

1

EUTHYPHRO

PROLOGUE

Socrates's Case

The first four sections of the dialogue depict the situation:

EUTHYPHRO. What in the world are you doing here at the archon's porch, Socrates? Why have you left your haunts in the Lyceum? You surely cannot have an action before him, as I have.

SOCRATES. No, the Athenians, Euthyphro, call it a prosecution, not an action.

EUTH. What? Do you mean that someone is prosecuting you? I cannot believe that you are prosecuting anyone yourself.

SOCR. Certainly I am not.

EUTH. Then is someone prosecuting you?

SOCR. Yes.

EUTH. Who is he?

SOCR. I scarcely know him myself, Euthyphro; I think he must be some unknown young man. His name, however, is Meletus, and his deme Pitthis, if you can call to mind any Meletus of that deme, a hook-nosed man with long hair, and rather a scanty beard.

EUTH. I don't know him, Socrates. But tell me, what is he prosecuting you for?

SOCR. What for? Not on trivial grounds, I think. It is no small thing for so young a man to have formed an opinion on such an important matter. For he, he says, knows how the young are corrupted, and who are their corruptors. He must be a wise man, who, observing my ignorance, is going to accuse me to the city, as his mother, of corrupting his friends. I think that he is the only man who begins at the right point in his political reforms: I mean whose first care is to make the young men as perfect as possible,

just as a good farmer will take care of his young plants first, and, after he has done that, of the others. And so Meletus, I suppose, is first clearing us off, who, as he says, corrupt the young men as they grow up; and then, when he has done that, of course he will turn his attention to the older men, and so become a very great public benefactor. Indeed, that is only what you would expect, when he goes to work in this way.

Two remarkable men have met, quite by accident and at a dubious place: namely in Athens, before the office building of the Second Archon, who still retains the title of Basileus from the time of the kings, and whose duty it is to hear indictments concerned with political crimes. One of these men is Socrates, the somewhat eccentric philosopher who is well known in the city; the other is Euthyphro, a priest and a person of no great consequence. From the very first words of the dialogue we hear that Socrates is accused; it is the first stage of the case which was tried before the supreme court in the year 399 B.C. and ended with his condemnation.

Socrates's character comes out at once in the first words: bantering and yet with deep inward concern, ironical and serious. At the same time the prosecutor is sketched. He is an unknown young man, of somewhat sorry appearance; a poet, as we shall hear later, without much substance, but with all the more arrogance, clever and with an eye to his own advantage.

To Euthyphro's question, what, according to Meletus, are Socrates's pernicious teachings, the latter replies:

SOCR. In a way which sounds strange at first, my friend. He says that I am a maker of gods; and so he is prosecuting me, he says, for inventing new gods, and for not believing in the old ones.

Euthyphro rejoins:

EUTH. I understand, Socrates. It is because you say that you always have a divine sign. So he is prosecuting you for introducing novelties into religion; and he is going into court knowing that such matters are easily misrepresented to the multitude, and consequently meaning to slander you there. Why, they laugh even me to scorn, as if I were out of my mind, when I talk about divine things in the assembly, and tell them what is going to happen: and yet I have never foretold anything which has not come true. But they are jealous of all people like us.

Socrates, then, is accused of undermining the traditional piety. But the accusation is at once set in a strange light, both by the personality of the accuser and by the proximity into which the other speaker, Euthyphro, puts his own case with that of Socrates. For the man's very first words give the impression that he is not a first-rate character. From all these doubts, however, emerges, right from the beginning of the dialogue, that striking phenomenon which marks the religious figure of Socrates and will later, in the *Apology*, play so pathetic a role his Daimonion. It appears that Socrates himself has never made a secret of it. It is such common knowledge among his acquaintances that even Euthyphro, who is evidently not of the inner circle, can see in it the occasion for the indictment. For whenever Socrates is about to do something that is not right — and, as will appear, this criterion of Tightness extends from the foreground of the practical to the furthest depths of the existential — something warns him; often, as he says, in the middle of a sentence, so that he has to pause. He has always taken this voice very seriously. It certainly does not stand for the voice of reason or conscience, as a rationalistic interpretation would have it. Rather it is quite plainly a question of some warning coming from without and bearing a numinous character. This alone explains how Socrates's talk of his "daemonic sign" could be misinterpreted as a new religious message, endangering the traditional beliefs.

Euthyphro's Case

EUTH. Well, Socrates, I dare say that nothing will come of it. Very likely you will be successful in your trial, and I think that I shall be in mine.

Socrates replies with a question:

SOCR. And what is this suit of yours, Euthyphro? Are you suing, or being sued?

EUTH. I am suing.

SOCR. Whom?

EUTH. A man whom I am thought a maniac to be suing.

SOCR. What? Has he wings to fly away with?

EUTH. He is far enough from flying; he is a very old man.

SOCR. Who is he?

EUTH. He is my father.

SOCR. Your father, my good sir?

EUTH. He is indeed.

*SOCR. What are you prosecuting him for? What is the charge?
EUTH. It is a charge of murder, Socrates.*

Socrates is taken aback.

