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"What Are You Doing? You Are Leaving Now!": The Twin Trials and Tragic Irony in Plato's *Euthyphro*

In a recent article, Geoffrey Bakewell contends that the introduction to Plato's *Republic* – Socrates' and Glaucon's walk from Athens to the port at Piraeus – is much more than mere background to the dialogue but is instead tied directly to its philosophical content.¹ Specifically, by exploring the topography of this journey and the connotations it would have held for the interlocutors themselves as well as for Plato and his audience, Bakewell demonstrates that the opening of the work helps to shape the ensuing conversation and signals its important themes. In this paper, I consider whether a similar framework of analysis may be applied to the *Euthyphro*, with the two trials – Socrates' upcoming defense on an impiety charge and Euthyphro's prosecution of his father on a murder charge – filling the role of an introduction which informs the structure and content of the entire dialogue. The analogy is of course inexact, since the *Euthyphro* does not contain any physical journey whose route can be mined for details on subtle political or philosophical references. Rather, the affinity with Bakewell is one of general approach and perspective; in reflecting on how the trials shape the internal dynamics of the dialogue in addition to their meaning to the outside reader, we

¹ G. Bakewell, "'I Went Down to Piraeus Yesterday': Routes, Roads, and Plato's *Republic*," *Hesperia* 89, no. 4 (2020), pp. 725-55.

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may ultimately hope to reveal something of Plato's underlying message.

While previous scholarship has tackled the issue of the trials and their place in the *Euthyphro*, most of this work has tended to focus either on the question of whether Euthyphro has a valid case against his father under Athenian law² or on what his decision to prosecute in the first place might reveal about his religious or moral predispositions.³ By contrast, the importance of Socrates' impending trial has gone relatively overlooked. It has rarely been treated as anything beyond context, though Diamond's article is a notable exception. Diamond suggests that the "parallel trials" establish the innocence of Socrates and Euthyphro's elderly father, on the one hand, while condemning the recklessness of their accusers on the other – he even observes that Euthyphro's abandonment of the conversation at 15e-16a is described with the same verb (the participle καταβαλῶν) used for Euthyphro's father tossing the worker into the trench at 4c7.⁴

² See M. Gagarin, "The Prosecution of Homicide in Athens," *GRBS* 20, no. 4 (1979), pp. 301-23; I. Kidd, "The Case of Homicide in Plato's *Euthyphro*," in *Owls to Athens*, ed. E. Craik (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 213-22; S. Panagiotou, "Plato's *Euthyphro* and the Attic Code on Homicide," *Hermes* 102, no. 3 (1974), pp. 419-37.

³ See, *inter alia*, J. Beversluis, "Euthyphro" in *Cross-Examining Socrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 160-84; M.J. Edwards, "In Defense of Euthyphro," *AJP* 121, no. 2 (2000), pp. 213-24.; R.J. Klonoski, "The Portico of the Archon Basileus: On the Significance of the Setting of Plato's *Euthyphro*," *CJ* 81, no. 2 (1985-6), pp. 130-7.

⁴ E. Diamond, "Parallel Trials: The Dramatic Structure of Plato's *Euthyphro*," *CQ* (new series) 62, no. 2 (2012), p. 530. I tend to believe that Diamond pushes the Socrates/father and Euthyphro/accuser comparison too far; however, he provides a useful framework for considering that both trials have an equally important role to play in the dialogue.

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In this paper, I am concerned with the way in which both trials, in addition to supplying context which conveniently introduces the topic of piety, are central to the conversation that develops throughout the *Euthyphro*. Not only do I posit that explicit references to one or both of the trials create narrative structure for the dialogue by providing a mental reference point to which the interlocutors continually return, but also that they inform the tone and content of Socrates' and Euthyphro's discussion. That is to say, I wish to contend that the two speakers constantly appear aware of the presence of the upcoming cases and respond accordingly throughout their arguments. Specifically, I suggest that emphasizing this aspect of the dialogue enables us to make sense of moments in which Socrates appears to hesitate or seems unusually anxious to learn from Euthyphro's ideas.

