

ROUTLEDGE PHILOSOPHY **GUIDEBOOK** TO

Plato

and the
Trial of Socrates

Tom Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith

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Thomas C.

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TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

All citations used for Plato's works in this book refer to the Oxford Classical (Greek) texts. Citations are made by Stephanus page number, section letter, and then line number. All translations we provide in this book are our own. Those we give for Plato's *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo* are from our *The Trial and Execution of Socrates: Sources and Controversies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Aristotle

<i>Metaph.</i>	<i>Metaphysics</i>
<i>D.L.</i>	<i>Diogenes Laertius, Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers</i>

Plato

<i>Ap.</i>	<i>Apology</i>
<i>Charm.</i>	<i>Charmides</i>
<i>Euthyd.</i>	<i>Euthydemus</i>
<i>Euthphr.</i>	<i>Euthyphro</i>
<i>Grg.</i>	<i>Gorgias</i>
<i>Hip. Ma.</i>	<i>Hippias Major (Greater Hippias)</i>
<i>La.</i>	<i>Laches</i>
<i>Lys.</i>	<i>Lysis</i>
<i>Phd.</i>	<i>Phaedo</i>
<i>Phdr.</i>	<i>Phaedrus</i>
<i>Rep.</i>	<i>Republic</i>

Xenophon

<i>Ap.</i>	<i>Apology</i>
<i>Hell.</i>	<i>Hellenica</i>
<i>Mem.</i>	<i>Memorabilia</i>

INTRODUCTION

Socrates was born in Athens in 469 B.C.E. Although he wrote nothing of any significance and had no students in anything like the ordinary sense of that term, he became one of the most influential philosophers in western civilization. During his own lifetime, his philosophical activities, which were carried on in public settings and private homes, together with his idiosyncratic demeanor, gained him great notoriety and, indeed, must have made him one of Athens' best known figures. To many, however, he must have been more than a mere curiosity, for in 399 B.C.E. Socrates was tried on a charge of impiety, convicted, and executed after a period of imprisonment.

Plato, who was a member of one of Athens' most aristocratic families and who dedicated his life to philosophy because of Socrates' influence, occupies a central place in this debate. The *Euthyphro*, *Apology of Socrates*, *Crito*, and the death scene from the *Phaedo*, the four writings to be examined in this book, are Plato's dramatizations of various episodes in Socrates' final days. The *Euthyphro* purports to be a conversation between Socrates and a self-styled religious expert that takes place in front of the office

of the king-archon, where Socrates had been ordered to appear to hear the exact nature of the charges against him. The *Apology* provides Plato's version of three speeches Socrates makes before his jurors at the trial: his defense, a counter-penalty proposal following his conviction, and some final words after he has been sentenced to execution. The *Crito* takes place in the final days of Socrates' incarceration as he awaits execution. The selection from the *Phaedo* provides an account of Socrates' final conversation with his friends and associates, and at the end of the dialogue, he drinks the poison required for his execution and dies.

These four works are often published together and legions of students have studied them as a group. The joint publication of these works, however, has by no means been restricted to modern times. Thrasyllus, the first-century C.E. scholar, whose collection of Plato's writings forms the basis of what we now recognize as the Platonic corpus, treated the four writings with which we are concerned as a unit, although he included the entirety of the *Phaedo* in the group. Indeed, Thrasyllus divided all of Plato's dialogues into groups of four, called tetralogies, of which these four works are the first. Although it is doubtful that Plato himself intended his works to be so grouped, the common background against which the four works with which we will be concerned are set makes it only natural to study them together.

If we accept Plato's description of Socrates' activities and the motivation behind them as at all accurate, the decision to put him on trial as a serious threat to Athens must be seen as a bitterly ironic miscarriage of justice. In Plato, Socrates is a heroic figure who spent virtually his entire life exhorting others to put less stock in worldly matters and to make the improvement of their souls their primary concern. Where Plato's Socrates sought to make others question their values in order to understand better how they ought to live, others saw only the promulgation of moral nihilism. The decision to silence Socrates, then, was a tragic misunderstanding of the philosopher's real intent. Certainly, this is the natural conclusion to reach if we look only to the first tetralogy of the Platonic corpus for our understanding of the motives behind Socrates' trial and execution.