SOCR. Good heavens, Euthyphro! Surely the multitude are ignorant of what makes right. I take it that it is not everyone who could rightly do what you are doing; only a man who was already well advanced in wisdom.

EUTH. That is quite true, Socrates.

SOCR. Was the man whom your father killed a relative of yours? No, of course he was: you would never have prosecuted your father for the murder of a stranger?

EUTH. You amuse me, Socrates. What difference does it make whether the murdered man was a relative or a stranger? The only question that you have to ask is, did the slayer slay justly or not? If justly, you must let him alone; if unjustly, you must indict him for murder, even though he share your hearth and sit at your table. The pollution is the same, if you associate with such a man, knowing what he has done, without purifying yourself, and him too, by bringing him to justice. In the present case the murdered man was a poor dependent of mine, who worked for us on our farm in Naxos. In a fit of drunkenness he got in a rage with one of our slaves, and killed him. My father therefore bound the man hand and foot and threw him into a ditch, while he sent to Athens to ask the seer what he should do. While the messenger was gone, he entirely neglected the man, thinking that he was a murderer, and that it would be no great matter, even if he were to die. And that was exactly what happened; hunger and cold and his bonds killed him before the messenger returned. And now my father and the rest of my family are indignant with me because I am prosecuting my father for the murder of this murderer. They assert that he did not kill the man at all; and they say that, even if he had killed him over and over again, the man himself was a murderer, and that I ought not to concern myself about such a person, because it is unholy for a son to prosecute his father for murder. So little, Socrates, do they know the divine law of holiness and unholiness.

In the last sentence the key-word of the dialogue has been spoken, and Socrates at once takes it up:

SOCR. *And do you mean to say, Euthyphro, that you think that you understand divine things, and holiness and unholiness, so accurately that, in such a case as you have stated, you can bring your father to justice without fear that you yourself may be doing an unholy deed?*

EUTH. *If I did not understand all these matters accurately, Socrates, I should be of no use, and Euthyphro would not be any better than other men.*

Socratic Irony

The question, then, with which the dialogue is concerned is the nature of piety, interwoven with that of the fate of Socrates, who himself is charged with an offence against piety and religion. But in what a peculiar way the question is put! How inappropriate, one would think, to the deadly seriousness of the situation! For it is the prelude to a tragedy which, at the time of writing, must have been a matter not only of clearest recollection but of keenest feeling to the author of the dialogue. Plato was then still young, barely thirty; and Socrates was his master, who had shown him the way to all that was great; not only venerated, but loved, and taken away by an event in which the disciple can see nothing but injustice and evil. How is he to speak about it then? The answer seems undoubted: as the *Apology* speaks. Yet here is the *Euthyphro*, forming the introduction to the *Apology* — a sort of satyric drama, placed before instead of after the tragedy. This can only be because Socrates was just as this dialogue describes him. In fact he was not only the heroic philosopher depicted in the *Apology*, *Crito* and *Phaedo*. From these works alone his personality and his death would not stand out in their full character; another note is wanting, that of the *Euthyphro*. By this an air of disdain is thrown over the whole affair — though at the same time care is taken that Socrates shall remain wholly Socrates. The *Euthyphro* is, among the texts with which we are concerned, that in which the irony of Socrates appears most clearly. This peculiarity is shown in the other texts too, but it is overborne by the solemnity of the mood. In the *Euthyphro* the irony unfolds with all its effortless and redoubtable power.

What is the real meaning of it? What does a man do when he treats another with irony? He makes him ridiculous. But he could do that without irony. He could say something straight out which would put the object of his attack in a comic light; but that would not look well. It would show up the attacker as unimaginative and coarse. There is another drawback too: to attack directly shows one to be entangled

in the situation, while the wielder of irony stands above it. He makes appreciative remarks, but in such a way that an unfavorable meaning appears through them. His assent only underlines the contradiction more plainly. He assumes an inoffensive air, only to wound the more surely. The ironic attack shows the aggressor in blithe security. All this could be said of irony in general; but Socratic irony is more than this. In the last resort its object is not to expose, to wound, to dispatch, but to help. It has a positive aim: to stimulate movement and to liberate. It aims at serving truth. But would it not be better to teach directly, to refute, warn, challenge? Only when the truth in question can be communicated in this way. Socrates's concern is, above all things, for an inward mobility, a living relation to being and truth, which can only with difficulty be elicited by direct speech. So irony seeks to bring the center of a man into a state of tension from which this mobility arises; either in the interlocutor himself, or, if he is not to be helped, in the listener. But how does irony gain this positive character? By the speaker's putting himself into the situation. He must not be one who lectures others in the consciousness of his own secure possession, but one who is himself a seeker. The wielder of Socratic irony is not satisfied with his own state. He knows — or at least suspects — what he ought to be, but has no illusions about the fact that he is not so. He has a keen sense for what is wrong in others, but he is just as keenly critical of himself. His superiority to his opponent lies ultimately in the fact that he is not only cleverer and more adroit, but that he does not delude himself. He "knows that he knows nothing" — not in a skeptical spirit, however, but conscious that this only obliges him to explore all the more resolutely, and with confidence that this exploration will one day lead to a real find.