In demonstrating these points, I divide the remainder of this paper into three sections followed by a brief concluding discussion: first, I provide a brief summation of the two trials and important context; second, I suggest that mentions of the trials lend a structural pattern to the dialogue; third, I examine subtler ways in which Socrates and Euthyphro reveal that the trials are "on their minds," so to speak, and adjust their arguments in light of this reality.

I

Before progressing to my analysis, I begin by establishing the background that is necessary to ensure the clarity of my argument. The details of Euthyphro's case against his father are admittedly (to borrow Rosen's assessment) "somewhat

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bizarre.”⁵ In a lengthy description, Euthyphro explains that the dead man, who “was working for us as a *thete*” on Naxos,⁶ had previously killed one of the family’s slaves while in a drunken rage; Euthyphro’s father tied up the worker and threw him into a trench while awaiting guidance from the religious advisor (4c8: ἐξηγητής) in Athens,⁷ but the man succumbed to the elements and his confinement before a response could be received.⁸ Accordingly, Euthyphro brings a charge against his father and seeks to hold him accountable for the worker’s death.

Socrates’ case, meanwhile, is mentioned only briefly in the *Euthyphro*; we are told that a man named Meletus “knows in what manner the young are being corrupted and who is corrupting them”⁹ and accuses Socrates of harming the youth by “creating brand new gods and not believing in the old ones.”¹⁰ Moreover, the charge is said to be a public indictment

⁵ F. Rosen, “Piety and Justice: Plato’s *Euthyphro*,” *Philosophy* 43, no. 164 (1968), p. 105.

⁶ 4c5: ἐθήτευεν ἐκεῖ παρ’ ἡμῖν. All translations in this paper are my own; the Greek has been taken in all cases from the Oxford text. For the possible implications of the worker’s status on his legal relationship with Euthyphro, see Kidd, “The Case of Homicide in Plato’s *Euthyphro*,” pp. 219-221.

⁷ This seems to imply that the event, if we are inclined to believe that Plato has recorded a real occurrence, happened during the Peloponnesian War while Naxos was still subject to the Delian League; see Panagiotou, “Plato’s *Euthyphro* and the Attic Code on Homicide,” pp. 424-5. Rosen, “Piety and Justice,” pp. 106-7, ponders why the ἐξηγητής would have been consulted at all if Euthyphro himself was a religious specialist, concluding that he must not yet have become an expert on the divine when the crime originally occurred.

⁸ 4d3-4: ὑπὸ γὰρ λιμοῦ καὶ ρίγους καὶ τῶν δεσμῶν ἀποθνήσκει.

⁹ 2c4-5: οἶδε τίνα τρόπον οἱ νέοι διαφθείρονται καὶ τίνες οἱ διαφθείροντες αὐτούς.

¹⁰ 3b2-3: καινοὺς ποιοῦντα θεοὺς τοὺς δ’ ἀρχαίους οὐ νομίζοντα. These accusations are equivalent to those laid out at *Apology* 24c, for which see T.C. Brickhouse and N.D. Smith, “The Formal Charges Against Socrates,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 28, no. 4 (1985), esp. pp. 459-65. For a fuller treatment of the charges and the trial as a

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brought to condemn and punish Socrates on behalf of the whole city of Athens (2a6: γραφή) rather than a private case between Meletus and Socrates (2a5: δίκη).¹¹

Having thus sketched out the factual basis of the cases, I wish to emphasize that these trials should not be taken as mere pretense;¹² instead, they each represent serious legal issues in their own right. Taking Socrates' trial first, Brickhouse and Smith argue very compellingly that the case reflects a genuine set of questions presented to the dicasts, contrary to traditional views which see the accusers themselves as never having taken the charges seriously and merely using them as a means to get Socrates before a jury.¹³ Indeed, it should be apparent that there is much at stake in Socrates' trial; aside from the defendant's life – clearly no trifling matter – the

whole, including other primary source material, see Brickhouse and Smith, *The Trial and Execution of Socrates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹¹ For the differences between δίκη and γραφή, see A.R.W. Harrison, *The Law of Athens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 76-8. The basic point seems to be that by charging him with a γραφή, the accusers would not have needed to demonstrate that they were harmed personally by Socrates, but only that his actions were detrimental to the community. In general, see also D. Cohen, "Crime, Punishment, and the Rule of Law in Classical Athens" in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Greek Law*, ed. M. Gagarin and D. Cohen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 211-35.