Unfortunately, things are not so simple, as Plato was by no means the only person in antiquity to write about Socrates, and what all of the ancient authors say about him and about the reasons the Athenians put him to death by no means forms a coherent picture. One prominent example is Aristophanes, the comic playwright, whose play, *The Clouds*, first produced some 24 years before Socrates' trial,¹ revolves around the antics of a counterfeit intellectual by the name of "Socrates." Because *The Clouds* figures so prominently in Plato's account of the trial, we can postpone a more detailed discussion of it until our discussion of his *Apology of Socrates*. Suffice it to say now that Aristophanes' purpose could only have been to use Socrates as a caricature for a whole, but quite diverse, group of intellectuals Aristophanes sought to lampoon in the play. However, there must have been sufficient similarity between the character in the play and the real Socrates and between the real Socrates and the intellectuals who were Aristophanes' comic target to make the character named "Socrates" work as a caricature. When Socrates says in the *Apology* (19c2–3) that Aristophanes' misrepresentations of him engendered very dangerous prejudices against him, we have to wonder exactly what was misrepresentation and what was not.

Any attempt to see clearly who Socrates was and why the Athenians would have tried and executed him is further complicated by the fact that in the years following Socrates' death a number of authors, many admirers of Socrates, began to write works in which a character named Socrates is prominently featured. What we know of these "*Sokratikoi logoi*" (Socratic arguments), which included all of the works of Plato except the four dialogues in which Socrates does not appear at all, reveal just how little these authors agreed about what Socrates stood for and what philosophy he propounded. This very troubling fact has led many scholars, especially recently, to dismiss entirely the very idea that a "Socratic philosophy" or accurate historical reconstruction of the philosopher himself can be found in any of this complex and contradictory literature, including especially in the dialogues of Plato.

In fact, Plato's own works make the picture even less clear, principally because different groups of Plato's works portray Socrates and

his views in very different ways. Scholars who have sought to reconstruct a Socratic philosophy have generally attempted to separate one group of Plato's dialogues out in which Socrates and his philosophy are represented more or less accurately. On the basis of various characterizations of the differences between Socrates' philosophical views and those of Plato in his own philosophical maturity, and also on the basis of techniques of measuring stylistic differences between the dialogues (called stylometry), many scholars have proposed that a group of dialogues that Plato wrote early in his career represent Socrates and his philosophy reasonably accurately. But as the genre of the *Sokratikoi logoi* became more popular and when fidelity to the historical Socrates and his actual views was neither required nor expected by readers of the genre, Plato eventually began to insert his own philosophical views into the mouth of Socrates. This, according to some scholars (known as the developmentalists,² because their account involves the idea that Plato's writings show evidence of him developing from a primarily Socratic point of view into a fully independent philosopher in his own right), explains why the Socrates who speaks in some of Plato's dialogues seems committed to very different philosophical positions than those for which he argues in other dialogues.

So, to what extent do Plato's writings about the trial and death of Socrates accurately portray the philosopher's final days? Are these works historically reliable, or are they fictions that use the names of historical persons? Perhaps not surprisingly, these questions continue to be hotly debated. Those inclined to think these works are fictional tend to be most impressed by the existence of the *Sokratikoi logoi* and argue that Plato's writings must be understood as members of this genre – a genre that represents Socrates in so many different ways that historical accuracy could never have been an interest for any of the writers working in the genre. Developmentalists, on the contrary, argue that none of the other writers had the same close relationship to Socrates as Plato had, and while conceding that even Plato eventually moved away from portraying Socrates accurately, the existence of this genre of writings does not prove that Plato's earlier works were written as part of that genre, or showed the same lack of concern for accuracy that

others, writing in that genre, did. Those who discount the historical accuracy of any of Plato's works also sometimes argue that their exceptional literary quality makes it very unlikely that they portray actual events or people accurately. But developmentalists will retort that literary excellence is entirely compatible with historical accuracy.

According to most developmentalists, the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito* all belong to the group of Plato's works regarded as early or "Socratic" works, in which Socrates and his views are as true to the original as we will find in any ancient writings. The *Phaedo*, however, is usually dated somewhat later than these other three, and developmentalist studies of the philosophical content of this dialogue contend that the views for which Socrates argues in this work are no longer those of the historical Socrates, but are instead those of Plato himself. The *Phaedo*, in other words, is generally not counted as a reliable source on Socrates or his philosophy, *even by those who regard some of Plato's other works (the early ones) as historically reliable*. This, perhaps, is one reason why many selections of Plato's works – including especially those devoted to the trial and death of Socrates, include only the last scene from the *Phaedo*, in which Socrates drinks the hemlock poison and dies. When we consider this scene in detail, later in the book, we will discuss the debate over whether this scene should be regarded as accurate about the way Socrates actually died. But few scholars regard the rest of the *Phaedo* as likely to provide an accurate portrayal of the historical Socrates and his philosophy.

