

EUTHYPHRO

Euthyphro was written by Plato c. 390 BCE depicting an event
(or Socrates' version of an event) of c. 400 BCE.
This paraphrase is to make his thoughts more palatable to modern Americans.

© Cary Cook 1999

CAST: SOCRATES: age 70, white hair & beard
EUTHYPHRO: age 30 - 50

SET: the front porch of the Athenian administration building

AT RISE: EUTHYPHRO is sitting patiently on this porch. SOCRATES enters.

SOC.

Euthyphro?

EUTH.

Yes. Uhh...

SOC.

Socrates.

EUTH.

Yes, of course, Socrates. I hardly recognized you outside the Lyceum. What are you doing here at the porch of the archon? I thought you didn't care for legal matters.

SOC.

Actually I don't. I've been indicted.

EUTH.

You? By whom?

SOC.

Somebody named Miletus from Pitthus.

EUTH.

Don't know him.

SOC.

I don't either... very well. Young man, little beard, hook nose.

EUTH.

Hmm... No. What sort of indictment?

SOC.

Corrupting the youth.

EUTH.

Only the youth? I thought you corrupted everybody. [pause]

A jest. I was jesting.

SOC.

Of course. It's hard to know what to take seriously any more.

EUTH.

And if Miletus succeeds, will he go after corruptors of adults?

SOC.

I suppose. But then there's the bright side.

Athens will be totally free of corruption.

EUTH.

I'm sure. What are the charges, specifically?

SOC.

Bunch of drivel. He says I am a maker of gods, and therefore I don't believe in the old ones. So he's indicting me in defense of the older gods.

EUTH.

Pious boy. But you know, you have claimed that you've received divine communication at times. I've heard you say that.

SOC.

True.

EUTH.

Charges like this are popular. Athenians don't like religious innovations. I guess they'll be after me next.

SOC.

You?

EUTH.

No doubt. I hear the gods too, in case you haven't heard. Nothing woowoo, but I get messages. You know, the kind where it's just so right on, and you go "*Woah, where did that come from?*" Of course, I soft peddle it. I don't come right out in the areopagus, but off to the side with a few assemblymen. I should have known better.

SOC.

Not well received?

EUTH.

They laughed at me, called me crazy. Even after I prophesied things that came to pass, these people still don't listen. I didn't foretell a single thing that didn't happen. Bunch of petty politicians. They're jealous of men like us.

SOC.

I think you're safe. Athenians don't care if you say clever things, even impious things, as long as nobody else cares either. But if you start making converts, then you're dangerous.

EUTH.

Exactly why I've steered clear of it.

SOC.

You are wise to impart your wisdom sparingly, Euthyphro. I fear that my love of conversation and lack of charge has them thinking I pay people to listen to me. I wouldn't mind if they laughed at me. But since they are serious, I suppose only soothsayers like you can tell how this will end.

EUTH.

Ah, these law suits are a die toss. Usually don't amount to much. I think my case will come out okay.

SOC.

You defending or prosecuting?

EUTH.
Prosecuting.

SOC.
Whom?

EUTH.
My father.

SOC.
Your father?

EUTH.
Mmh.

SOC.
What are you charging him with?

EUTH.
Murder.

SOC.
Your father killed somebody?

EUTH.
Mm hm.

SOC.
You obviously have a very acute sense of right and wrong,
Euthyphro.

EUTH.
Sharp as flint.

SOC.
This person who was killed by your father - a relative I
suppose? But of course. You wouldn't charge your father
with murdering a stranger.

EUTH.
Why not?

SOC.

Well, one would expect filial...

EUTH.

Ridiculous! Surely the famous Socrates can see that one's relationship to the victim is irrelevant. All that matters is whether the action of the slayer was justified. If he is justified, you let him alone. If not, prosecute him. Personal relationship to the criminal is just as irrelevant. You start making exceptions, you share in his guilt.

SOC.