¹² Note that I am not especially concerned, either here or throughout this paper, with the thorny issue of whether Plato's dialogues represent true historical events or conversations between Socrates and real Athenians. On this topic, see J. Halverson, "Plato, the Athenian Stranger," *Arethusa* 30, no. 1 (1997), pp. 75-102; C.H. Kahn, "Did Plato Write Socratic Dialogues?" *CQ* 31, no. 2 (1981), pp. 305-20. Kidd, "The Case of Homicide in Plato's *Euthyphro*," p. 214 places the dialogues in the genre "faction" – imagined scenarios that are sufficiently realistic to be credible for the reader.

¹³ Brickhouse and Smith, "The Formal Charges Against Socrates," esp. p. 458 with nn. 3-4 and pp. 467-8 on the accusers' seriousness in choosing the particular charges.

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eventual outcome of the case, which Plato and his audience in the fourth century would certainly have known, might also reveal whether Socratic philosophizing as an activity and an intellectual style could survive in Athens or if it would be suppressed by established forms of knowledge.¹⁴

Turning to Euthyphro's prosecution of his father, the seriousness of the case may, to my mind, be proven largely by the internal evidence supplied within the dialogue itself. One is struck when reading the text by the zealotry of Euthyphro's insistence that wrongdoers must be brought to justice ("it is laughable, Socrates, that you think it matters if the one who died was a stranger or someone from our household"¹⁵) and that he is correct to prosecute despite his family's exhortations ("[they say] that it is unholy for a son to prosecute his father for murder, since they understand poorly, Socrates, how the divine regards the holy and the unholy"¹⁶). Now, whether an Athenian jury would have been likely to agree with his sense of justice is another matter entirely,¹⁷ but the point is that Euthyphro clearly is committed to seeing the case all the way through to trial. Certainly, there is very little indication that he has initiated the prosecution purely as a symbolic action to cleanse away his family's "pollution" (4c1: μίαισμα), hoping for

¹⁴ See B. Lincoln, "Socrates' Prosecutors, Philosophy's Rivals, and the Politics of Discursive Forms," *Arethusa* 26, no. 3 (1993), pp. 233-46.

¹⁵ 4b7-8: γελοῖον, ὃ Σώκρατες, ὅτι τι διαφέρειν εἴτε ἀλλότριος εἴτε οἰκείος ὁ τεθνεώς.

¹⁶ 4d10-e3: ἀνόσιον γὰρ εἶναι τὸ ὑὸν πατρὶ φόνου ἐπεξίεναι – κακῶς εἰδότες, ὃ Σώκρατες, τὸ θεῖον ὡς ἔχει τοῦ ὀσίου τε περὶ καὶ τοῦ ἀνοσίου.

¹⁷ See Gagarin, "The Prosecution of Homicide in Athens," pp. 305-6.

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the suit's rejection by the Archon or a vote of innocence by the jury.¹⁸

The scope of the situation has now hopefully been made clearer. At the outset of the *Euthyphro*, we are presented with characterizations of two figures, both of whom are set to be engaged in trials of potentially life-and-death significance.¹⁹ Each of these cases at the court of the Archon Basileus presents substantive and legally challenging issues, not to mention the social and political ramifications which might result from their outcomes. With these considerations in mind, we should not be surprised to find that the trials stand at the center of the following conversation, providing a mental reference point to which the speakers repeatedly return throughout their debate over the nature of piety.