That having been said, what about the value of the rest of the first tetralogy as historical sources about the last days of Socrates? To what extent, if any, can we regard what Plato wrote in the other three dialogues as historically accurate? We doubt that evidence exists that would settle this dispute between those who affirm and those who deny Plato's role as a faithful recorder of those famous events. Such a conclusion, however, should in no way detract from our study of Plato's writings about the end of Socrates' life. Few who read the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and the death scene from the *Phaedo* will deny that they provide a compelling account of a philosopher so dedicated to "living the

examined life” that he preferred death to a life devoid of philosophical inquiry. In our discussions of each of these works, we will try to identify the specific scholarly controversies that affect the interpretation of each dialogue; but we also hope never to lose sight of the wonder and tragedy of the narrative Plato provides in these dialogues. In the trial and death of Socrates, there continue to be many lessons for all of us to learn, lessons that can change our lives and values forever.

NOTES

- 1 The play was first produced in 423 and later revised (but what was changed in the second edition of the play is unknown). The revised version of the play has survived, and is now widely available in several English translations. The play itself continues to be produced and performed occasionally, and modern students who read it are delighted to find that ancient comedy can still make us laugh out loud.
- 2 All developmentalists are committed to the view that there is a group of dialogues written early in Plato’s career in which Socrates and his views are represented in a more or less consistent way that is different from the way in which Socrates and his views are depicted in dialogues Plato wrote later on. Some developmentalists are also “historicists”; that is, they claim that the earlier dialogues represent Socrates and his views in a way that is faithful to the historical original. Other developmentalists are agnostic about – or reject – the historicist theory, claiming only that Plato chose to change the way he represented Socrates from the earlier to the later works, but that this change may only represent a change in Plato’s own views, and that none of Plato’s works may be regarded as faithful to the historical Socrates. Our own view is a developmentalist one, and though we believe the historicist view provides the best explanation of why Plato’s dialogues show such marked shifts between the earlier and later dialogues, we are open to the idea that some other explanation of these shifts may end up explaining them more persuasively than the historicists do. To that extent, we also count ourselves as somewhat agnostic about historicism. For the sake of simplicity, in the rest of this discussion, by “developmentalist” we will mean “historicist developmentalist.”

1

THE *EUTHYPHRO*

1.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE *EUTHYPHRO*

1.1.1 *The legal setting*

Most legal cases in ancient Athens were initiated and litigated by private citizens.¹ This meant that the first thing a would-be prosecutor had to do was to write out an indictment and then get the one he was prosecuting to appear before the appropriate magistrate (or *archon*). In cases such as the one against Socrates, it would be the king-archon, whose job it was to make sure the charges were clear and legally appropriate, and whose decision it would be whether to forward the case to a trial by jury. In order to get the accused person to appear before the king-archon, a summons had to be issued. The summons was oral, not written, and would be delivered by the prosecutor himself. So, shortly before the scene we find in the *Euthyphro*, we can imagine Meletus going to Socrates, and before the required two witnesses, Meletus would have confronted Socrates and informed the latter that he was summoned to the king-archon's office on such-and-such a date, and stated the offense, probably exactly as it appeared in the official indictment.

Then, both Socrates and Meletus would appear at the king-archon's office, where Meletus would hand over a written copy of the indictment. Meletus may at that time also have been required to pay a fee (whose amount is not now known).

The king-archon would then set a date for a preliminary hearing on the charges, called an *anakrisis*. In the meantime, prior to the *anakrisis*, the king-archon posted a copy of the charge on a notice-board in the marketplace (the *agora*). Then, the *anakrisis* would be held, at which the indictment would be read aloud, and Socrates would be required to enter his plea. Socrates would then have had to submit a formal statement to the effect that he denied the charge against him. Both sides of the legal case would then respond to questions from the king-archon, which would serve to clarify for all concerned what the issues were and what would be required as evidence at the trial. It appears to be the general rule that prosecutions would almost always be sent to trial, as long as the charges themselves were in appropriate legal order. Those who sought to abuse the courts by initiating frivolous or patently inappropriate charges were fined if they did not win at least one-fifth of the jurors' votes. So, even if the king-archon had serious doubts about the merits of some prosecution, he would ordinarily send it to trial on the assumption that prosecutions lacking in merit would be dealt with this other way. At the end of the *anakrisis*, then, a trial date would be set, and the king-archon would determine what size of jury would be required. In Socrates' case, 500 jurors were selected, chosen by lot from a list of volunteers.