Mmm... Whom did your father kill?

EUTH.

A hired workman of mine. The man got drunk and butchered one of our house slaves.

SOC.

The workman or your father?

EUTH.

The workman killed the slave. So my father tied him up and threw him in a ditch.

SOC.

The workman?

EUTH.

Right. Then he sent a messenger here to Athens to ask the authorities what he should do. Meantime my father paid no attention to the man in the ditch, because he was a murderer and he had it coming. Well, the fellow died before the messenger returned.

SOC.

The murderer died.

EUTH.

Exactly, so my father technically murdered the murderer. Of course, the whole family is furious at me for bringing charges, but I just have to live with it. They have no spiritual eyes, you know - no sense of divine law.

SOC.

Unlike yourself.

EUTH.

Well, I'm no Delphic oracle, but I dare say I've yet to see an Athenian with a keener ear.

SOC.

So in prosecuting your father for murder, you are not afraid of doing something immoral yourself?

EUTH.

Not at all. Clear case of morality over emotion.

SOC.

Interesting. You seem to have divine law and morality down to a science. I've been trying to figure it out all my life. Maybe I should become your pupil before my lawsuit with Meletus. If I am to blame for the youth being corrupted, I could always say that you are to blame for my being corrupted. Pin it all on you.

EUTH.

By Zeus, Socrates, if this kid ever indicted me, I'd be the one putting him on trial.

SOC.

Ah, I would love to see that! Now tell me how this works. What is the nature of good and bad behavior? - not just in relation to murder - everything. Is not righteousness always the same in every righteous act? - and unrighteousness the same in every unrighteous act?

EUTH.

Certainly.

SOC.

So then what is it? What is righteousness?

EUTH.

It's uh... what I'm doing right now - prosecuting the wrong doer regardless of who he is. You want proof? Is not Zeus the most righteous of the gods?

SOC.

Uhh...

EUTH.

Of course he is; everyone knows it. And Zeus put his own father, Cronus, in bonds because Cronus was eating his children. And Cronus mutilated his own father, Uranus, for similar conduct.

SOC.

Yeah. Uh... You know, one of the reasons I'm being prosecuted is because I find it difficult to accept these stories. Do you really believe these things actually happened?

EUTH.

Sure. What's hard to believe? And let me tell you something. There's more things that most people haven't even heard about. I could tell you some stories about the gods that would amaze you.

SOC.

I don't doubt that a bit. Maybe some other time. But right now let's go back to the question. I asked you what righteousness is, and you said it was what you're doing.

EUTH.

Exactly.

SOC.

But there are other things besides what you are doing that are also righteous.

EUTH.

Of course.

SOC.

So what I'm asking for is a definition, not an example - not even a bunch of examples. I'm asking what makes all good acts good? - or bad acts bad? You said all righteous acts were the same in this one essential thing, remember?

DISCUSSION BREAK

1. What makes an act righteous or unrighteous - the results or the intent of the actor?
-

EUTH.

I remember.

SOC.

Do you mind telling me what it is?

EUTH.

Okay, if you wish me to explain in that way, I will be happy to do so.

SOC.

I do wish it.

EUTH.

Well then, those acts which are approved by the gods are righteous, and disapproved acts are unrighteous.

SOC.

Excellent! That's the kind of answer I was asking for. However, my next problem is that I am not yet sure if it's true. So are you prepared to show me that what you say is true?

EUTH.

Certainly.

SOC.

Good, 'cause I have a serious problem with it. You have just mentioned divine squabbles between Zeus and Cronus, Cronus and Uranus. And we've all heard stories of more such quarrels between gods.

EUTH.

And I could tell you some doosies.

SOC.

But more importantly, what things do they disagree about? If you and I were to disagree about say... which of two pots is heavier, we could simply weigh them. Or which of us is taller, we could measure ourselves against a wall.

EUTH.

Of course.

SOC.