II

Given the importance of their trials to each of the two men whom Plato depicts in the *Euthyphro*, it is hardly remarkable that the dialogue begins and ends with references to these impending cases. Indeed, this fact is entirely consistent with the notion that the legal questions at hand for Socrates and Euthyphro, like their physical location at the court of the Archon Basileus, frame the issue of piety and the contrasts which will be drawn between the philosopher and the diviner (3e3:

¹⁸ For this view, see R.G. Hoerber, "Plato's *Euthyphro*," *Phronesis* 3, no. 2 (1958), pp. 97-8.

¹⁹ Socrates' execution is well known; for possible consequences in Euthyphro's trial of his father, see Harrison, *The Law of Athens*, p. 75, where he cites from Demosthenes' *Against Meidias* in noting that "willful murder" could carry penalties of death or exile in addition to property confiscation.

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μάντις).²⁰ What is much more interesting, however, is the fact that the trials are not present merely as decoration at the outset and the conclusion of the dialogue. Instead, mention of one or both upcoming cases is a recurring element of the text which, as I contend, gives structure to the interlocutors' arguments and guides the reader through the philosophical content of the work. I therefore devote this section to surveying and analyzing these moments of the dialogue.

There are five explicit references to one or both of the trials throughout the course of the *Euthyphro*, though one may come to a different count depending upon what is considered sufficient to qualify as a direct reference and where one divides up the introduction. It is worthwhile to briefly outline these here.

- 2a-5b: This is the introductory scene of the dialogue. Socrates and Euthyphro happen upon one another at the court of the Archon Basileus and discuss their respective cases as summarized above; additionally, the latter portions of this section announce to the reader that piety will be the philosophical subject at question.
- 5d-6a: Upon being asked to define piety, Euthyphro responds by saying that the pious action "is exactly what I am doing now, to prosecute someone who does wrong,

²⁰ For this view, see Klonoski, "The Portico of the Archon Basileus," esp. pp. 131-2. For the importance of beginnings or settings in Plato more generally, see Bakewell, "I Went Down to Piraeus Yesterday," pp. 726-7 with nn. 9-15, where he observes that in the *Republic* in particular, Plato "tried hard to set off on the right foot."

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either for murder or stealing from temples or who does any other thing of this sort.”²¹

- 8b-9d: After Socrates challenges him on the grounds that not all gods love the same things, Euthyphro retorts that surely no god would believe that “it is unnecessary for one who kills someone else unjustly to pay the punishment.”²² Following a brief conversation on what sorts of defenses the accused tend to make in court (8c-e), Socrates eventually concedes that all the gods may feel this way about Euthyphro’s trial and they revise their definition of piety to include only what is loved by *all* of the gods.
- 12e: While attempting to define piety as being a part of justice (11e-12d), there is an unusual digression at 12e; Socrates bids his interlocutor continue their discussion “so that I can tell Meletus no longer to harm me and not to prosecute me for impiety, since I have already learned sufficiently from you what things are holy and pious and what is not.”²³
- 15d-16a: This is the concluding scene of the dialogue; Socrates repeats his assertion (4e) that Euthyphro must be wise in divine matters or else he would not undertake to prosecute his father and claims again that he himself “will be free from the indictment brought by Meletus”²⁴

²¹ 5d8-10: τὸ μὲν ὅσιον ἐστὶν ὅπερ ἐγὼ νῦν ποιῶ, τῷ ἀδικοῦντι ἢ περὶ φόνους ἢ περὶ ἱερῶν κλοπᾶς ἢ τι ἄλλο τῶν τοιοῦτων ἐξαμαρτάνοντι ἐπεξιέναι.

²² 8b8-9: οὐ δεῖ δίκην διδόναι ἐκείνον ὃς ἂν ἀδικῶς τινὰ ἀποκτείνῃ.

²³ 12e1-3: ἵνα καὶ Μελήτῳ λέγωμεν μηκέθ’ ἡμᾶς ἀδικεῖν μηδὲ ἀσεβείας γράφεσθαι, ὡς ἱκανῶς ἤδη παρὰ σοῦ μεμαθηκότας τὰ τε εὐσεβῆ τε καὶ ὅσια καὶ τὰ μῆ.