The *Euthyphro* is set on the steps of the king-archon's office. From the way the dialogue begins, Socrates has plainly already received the summons. It is not entirely clear, however, whether Socrates has perhaps come to the king-archon's office for the first time – that is, to have a date for the *anakrisis* set – or whether he meets Euthyphro on the day of the scheduled *anakrisis*.² Euthyphro begins the dialogue expressing surprise at seeing Socrates at the king-archon's office (see 2a1–b2). If Socrates were there for his *anakrisis*, the charge against him would already have been publicly posted, in which case one might expect Euthyphro to know about it. Socrates seems to know very little about Meletus (2b7–11), and also seems somewhat unclear about what the exact

charges are and what Meletus actually means to be claiming in them (2c2–3a5, 3b1–4, 6a7–9). What Socrates does know seems compatible with his having only been summoned by Meletus, and not yet heard anything more about the charge or evidence to be presented against him than he would normally hear in being summoned. Moreover, at *Euthyphro* 5a3–b8 Socrates (no doubt ironically) proposes to become Euthyphro's student, so that Socrates might become defter in his legal defense strategy. At 5a9–b2, he imagines one successful outcome of becoming Euthyphro's student to be that he might persuade Meletus not to bring him to trial. If he was awaiting the *anakrisis* on the day he talks with Euthyphro, however, unless Socrates somehow thinks that all of his lessons might be completed while they wait in line at the king-archon's office, such an outcome would be impossible – on this very day, if it is the day of the *anakrisis*, Socrates' case will be bound over to trial, and it will be too late to persuade Meletus to desist from the prosecution. So Socrates' playful suggestion that he become Euthyphro's student strongly suggests that the legal proceeding for which Socrates has appeared is not the *anakrisis*, but is, rather, the first meeting in response to the summons.

1.1.2 *The charge against Socrates (2a1–3e7)*

When Euthyphro first asks what charge is being brought against Socrates (2b12–c1), Socrates first replies that he is charged with corrupting the youth (2c2–3a5). Euthyphro then responds by asking what Meletus (presumably, in the indictment) claims that Socrates does to corrupt the youth, and Socrates responds,

Absurd things at first hearing, my wonderful friend. For he says that I'm a maker of gods, and because I make new gods but don't believe in the old ones, he has indicted me, or so he says.

(3b1–4)

Euthyphro reacts to this by saying that it must be because Socrates claims to have a divine sign (3b5–9; see also Plato, *Ap.* 31c8–d1, 31d2–3, 40a4–6, 40c3–4, 41d6; *Euthyd.* 272e4; *Phdr.* 242b8–9, 242c2; *Rep.* VI.496c4). Socrates does not contradict Euthyphro's hypothesis – although if we are right that Socrates is

only just now appearing at the king-archon's office in response to the summons, he may not be all that clear about exactly why he is being charged as he is. By the time he faces Meletus in court, however, which is what we find depicted in Plato's *Apology*, Euthyphro's surmise turns out to be exactly correct (see *Ap.* 31c7–d4), and this link between the charge of religious innovation and Socrates' "sign" or *daimonion* ("divine thing") is also corroborated by other ancient sources (see Xenophon, *Ap.* 12).

Diogenes Laertius (c. 250 C.E.) makes the incredible claim that the actual indictment against Socrates was still publicly posted over six hundred years after the actual trial:

The plaintiff's oath in the trial was like this. It is still posted even now, so Favorinus says, in the Metroon. "Meletus, the son of Meletus, of the deme of Pitthos, has written down these things against Socrates, the son of Sophroniscus, of the deme of Alopece, and swears to them. Socrates is guilty of not recognizing the gods that the city recognizes, and of introducing other new divinities, and he is guilty of corrupting the youth. The penalty is to be death."

(2.40)

A much earlier source, Xenophon (*Mem.* 1.1.1), a contemporary of Plato's, also provides the same wording as Diogenes Laertius' version, with one word changed.³ But here in the *Euthyphro*, as we have noted, and also in Plato's *Apology*, both the actual wording of the indictment and also the order of the three specifications of the charge are given differently. In both instances, Plato has Socrates list the corruption of the youth first, followed by the claims that he fails to recognize Athens' gods and introduces new divinities (see *Ap.* 24b8–c1). It is not at all clear what to make of these differences. The substance of the accusation and its three specifications, however, is the same in all of the ancient reports.