But what if we had nothing to measure by? For instance, how does one measure the righteousness of an act? If we have no scale to put it on, then surely we are going to disagree at least some of the time. And these matters are often so important that such disagreements can cause quarrels, fights, even wars.

EUTH.

Yes, these questions can make enemies.

SOC.

And what about the gods? Do they not disagree on these same matters? Is not the same act righteous to one god and unrighteous to another?

EUTH.

Well, if you want to split hairs.

SOC.

Then you did not answer my question. Your act of punishing your father may be pleasing to Zeus, but hateful to Cronus.

EUTH.

Well yes, but you have to look at the principle. Surely all of the gods would say that he who kills anyone wrongfully ought to pay the penalty.

SOC.

Oh, well, if you are going to say 'wrongfully', sure. Anyone will agree that if you do wrong, you should pay the penalty.

EUTH.

Not necessarily. The law courts are full of people who do wrong. And they'll do anything they can to avoid punishment.

SOC.

Yes, but do they acknowledge that they have done wrong, and still say that they don't deserve punishment?

EUTH.

No, they don't actually admit it.

SOC.

Then they're not disagreeing with the principle that wrong acts should be punished. They're saying they didn't do a wrong act.

EUTH.

Uh... true.

SOC.

Then is not the same thing true of the gods? Surely they don't dispute the principle of punishing wrong acts; they dispute about each separate act - whether it's right or wrong.

EUTH.

Certainly.

SOC.

Now in your case, we have a murderer who was tied up and thrown in a ditch by your father, who apparently didn't intend to kill him, because he sent for advice on how to handle it. So how do you know the gods didn't want your father to do exactly what he did? If you can answer that I will glorify your wisdom as long as I live.

EUTH.

I'm not sure I can satisfy you on this, but I've got it worked out so the judges will understand clearly, if they listen to me.

SOC.

They'll listen if you say it well. But wait a minute; I just thought of something. Even if you prove conclusively that all the gods hate what your father did, it wouldn't answer my question. I still wouldn't know how to judge which acts all the gods approve or disapprove. But at least we made some progress. We can say that whatever all the gods love is righteous and whatever they all hate is unrighteous.

EUTH.

Precisely. That's what I meant in the first place.

SOC.

Hmm... yes. But it does bring me to another question. Is that which is righteous loved by the gods because it is righteous, or is it righteous because it is loved by the gods?

EUTH.

Uh... the first, I would suppose.

DISCUSSION BREAK

1. Does monotheism totally remove the problem of disagreement among gods?
2. Would you say that whatever God loves is righteous, & the opposite unrighteous?
3. Is Socrates' question about cause & effect relevant to his previous question about what makes all righteous acts right?

SOC.

Then you agree that a thing is what it is, not because something happens to it, but because of what it is.

EUTH.

Yes, it's rather obvious... when you think about it.

SOC.

But consider, is that which is dear to the gods dear to them because they live it? Or do they love it because it is dear?

EUTH.

Well the same as the other, of course.

SOC.

Is it really? Does someone love something because it is dear? Does it not become dear because it is loved?

EUTH.

[pause] Uh, well I suppose if you want to get technical.

SOC.

Now what did you say about what is righteous? Is it loved by the gods because it is righteous, or righteous because it is loved?

EUTH.

Loved because it is righteous.

SOC.

Then that which is righteous is different from that which is dear to the gods. Because righteousness is loved because it is righteous. Whereas what is dear to the gods is dear to the because they love it. You see, something happens to righteousness because of what it is, but piety becomes what it is because something happens to it.

EUTH.

Uh huh...

SOC.

Now let's go back to my original question. I asked you what makes all good acts good, and all bad acts bad. Yet you have told me not what makes them good or bad, but only that they are loved or hated because they are good or bad. So if you please, do not hide it from me, but begin over again and tell me what righteousness is, no matter whether it is loved by the gods or anything else happens to it.

EUTH.

By Zeus, Socrates! How can you expect a man to explain anything when you keep moving the words around?

SOC.

Moving them around?

EUTH.

Yes. I put my words very carefully where they belong, and you pick them up and put them somewhere else, and say, "Aha! *They don't fit over here.*"

SOC.

Well, they don't.

EUTH.

Which is exactly why I didn't put them over there!

SOC.

Well surely a word must mean the same thing no matter where you put it.

EUTH.

Not necessarily, and I can prove it. I can give you an example - a jest.

SOC.

A jest? You mean like chickens crossing roads?

EUTH.

No, I mean the kind where you take a word and it means one thing, and then you use the same word to mean something else.

SOC.

Oh yes, I know what you mean. You find those funny?

EUTH.

Quite often.

SOC.

Maybe someday you will explain them to me. But for now I must admit that I've been trying all my life to keep words still, and without success. To me they are all like grasshoppers. If you would tell me how to tame them, I would be most grateful.

EUTH.

It's easy. You just treat them with respect. Words are like women. You don't be looking down their dress, and asking them where else they've been.

SOC.

Thank you, Euthyphro. Respect. I must learn to respect words. Okay then, perhaps you can help me with another word. I am also being charged with impiety.

DISCUSSION BREAK

1. Is Euthyphro's complaint justified? What words were moved?
2. Socrates tells Euthyphro to forget about what happens to good or bad acts, but to go back and define them.
Did Socrates himself not bring up the subject of causation?

EUTH.

You want my assistance with the word itself.

SOC.

Yes. If you could help me keep it still, I would be so grateful. Please tell me, is everything that is pious right?

EUTH.

Certainly.

SOC.

But is everything that is right also pious? Or is part of it pious and part something else?

EUTH.

Uhh...

SOC.

Perhaps this will clarify the problem. Do you recall when the poet said, "Zeus the creator, him who made all things, thou wilt not name; for where fear is, there also is reverence"?

EUTH.

No.

SOC.

Well, take my word for it, he did. And at first I thought he was right, but now I have come to disagree with him. Shall I tell you why?

EUTH.

By all means.

SOC.

It does not seem to me that in all places where fear is, there also is reverence; because we fear disease and the like, but we don't revere these things. You agree?

EUTH.

Certainly.

SOC.

But I think that where reverence is, there also is fear, because when we revere someone we also fear him - right?

EUTH.

Yes, we do fear.

SOC.

Then it is not correct to say, "where fear is, there also is reverence," but rather, where reverence is, there also is fear.

EUTH.

Perfectly correct.

SOC.

And likewise with piety and righteousness. Are there not some things which are right, but have nothing to do with piety?

EUTH.

Yes.

SOC.

Then it is not correct to say, "where the right is, there also is piety," but rather, where piety is, there also is right.

EUTH.

I agree.

SOC.

Now observe my next point. If piety is a part of the right, how can we discover what part it is?

EUTH.

How many parts are there?

SOC.

I have no idea; and therein lies my problem. Now if I were to ask, "What part of numbers are even?" you could reply, "Surely those which are divisible by two".

EUTH.

I agree.

SOC.

Now try if you would to teach me what part of the right piety is.

EUTH.

Very well, it is my opinion, Socrates, that piety is the part of the right which has to do with the attention of the gods, and the remaining part of the right is that which has to do with the service of men.

SOC.

Excellent, Euthyphro! That would divide it nicely, yes. But what do you mean by "attention"? We pay attention not only to gods, but to all kinds of things. I suppose you pay attention to your horse also.

EUTH.

Yes, but not the same way.

SOC.

Exactly. You pay attention to your horse in order to keep it healthy - to improve it. But you don't pay attention to the gods to keep them healthy. Do you think your attention improves the gods?

EUTH.

No, by Zeus! Not I.

SOC.

Nor do I think that is what you meant. But I asked what you meant by "attention to the gods" just because I did not think you meant anything like that.

EUTH.

You are right; that is not what I mean.

SOC.

Well, then what is the purpose of attending to them?

EUTH.

Purpose?

SOC.

Yes. Attending to horses serves the purpose of improving them. What is the purpose of attending to the gods if we can't improve them?

EUTH.

Many fine purposes, Socrates. We obtain their favor and avoid their anger.

SOC.

And you could no doubt cite many examples of this?

EUTH.

Most heartily. Why just consider the wealth of the temples and priesthods...

SOC.

I take your word for it. Now tell me if you please what manner of attending to the gods is piety?

EUTH.

It is a long task to learn accurately all about these things. But simply, when one knows how to say and do what is gratifying to the gods, in praying and sacrificing, that is piety.

SOC.

The piety is a kind of science of sacrificing and praying?

EUTH.

Yes.

SOC.

And sacrificing is making gifts to the gods, and praying is asking from them?

EUTH.

Exactly, Socrates.

SOC.

Then to clarify, piety would be a science of giving and asking.

EUTH.

You understand perfectly what I said.

SOC.

But tell me, what advantage have the gods from our gifts? I understand that men ask for what they need, but what do the gods need from men?

EUTH.

I dare say the gods need nothing from men.

SOC.

Well then, what would those gifts of ours to the gods be?

EUTH.

Why, honor and praise, of course. Gratitude for what they give to us.

SOC.

But the gods don't *need* these things; they just *want* these things?

EUTH.

That is theologically correct.

SOC.

And they want these things not because they *need* them, but because these things are dear to them?

EUTH.

Yes, very dear.

SOC.

Ah, so piety is that which is dear to the gods.

EUTH.

Yes, by Zeus, you have it.

SOC.

Oh joy! I have so long awaited this. Let me be sure I have it straight. Is piety just a part of that which is dear to the gods? Or is that which is dear to the gods a part of piety?

EUTH.

The first. All that is pious is dear.

SOC.

Wonderful! And is it dear to the gods because it is pious, or pious because it is dear?

EUTH.

Pious because it is dear.

SOC.

Uh oh.

EUTH.

Uh oh, what?

SOC.

Ooo. This is truly unfortunate.

EUTH.

Unfortunate?

SOC.

Yes. If you remember, we agreed that righteousness is loved because it is righteous, not righteous because it is loved.

EUTH.

Yes.

SOC.

And all that is pious is righteous.

EUTH.

Yes.

SOC.

But now you say that piety is pious because it is dear to the gods. And what is dear to the gods is dear to them because they love it. Is that not correct? [pause] Come now, if the word is too painful, just nod your head.

[Euthyphro nods in assent.]

Now if righteousness is loved because of what it is, and piety is what it is because it is loved, then how can piety possibly be a part of righteousness? [pause]

Alas, Euthyphro, I had so hoped that you would help me keep the words from jumping, but now it appears that you, yourself have moved them. Now I see no alternative but to start over from the beginning and attempt to discover where we made our mistake. So I will ask you once again. What is righteousness?

EUTH.

Ah, the time has slipped by so quickly. I had almost forgotten to do something I had promised my wife.

SOC.

And what is that?

EUTH.

Something very important.

SOC.

Perhaps I could assist you.

EUTH.

No, it is not the assisting kind of important.

SOC.

But you have waited so long to see the archon. What of your appointment?

EUTH.

Please tell the archon I had urgent business.

SOC.

Of a righteous nature, no doubt. I shall convey it to him with your regrets.

EUTH.

You are so kind.

[Exit EUTHYPHRO.]

SOC.

[sighs] I had so hoped for an answer.
Well, it appears that I am next in line.

Fade out

FINAL DISCUSSION

1. If A is what it is because B happens to it, does it necessarily follow that B doesn't happen to A because of what A is?
2. If A is a subset of B, and all B are C, does it follow that all A are C?
3. If A is a subset of B, and all A are C, does it follow that all B are C?