²⁴ 15e7: τῆς πρὸς Μέλητον γραφῆς ἀπαλλάξομαι.

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if he can prove that he has learned about the nature of piety.

It should now be apparent that references to the upcoming trials are not confined to tangential portions of the dialogue, and least of all not only to the introductory and concluding scenes. Much to the contrary, the cases resurface in the heart of the philosophical discussion; the fourth reference in the list above, for instance, enters the dialogue at a moment when there is no indication that Socrates or Euthyphro is considering the trials and is passed over just as quickly, yet it serves to remind the reader that the dialogue is not merely an intellectual endeavor but is in fact addressing issues which are likely to be of paramount importance to the two speakers when they go on to present their respective cases before a jury.²⁵ In other words, we can infer that both Euthyphro and Socrates are keenly aware of the weightiness of their situations; the trials are “on their minds,” so to speak, as they engage in their discussion at the Archon’s court. I shall explain in the next section how the centrality of the trials guides the content and tone of the *Euthyphro*; for the moment, I address how it shapes the literary structure of the work.

Using these passages as a reference, we might construct a loose structural outline of the dialogue by dividing the work into sections; for the sake of not interrupting the course of my argument by displaying it here, this may be found as an appendix at the end of the paper. Within this outline, it is notable that each reference to one or both of the impending

²⁵ See Beversluis, “Euthyphro,” p. 160, who observes that the presence of the trials in the background “infuses the discussion with a sense of practical urgency.”

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trials comes either at the beginning of a new attempt to define piety or just after a seemingly promising definition has been rejected. After the introductory scene, Euthyphro's first move is to explain piety in terms of his own act of prosecution, an effort which fails because it is an example rather than a definition. The second effort, that of defining piety as whatever the gods love, has only just been disproven when Euthyphro objects with his confidence that every god would support punishing a wrongdoer even if he was one's father, thus leading directly to the revised definition that the pious is loved by all the gods. Finally, the attempts to categorize piety as some part of justice or as some form of care to the gods are both punctuated by Socrates' remarks on his upcoming defense. Therefore, we see that mention of the trials frame off various portions of Socrates' and Euthyphro's philosophical discussion, as if to inform the reader that a new idea will follow by returning to the impetus for the dialogue as a whole. Although not identical, this pattern functions in much the same fashion in which the *Republic* consistently draws one's mind back to the journey to Piraeus and the sites which Socrates and Glaucon would have passed along the way.²⁶

III

Having established the significance of the trials with regard to both their social/political importance and their literary role in shaping the conversation depicted in the *Euthyphro*, I turn to an analysis of the ways in which the interlocutors' awareness of this

²⁶ As an example, see Bakewell, "I Went Down to Piraeus Yesterday," pp. 738-41, where he explains how the soldiers' tombs on the Kerameikos road (especially the tomb of the Lacedaemonians) would reinforce important themes of the *Republic* such as bravery or civic loyalty.

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context may help to explain the sorts of arguments they make and how they respond to each other's claims. This analysis will highlight an important distinction between what Socrates and Euthyphro (as figures characterized by Plato) seek to achieve through their discussion, and what we (as Plato's audience) are in fact able to learn from the dialogue and its unsuccessful outcome.

My basic point is that certain scenes or portions of the dialogue which may otherwise appear to be unconnected to the main thrust of Socrates' and Euthyphro's argument are made intelligible by bearing in mind that the speakers are constantly aware of the impending threat presented by their respective suits – a circumstance which certainly is not made any easier by their physical presence at the stoa of the Archon Basileus.²⁷ While Euthyphro's zealous commitment to his case and to his conception of justice clearly informs his line of thinking throughout the conversation, many of Socrates' comments as well can be better understood through the lens of concern about his looming defense. Specifically, I wish to argue against Rosen's perception that Socrates in the *Euthyphro* is able to speak with a level of "candor and detachment" that would be impossible, say, before an audience of Athenians about to try him for impiety;²⁸ by contrast, he seems uncharacteristically cautious, perhaps conscious of the public setting of his debate with Euthyphro and the danger implied by a potential misstep. To this end, there are at least two moments which provide clear evidence for Socrates being on guard against statements that

²⁷ This is the main topic of Klonoski, "The Portico of the Archon Basileus."