1.1.3 *Euthyphro's case (3e8–4e3)*

Euthyphro's situation at first appears to be very different from Socrates': Euthyphro proposes to be the prosecutor in his case,

whereas Socrates is to be the defendant in his. Socrates is charged with impiety; Euthyphro's charge is murder. A younger man is charging Socrates, now an old man; Euthyphro is indicting his own father, whom he describes as "quite old" (4a4). In fact, however, these contrasts almost certainly form part of the dramatic design of the dialogue, in order to situate the two men in the conversation in parallel, but opposite, circumstances. Despite the superficial differences in the charges, in fact both cases involve religious matters – it is plain from Euthyphro's account of his reasons for the prosecution that he is interested in removing what he perceives as a religious pollution that his father's "crime" caused. One of the specifications of the charge against Socrates is that he "corrupted the youth," thereby turning them against their elders (and even, in Aristophanes' comedy, *The Clouds*, against their own fathers) – a situation ironically called to mind by the young Meletus' prosecution of the aged Socrates. At any rate, by this measure, the text seems to support the claim that Euthyphro has already been corrupted in some way, for he seeks to prosecute his own father for murder. After all, Socrates says no one would think of doing what Euthyphro is intent on unless the victim was another relative (4b5–6). Indeed, Plato has Socrates emphasize this point, by playfully proclaiming that Meletus should prosecute Euthyphro for corrupting his elders and father (5b2–6). So, Plato's dialogue turns the accusation against Socrates on its head: how does Socrates interact with youths who are already corrupted – already turned against their elders and fathers?

Euthyphro's case has engendered a certain amount of scholarly controversy, because the case itself seems to be an extraordinary one. The facts, as Euthyphro presents them, are these: Euthyphro's family hired a day-laborer to help with their farm on Naxos, a small island in the Aegean. This laborer got drunk, got in a fight, and killed one of Euthyphro's family's slaves. It is not clear that Euthyphro's father did anything wrong by binding the killer, throwing him in a ditch, and sending a man to the Religious Counselor (called the *exêgêtês*) in Athens who is to inform him as to what should be done.

From the point of view of law, then, it is not at all clear that Euthyphro's father would have any responsibility towards the killer. But from a religious point of view, the fact that the laborer

had killed one of Euthyphro's father's household slaves – and the fact that the killing had presumably taken place on property allotted on Naxos by Athens to Euthyphro's family – required some response. Bloodshed involved great risks of *miasma* or religious pollution, and as the one responsible for the two men and the land, Euthyphro's father seemed to realize that some response was called for. His question was: what should he do? So, he sent to the appropriate religious authority to get some direction in the matter, in the meantime making sure the guilty party did not escape, and evade punishment. The length of time necessary to get a response from the Religious Counselor in Athens, however, was too long, and the prisoner in the meantime (who may also have been injured in the fight with the slave) was not sufficiently cared for. As Euthyphro puts it:

During this time, he [Euthyphro's father] paid little attention to the captive and really didn't care much if he did die because he was a murderer, which is just what happened. He died from hunger and cold and being bound up before the messenger got back from the Religious Counselor.

(4c9–d5)

It is for *this* death – the death of the man who had murdered Euthyphro's family's slave – that Euthyphro proposes to prosecute his own father for murder. It is also plain that some time has elapsed since these unfortunate events took place. Euthyphro says that all of this took place “when we were working our farm on Naxos.” Scholars generally agree that this reference shows that Euthyphro's family had been allotted some land on Naxos (called a *cleruchy*) by the Athenian government. But the Athenians lost their *cleruchies* when the Peloponnesian War came to an end (in early 404 B.C.E), and so that meant that at least five years or so had elapsed since Euthyphro's father had committed his alleged “crime.” Some scholars have found it so implausible that Euthyphro would wait so long to prosecute his father that they have found Euthyphro's entire situation historically implausible.⁴ Others, however, have argued that the entire legal situation in Athens during the aftermath of the war

would have been so tenuous that any such prosecution may well have not been possible earlier.⁵

And there is yet another puzzle about this case: the Athenian law on homicide seems to have stipulated that a relative of the victim should legally prosecute on such a charge. In Euthyphro's case, however, it is the alleged *murderer* who is the relative of the prosecutor; the victim was only a day-laborer who worked on the farm Euthyphro's family had at the island of Naxos. No doubt this is one of the reasons Plato has Socrates respond as he does when he hears that Euthyphro intends to prosecute his father for murder:

Surely the one killed by your father is a member of your family. Of course, that's obvious. I suppose you wouldn't prosecute him for the murder of someone outside the family.