So he provokes the man who is secure in his own ignorance; not in order to make a fool of him, but to stir him into movement. He accosts him thus: "What a strange thing it is that people think they know and are goodness knows what, and yet they neither know anything nor are anything. You have not found that out yet; I have. So laugh at men; but don't forget that you are a man yourself, and laugh at yourself too. The moment you can do that, your eyes are opened. Mark the difference between genuine and spurious, reality and appearance. Be exacting, not in your own interest, but in that of truth; and not against others, but against yourself. The true standard lies in yourself, and the power also of subjecting yourself to it." Thus there is in Socratic irony both a passion for the cause and a deep kindness.

One point more: it reveals a special experience of existence. Existence is powerful, splendid, fearful, mysterious and much else

but it is also odd. It is such that it excites not only the sense of great “surprise”, astonishment at its height and depth, the “amazement at the essences of things”, but also the twin feeling of this, the sense of the queer, contradictory, complicated. This too finds expression in irony. Irony is no less serious than direct speech, but it knows that life cannot really be grasped if one takes it too solemnly. It thinks that seriousness can itself be a kind of evasion — taking refuge in poses and phrases. The genuine ironical man is a man with a great heart and a sensitive soul; that is why he cannot endure direct statement for long. He is a lover, but round the corner, so to speak. Such was Socrates. Alcibiades puts it best when he says in the Symposium (215a-b) that Socrates is like one of those ugly Silenus-figures which you can open, and then golden images of the gods gleam at you from inside them. And it is a wonderful thing that Plato, himself anything but an ironical mind, but an absolutist of the purest water and tending to the doctrinaire and despotic, made this man his master.

The first of the four dialogues which extol the greatness of Socrates gives freest play to his irony.

The Movement of the Dialogue

It is as though *Euthyphro* states the theme of the dialogue the human theme behind the intellectual; the passionate emotion of the spirit called forth by the dialogue behind the logical effort when he says in the eleventh section:

EUTH. But, Socrates, I really don't know how to explain to you what is in my mind. Whatever we put forward always somehow moves round in a circle, and will not stay where we place it.

Towards the end of the dialogue Socrates himself and with what delightful satire takes up the statement and confirms it:

SOCR. After that, shall you be surprised to find that your definitions move about, instead of staying where you place them? Shall you charge me with being the Daedalus that makes them move, when you yourself are far more skillful than Daedalus was, and make them go round in a circle? Do you not see that our definition has come round to where it was before?

In this circular movement something vital is happening. At the beginning Euthyphro brings himself into dangerous proximity with

Socrates, as a specialist, so to speak, in prophecy and religious science addressing a colleague. This association then gets involved in the vortex of the irony, and neatly decomposed, as by a centrifugal force of the mind, into its elements. In the end, indeed, neither Socrates nor Euthyphro is defined, philosophically or even psychologically; but their difference has come into view and they can no longer be confused. The intellectual point, too, remains undefined. The question, what is true piety, has been given no answer; but it has become clear that at any rate it has nothing to do with what Euthyphro means and is. And Socrates's words have revealed hidden depths, so that the reader sees how the question about the essence of piety ought to be attacked.

Besides this, however, the reader has become aware of something else: namely, that Socrates's accusers as also a large proportion of his judges — are people of Euthyphro's stamp. The latter is well disposed to Socrates. But if Socrates cannot make himself comprehensible even to Euthyphro, how will he be able to do so to people of the same kind who also hate him? Euthyphro himself would know how to dispose of such adversaries. One believes him at once when he says:

EUTH. Yes, by Zeus, Socrates, I think I should find out his weak points, if he were to try to indict me. I should have a good deal to say about him in court long before I spoke about myself.

In such a contest like would be matched with like. But Socrates will neither have the weapons necessary for the coming contest, nor, if he had them, would he know how to use them. So from the dialogue, conducted almost with arrogance on Socrates's part, comes a breath of tragic presentiment of what is to follow.

THE PROBLEM AND ITS DISCUSSION

The First Series of Questions

Socrates then begins, stating the theme of the dialogue:

SOCR. Now, therefore, please explain to me what you were so confident just now that you knew. Tell me what are piety and impiety with reference to murder and everything else.

Continuing, he brings out sharply the main Socratic-Platonic interest, the strictly philosophical question:

SOCR. I suppose that holiness is the same in all actions; and that unholiness is always the opposite of holiness, and like itself, and that as unholiness, it always has the same essential nature, which will be found in whatever is unholy.

Euthyphro assents, and the irony is brought to bear again; then Socrates asks further:

SOCR. Tell me, then; what is holiness, and what is unholiness?

The answer is one that he can hardly hear without a chuckle of delight:

EUTH. Well, then, I say that holiness means prosecuting the wrongdoer who has committed murder or sacrilege, or any other such crime, as I am doing now, whether he be your father or your mother or whoever he may be; and I say that unholiness means not prosecuting him.

The proof is equally gratifying:

EUTH. And observe, Socrates, I will give you a clear proof, which I have already given to others, that it is so, and that doing right means not suffering the sacrilegious man, whosoever he may be. Men hold Zeus to be the best and the justest of the gods; and they admit that Zeus bound his own father, Cronos, for devouring his children wickedly; and that Cronos in his turn castrated his father for similar reasons. And yet these same men are angry with me because I proceed against my father for doing wrong. So, you see, they say one thing in the case of the gods and quite another in mine.