²⁸ Rosen, "Piety and Justice," p. 108.

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would reinforce the charges brought by Meletus and his companions.

First, there is the curious exchange at 11b-e in which Socrates and Euthyphro briefly argue over which of them causes their statements to “wander around” (11b7: περιέρχεται) and which of them is most like Daedalus. Interestingly, Socrates rejects the comparison with Daedalus and claims that if he is clever, he is so against his will – “surely this is the most remarkable part of my skill, that I am wise involuntarily.”²⁹ Of course, a crucial element of Socrates’ eventual strategy in his defense before the jury is an emphatic denial that he had ever been a paid instructor like the sophists³⁰ – a point he supports with the claim that he did not possess their kind of knowledge and was surprised to hear the oracle at Delphi label him the wisest of all men.³¹ So we see a consistent depiction of Socrates across the two works; in the *Euthyphro*, while conversing on the nature of piety and holiness – the very issues at the heart of his supposed crimes against the city – he presents the same self-effacing image that will reappear in the *Apology*. Although the trial is not mentioned outright in this section on Daedalus and the “wandering” arguments, this parallel could be taken to suggest that Socrates’ careful posturing toward Euthyphro (as well as any potential onlookers to their debate) represents a sort of rehearsal for his defense. In this way, by emphasizing the context of the upcoming legal ordeal, an otherwise digressory moment in the dialogue takes on much clearer thematic significance.

²⁹ 11d6-7: καὶ δῆτα τοῦτό μοι τῆς τέχνης ἐστὶ κομψότατον, ὅτι ἄκων εἰμι σοφός.

³⁰ *Apology*, 19d-20c.

³¹ *Apology*, 20c-21b.

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Socrates seems to be similarly careful with his words at 13c-d, directly in the midst of his interrogation of Euthyphro about the idea that piety is a sort of “care” (12e7: *θεραπεία*) for the gods. In this passage, Socrates asks Euthyphro if “piety, since it is the care of the gods, is a help for the gods and makes the gods better,”³² to which the interlocutor – seemingly horrified at the suggestion that the gods could ever be improved – responds with an emphatic “by Zeus, no I don’t think so!”³³ Now, Socrates has said many things throughout the course of the dialogue with which Euthyphro disagrees; in this case, however, Socrates’ reaction to his companion’s forceful rejection is particularly noteworthy. He takes the unusual step of walking back his argument, even interjecting to reassure Euthyphro that “I myself do not think that you meant to say this.”³⁴ Seeing as Beversluis has shown convincingly that Socrates does not have much regard or care for Euthyphro throughout the dialogue and is thus unlikely to be responding out of concern for having offended his conversation partner,³⁵ what are we to make of this move? I posit that, as in the Daedalus incident discussed above, Socrates is aware that whatever he might go on to say could pose a potential danger for his upcoming trial, particularly if he ventures into the realm of impious or scandalous remarks about the gods on the front porch, so to speak, of the official who will oversee his case.

³² 13c6-7: ἢ οὖν καὶ ἡ ὁσιότης θεραπεία οὖσα θεῶν ὠφελία τὲ ἐστὶ θεῶν καὶ βελτίους τοὺς θεοὺς ποιεῖ.

³³ 13c10: μὰ Δι’ οὐκ ἔγωγε.

³⁴ 13c11: οὐδε γὰρ ἐγώ, ὦ Εὐθύφρων, οἶμαι σε τοῦτο λέγειν.

³⁵ Beversluis, “Euthyphro,” pp. 181-4; for the view which he refutes – that Socrates cares about Euthyphro and hopes to provide him with moral guidance – see the arguments made by Rosen, “Piety and Justice” or, in a somewhat different sense, Diamond, “Parallel Trials.”

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This interpretation, which sees the legal concerns as the driving force at the very heart of the dialogue, is further strengthened if we begin to consider the nature of Socrates' discussion with Euthyphro more generally. Indeed, while their conversation is mostly amicable,³⁶ it has also been argued that "Euthyphro is hopelessly unequipped ... and almost immediately out of his depth"³⁷ and that the dialogue concludes not when the interlocutor has been convinced of the flaws in his theological reasoning, but rather simply when he tires of their fruitless back-and-forth.³⁸ The lack of success in changing Euthyphro's mind, together with the portrayal of his character as one who is excessively committed to piety and divine justice, raises questions about the underlying meaning of the work as a whole and Plato's intentions for his audience.

Up to this point, I have been treating Socrates' and Euthyphro's conversation within the dialogue as a self-contained unit of analysis; that is, I have written "Socrates says X" or "Euthyphro responds with Y" without emphasizing the fact that the *Euthyphro* is a composition devised by Plato.³⁹ Thus, when I have claimed that the upcoming trials are at the front of the speakers' minds throughout the dialogue, what I really mean is that Plato has depicted the characters of Socrates and Euthyphro in such a way that we can infer the trials to be of importance for the progression of their argument. Of course, this raises a meaningful question: why would he portray them in such a way? Or, even more fundamentally, why would Plato

³⁶ Rosen, "Piety and Justice," p. 107.

³⁷ Beversluis, "Euthyphro," p. 162.

³⁸ Beversluis, "Euthyphro," pp. 180-1.

³⁹ Note that this is a separate matter from the historicity of the dialogue, for which see n. 12 above.

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bother to put Socrates in conversation with someone like Euthyphro during so critical a moment as the days or weeks prior to his trial? As many scholars have regarded the diviner as little more than an egotistical dolt,⁴⁰ we might be led to consider Rosen's position that "the unlikely result of such a conversation bearing philosophic fruit [seems] to preclude the likelihood of its occurrence."⁴¹ However, there is in fact a perfectly good reason to have Socrates discuss the nature of piety with Euthyphro in particular, one which is mentioned explicitly at multiple points in the dialogue: namely, that Socrates might genuinely want to become Euthyphro's student with regard to the divine.

If one were to consider the situation in the *Euthyphro* without knowledge of how the dialogue ends – that is, without knowing that they will never reach a successful definition of piety – it would be entirely logical to think that Socrates might have something to gain from his interlocutor. About to face trial for impiety, he finds himself in the company of a self-professed expert on religious matters (Euthyphro claims (3c) that his predictions have never been wrong), whom he immediately praises as being "already very far along in wisdom"⁴² and an ideal person from whom to learn traditional orthodoxy in order to escape Meletus' ire (5a-b). Although certain scholars have suggested that Euthyphro is not in fact meant to represent the belief system of an average Athenian but rather those of the Orphics or some other mystery cult⁴³ (and thus would be a poor

⁴⁰ See Beversluis, "Euthyphro," pp. 162-3 with nn. 7-19, for a selection of their harsh words for Euthyphro.

⁴¹ Rosen, "Piety and Justice," p. 108.

⁴² 4b1: πόρρω που ἤδη σοφίας.

⁴³ See Hoerber "Plato's *Euthyphro*," pp. 95-6 and Klonoski, "The Portico of the Archon Basileus," pp. 132-4. This general idea seems to originate

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choice of instructor if Socrates is trying to prove his orthodoxy), I agree with Furley in rejecting this assessment.⁴⁴ Not only is there little internal evidence within the *Euthyphro* to endorse this view, but in fact the dialogue itself seems to support Furley's argument that Euthyphro is strange only insofar as he is *too* committed to traditional beliefs, whether by accepting Homer and Hesiod as actual truth⁴⁵ or by placing his sense of justice and piety ahead of responsibility to his family. In other words, Euthyphro's religious views probably differ in degree, rather than in nature, from those of a typical Athenian. This brings us back to the issue of the impiety trial, for if Euthyphro does indeed stand for the mindset of those who will be deciding Socrates' fate, then it is even more sensible that he would be – or at least would appear to be – a useful instructor. However, Furley and others go on to claim that Plato is being "ironic" when Socrates proposes becoming his interlocutor's student.⁴⁶ This may be true, but perhaps for a different reason from what these scholars have in mind.