(4b4–6)

Some scholars have argued that the law on homicide did not simply state a preference or presumption that the prosecutor be a relative of the victim; instead, they claim, the law was so restrictive that the prosecutor would have *had* to be a relative of the victim.⁶ Now, neither Euthyphro nor Socrates seem to react to Euthyphro's legal situation as if the law were restrictive in this way, for if it were, Euthyphro's case could not be made (or, at any rate, could not be made by Euthyphro himself). And since this passage in the *Euthyphro* is one of three ancient texts on which scholars have based their judgments about the degree of restrictiveness of the homicide law,⁷ and because, in our view, neither of the other two texts requires the more restrictive understanding of the law,⁸ we are inclined to believe that, however unusual Euthyphro's case may be, it is not one that would have been legally impossible.

The first thing Euthyphro would have had to do is to make a proclamation in the Athenian *agora*, requiring the accused to "keep away from the things laid down by law," which was intended to have the effect of minimizing the risk of pollution from the crime to the rest of Athens and its citizens.⁹ The prosecutor would then go to the king-archon and enter his charge, whereupon the king-archon would also make a proclamation reiterating that the accused

should “keep away from the things laid down by law.” This proclamation would have the effect of a restraining order, preventing the accused from setting foot in any temple, from taking part in any public religious ceremony, from going to the *agora* or any of its buildings (including any court of law other than the one in which and only when his own case was tried), and any other public buildings. If the accused were found in any of these places, he would be summarily arrested and thrown in jail until his trial. The net effect, as MacDowell puts it,¹⁰ was a kind of temporary disfranchisement.

Assuming that the case met minimal legal standards, the king-archon would then schedule the first of three preliminary hearings, in this case called *prodikasiai* (unlike the single *anakrisis*) for other crimes). These hearings would be scheduled – one per month – over the next three months, with the actual trial to be held in the fourth month, and because all of the proceedings had to be held under the same king-archon, whose term was one year and who could not succeed himself, this meant that murder trials could not be initiated in the last three months of the year.

Just as Euthyphro seemed wholly unaware of why Socrates would have shown up at the king-archon’s office, so too, when the two men begin talking, Socrates has no knowledge of Euthyphro’s case. It is, of course, not impossible that Euthyphro’s case might already have gone through one or more of these preliminary stages and Socrates not have paid any attention to it. But it also seems plausible to think that Euthyphro, too, has come for the first meeting with the king-archon, having only just summoned his father thus far.¹¹ At any rate, the mirroring of the two men’s legal circumstances adds yet another reason for thinking that both had appeared at the king-archon’s office at the same stages in their legal cases, which we take to be the first meeting to respond to the summons.¹²

1.1.4 *The opening and closing scenes of the dialogue (4e4–5c8)*

The dialogue begins with Euthyphro greeting Socrates before the king-archon’s office. From the way Euthyphro greets Socrates, it appears that it is Euthyphro – and not Socrates – who has just

appeared on the scene. There are thus two possibilities one can imagine, and which one we choose will make some difference as to how we interpret the entire dialogue. On the one hand, perhaps we are to imagine that Euthyphro has just completed his business with the king-archon, and is coming out of the latter's office, whereupon he sees Socrates waiting outside for a later meeting with the magistrate. If so, we may assume that whatever legal business Euthyphro had come to do that day had already been completed successfully by the time the conversation began. This view of the scene has had a number of adherents, including John Burnet, whose 1924 edition of the Greek texts of the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito* continues to be widely cited for its erudition. According to Burnet, the opening scene of the dialogue is one in which Socrates is

waiting outside [of the king-archon's office] till his turn comes, when he is accosted by Euthyphro. As Euthyphro too had a case before the 'King', and as, at the end of the dialogue, he suddenly remembers another engagement (15e3), we must suppose that his business here is over for the present, and that he is coming out of the [king-archon's office] when he sees Socrates.¹³

Burnet is plainly right to understand that Euthyphro's entrance and sudden exit are likely to be significant features of Plato's crafting of the dialogue. But is Burnet right about Euthyphro's entrance? One ancient source, at any rate, seems to have understood the situation markedly differently from the way Burnet does. According to Diogenes Laertius (c. 250 C.E.),

After discussing something about piety with Euthyphro, who had indicted his father for the murder of a stranger, he [Socrates] diverted him [from what he had set out to do].¹⁴

In other words, Diogenes seems to suppose that Socrates' conversation with Euthyphro is to be understood as taking place *before* Euthyphro had done his business with the king-archon – otherwise, it would already be too late for Socrates to “divert” Euthyphro from his prosecution. In Diogenes' version of the opening scene, we

should therefore picture Euthyphro arriving at the king-archon's office and finding Socrates already waiting there.

The difference between these two views of the opening scene has enormous impact on what we are to imagine about Euthyphro's (proposed) prosecution of his father. For if he has already completed his business at the king-archon's office, as Burnet suggests, then Euthyphro's hasty departure at the end of the dialogue shows nothing more than haste to get away from Socrates' questioning. If Diogenes is right, however – whether we imagine Euthyphro simply as having come to present his summons to the king-archon, or even more strongly, if we imagine him as having come for the preliminary hearing for his case – then Euthyphro's sudden exit from the scene means that he is also abandoning his prosecution, at least for the moment.

Plato does not provide clear “stage directions,” as it were, or we would not likely have such a difference of opinion about the beginning and end of the dialogue. Because either conception of the opening scene – and therefore, the consequences or lack of such implied by Euthyphro's departure at the end – is logically compatible with what we find in the text, we do not suppose there can ever be a decisive answer to the question of which of the competing views is correct. Our own preference in this case, however, is for Diogenes' understanding of the dialogue, precisely because it seems to us to add to the dramatic effect, and we therefore think it does more credit to Plato's literary and philosophical craftsmanship.

Notice that when Socrates turns the conversation (at 3e8) to Euthyphro's own case, one of the very first things Euthyphro acknowledges is that he is thought to be insane to be undertaking his prosecution (4a1). Socrates reacts with incredulity (4a7) when Euthyphro explains that it is his father he proposes to prosecute (4a6), and then cries out an expletive (“Heracles!”) when Euthyphro says that the charge is to be murder (4a11). Socrates goes on immediately to note that

Surely most people *don't* see how that's right! Indeed, I don't think this would be done correctly by just anyone, but I suppose it takes someone *far* advanced in wisdom.

(4a11–b2)

Euthyphro admits that his decision betokens an unusual degree of wisdom on his part (4b3), and later acknowledges (what no one would have doubted) that his father and other relatives are outraged at Euthyphro's decision (4d5–e1). Socrates continues to remind Euthyphro throughout the dialogue that the religious stakes Euthyphro faces are very high, indeed: by acting as he proposes to do, Euthyphro actually risks committing an egregious offense against piety, rather than – as he claims – demonstrating an unusual commitment to and understanding of this most important religious virtue (see 4b4–6, 4e4–8, 5c8–d1, 6d2–4, 9a1–b4). Indeed, the very last thing Socrates says to Euthyphro before the younger man suddenly hurries off makes the point vividly:

If you didn't know clearly what the pious and the impious are, you couldn't possibly be trying to prosecute your elderly father for murder on behalf of a servant, and you'd fear that you'd be at risk with respect to the gods that you would be wrong in doing this and would be held in contempt by men.

(15d4–8)

Euthyphro's relatives are outraged at his reckless plan to prosecute his own father; but plainly nothing they have managed to say or to do has persuaded him to desist from the prosecution. Socrates, however, though obviously shocked at Euthyphro's presumption, never directly attempts to dissuade the younger man from his plan. Instead, Socrates gets him to see and agree that no one would dare risk such an adventure unless he knew clearly and confidently what piety required. But in order to make difficult decisions about piety – in order to make expert judgments about whether some very controversial and highly unusual plan of action is or is not pious – one would surely have to have an expert's knowledge of what piety is. On this point, at any rate, Socrates and Euthyphro agree entirely (see 4a11–b3, 4e9–5a2). If Socrates can show Euthyphro that the latter does *not* have such expert knowledge of piety, then he will also have succeeded in undermining utterly the arrogant confidence that spurred the young man into such dangerous and potentially deadly conflict with his father and other relatives. This, we argue, is precisely what the dialogue shows Socrates doing with Euthyphro – with the

result, as Diogenes had it, that Socrates actually succeeds (at least temporarily) in achieving what all of Euthyphro's relatives failed to achieve: Socrates "diverts" Euthyphro from the prosecution. After talking with Socrates for a while, Euthyphro loses his confidence in his religious expertise, and beats a hasty retreat from what he now senses is too risky a course of action, the religious requirements about which have been revealed to be much less clear than he had supposed them to be. Socrates has not *proven* Euthyphro's proposed prosecution to be wrong or impious; he has, instead, only revealed to Euthyphro that the latter is in no position to make the kinds of judgments any such radical action would require.

In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates makes the startling claim that he is no teacher and has never taught anyone anything (*Ap.* 33a5–6, 33b3–6). Instead, he claims only to ask questions and not to promote specific doctrines or beliefs. In the *Euthyphro*, we claim, Plato depicts Socrates in precisely the way in which he has Socrates characterize himself to the jurors – he does not attempt to teach Euthyphro any particular view about Euthyphro's proposed prosecution. But his questions make all the difference, and the difference plays out in most important ways in the moral and legal lives of Euthyphro and his family. Far from being a corrupter of youth, the Socrates of Plato's *Euthyphro* is revealed to be the savior of a young man so badly corrupted that even his family – his own father – could no longer help him. And in saving the young man, Socrates also saves his father and other family members. Precisely because this seems so entirely in keeping with Plato's apparent purposes in his Socratic dialogues, we are strongly inclined to the ancient view of the opening scene, and disinclined to accept Burnet's version – which would have the effect of nullifying all of the above dramatic results.

1.2 DEFINING PIETY

1.2.1 *Socrates asks Euthyphro to say what piety is* (5c8–6a6)

Euthyphro's name literally means "straight thinker." From the very beginning of the argument, however, Euthyphro's ability to

think along straight and logical lines is anything but evident. Having very vividly identified Euthyphro's presumption of wisdom about religious matters, at 5c9, Socrates issues his challenge to the younger man to explain what piety is:

What sort of thing do you say piety and impiety are as they apply to murder and to other things, or isn't the pious the same thing in every action, and isn't impiety in turn the complete opposite of piety, but in itself the same as itself, and doesn't all that is going to be impious in fact have a certain distinctive feature of impiousness?

(5c9–d5)

Many of Plato's Socratic dialogues are centered around what is known as the "What is F-ness?" question, where F is some significant virtue or other ethical term. In this case, the question of the dialogue will be, "What is piety?" Having established that Euthyphro's present course of action is based on his presumption of extraordinary and sophisticated expertise in this area, Euthyphro eagerly answers Socrates' question. Piety, he proclaims, is doing the sort of thing he now proposes to do: prosecuting wrongdoers no matter what their relation to you might be (5d8–e5). He then compares his own conflict with his father with the myth about Zeus imprisoning his own father, Cronus, and Cronus' earlier castration of his father, Ouranus. Nonetheless, Euthyphro exclaims, people think Zeus is "the best and most just of the gods," but then turn around and get angry with him for prosecuting his father for wrongdoing.

Euthyphro's comparison of his own case to the myths about Zeus and Zeus' father and grandfather is shocking. Greek popular myths about the gods often portrayed them behaving in ways that would be abhorred among human beings. Indeed, many of the stories about the gods characterize them as engaging in activities that would actually be illegal – even to the point of meriting capital punishment – among human beings. The logic of Euthyphro's argument, then, is elusive at best: is he proposing that his family members would not or should not be angry with him if he imprisoned or castrated his father? Or is it, rather, that if they deplore

what Euthyphro intends, so, too, should they deplore the actions of gods?

It has sometimes been popular among scholars to think of Euthyphro as a kind of stiff-necked traditionalist about religion.¹⁵ But Euthyphro's incredible arrogance, in comparing his own actions with those of the gods, is enough in itself to prove decisively otherwise.¹⁶ But Socrates already knew as much about Euthyphro, precisely because the young man was ready to take such serious action against his own father, thus plainly violating his duty of filial piety,¹⁷ as he suggested at 4e7–8, and to which he points again at 9a1–b4 and at 15d4–8.

So Socrates does not directly react to this new outrage by Euthyphro, but rather subtly points out the flaw in Euthyphro's own position. Euthyphro has criticized his relatives for what he regards as the contradiction in their views about the gods and Euthyphro's actions. Socrates, in response, notes that the myths to which Euthyphro compares his own situation in effect accuse the gods of evil and shameful acts (6a7–10). If Euthyphro agrees that the actions of Ouranus, Cronus, and Zeus are not the sort that we should associate with moral gods, then Euthyphro cannot simply point to such gods and their actions as moral models for his own behavior. On the other hand, if Euthyphro is really prepared to claim that such myths about the gods are consistent with the gods being fully and flawlessly moral (which, we will soon find, he is not at all clear about in his own mind), then he cannot explain what injustices Ouranus and Cronus did – that is, what wrongs were done by allegedly morally flawless divinities – that would merit such cruel treatment in response by their sons. Briefly, if the gods really do terrible and evil things to one another, on what basis can we mortals judge some of their actions good, and some bad? In order to answer this question, Socrates realizes, Euthyphro would have to be able to be a better judge of morality than the gods themselves appear to be.

1.2.2 *Socrates and the myths (6a7–c7)*

Now, the way that Socrates expresses this challenge to Euthyphro has sometimes been taken to make a specific and historically