In Socrates's rejoinder jest and earnest are curiously mingled:

SOCR. Is that not why I am being prosecuted, Euthyphro? I mean, because I am displeased when I hear people say such things about the gods? I expect that I shall be called a sinner, because I doubt those stories. Now if you, who understand all these matters so well, agree in holding all those tales true, then I suppose that I must give way. What could I say when I admit myself that I know nothing about them? But tell me, in the name

of friendship, do you really believe that these things have actually happened?

The answer which Euthyphro gives to Socrates's philosophical question is the mythical answer — more accurately, that mythical answer which in the course of historical evolution has lost its proper meaning. To be a real answer, it presupposes a certain view of man and religion with its particular type of life-experience. For this view reality is at once foreground and background. It consists not of scientifically transparent systems of matter and energy, but of forces of a natural and at the same time numinous order, which conflict mutually, and from whose incessant conflict life continually emerges.

The mythical truth lies in the fact that these forces and their relation to one another reveal themselves to the onlooker in valid forms and processes. The images, therefore, by which this is done are something different from the irresponsible shapes of later, aesthetically emancipated art. They are the immediate expression of essential truth; and the man who knows about them and is familiar with them lives in the existential order. The mythical attitude implies further that the man has not yet come to dissociate himself by critical judgment and technical skill from those forces, but is still directly controlled by them. He has a constant perception of their working, not only in the constellations, in the atmospheric processes, in the rhythms of growth, but also in his own being. They determine his instinctive life, regulate the emotions and passions of his mind, and show themselves in dreams and inspirations. His fate is ever their work; the order of family and community life results from their operation and at the same time affords a protection against their tyranny.

As long as all this holds good, piety means indeed a revering gaze, a respectful self-surrender, a constant interpretation of one's own life, as of the surrounding world, in accordance with those figures and legends which have been received from experiences of past seers and handed down by religious tradition; and the question what is true and not true in a religious sense, what is right and wrong, really is answered by referring to the figure of a god or the deed of a hero. All this has as yet nothing to do with philosophy. But in the course of history the mental make-up which produces it gradually dissolves. The ideas of the Ionian philosophy of nature in some respects mark the critical point. The "Water" of Thales, the "Formless Infinite" of Anaximander, the "Air" of Anaximenes, the "Fire" of Heraclitus, are certainly not yet philosophical concepts in the proper sense, only images for

the primal reality; but in them a new relation to the world already emerges. Man begins to detach himself from the ensemble of powers which have been hitherto a direct experience, wholly containing him; he begins to perceive reality differently and to examine it in a new way, the scientific and critical way. He not only contemplates phenomena, but tries to get behind them. He not only investigates the meaning of valid images, but becomes aware of the coherence of cause and effect, whole and part, means and end, and feels himself challenged to give a rational explanation. He sees himself no longer as involved in a mysterious play of natural and divine powers, which according to their particular nature have to be averted or directed by ceremonial and magical rites and precautions; he begins to see the things around him as natural objects, and to acquire and use them according to their actual qualities. So the traditional picture of the world loses its original character. Men continue to live in it, but without being deeply committed to it. Criticism grows; and as it has not yet acquired its appropriate standards, it has a largely arbitrary and destructive character. At this point stands Socrates. Men have inwardly abandoned the system of myth, even though its beautiful and venerable images still accompany them through life. Mythical thought has lost its real justification, and Euthyphro is the expression, albeit caricatured, of the actual state of things. A step forward must now be taken. The forces which have destroyed the myths must find a new norm and guarantee for life. This is done by Socrates's question: "What is the nature of things? What is the right order of existence which results from it? What are the values which give to human existence its meaning?" This question, however, is taken amiss by those circles of his native city whose spokesman is Meletus. They have no longer any real belief in the myths; but they shrink from the convulsions and labors of the break-up, and turn against the man who is bringing it about. *Euthyphro*, in spite of all momentary opposition, thinks as they do. His quarrel with them is conducted within an identity of views. So in his person the accusation itself becomes ludicrous.

EUTH. Yes, and stranger ones, too, Socrates, which the multitude do not know of.

SOCR. Then you really believe that there is war among the gods, and bitter hatreds, and battles, such as the poets tell of, and which the great painters have depicted in our temples, especially in the pictures which cover the robe that is carried up to the Acropolis at the great Panathenaic festival. Are we to say

that these things are true, Euthyphro?

EUTH. Yes, Socrates, and more besides. As I was saying, I will relate to you many other stories about divine matters, if you like, which I am sure will astonish you when you hear them.

SOCR. I dare say.

The Question Concerning Essence

The first round is over, without Euthyphro's having noticed anything. Only the invisible listener has taken note, to wit, the youth of Athens, which loves Socrates, and has been listening while the whole scene is enacted. Then the master begins anew:

SOCR. You shall relate them to me at your leisure another time. At present please try to give a more definite answer to the question which I asked you just now. What I asked you, my friend, was, What is holiness? and you have not explained it to me, to my satisfaction. You only tell me that what you are doing now, namely prosecuting your father for murder, is a holy act.

Euthyphro confirms this. Whereupon Socrates:

SOCR. Very likely. But many other actions are holy, are they not, Euthyphro?

EUTH. Certainly.

SOCR. Remember, then, that I did not ask you to tell me one or two of all the many holy actions that there are; I want to know what is the essential form of holiness which makes all holy actions holy. You said, I think, that there is one form¹ which makes all holy actions holy, and another form which makes all unholy actions unholy. Do you not remember?

EUTH. I do.

SOCR. Well, then, explain to me what is this form, that I may have it to turn to, and to use as a standard whereby to judge your

¹ *Eidos* ("essential image") and *idea* ("original form") mean the same thing, although with a somewhat different nuance; the necessary content of a thing's property and meaning, though not by way of abstract definition, but of course pictorial perceptibility. This "image" acquires in the course of Platonic thought an ever more pronounced metaphysical significance.

actions, and those of other men, and be able to say that whatever action resembles it is holy, and whatever does not, is not holy.

Here then is the question concerning essence again. Euthyphro tries to answer:

EUTH. Well then, what is pleasing to the gods is holy; and what is not pleasing to them is unholy.

SOCR. Beautiful, Euthyphro. Now you have given me the answer that I wanted. Whether what you say is true, I do not know yet. But of course you will go on to prove the truth of it.

The answer is in fact better than the preceding one, for at least it ventures into the region of conceptual definition. But is the standard assigned, according to which the pious is what the gods love, really the right one? A standard must be unequivocal: that is, in this case, all the gods must love and hate the same things. But do they? Evidently not, for the myths are always describing their quarrels. And you cannot have a real quarrel about mere facts — for instance, whether a thing is bigger or smaller than another thing — for then one would simply measure them and the matter would be settled. It must be about matters of principle — what, for example, the just or the unjust, the beautiful or the ugly, is in itself. So if even gods quarrel, it is only about such things that they can quarrel:

SOCR. And each of them loves what he thinks honourable, and good, and right, and hates the opposite, does he not?

EUTH. Certainly.

SOCR. But you say that the same action is held by some of them to be right, and by others to be wrong; and that then they dispute about it, and so quarrel and fight among themselves. Is it not so?

EUTH. Yes.

SOCR. Then the same thing is hated by the gods and loved by them; and the same thing will be displeasing and pleasing to them.

EUTH. Apparently.

SOCR. Then, according to your account, the same thing will be holy and unholy.

EUTH. So it seems.

So this definition of piety will not do either, since it proceeds not from definable quantities, but from an uncriticized popular belief which is in fact decaying. The question of the real significance of the mythical strife is not raised. When in the light for Troy Hera is ranged against Aphrodite, the former goddess pronounces Paris's act to be reprehensible, the latter noble. This has a quite different significance from a discussion between two philosophers on ethical problems; for Aphrodite is the nature-force of love and Hera the social force of family order, both being understood not as logical principles, but as empirical and at the same time numinous life-forces. Formulated in theoretical assertions, their claims exclude one another; contradictory propositions cannot be simultaneously true. It is different in the mythical sphere. Myth says: Everything is divine. All is resolved in the unity of the world, which is itself the ultimate Divine and comprises all contradictories. So both are right, and the conflict between them is right too. Paris as well as Menelaus is under the protection of a divine power. The fact that they must fight constitutes the inevitable tragedy, in which however life does not disintegrate, but persists as a supra-intelligible whole. All this the mythically perceptive man, whose decadent phase is represented by *Euthyphro*, would not indeed state conceptually, but would see, feel and live. That Euthyphro's place is not taken by the real representative of myth, who, at once bound and sustained by its power, embodied it convincingly by his whole being, of course constitutes the latent injustice of the dialogue and of the Socratic-Platonic campaign against antiquity. Nevertheless the attackers are in the right, for the object of their attack is no longer the living mythical mentality, but one which has gone fundamentally astray in itself and only continues to exist by virtue of the inertia of what has once been historical fact. Thus it is, from an historical point of view, ripe for dissolution — quite apart from the fact that it is erroneous in itself; — and it must be allowable to say this, in spite of romantic considerations. The mythical order has a great power, and there is a glory over it for which the modern man, tormented with criticism, feels full of longing. But it presupposes a confusion in nature which a man cannot acquiesce in without shirking his mission. As soon as his conscience becomes aware of the self's personal value and is prepared to answer for it, he must throw off the mythical mentality. Socrates, then, is not only the advocate of what is historically ripe, but of what has a higher significance too. It is also true that in bringing forward this new and higher good he destroys much that is old and excellent, and this justifies the resistance to him. As always in historical matters,

in which there is no absolute progress, he is at fault by reason of his very mission.

Essence and Fact

The attempt has miscarried again, and Socrates does not fail to bring this to his companion's notice:

SOCR. Then, my good friend, you have not answered my question. I did not ask you to tell me what action is both holy and unholy; but it seems that whatever is pleasing to the gods is also displeasing to them. And so, Euthyphro, I should not wonder if what you are doing now in chastising your father is a deed well-pleasing to Zeus, but hateful to Cronos and Ouranos, and acceptable to Hephaestus, but hateful to Here; and if any of the other gods disagree about it, pleasing to some of them, and displeasing to others.

Euthyphro tries once more to save his thesis:

EUTH. But on this point, Socrates, I think that there is no difference of opinion among the gods; they all hold that if one man kills another wrongfully, he must be punished.

So far, so good; he points to the evident principle that every injustice must be atoned for. Socrates too agrees with this; no, he elucidates the statement further in these words:

SOCR. Then they do not dispute the proposition, that the wrongdoer must be punished. They dispute about the question, who is a wrongdoer, and when, and what is a wrong deed, do they not?

The principle is clear, only the fact is in dispute. But what does this imply for the question under discussion? The proposition, "Injustice must be punished", amounts after all to the same as, "Injustice is unjust". But what is injustice? How does one distinguish a case of injustice from one of justice? Socrates formulates the question by going back to the case that is occupying their attention:

SOCR. Come then, my dear Euthyphro, please enlighten me on

this point. What proof have you that all the gods think that a labourer who has been imprisoned for murder by the master of the man whom he has murdered, and who dies from his imprisonment before the master has had time to learn from the seers what he should do, dies by injustice? How do you know that it is right for a son to indict his father, and to prosecute him for the murder of such a man? Come, see if you can make it clear to me that the gods necessarily agree in thinking that this action of yours is right. . . .

Euthyphro evades the question understandably, from his way of thinking, for it again approaches the critical point. Socrates at once makes this clear:

SOCR. Suppose that Euthyphro were to prove to me as clearly as possible that all the gods think such a death unjust; how has he brought me any nearer to understanding what holiness and unholiness are?

He would have to say

. . . that whatever all the gods hate is unholy, and whatever they all love is holy: while whatever some of them love, and others hate, is either both or neither? Do you wish us now to define holiness and unholiness in this manner?

EUTH. Why not, Socrates?

SOCR. There is no reason why I should not, Euthyphro. It is for you to consider whether that definition will help you to instruct me as you promised.

EUTH. Well, I should say that holiness is what all the gods love, and that unholiness is what they all hate.

Euthyphro has maintained that the goodness of the good consists in its affirmation by the gods: that is, he has made a formal content depend on the attitude taken towards something by certain beings, even though beings of the highest order — the gods. To put it more pointedly, he has founded an absolute principle on a fact, whereas on the contrary the fact should be founded on the principle, which rests on itself and cannot be proved, but only indicated.

Socrates indeed brings this home to him by asking:

SOCR. We shall know that better in a little while, my good friend.

Now consider this question. Do the gods love holiness because it is holy, or is it holy because they love it?

The question here touches the decisive point, but it thereby passes beyond Euthyphro's power of comprehension. So Socrates tries to make clear to him the difference between the two propositions. The proposition, "This is pious", is a statement of essence; the proposition, "This is loved", is a statement of fact. The sense only comes out correctly when one says:

SOCR. Then it is loved by the gods because it is holy: it is not holy because it is loved by them?

EUTH. It seems so.

SOCR. But then what is pleasing to the gods is pleasing to them, and is in a state of being loved by them, because they love it?

EUTH. Of course.

SOCR. Then holiness is not what is pleasing to the gods, and what is pleasing to the gods is not holy, as you say, Euthyphro. They are different things.

EUTH. And why, Socrates?

SOCR. Because we are agreed that the gods love holiness because it is holy: and that it is not holy because they love it. Is not this so?

EUTH. Yes.

Euthyphro has first answered "It seems so", next "Of course", then "And why, Socrates?" and now he says "Yes". But all this only amounts to "I haven't understood a thing". And when Socrates then proceeds to draw out the relations of "pious" and "loved" in a rapid succession of statements, and asks:

SOCR. Do not, if you please, keep from me what holiness is; begin again and tell me that. Never mind whether the gods love it, or whether it has other attributes: we shall not differ on that point. Do your best to make clear to me what is holiness and what is unholiness.

The poor man is quite dizzy:

EUTH. But, Socrates, I really don't know how to explain to you what is in my mind. Whatever we put forward always somehow moves round in a circle, and will not stay where we place it.

And we feel the power of the master of irony when he goes on to remark:

SOCR. I think that your definitions, Euthyphro, are worthy of my ancestor Daedalus. If they had been mine and I had laid them down, I daresay that you would have made fun of me, and said that it was the consequence of my descent from Daedalus that the definitions which I construct run away, as his statues used to, and will not stay where they are placed. But, as it is, the definitions are yours, and the jest would have no point. You yourself see that they will not stay still.

EUTH. Nay, Socrates, I think that the jest is very much in point. It is not my fault that the definition moves round in a circle and will not stay still. But you are the Daedalus, I think: as far as I am concerned, my definitions would have stayed quiet enough.

SOCR. Then, my friend, I must be a more skillful artist than Daedalus: he only used to make his own works move; whereas I, you see, can make other people's works move too. And the beauty of it is that I am wise against my will. I would rather that our definitions had remained firm and immovable than have all the wisdom of Daedalus and all the riches of Tantalus to boot.¹

Piety and Justice

Socrates starts again, spurring on poor Euthyphro, who would certainly rather be left in peace:

SOCR. Well, then, is all justice holy too? Or, while all holiness is just is a part only of justice holy, and the rest of it something else?

EUTH. I do not follow you, Socrates.

SOCR. Yet you have the advantage over me in your youth no less than in your wisdom. But, as I say, the wealth of your wisdom makes you indolent. Exert yourself, my good friend: I am not asking you a difficult question.

And he then works out an example by means of a poetic quotation.

¹ Tantalus in Hades was surrounded by cool water and fine fruits; but whenever he tried to drink, the water dried up, and whenever he reached for the fruits, a storm-wind lifted the branches high in the air.

The two phenomena “fear” and “shame” have a different extension. The first is more general and includes the second. It is the same with piety and justice. The latter — taken in the sense of natural justice or natural suitability — has a wider extension than piety. The pious forms a part of the just; it is natural suitability under a special aspect. Then he asks:

SOCR. Then see if you can explain to me what part of justice is holiness, that I may tell Meletus that now that I have learnt perfectly from you what actions are pious and holy, and what are not, he must give up prosecuting me unjustly for impiety.

Socrates, then, has told his companion what are the elements of a correctly constructed definition: the more general major term, and the specific difference by which the thing to be defined is classed under the former. According to this scheme *Euthyphro* has now to say how piety is related to justice, and so to define it.

EUTH. Well then, Socrates, I should say that piety and holiness are that part of justice which has to do with the attention which is due to the gods: and that what has to do with the attention which is due to men, is the remaining part of justice.

Once more the thought has lost its elevation. *Euthyphro*'s answer is not on Socrates's level, but has sunk to that of everyday practice. So Socrates tries to regain the higher level:

SOCR. And I think that your answer is a good one, Euthyphro. But there is one little point, of which I still want to hear more. I do not yet understand what the attention or care which you are speaking of is. I suppose you do not mean that the care which we show to the gods is like the care which we show to other things. We say, for instance, do we not, that not everyone knows how to take care of horses, but only the trainer of horses? . . . Well, then, has not all care the same object? Is it not for the good and benefit of that on which it is bestowed? for instance, you see horses are benefited and improved when they are cared for by the art which is concerned with them. Is it not so? . . . Then is holiness, which is the care which we bestow on the gods, intended to benefit the gods, or to improve them? Should you allow that you make any of the gods better, when you do a holy action?

EUTH. No indeed: certainly not.

SOCR. No: I am quite sure that that is not your meaning,

Euthyphro: it was for that reason that I asked you what you meant by the attention due to the gods. I thought that you did not mean that.

EUTH. You were right, Socrates. I do not mean that.

SOCR. Good. Then what sort of attention to the gods will holiness be?

EUTH. The attention, Socrates, of slaves to their masters.

SOCR. I understand: then it is a kind of service to the gods?

The answer has got stuck in the practical again. The nature of the thing meant has not come out yet. What is the meaning of this “care” and this “service”?

SOCR. Then tell me, my excellent friend; what result will the art which serves the gods serve to produce? You must know, seeing that you say that you know more about divine things than any other man.

The train of thought has come back again somewhat deviously to the critical point. *Euthyphro* has now to say what constitutes the special significance of an act of piety. He will thereby enunciate the essence of piety and clear the way for the further question as to the essence of its superior virtue, justice. “Justice” is for Plato something ultimate and comprehensive, namely the will and ability to give everything what is due to its proper nature — therefore, rightly understood, morality as such. *Euthyphro*, however, does not understand what it is all about, but again talks round the point, until, pressed by Socrates, he finally declares:

EUTH. I told you just now, Socrates, that it is not so easy to learn the exact truth in all these matters. However, broadly I say this: if any man knows that his words and deeds in prayer and sacrifice are acceptable to the gods, that is what is holy: that preserves the common weal, as it does private households, from evil; but the opposite of what is acceptable to the gods is impious, and this it is that brings ruin and destruction on all things.

Another disappointment. The answer begs the question. That disposition is called “pious” in which the right “service” is rendered, whereas the very thing to be determined is, in what consists the service that is right for the gods, that is, pious. At the same time the answer slips down from the region of serious thinking into that of practice and a very dubious practice, as will soon appear.

Piety and Service of the Gods

But Socrates does not let go:

But you are evidently not anxious to instruct me: just now, when you were just on the point of telling me what I want to know, you stopped short. If you had gone on then, I should have learnt from you clearly enough by this time what is holiness. But now I am asking you questions, and must follow wherever you lead me; so tell me, what is it that you mean by the holy and holiness? Do you not mean a science of prayer and sacrifice?

Apparently an attempt to come to a definition but an insidious one, as will be seen in a moment:

SOCR. To sacrifice is to give to the gods, and to pray is to ask of them, is it not?

EUTH. It is, Socrates.

SOCR. Then you say that holiness is the science of asking of the gods, and giving to them?

EUTH. You understand my meaning exactly, Socrates.

SOCR. Yes, for I am eager to share your wisdom, Euthyphro, and so I am all attention: nothing that you say will fall to the ground. But tell me, what is this service of the gods? You say it is to ask of them, and to give to them?

EUTH. I do.

SOCR. Then, to ask rightly will be to ask of them what we stand in need of from them, will it not?

EUTH. Naturally.

SOCR. And to give rightly will be to give back to them what they stand in need of from us? It would not be very clever to make a present to a man of something that he has no need of.

EUTH. True, Socrates.

SOCR. Then, holiness, Euthyphro, will be an art of traffic between gods and men?

Euthyphro feels that this is questionable, and would like to let it rest there:

EUTH. Yes, if you like to call it so.

But Socrates holds him fast:

SOCR. No, I like nothing but what is true.

And he then exposes the reason for the evidently dubious character of the statement, namely the false religious ideas on which Euthyphro's argument rests.

SOCR. But tell me, how are the gods benefited by the gifts which they receive from us? What they give us is plain enough. Every good thing that we have is their gift. But how are they benefited by what we give them? Have we the advantage over them in this traffic so much that we receive from them all the good things we possess and give them nothing in return?

Euthyphro sees where the ideas he has expressed are leading:

EUTH. But do you suppose, Socrates, that the gods are benefited by the gifts which they receive from us?

But Socrates will not let him escape the consequences of his assertions:

SOCR. But what are these gifts, Euthyphro, that we give the gods?

Euthyphro answers:

EUTH. What do you think but honour, and homage, and, as I have said, what is acceptable to them.

Socrates now proceeds to close the circle:

SOCR. Then holiness, Euthyphro, is acceptable to the gods, but it is not profitable, or dear to them?

EUTH. I think that nothing is dearer to them.

SOCR. Then I see that holiness means that which is dear to the gods.

EUTH. Most certainly.

CONCLUSION

SOCR. After that, shall you be surprised to find that your definitions move about, instead of staying where you place them? Shall you charge me with being the Daedalus that makes them move, when you yourself are far more skillful than Daedalus was, and make them go round in a circle? Do you not see that our definition has come round to where it was before? Surely you remember that we have already seen that holiness, and what is pleasing to the gods, are quite different things. Do you not remember?

EUTH. I do.

SOCR. And now do you not see that you say that what the gods love is holy? But does not what the gods love come to the same thing as what is pleasing to the gods?

EUTH. Certainly.

SOCR. Then either our former conclusion was wrong, or, if that was right, we are wrong now.

EUTH. So it seems.

What, then, is the outcome of the whole discussion? Substantially, nothing at all. Euthyphro has stuck to his first opinion. But could not Socrates have told him what piety really is? To such a question the master of irony would probably have answered: "But I don't know that myself!" Yet the answer might have had several meanings. It might have meant: "I know a few things, but would like to find out more. That can only happen when the other man joins in the search, therefore I cannot give away the solution to him." But perhaps the answer would have meant the following: "I cannot tell him the solution so simply as that. For either he would not understand it at all, and then it would be no use telling him. Or he would understand it as a positive statement, without perceiving the problem. He would swallow the answer and think he had got the gist of it, and then he would be a lost man as far as real knowledge goes. For only the man who is inwardly set in motion grasps the truth. So far he has not got moving, but has probably only been thinking that Socrates is a queer old gentleman who can be very importunate; and telling him the definition of piety would not get him any further than that."

The only alternative, then, is either to leave the man alone or to start again from the beginning; and the elderly questioner in fact begins afresh. To be sure, it is an odd sort of interrogation, and a dangerous undertone is audible in it:

SOCR. Then we must begin again, and inquire what is holiness. I do not mean to give in until I have found out. Do not deem me unworthy; give your whole mind to the question, and this time tell me the truth. For if anyone knows it, it is you; and you are a Proteus whom I must not let go until you have told me. It cannot be that you would ever have undertaken to prosecute your aged father for the murder of a labouring man unless you had known exactly what is holiness and unholiness. You would have feared to risk the anger of the gods, in case you should be doing wrong, and you would have been afraid of what men would say. But now I am sure that you think that you know exactly what is holiness and what is not: so tell me, my excellent Euthyphro, and do not conceal from me what you hold it to be.

The discussion is back at the beginning again. The domestic affair which has brought Euthyphro here crops up again; once more his competence in religious matters is emphasized, and Socrates craves instruction on the nature of π piety, so that he, a man under accusation of impiety, may learn wherein he has been at fault. But Euthyphro must have felt sure of one thing: what is aimed at him here is no mere question, but an exposure and a verdict. So he takes to flight:

EUTH. Another time, then, Socrates. I am in a hurry now, and it is time for me to be off.

SOCR. What are you doing, my friend! Will you go away and destroy all my hopes of learning from you what is holy and what is not, and so of escaping Meletus? I meant to explain to him that now Euthyphro has made me wise about divine things, and that I no longer in my ignorance speak rashly about them or introduce novelties in them; and then I was going to promise him to live a better life for the future.

But Euthyphro is not going to let himself in for any more. One can see him hurrying away and Socrates looking after him with a smile.

The conversation has been fruitless. Euthyphro has not opened out. Even the indirect method has not succeeded in getting at him. But one thing has become clear: what he is, and what Socrates is those two who at the beginning of the dialogue seemed so near to each other. And as Euthyphro is, so will be the majority of the judges before whom Socrates has to defend his case.