The well-known device of "Socratic irony" plays an important role in several of the Platonic dialogues, where it usually takes the form of Socrates meaning something other than what his words literally imply.⁴⁷ Those who have labeled Socrates' request for Euthyphro's instruction as ironic seem to

from the commentary of J. Burnet, *Plato's Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates, and Crito* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924).

⁴⁴ W.D. Furley, "The Figure of Euthyphro in Plato's Dialogue," *Phronesis* 30, no. 2 (1985), pp. 201-8.

⁴⁵ Furley, "The Figure of Euthyphro," p. 203.

⁴⁶ Furley, "The Figure of Euthyphro," p. 204. See also Rosen, "Piety and Justice," p. 108.

⁴⁷ For a nice summary of Socratic irony, see K.M. Sayre, "Refutation and Irony: Preparing the Ground" in *Plato's Literary Garden* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1995), esp. pp. 52-9.

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be following this perspective, assuming that Socrates would never actually intend to learn from his interlocutor. Rosen, for instance, implies that the whole situation is a kind of joke and that Socrates is “dallying.”⁴⁸ To be sure, for Plato writing the dialogue and for a reader who is already familiar with the Socratic method of interrogation, it may be funny to think that someone as stubborn and inarticulate as Euthyphro has anything of value to teach.⁴⁹

However, it is also possible to see in the *Euthyphro* another kind of irony altogether, one much closer to our concept of “dramatic irony,” in which something that is obvious to the audience of a work is unclear from the characters’ perspective. As shown above, the internal structure of the dialogue indicates that concerns about the upcoming trials are of the utmost importance to each of the two speakers; thus, for the version of Socrates portrayed in the *Euthyphro*, the idea of becoming a student likely would not seem to be funny in the slightest. Why else would he react so emphatically at the end of the dialogue – “What are you doing? You are leaving now, after throwing me down from the great hope which I had held, that by learning from you about the holy and the unholy I could be free from the indictment brought by Meletus!”⁵⁰ – if he were not serious in wishing for Euthyphro’s help? There may indeed be irony at play in the *Euthyphro*, but it need not be interpreted as humorous;

⁴⁸ Rosen, “Piety and Justice,” p. 108.

⁴⁹ For more sympathetic views toward Socrates’ inability to convince or to argue with Euthyphro, see Beversluis, “Euthyphro,” p. 163 and Edwards, “In Defense of Euthyphro,” pp. 219-23.

⁵⁰ 15e5-7: οἷα ποιεῖς, ὧ ἐτάϊρε. ἀπ’ ἐλπίδος με καταβαλὼν μεγάλῃς ἀπέρχῃ ἦν εἶχον, ὡς παρὰ σοῦ μαθῶν τὰ τε ὅσια καὶ μὴ καὶ τῆς πρὸς Μέλῃτων γραφῆς ἀπαλλάξομαι.

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rather, the irony is tragic in nature.⁵¹ At the end of the dialogue, Socrates does learn from his companion after all, and he does so by recognizing the very thing which Plato has been signaling to the audience all along: if Socrates cannot understand or express traditional piety even with the help of one of its most fervent proponents, what possible hope does he have when he faces a jury of ordinary Athenian men?

Conclusion

I have argued for an interpretation of the *Euthyphro* which places the trials – Euthyphro’s prosecution of his father for murder and Socrates’ defense on a charge of impiety – at the heart of the dialogue. The context of these legal cases, their seriousness, and the recurring mentions of them throughout the course of the dialogue, even with little context or transition, provide a compelling rationale for the discussion on piety as well as its structural framework. