goodness 'comes first'. That is, there is some god-independent, reason-giving standard of holiness — of right conduct. On this picture an ethically-minded individual might cut out the middle man (Euthyphro) and middle god (Zeus.) Taking your cue from wise Zeus' love puts you on the right track, sure. But, if **murder is wrong** makes sense, independently, you can figure it out yourself without asking Zeus; just as you can do your calculus homework without praying to Zeus for the solutions. Even if Zeus gave you an answer key, that wouldn't turn calculus into a branch of Greek mythology. Ethics will be like that. It just makes sense!

That's the first horn of the dilemma. Here's the second. If there **isn't** an independent, prior standard of holiness (goodness), it must be that god(s) create right and wrong (good/bad) by liking/ordering some things, not others. This is often called 'divine command theory'. What the god says, goes. Could there be a simpler picture? It's pretty straightforward. Still, there is a problem. Zeus hates murder. But why?



Isn't it obvious what's hateful about it? He hates it because it's wrong!

No, that gets us back to the first horn of the dilemma. Think of it this way: could Zeus make murder right if he got up on the wrong side of bed some morning? Or like this: do you have any reason to dislike murder **besides the fact that it is wrong**? Strange question. (Do gods dictate values the way mortals pick car colors. We say, 'I like it! Do you have it in red?' They say: 'I like it! So we'll have it in red!')

How are we supposed to understand Zeus' moral preferences if we can't wrap our heads around his (by hypothesis pre-moral) reasons for having them?

Could it all be random? There is a key scene in Homer's *Iliad* in which Zeus watches the fight between Achilles and Hector. He raises his golden scale and places a 'doom' for each warrior in the pans. Hector's goes down. He is to die. Zeus' scales do not suit our case perfectly. They don't make it be the case that Hector **deserves** to die. They do not determine right and wrong, only life and death. But if we imagine Zeus using his scales as a device for randomly generating values, then we might envision a world that is, ethically, as arbitrary as the course of the Trojan War is, militarily. But the conceptual disadvantages of divine command theory go deeper than mere fluke of fate (or fog of war.) It is not clear that we can **reason** about ethics on this view, something Euthyphro definitely wants to do. Zeus could command us to prosecute all murderers **and** never to prosecute our own fathers. An inconsistent set of demands can't all be met. But that doesn't mean they can't be made.

## 11

Euthyphro is attracted to something like divine command theory; but he wants ethics to make sense. But that first horn won't save us if we flip back now. It isn't just that you don't need Zeus' help if you can figure out right and wrong for yourself (like math.) If ethics is delinked from potentially arbitrary god-love, to ensure its good sense, there is no reason religion — the gods — must remain ethical rather than unethical.

Here is Adeimantus from **Republic** (we'll meet him when we get there.) He is speaking for Plato, I expect; and — who knows? — he might be thinking about poor Hector, who hardly deserved his fate.

What is said about the gods and virtue is the most incredible thing of all; namely, that the gods themselves inflict misfortune and misery upon many a good man, while the opposite fate awaits the opposite sort. Begging priests and prophets darken the doors of the rich and persuade them they possess a god-given power to stage a pleasant festival

of sacrifice and prayer, thereby expiating any crime the rich man or one of his ancestors may have committed. Not only that, but if one wants to make trouble for some enemy, then — for a very reasonable price — this lot will contrive to harm the just and unjust alike; because they have incantations and spells for persuading the gods to serve them. (364b)



Selling salvation like soapsuds! (Or soapsuds like salvation?) Either way, **that** can't be right! Let's check back in with our heroes, Socrates and Euthyphro.

As mentioned, the Panathenaic festival parade will pass within just a few meters of where they are sitting now, proceed up the road, up the hill to the temple. It's the most wonderful event — exciting, entertaining! You get to admire the designs on the peplos. Of course it costs the city a pretty penny, but that's a small price to pay for automatically becoming a better person just by meeting a few ritual obligations. Also, all those tourists buy stuff while they're here.

Adeimantus is complaining about low-end private operators in the holiness line, not the high-end civic version (which I expect he supports.) But the model is kind of the same, right?

## 12

But what does this have to do with Euthyphro?

He may be a self-righteous idiot. (You be the judge.) But, in his defense, he doesn't seem to be in it for the money. And he doesn't work for the city.

Let's see how it ends. Euthyphro is stumped by chicken-and-egg: **is it holy because the gods love it, or do the gods love it because it is holy?** He wants it both ways, but Socrates won't let him have it. But things get scrambled up in two final ways.

First, Socrates finally raises the issue of justice (better late than never!) He asks, in effect, whether 'just' and 'holy' just mean the same. One or two? "Is all that is just holy?" (11e). This sounds odd. Euthyphro doesn't get it. Socrates makes it simpler, hands Euthyphro a better idea on a platter. "Is it rather that where there is holiness, there is also justice, since justice is not coextensive

with holiness — holiness is a part of justice?" (12d). And, completing the thought: where there is justice, there is not necessarily holiness.

Oh, **that**!

Yes, of course, there's justice and then there's holiness. Of course not all questions of justice are settled just by asking what is holy.

This is sensible enough. But it highlights the oddity of the performance to this point. Why didn't Euthyphro think of this before? His case against his father is, on the face of it, a question of justice — a legal issue.

Maybe we should examine it in those terms, rather than flying straight up to Olympus for our answers?



### 13

There actually **is** an explanation for Euthyphro's determination not to consider his own legal case in terms of justice, rather than holiness.

Let's turn back to the beginning of the dialogue. Socrates and Euthyphro meet on the steps of the **archon basileus' stoa**. (Open-sided, colonnaded building, like a stand-alone porch.) Who is this man? There are nine **archons** in Athens, elected officials who serve terms of a year. (One archon, the **polemarch**, is selected less democratically. But never mind about the man in charge of the army.) The **basileus** — the king — oversees religious affairs. It's an archaic title, as befits the venerable character of his duties, making sure that peplos gets made on time and that other aspects of the Panatheneia are properly conducted. There are temples to keep up, sacrifices to be arranged. The basileus is busy, keeping books for all that.

Beyond that, his most significant duty is hearing cases concerning alleged religious crime. Socrates' case is before the basileus because he is charged with impiety. Why is Euthyphro here? Because murder is a religious matter. Athens is like Euthyphro: it distinguishes justice and holiness. Then, having done so, it thinks about murder in terms of holiness. The basileus hears about, "that part of justice concerned with the care of the gods, while the part of justice concerned with the care of men comprises the rest" (12e). I'm quoting Euthyphro on holiness but it is also a nice and accurate formulation of the basileus' delimited domain of legal authority.

Think about what it means that this domain includes murder. Euthyphro comes upon the dead servant in the ditch. He responds as any pious citizen would. 'Great Zeus needs my help! He stands in immediate need of my care

and assistance. Call the city official in charge of taking care of the gods so that he and I can work together to take better care of Zeus!

And the shade of the dead servant looks up from Hades and adds: 'And I'm not feelin' so good neither.'



How does such an absurdity work its way into the justice system? Via Euthyphro's dilemma (so it isn't **just** his.)

It is absurd to suppose the reason we care about murder is **only** because Zeus cares. Obviously the idea is supposed to be that Zeus has a reason to look down, angrily, and judge, 'this man has been mistreated!' But if that's the case, it's a case of 'care of men', after all. So we should cut to the chase and just plain **care** about , hence for, the man in the ditch. (That's what Zeus would do. We want to be like Zeus.) We are back on the first horn of the dilemma. If you've figured out what makes sense, regarding care of men, what do you need Zeus for?

#### 14

There is more to the murder-as-religious-crime story. Euthyphro explains at the start that he is concerned about being 'polluted' by his father, being forced to be under the same roof. The Greek for this is **miasma**, a term we now use for the 'bad air' associated with a swamp. We understand, intuitively, what it means to be stained by sin. We understand why people want to 'clean up their act'. But the Greeks apparently took this idea literally. Miasma is contagious.

Guilt is catching? Like the flu?

It might seem this strange notion makes merely figurative sense. By staying under the same roof, Euthyphro is implicitly condoning his father's actions. The Greeks held all murder trials in the open air, by law. If Euthyphro's case comes to trial, no one will be willing to be under the same roof as his father for the duration, so to that extent they will be ratifying the son's apparently excessive notions about sanitary housing. Still, symbolism matters. The notion that bad behavior infects by contact may not be superstition but a way of condensing plausible thoughts about social dynamics. Condoning wrongdoing causes it to spread. But there is more. The orator Antiphon:

You no doubt know that many men with unclean hands, or suffering from other pollution, have, by taking ship with others destroyed not only their own lives but along with themselves men who were pure; and also that others, although escaping death, have had inflicted upon them the greatest dangers because of such men; and also that many attending at the sacrifices have been shown to be impure and to be standing in the way of the performance of the rites. (A.5.82)



The ship case is nice because it solves for the variable of intention, also for any 'collective guilt'. I can feel ashamed of something my country has done, my family, my in-group. But if the stranger you happen to sit next to on the boat turns out to be a fugitive murderer, it can hardly be your fault. Still, you can catch your death from miasma. The moral of this story is that pollution, in this ancient Greek sense, is not strictly a **moral** story.

There are guilty people who are not polluted. Note how when Euthyphro lists things that count as 'wrong-doing' he lists, "murder or temple robbery or anything else" (5d). 'Anything else' would seem to cover: robbing a merchant, breaking a contract. Doing all that is wrong, right? Yes, but what Euthyphro is trying to get at is the sort of wrongdoing whose prosecution counts as **holy** (because it cleans miasma.) So even at this early stage, where he is just listing a few obvious examples, not yet offering bad definitions, he is already mis-speaking. He is conflating justice with holiness, via 'wrong-doing'. Conversely, there are polluted people who are not guilty. New mothers are polluted; soldiers who kill in battle. There is no moral guilt associated with giving birth or defending your city. A highly but not strictly common denominator in these cases is blood. There are rituals for handling blood; places you don't go until cleansed. Call it superstition, contagious magic, hemophobia, innate disgust response, metaphor, religion, moral confusion. Whatever it is, it is the basileus' business. He's the divine sanitation engineer for the city.

He cleans up spilled blood.





So murder, qua miasma question, isn't pure fairness-and-justice. Or it is **and** isn't. Anyway, facts are facts: Zeus cares about miasma, so we have to care about him caring about it, 'fair' or not.

Thus, we appear to be back on the second horn of Euthyphro's dilemma. What is holy and unholy only determines what counts as polluted. Care of the gods is shaping up to be ethically arbitrary. But that can't be right. Right?

## 15

But what exactly does this have to do with Euthyphro? Is all this exotic ancient Greek cultural background supposed to point us to some solution to his problem? What is the relationship between holiness and justice? (Also, wasn't there a suspected money trail around here?) Let's forge on to Euthyphro's final stab at an account (12e):

### Third Definition: Holy = Care of the gods

But Socrates manages to make it all sound like sordid haggling.

He doesn't do this by highlighting the hazards of miasma-spill. He considers more happy accidents. How have we managed to strike such a favorable balance of trade with the gods? They give us a lot, don't ask for much in exchange.

Funny story in Plutarch (later Roman writer, but the style of thinking is the same.) Jupiter (Zeus) offers King Numa a deal: in exchange for a moratorium on lightning strikes, he wants 'heads' — that is, human sacrifice. Numa figures he can satisfy the letter of the contract by providing onion heads. How do we humans keep finding all these bargains and loopholes? Euthyphro tries to moralize the picture. Somehow care of the gods is inherently linked to doing the right thing. But he only manages to stick himself back on the horns of the dilemma. Our religious acts — our sacrifices and services — are "pleasing to the gods." That is what makes them holy. But why do the gods want us to do these things, rather than something else? Is it because these things are good in themselves? Or is it because ... ? Round and round we go.

## 16

By way of filling out this point, let me report another Greek-Chinese coincidence, and ponder the significance. In a classic discussion of ancient Chinese thought, **The Way and Its Power**, Arthur Waley hypothesizes that around

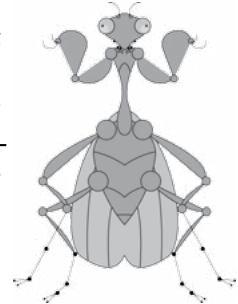
400 BCE attitudes shifted.<sup>4</sup> (This attempt at dating is not precise. Societies don't flip attitudes like a light-switch. But I like that Waley picks almost the exact date of Socrates' meeting with Euthyphro.) Before this time, sacrifice had been understood to be the offering of proof to the divine ancestors that their descendants are prospering. (So says Waley. It's not clear this line is satisfactory. But the ancient Chinese would not deny this was a point of sacrifice.) The shift Waley describes really amounts to thinking this thought through with elementary consistency. Since prosperity of the living is the point, sacrifice (signaling prosperity) comes second. The gods are far away but man is near. Indeed, take care of men and care of gods very nearly takes care of itself (since these gods we care about so much care so much about us.)

Do you see the connection with Zeus and the man in the ditch?

Waley calls the old perspective 'pre-moral'. He wants to contrast it with the moral 'care of men' perspective he sees coming on. He picks this term because, at this stage, all the moral words have primitive meanings that look, to us, non-moral, or not clearly moral. 'Moral' meant **customary**, as did 'ethics'. 'Virtue' meant **power**. 'Just' may have meant something like **ritually appropriate**. 'Holy' meant **inviolable** (not touched or penetrated); perhaps this was just an extension of **healthy** (clean?) These are Indo-European examples. The Chinese cases follow the same pattern. At bottom we find power and ritual and conventions enforcing social solidarity. Waley admits 'pre-moral' is not a good term. He prefers 'auguristic-sacrificial' (although it's a mouthful) because, as he says, ancient ethics-talk revolves around religion, and religion-talk revolves around two things: augury — that is, the establishment of channels of privileged communication with divine beings. And sacrifice: ritual, devotional acts intended to placate/win favor of divine beings.

Euthyphro is teetering on the edge of just such a shift. He is sometimes called a priest. But he doesn't have a human flock — and not just because he's unpopular. He might be a preacher, spreading the Hades-and-brimstone word of Zeus. But, to the extent this is true, it underscores how strange Euthyphro's behavior is in the eyes of his fellow Athenians. Ancient Greek religion isn't doctrinal. It is not a matter of sitting through righteous sermons but of making right sacrifices. And augury. Euthyphro is bitter that all his prophecies have come true, yet still he gets no respect!

What Euthyphro really is, is a **mantis**!



4 Arthur Waley, *The Way and Its Power: Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought* (Grove Press, 1994), p. 21 and following.

Like a bug?

In Greek, a **mantis** is not a bug but a religious person who wears many hats, potentially: seer, sooth-sayer, priest, prophet. 'Mantis' is related to all our words ending in 'mancy'. A wizard hat, then?

Euthyphro is, if you like, a self-styled **logomancer**.

Magic + logic. Provoking conjunction!

But let's get back to Waley and allegedly pre-moral points of view. That 'pre-moral' isn't really the word for it is shown by Waley's own illustrations.

He quotes a tale from **The Book of History** about the Duke of Chou [Zhou], who bargains for his dying king's life, striking a deal with the spirits of the ancestors. It is a story of augury and sacrifice. The Duke makes special contact and negotiates a mutually beneficial exchange of goods and services. But the story is clearly intended to showcase the Duke's exemplary righteousness, not his superlative skills as supernatural haggler. He is doing the 'done thing', behaving in a ritually appropriate manner. But, even more, he is doing something courageous and exemplary.

The Duke bravely offers **himself** to the spirits, to serve in place of his dying king. The spirits, evidently moved, spare the king. Noble, uplifting tale!

But — this is key — the story has no vocabulary for referring specifically to the Duke's especially admirable moral qualities, let alone theorizing them. There is only augurist-sacrificial religious talk. The Duke has advanced telecommunications gear (discs of jade, in case you are wondering how the magic is done) and exchange goods to offer. All such stuff is instrumental. Even the Duke himself, offering to serve the spirits, is a trade good. It is all means, as opposed to moral ends. Hence the story is not so much pre-moral as non-moral.

Of course we smell the difference between pure, noble self-sacrifice and cut-rate **Miasmaway** brand commercialized cynicism. We instinctively distinguish the Duke from those 'begging priests'. Still, there is nothing in the story that explicitly articulates what the difference comes to. Exactly what moral rule is the Duke following? (Don't say anything about discs of jade this time.)

Obviously it is the selfless quality of what the Duke does that seems so admirable! He is altruistic, hence moral!



Yes, but Euthyphro is on track to sacrifice not just himself but his whole family on the altar of justice — or holiness.

Is that noble?

Or idiotic?

Or morally reckless?

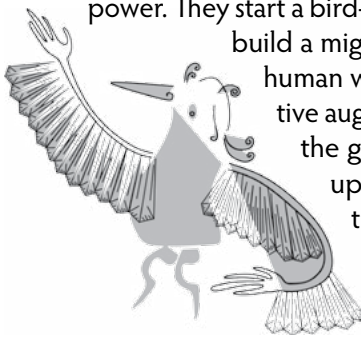
Is Euthyphro just making a spectacle of himself, to embarrass his father, or to enhance his personal religious fame? Surely there is such a thing as ethically-misguided self-sacrifice.

How do you tell the difference?



17

Let me underscore this point with another Greek example, by way of Latin etymology. **Augur** is uncommon in English. (You know 'oracle'? Same thing.) Possibly the job title came from **augere** — increase. (Same root as 'augment'.) Priests were in charge of making sure the gods gave us the goods. Alternatively, the job title meant 'bird talk' (**avis** + **garrire**). The Chinese had oracle bones and discs of jade. Greeks and Romans preferred to study entrails and flight patterns of birds. So let's talk birds. Aristophanes — the comedian who stuffed Socrates in a basket in the clouds — wrote **The Birds**. A pair of idiots find themselves in the country of birds, where, to save their skins, they end up feathered and winged, organizing the birds into a political power. They start a bird-centric religion. The newly self-confident birds build a mighty fortress, Cloud Cuckooland, between the human world and Olympus, so they cut into the lucrative augury-sacrifice trade route. The gifts humans give the gods — vaguely conceived of as aromas rising up out of the fires — are embargoed. A deputation of Olympians (and one Thracian god, who can't speak Greek, or get his clothes on straight) come to Cuckooland on a diplomatic mission. They **need** this stuff they are used to getting from mortals on a regular basis!



In effect, it's all a **reductio** on auguristics-sacrificial approaches to religion and ethics. To see what's absurd about such talk, just imagine that it literally works the way the talk implies. Holiness is telecommunication and trade. Fine. But then the line can be cut. But surely a trade embargo/denial-of-service attack on piety is absurd.



Also, when the humans-turned-birds find their new condition convenient, they reflect on why this is so. If you have powers no ordinary mortals do — in this case, flight — they can't touch you. Obviously you will get up to all sorts of unethical stuff, if there is no threat of punishment. Here we touch on a very simple thought about the relationship between holiness and ethics. We don't want them to come apart, but there is actually a reason to think they will be, not just imperfectly aligned, but negatively correlated. If 'holy' means **inviolable**, the bird-men have become that. They are untouchable. But power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Is there any reason to think someone like Zeus will always do the right thing, if the only thing we're really sure of is that he has nearly absolute power?

## 18

Generally readers have a poor impression of Euthyphro, hardly the sharpest knife in the drawer of sacrificial implements. One can't help wondering whether he has some dubious motive, conscious or unconscious. It must have stung Euthyphro that dad didn't consult **him** about how to handle the murder on their farm, instead sending off for advice from the city. Is this a father-son struggle for authority and dominance (like Zeus had with dad, in his day?) Is the trial, or the threat of the trial, some publicity stunt? Or maybe, as sacrificial technicians go, he's just a bird-brain, off in some eccentric Cloud-Cuckooland of his own invention?

Still, some readers are impressed by the moral clarity and forthrightness of Euthyphro's basic stance: set aside personal ties and **do the right thing**. That sounds good. Socrates' too-clever-by-half chicken-and-egg trouble-making can look frivolous, unserious by comparison.

Why doesn't Plato, or Socrates, tell us whether Euthyphro is doing the right thing? Maybe because that isn't the point. The point is: whichever it is, 'care of the gods' talk will not help us settle which it is. Worse, such talk will take up all the verbal room so no better style of thinking can get a word in edgewise.

This is Euthyphro's problem, and this is Socrates' problem with Euthyphro: he is ethically inarticulate. **Maybe** he's doing the right thing. But even if he is, for all he knows he isn't. Worse: he has all sorts of stories that effectively paper over the gaps in his thinking. He can talk endlessly about his case without it so much as crossing his mind that he is not actually managing to talk about his case at all. To adapt Nietzsche (talking about someone else): Euthyphro has one significant advantage over his own views on holiness. He's interesting!

How can Euthyphro **even think** his approach to this issue is going to work? That's an interesting question. Now let me make things worse for him, by way of emphasizing how, at his very worst, Euthyphro is probably kind of like us.

If I asked you 'what are the three most important religious values?' you might answer in various ways. (Faith, hope and charity? I leave it to you.) If I asked what the three most important religious values were to the ancient Greeks, you might say (on the basis of what you have read in this chapter): augury, sacrifice and myth. But I think there is something to be said for adapting an old joke about real estate. The three values that mattered most, for ancient Greek religion, were: **location! location! location!** The one thing you absolutely could not do without was — not a book, not even a belief; but an altar, centering a sacred space. All ancient Greek religion is local. How local? Well, how many Athenas? Counting statues up on the Acropolis: **Athena Polias** (she beat Poseidon, to become patroness of the city. The peplos is hers); **Athena Promachus** (military lady and, at nine meters, no push-over); **Athena Parthenos** (virgin, even taller.)



But these are just representations of **the same** goddess, right?

In a sense, every shrine to Athena has its own goddess, since every altar is its own bit of real estate.

But there's **one** goddess, right?

What part of 'location, location, location' did you not understand?

Obviously this threatens to make the 'many gods' problem potentially much worse. Maybe something will be loved by **Athena Parthenos**, hated by **Athena Promachus**? Loved by **Zeus Meilichios**, hated by **Zeus Olympios**?

Then again, since 'many gods' was fatal enough when we only had one Zeus to worry about, why belabor the point? Doing so goes to show how far

Euthyphro has to go. If you try to read a religion consisting of ritual localism as impartial moral theory — misreading a table of real estate values as statements of universal, ethical value — it will come out arbitrary, hence absurd. (Remember the guy who drew such arbitrary lines in the sand — 10 meters, 20, 30? We don't want Zeus to be that guy.)

To be sure, there is something appealing about building morals up out of local circles: me/us/them.

Family first sounds good. Holy circles map family values (for a broad value of 'family').

But if, like Euthyphro, you aspire to something more impartial, universal, sensible? It is hard to square a circle. Euthyphro's attempt to project universal, abstract doctrines out of



local, grounded non-doctrines is, at best, a heroic effort to go against the grain. His level best is confusion about whether the many is somehow really one. And there, but for the grace of Zeus, go all of us!

People think in this confused way all the time. Let's work up to modern manifestations via another ancient source, Isokrates' **Areopagiticus**. He is an orator, a generation younger than Plato, nostalgic for the good old days of virtuous democracy when men were wise and Socrates was put to death (OK, to be fair he's thinking about a slightly earlier period.)

Where, pray tell, could one find a democracy more stable or more just than this [during the good old days], which appointed the best men to have charge of its affairs while giving the people authority over their rulers? Such was the constitution of their politics and from this it is easy to see that also in their day-to-day conduct they never failed to act appropriately and justly. For when people have laid sound foundations for the activities of the whole state it follows that in the details of their lives they must reflect the character of their government. (I. 7.27)

It's self-defeating of Euthyphro to imitate Zeus by asking WWZD (because, if you think about it, **Zeus** never asks what Zeus would do.) Venerating ancestral democrats as divinely infallible is, likewise, silly. They did not decide what was just and unjust by sitting down, democratically, and announcing 'let's devoutly imitate **ourselves**.'

What **made** those ancestral democrats just? Obviously the way to answer is to rattle on at great length about 'care of the gods', augury and sacrifice. I'm kidding. Isokrates is not. Let's read on:



First of all, as to their conduct towards the gods — for it is right to begin there — they were not haphazard or irregular in worship or in the performance of rites. They did not, for example, drive a procession of three hundred oxen to the altar, when it entered their heads to do so, while omitting on a whim sacrifices instituted by their fathers. Nor did they lavishly lay out for foreign festivals, whenever those went together with a feast, while selling to the lowest bidder the contract to perform the sacrifices demanded by the holiest rites of their religion. For their only care was that no institution of their fathers should be destroyed, and nothing introduced which was not approved by custom, for they believed that reverence consists not in extravagant expenditures but in disturbing none of the rites their ancestors had handed down to them. And so also the gifts of the gods were visited upon them, not fitfully or irregularly, but seasonably both for the plowing of the fields and for the harvesting of its fruits.

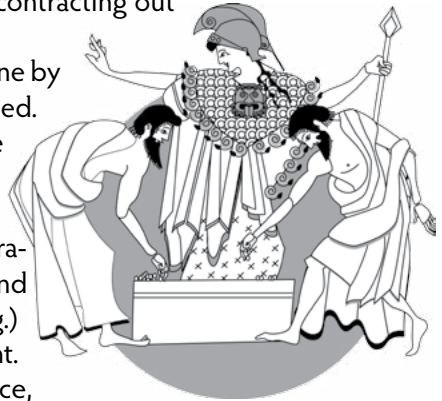
But if we are supposed to do as the ancestors did; then, if the ancestors instituted rites, shouldn't we imitate them by instituting rites of our own? If the point is to do the right thing, we should do **that**. Or if the point is to do what the gods want — again, why dog-leg through the ancestors? Also, what does any of this have to do with the virtues of democracy? Why vote on any of it, if we know the answers, or know who knows the answers? (Athena's right there! Just ask **her**.) Last but not least, if the point is to get a job of work done, what actually is the problem with contracting out "to the lowest bidder?" Why pay more?

Why bother giving speeches like this one by Isokrates? It's not as though we have stopped.

Think about the American veneration of the Founding Fathers; the US Constitution and its Framers. (You aren't American? Then substitute some document, institution or tradition your people hold especially dear and sacred. I'm sure you can think of something.) Suppose it comes to an argument — a fight.

(Needn't be politics. "Justice and injustice, beauty and ugliness, good and bad" (7d). Any of these

hot topics will do.) Your instinct is to argue — that is, justify yourself — with authoritative reference to some traditional things. But what are you **really** saying? That you know tales of the ancestors?



Surely you know this thing you are venerating is a household god. Maybe just a neighborhood shrine to a national god? And you have more than one. (Everyone has lots of circles! If circles are holy, we are all polytheists.) Yet your local notion is so wise, so you say, that you can presume to project it, over everything, for everyone? And you trust the results will be coherent?

Is it right because it's Constitutional, or is it Constitutional because it's right? You finesse it: there is wisdom in tradition. If it worked before, it probably won't kill us. But, even so, this doesn't remove the dilemma. From the inside, tradition always feels reasonable. But from the outside, you look like a circle pretending to be a straight line. (Am I saying you are stupid, because you are like Euthyphro? I'm hinting you might be a bit on the normal side, yes.)

## 19

We are effectively done with **Euthyphro**. But let's circle back to some lines tried out at the start. Remember circles vs. straight? Chicken-and-egg aside, the real dilemma should, by rights, be this one: which ethics is best?

1. I must be 'straight' with everyone: fair, impartial.
2. I must favor, be partial to, those in my 'circle'.

If I want a bit of both, how do I square the circle so it doesn't turn out a mess? What might Plato be prodding us to think of 1 & 2, even if he isn't saying much?

Euthyphro would strike his fellow citizens as ethically outlandish. Socrates' mock-shock is in line with conventional attitudes. But, in a sense, this shouldn't be the case. By rights, Euthyphro's dilemma ought to be recognized as a hometown tradition in its own right (or rite.) It is the self-same problem Athenians solved for Orestes. It is the great pride of the Athenian homicide court system that it **can** handle these cases well — better than the gods themselves, in fact!

Who's Orestes? What kind of case?

Obviously you are not an ancient Athenian or you would know.

The **Oresteia** is a trilogy of plays by the great playwright Aeschylus (a contemporary of Socrates): **Agamemnon**, **Libation Bearers**, and **Eumenides**.



Let me tell you just the end of the story of the royal house of Atreus — how its heavy crown dripped **miasma**. How it turned out OK. It's an old story. Homer told it. Aeschylus' version is fuller, more philosophical in its implications, and was especially beloved by the Athenians of Plato's day.

It's a revenge tale. Three generations are confronted with a dilemma of the following basic form: duty to family both requires and forbids the killing of someone else in the family. You can imagine how this will go. Vendettas, in their nature, are self-perpetuating. You killed one of ours. We kill one of yours. When this trouble arises within a family, the practical difficulties of endless killing are compounded by ethical paradoxes. Everything is right **and** wrong.

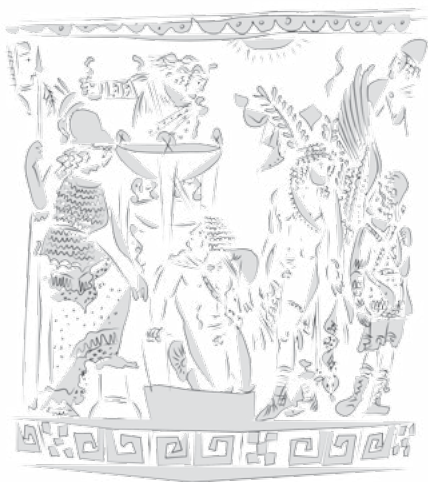
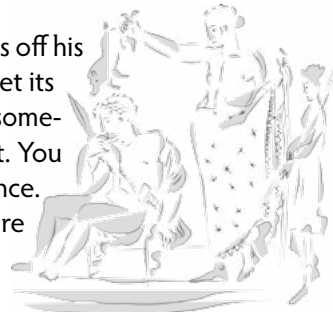
The final figure in this line is Orestes, son of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra. She killed her husband (her motives were multiple, but ritual sacrifice of their daughter would surely top the list.) Apollo commands that Orestes kill his own mother, to punish her for murdering his father. There is a (what's the word?) pregnant moment when Orestes' mother asks him if he can kill her, of all people.

He has a friend, Pylades, who was with him when he went to Apollo's temple and is with him now. He now tells Orestes to kill her not as his mother, but as 'one who has done wrong.' Be impersonal about justice. In short, Orestes is ordered to think like Euthyphro. But it doesn't work. Clytaemnestra ends up dead. Orestes end up covered with **miasma**, hounded by his mother's Furies (**Erinyes**). Some further mythological explanation is now in order. Furies are old gods — goddesses, rather — and here we find another connection to Euthyphro's case. The Furies belong to the generation of Kronos, prior to that of Zeus and the Olympians. (Athena and Apollo are the two other members of this young generation who figure in these plays.) The Furies are said to have sprung up from the familial blood shed when Kronos castrated his father, Ouranos, for wrong-doing. Alternately, they were, literally, 'born from the night'. The thematic significance is this: you might think that if you want to figure out how it can be just to prosecute your own parent, the first person you should ask is Zeus. But, in a sense, what Aeschylus' play suggests is that, precisely because Zeus did the same thing, he and his generation are going to be the last people to be able to help. As Socrates says, if the gods fight about anything, they fight about the same things we do, so we get a regress, no solution. Zeus' lofty impartiality can't be regarded as disinterested about impartiality. He has too obvious a personal stake in a case so much like his own (noble son punishes wrong-doing royal parent.)

On the other side stand the Furies with their own biases. Traditionally Furies punish oath-breakers and murderers. Homer says they are "those from

beneath the earth who punish a false oath." In Aeschylus that role is modified. Oaths become associated with the sky — Zeus, Apollo, Athena. The new gods stand for impersonal justice — law, contracts, abstract law and order. The old gods are always for vengeance on behalf of the ones closest to you, in terms of blood. Often the Furies have been depicted as rather sexy young huntresses, but Aeschylus goes for hideous and snake-haired. The furies are also traditionally depicted as winged, sometimes specifically bat-winged and cave-dwelling (like certain modern crime-fighters one could name.) In Aeschylus they are described as "like harpies, but without wings" and as "falling heavily" on wrongdoers. They are earth spirits, made heavy with gravity by the playwright. They smell **miasma**. Basically, they are anthro-po-bat-snake-morphized vengeance, just as miasma is chemicalized guilt.

Orestes tries the standard tricks to get the Furies off his scent. Sacrifice an innocent animal. A young pig. Get its blood on you, just as you might smear yourself with something strong-smelling to throw dogs off your scent. You are, in a sense, trying to fool the spirits of vengeance. But you are also exhibiting, symbolically, your desire to clean up your act. Apollo told him this would work but it doesn't. Orestes is chased from Argos to Delphi, Delphi to Athens.



Let's pick up the action at the point in the third play where he is on his knees, clutching the statue of Athena, claiming sanctuary. (Location, location, location!) The Furies heave and wheeze in at the gate, saying that they are extremely tired from walking all that way, but they smell blood.

Today is a good day for man-killing!

Orestes protests that he has made the right sacrifices. His hands are now clean. Athena appears in shining armor. She is polite.

'Long time no see, Furies. What brings you to Athens?' 'We're here to punish a matricide, Athena.' 'Is that him?' 'That's the one. He killed his mother.' 'That's it? He killed his mother? He didn't, for example, have a **reason** to kill his mother? This sounds like half the argument, Furies.' 'Fine, **you** be judge. See if what we say isn't right.' 'It wouldn't be right for me to decide the case by myself, goddess though I am,' says Athena. 'I will empanel a jury of twelve Athenian citizens, good men and true. And they will decide. If there is a deadlock, I will cast the deciding vote for conviction or acquittal.'

At this point Apollo shows up to be Orestes' defense lawyer. Athena declares the trial open. Apollo and the Furies engage in faintly ridiculous lawyerly dialectic, with Orestes getting a word in edge-wise at a few points when asked to testify. You can imagine how it might go. It's Euthyphro vs. his family — circles vs. straight lines. Apollo and the Furies make some conspicuously absurd arguments. First, the Furies argue that it isn't **so** unholy for a wife to kill a husband, because there is no blood relation, just a broken contract, in effect. In response, Apollo argues that it actually isn't **so** bad for a son to kill a mother because really sons aren't related to mothers, only to fathers, just as the plant that grows is only related to the seed that was planted, not to the earth in which the seed was planted. (The gods are such confabulators!)

The jurors split six to six. Athena breaks the tie in favor of Orestes. Since she herself is a woman who only had a father and no mother (since she sprang full-grown from Zeus' brow) she is always for the male and Zeus' side in such a case. The Furies are, predictably, furious. For this they will blast the ground of Athens, making it so that nothing grows! They start ranting and raving! Just wait and see what the old, much-abused earth gods can still do to a city like Athens that is so dear to the sky gods!

And, now, in the final scene of the third play, Athena does a funny thing. She bargains with the Furies.

Henceforth, if the Furies wish, they will be especially honored in Athens.

They will, as she says, win first fruits in all matters concerned with children, and marriage. The people of Athens will worship them and they will go from being cast out earth spirits from the previous generation to being honored goddesses of the land around Athens. They will cease to promote private



vengeance. They will unite citizens, serving public justice, protecting against external threats, sharing patron status with Athena herself.

The Furies take the good deal. They become **Eumenides**—meaning **good spirits**. Everyone is happy and exits the stage in a big parade.

And how are these new mother-figures for the city described in the final lines of the play? They are praised as **euthuphrones**! Took me a while to get to the punch line, but we've squared Euthyphro's circle for him, mythico-dramatically at least. A family-centered practice of sacrifice (purification) has turned abstract doctrine of impartial justice, at least at the civic level. As Isokrates puts it, in that very speech I was quoting: the Athenian homicide courts are so well constituted even the gods prefer the judgment of these juries to their own, divine wisdom!



## 20

By the way, what would have happened if Euthyphro's case came to trial?

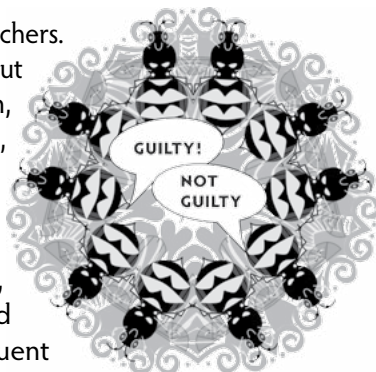
Did it?

We have no idea. But just suppose!

But why bother speculating? Even if we can be fairly confident how ancient Athenian justice worked in general—never mind one case—we couldn't be sure enough to know what Plato expected readers to know, hence might intend them to recognize them as legal background for this one dialogue.

Taking the second point first: it seems safe to say Plato's intended readers would be legally sophisticated. Hearing about Euthyphro's case, as we do at the start, the sorts of thinkers and students Plato would have had in his Athenian Academy could naturally leap a few steps ahead: what a weird case! How might it play out?

The Athenians were inveterate court-watchers. It was a national pastime. There is a play about it, Aristophanes' **The Wasps**. An old man, Philocleon, is addicted to the courts. That is, he is addicted to serving as a juror. There are lots of cases. Juries are large. They need lots of citizen bodies to fill those seats. Philocleon is paid a small amount, but—better than that—he feels flattered by the attention. All these fine and eloquent





speeches, all aimed at swaying his opinion! His son, in desperation, tries to lock dad in the house, eventually giving him a job judging cases like: which family dog stole the cheese? Inanimate objects are called in to testify as witnesses.

So pardon me as I play modern Philocleon, in my amateur-expert way, presuming to stage a mock Euthyphro trial. But where's the profit in make-believing a case that, maybe, never even happened?

We'll get to that. For now: even if we can't be sure, we can make out certain outlines. The courts are supposed to be about justice but there's also spectator sport spirit; status anxiety; swarming, stinging savagery. Winners and losers; insiders and outsiders. So much, so clear from **The Wasps**. Euthyphro is status-consciousness. He is sore about being ignored, an outsider, in the Assembly. Now he's nursing some ambition of playing to the jury, rhetorically, in the murder trial of the century! Father vs. son! Just like Zeus himself!

But how is this **not** going to get messy? Even if some twists and turns I am about to sketch are debatable, it seems clear Euthyphro's fond dream of a 'straight' answer, vindicating him, won't come true. The Athenian homicide court system is set up badly to handle such a case — an Orestes-type case. And, by calling it that, I emphasize that this is potentially embarrassing not just for Euthyphro but for Athens herself.

Without further ado, a whirlwind tour of the courts.<sup>5</sup>

## 21

We begin, again, at the stoa of the **archon basileus**. He won't judge the case himself. He will hold a preliminary hearing to determine what the issue is — the so-called **euthydikia**. Large juries, or bodies of judges, can't debate what cases are really about. They can only give a straight vote, up or down. The basileus must predetermine what 'straight justice' that straight vote will concern. He makes both parties swear, accordingly. The trial will, in a sense, be about which party has 'sworn straighter'.

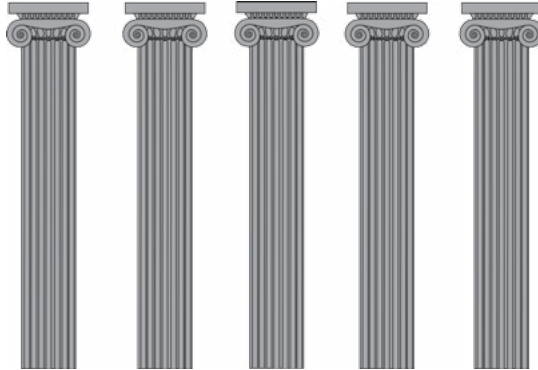
- 5 See Edwin Carawan, *Rhetoric and the Law of Draco* (Oxford UP, 1998); Douglas M. MacDowell, *Athenian Homicide Law In the Age of the Orators* (Manchester UP, 1966). In what follows I sound more certain about how the system worked than scholars can be today. Even if we can be sure how it was supposed to go in principle (which often we can't be), it doesn't follow that we know how the wheels of Athenian justice ground through in procedural practice. A lot of things you could only know by attending and participating in lots of trials, like old Philocleon, have surely been lost.



Oaths duly extracted, the basileus ushers the case on to one of five venues.

And, by the by, as he is not really the judge, he presumably does not have authority to dismiss a case a citizen is determined to bring. So even if he thinks Euthyphro is a maniac, if he's a maniac who is willing to swear to, we've got a case.

Which of five straight pillars of the legal system gets the case?



First, the alleged murder of the slave by the servant happened on the family farm on Naxos. So what? So this means Euthyphro and his father were part of the Athenian cleruchy there. That is, they were colonial occupiers of an island some distance from Athens. They must have been part of a group of Athenian citizens settled there to ensure the Naxians stayed within the sphere of Athenian naval hegemony, the so-called Delian League. But Athens lost the Peloponnesian War, and its empire, in 404 BCE. Our dialogue is set in 399, because Socrates' case is just coming to trial. This means the case Euthyphro means to bring against his father is at least five years old, maybe older. It concerns events that happened in territory over which Athens no longer claims jurisdiction.

We hear none of this in the dialogue, but it would be obvious to Plato's readers that Euthyphro is stretching things, across time and space.

It all happened long ago, and in another country.

On the other hand, murder is murder.

Remember the guy from section 3 with the weird moral theory? Side with people within 10 meters? That's crazy, because it means drawing an arbitrary circle in the dirt. Who cares which side of some line it happened on. Wrong is wrong. But courts, of course, often care very much which side of some line it happened on.

Since the **cleruchy courts** that might once have heard this case haven't existed for years, we had better move along.

Cases of alleged intentional homicide are handled 'on **the Areopagus**'; that is, by the Areopagite council composed of ex-archons. They do not hear cases in which victims are slaves or non-citizens. Suppose the victim was a citizen, as seems possible. Did Euthyphro's father intend to kill the man? It's hard to say what he was thinking, ditching him like that. We aren't even sure what he asked the **exegetes** — those religious experts whose advice he sought, perhaps to the annoyance of his allegedly expert son. Maybe he took it for granted that, far from Athens, colonial justice would be rough. He wasn't seriously going to haul that servant all the way back to Athens, to stand trial. Maybe all he was worried about, in asking advice, was how to clean up the miasma that was now polluting his farm?

Let's move on. If the Areopagus is not the proper venue, the **Palladion** might be better. The **ephetai**, jury of 51 (respectable old men) hear charges of unintentional homicide and 'planning'. There are a number of ways of being charged with a lesser crime than intentional killing. You can be involved, or conspire, without actually being the guy who sticks the knife in.

Charging Euthyphro's father with 'manslaughter' or 'negligent death', as we would say, makes intuitive sense. Is there any absurdity in trying the case here?

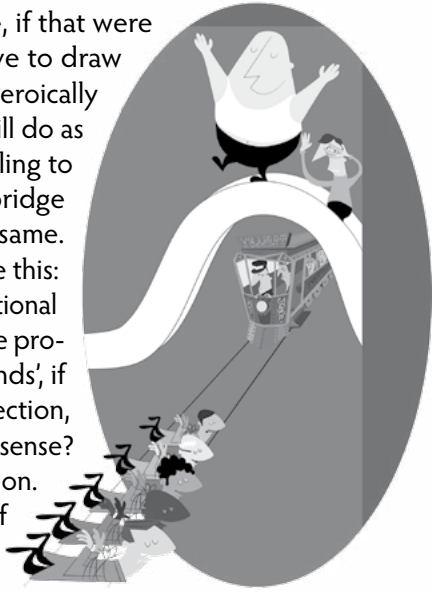
Two, actually. First, per above, the case concerns events that happened before the restoration of democracy, in 403 BCE. There has been an amnesty. That would cover Euthyphro's father, except that the amnesty excludes cases of 'homicide with one's own hand'. If dad is guilty of killing **with his own hands**, he can be tried.

Suppose, as is plausible, dad is at most guilty of 'planning'. He ordered the servant to be tied and ditched. (He's old, Euthyphro says. He has people to throw people in ditches for him.) Will the trial hinge on whether the father himself laid physical hands on the victim in a forceful way? And, if so, whether causing death by throwing someone into a ditch constitutes, not just causing death by letting die, but causing death by letting die with one's own hand? (Is there even such a thing as the crime of **letting die with one's own hand**? That's pretty passive-aggressive.)

Remember that classic moral dilemma, from Chapter 4, section 12? The trolley is out of control and five innocents will die unless you throw a switch, shunting it onto the other track, killing a single innocent person?

Here's an interesting fact. When asked, most people say they would be willing to throw the switch. Saving five seems to be worth killing one. But there is a standard variant, the so-called Footbridge Case, that gets a different response.

Would you push someone off a bridge, if that were the only way to save five others? (We have to draw the guy big. You have to imagine you can't heroically throw yourself off instead. Only **that** guy will do as a trolley-stopper.) People are much less willing to say they would push a living person off a bridge than to throw a switch. But it comes to the same. Psychologically, the explanation seems to be this: the application of personal force sets off emotional alarm bells in our moral brains.<sup>6</sup> It's like we are programmed to believe in miasma, in 'dirty hands', if we push someone to his death. But, on reflection, how can this pattern of moral alarmism make sense? Euthyphro's father's case is a perfect illustration. If the case comes down to the question of whether he pushed the victim, himself, **by hand**, rather than arranging things indirectly, that seems arbitrary.



And, as I said, there's a second absurdity. The punishment for unintentional homicide is exile. When the victim is a non-resident non-citizen, this doesn't make a lot of sense, since the point of exile is to get you away from the victim's family — lest you pollute them by your unwelcome presence. This is a good point at which to shift to our next venue, the **Phreattro**. Exiles wishing to plead to return home may do so 'in Phreattro', from a ship drawn near the shore. Should Euthyphro's father be convicted, and later plead to return home, he may have to take elaborate, pointless precautions to avoid stepping on Athenian soil — pointless because probably the dead victim's family is in Naxos.

The **Delphinium**, next stop, is also presided over by the ephetai. Here admitted killings alleged by the defense to be legal are judged: accidental killing of a fellow soldier in battle; accidental death in sporting events; doctors whose patients die. It might seem dad would be on fairly solid ground here. He feels he acted justly, binding the murderer and throwing him in the ditch. But, of course, one cannot argue **both** that a killing was unintended **and** that it was intended to be just. (A bit like the old lawyer joke. Lawyer borrows something from you. You ask for it back. He says: I never borrowed it and, anyway, it was broken. Furthermore, I returned it in perfect condition.)

6 See Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason and the Gap Between Us and Them* (Penguin, 2013), chapters 4 and 5.

Euthyphro might have to be careful, too. Even if his father killed justly, there should still be a trial. That's the point of having this court. But it would be uncomfortable for Euthyphro to argue that he is, wrongly, swearing his own dad is guilty of unjust killing, so dad can, rightly, get purified for a just killing. Who is more righteous? The father who killed justly, yet illegally? Or the son who prosecuted legally, yet unjustly?

And now things get weird.

Our final stop is the **Prytaneion**. The Athenians had a court for trying unknown killers, inanimate objects and animals. This one is presided over by the *basileus* and an assistant. How does it go? A stone is thrown and kills a man, say. The 'doer' may be convicted, even if unknown. A tree falls and kills a man. The tree itself may be convicted. (This is getting as silly as Philocleon trying the dog for stealing the cheese, calling the bowl and pot as witnesses.) The tree will be carried and cast beyond the border. (Again, very arbitrary lines are being fetishized as morally significant.) By modern standards holding a trial for an inanimate object is strange, to say the least. It is probably best to think of this court's function as located at the juncture of ritual, contagious magic, criminal forensics and public health and sanitation.

It would be bold, but, if hailed into one of the other courts, Euthyphro's father could move for a change of venue. The Naxian weather is the man you want! Or: the ditch did it. Sounds silly, but, in all seriousness, part of the appeal of the ditch option, from the start, is surely that dad wants the guy dead, but doesn't want to have killed him. He wants to keep his hands clean. (How did the Greeks dispose of unwanted infants? They exposed them. Left them on some hill, or in the woods. That way you can feel you didn't do it—kill a human child. You 'let it happen'.)

Our tour is done, but we shouldn't end it without noting the most significant non-stop along the way: the public prosecutor's office. There isn't one. From our modern perspective, Athenian justice, for all its many courts, is curiously lacking, due to its semi-private, semi-public character. Private citizens must prosecute on behalf of themselves, their family, **phratry** [clan] or friends.

Can a citizen sue his own flesh and blood? Can a son prosecute a father?

Obviously if a crime has been committed, **someone** should prosecute. We have plays like Aeschylus' **Oresteia**, positively celebrating the moral necessity of a son prosecuting a parent, in an extreme case. And again: Euthyphro is standing up for the principle that a suspect should stand trial, even if he is found innocent. The process purifies. Euthyphro may understand this in religious terms that are a bit strange to us. But we get that the justice system isn't just for punishing the guilty. Innocent people need to 'clear their names'.

But, again, the Athenian system is ill-equipped. Consider the oaths that must be sworn for the basileus, to get this ball rolling. Here is Demosthenes, explaining how that goes 'on the Aereopagus' (perhaps in other courts, in some form:)

First the man who accuses someone of such a deed [murder] will swear an oath calling down doom on himself and his family and his house, and it will be no common oath, but one sworn concerning no other thing, while standing over the cut pieces of a boar, a ram, and a bull, which have been slaughtered by the proper persons on proper days, so every sacred obligation has been fulfilled as regards both timing and participants. And even then, after all this, the man who has sworn this solemn oath is not to be trusted, but if he is proven to be a liar he will bring perjury home to his children and his family and will not gain anything by it at all. (D 23.67-8)



The defendant swears the same. So, obviously, if both Euthyphro and his father swear, their house is, literally, damned if he did, damned if he didn't. Far from affording an opportunity for the family to clean up pollution under its roof, any trial is doomed to rain miasma on everyone.

## 22

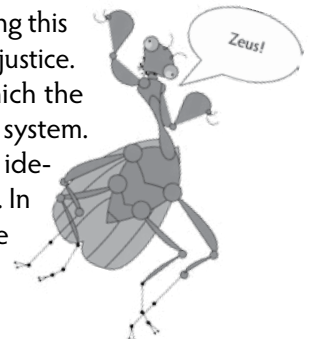
The point isn't that Euthyphro's summary of his case should trigger precisely this cascade of legal speculations in the minds of readers. But, plausibly, Plato does intend readers familiar with Athenian justice to see complications.

Like Euthyphro, the court system is a mix of the rational and irrational. It's modern in some ways — five courts! — primitive in others. (Plato, whose teacher was convicted and sentenced by an Athenian jury of 500, obviously has his concerns about the competence of Athenian juries.)

So the trouble isn't just one Zeus-bothering, manic mantis.

Even a true philosopher would have trouble navigating this legal system in pure pursuit of the straight lines of rational justice.

This gets us ahead of our story, to **Republic**, in which the move is explicitly made from the individual to the social system. You can't understand what justice is like unless you see it, ideally, in both City and Soul. For now we can say this much. In **Republic** some of the concerns raised in Euthyphro are implicitly dealt with.



For example what do we do about stories of the gods behaving unethically, rewarding the unjust or punishing the just? We don't let poets tell such stories.

What about Euthyphro-type dilemmas? Cases in which a son is called upon to prosecute a father? Plato advocates (perhaps not fully seriously) that a kind of communism should be instituted. Children (at least of the ruling class) will be raised communally and will not know who their biological parents are. That's **one** formula for straightening the curves.



23

In Chapter 3 I sketched Plato's Theory of the Forms because, so I said, the reader deserves an answer to a simple question: where is all this going? But did I give the right simple answer? I don't think many scholars would dispute that **Republic** Book I is headed for Books V-VII, in which the Theory of Forms is presented, or that certain elements of the **Meno** foreshadow the Theory of Forms in ways that can hardly be accidental. But **Euthyphro** might be a different case. It is a very early dialogue. Perhaps it is more purely Socratic. Perhaps Plato has not come up with anything like his Theory of Forms yet.

There is no answering this question. But, once again, let's speculate. If we look for anticipation of mature Platonic epistemology in **Euthyphro**, where might we find it? It seems to me we are likeliest to find it in the sheer, frustrating irrelevance of what we are seeing to the thing we are supposed to be thinking about.

In The Myth of the Cave, the walkers on the wall carry their statues — statues of the gods included, I presume. The shadows of these flicker for the prisoners to see. In the Myth we hear that something causes a certain prisoner's head to turn. But what? What does Socrates (Plato) say about what might actually induce us to turn our heads around and look in that backwards direction? What might we be seeing, in front of us, that would make us look behind? Here is Socrates, explaining to Glaucon:

Among our sense impressions there are some that do not call upon the intelligence to examine them because what is delivered up to the senses is sufficient, while other cases certainly summon the help of intelligence to examine them because the sensation does not achieve a sensible result. You are, he said, obviously referring to things appearing in the distance and to shadow-painting.

You are not quite getting my meaning, I said. — What is it then?

They do not call for help, I said, if they do not at the same time give a contrary impression. I describe those that do as calling for help whenever the sense perception does not point to one thing rather than its opposite, whether its object be far or near. You will understand my meaning better if I put it this way: here, we say, are three fingers, the smallest, the second, and the middle finger. — Quite so.



Assume that I am talking about them as being seen quite close. Now examine this about them. — What?

Each of them equally appears to be a finger, and in this respect it makes no difference whether it is seen to be at the end or in the middle, whether it is white or black, thick or thin or any of that sort of thing. In all this the common sort of soul is not compelled to ask the intelligence what a finger is, for the sense of sight does not indicate to it that the finger is the opposite of a finger. — Certainly not.

Therefore this sense perception would not be likely to call on the intelligence or arouse it. — Hardly likely.

What about big and small? Does the sense of sight have a sufficient perception of them, and does it make no difference to it whether the finger is in the middle or at one end? Or thick and thin, hard or soft, in the case of the sense of touch? And do our other senses not lack clear perception of these qualities? Does not each sense behave as follows: in the first place the sense concerned with the hard is of necessity also concerned with the soft and it declares to the soul that it perceives the same object to be both hard and soft. — That is so.

Then in these cases the soul in turn is puzzled as to what this perception means by hard, if it says that the same thing is also soft; and so with the perception of the light and the heavy, the soul is puzzled as to what is the meaning of the light and the heavy, if sense perception indicates that what is light is also heavy, and what is heavy, light.



Yes, he said, these indications are strange to the soul, and need investigation.

Probably then, I said, in these cases the soul will attempt, by means of calculation and intelligence, to examine whether each of the things presented to it is one or two. — Of course. (523b-4b)

Was that hard to follow? Socrates' three fingers are my three cows (from Chapter 3) all over again. Also, all those Athenas up on the Parthenon. Is she one or many? And Euthyphro's dilemma. One straight way looks like two horns. Surely seeing holiness as a dilemma means suffering double-vision. We need a resolution that reduces an appearance of two to a reality of one.

But Euthyphro can't manage. "I can't possible explain to you what I have in mind because every time we advance some proposition it runs around in circles somehow, refusing to stay where we put it" (11b).

Socrates replies that such propositions must be "like the works of my ancestor, Daedalus." Daedalus was a mythical artist-inventor (allegedly an ancestor of Socrates: divine beings and long dead family proving, once again, hard to distinguish.) His statues were so lifelike they got down from their pedestals and walked around. Socrates says that Euthyphro can't credit him, Socrates, with having inherited this magical power, because these are Euthyphro's propositions coming to life. Socrates didn't make them. Euthyphro replies that he does indeed think it is all Socrates' fault. "They would have stayed put if it were up to me" (11d).

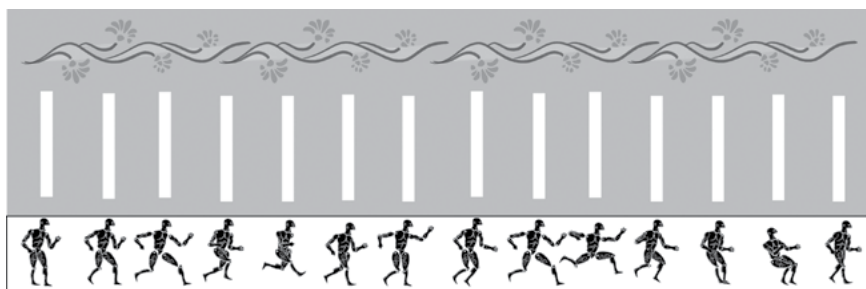
This Euthyphro — who, so he says, would be no better than the ordinary man on the street if he did not have "accurate knowledge of all such things" — would seem to be, alas, no different from the ordinary man on the street. He keeps seeing two related things (justice and holiness) and thinking he is seeing one (holiness), so of course there is an optical illusion of motion.

## 24

Returning to the Cave, it is a bit of a puzzle where the walkers along the wall come from and where they go. I imagine their platform wall as circular. They go around the back of the fire and come round again. (This would conserve the supply of walkers.) In Chapter 3 I made the inevitable film comparison. The walkers are like individual film cells passing before the projector's light. But I have always imagined that the Cave projection mechanism as more like a zoetrope. Or, to be precise, a late-model praxinoscope, which is like a cross between a zoetrope and a magic lantern (but who's counting? Perhaps this is not the time for a history of precursors to modern cinema.)

Do you know what a zoetrope is? They are simple toys. I'll show you how to make one. Do you see that picture below? Cut it out. (Photocopy it first. Don't ruin your nice book.) Cut out all those little slits — the white vertical bits. Wrap the ends around so it makes a cylinder. You want the pictures to be on the inside.

Now figure out some way for it to revolve. (**You** figure it out. Maybe tape it to a toilet paper roll.) Gaze through the slits at the figures. If I've drawn the pictures exactly right (honestly, I haven't!) it should look like the little statue-man is running and jumping. Do you know who invented the zoetrope? Apparently it was invented in China almost 2,000 years ago. But it was independently reinvented in 1834 by a man named William Horner.



Do you know what he called it? A 'daedalum'. I think maybe it was Plato who really invented the first one. He might have called the technique **euthy-phrotoscoping**. (Only animation buffs are going to get that one!)

## 25

Am I arguing that Plato is already narrating the Myth of the Cave, anticipating his Theory of Forms, as early as **Euthyphro**? No. I don't think it would be surprising if it turned out Plato was thinking certain thoughts years before committing them to paper, but I can't say how likely that is. What I do think is that Plato's mind works in funny ways, making him hard to follow. Your nearest emergency exit may be behind you. Except he doesn't bother to put up signs that say so, in so many words.

Let me complete the Cave analogy. If Euthyphro is in the Cave, the set-up is as follows.

Euthyphro sees **holiness** running in circles like a statue of Daedalus because he is seeing two as one: holiness and justice. He ought to turn around and see two things as two.

So is that the answer? Does this somehow solve Euthyphro's dilemma?

Once we have seen holiness and justice as two things, not one incoherent thing, we keep going, climbing up. There will come a point at which these two become one again. When we have apprehended the Form of the Good we will see why holiness and justice cannot really come apart, or conflict, even though they are distinct. Euthyphro was right all along to want to see them as one, but he was looking in the wrong direction. But turn him around and the unpleasantness of feeling unity dissolve keeps him from fighting through to a recovery of real unity.



Do you see the similarity between the lowest and the highest levels of intellectual development, according to Plato? Watching a film — peeking through the slits of a zoetrope — is tricking your eye into seeing the many-as-one.  $2 = 1$  is the soul of cinema, its Heraclitean trick.  $2 = 1$  is the soul of Plato, too, in a sense. His Parmenidean truth.

This is why Plato hates movies. They trick people into thinking they are getting what only philosophy truly provides. In the movies it runs together, but in illusory, contradictory ways. By contrast, going to the Not-Movies, **thinking** the many-as-one, is the highest intellectual achievement. It all comes together, in real, non-contradictory ways.

To repeat points made in Chapter 3: the Form of the Good is like the light shining out of the projector. It is the unitary, constant condition of the possibility of apparent change and multiplicity. The Form of the Good is also like the light of your own mind. Or of Mind. Plato thinks it is important to realize the ultimate source of the passing show is not outside but, in a sense, inside. Or deeply akin to what is inside you. A strange enough thought that we should probably set it aside until it is placed front and center in **Meno**.

Euthyphro, of course, is moving off too soon. "Some other time, Socrates. I am in a hurry, and I really have to go now" (15e).



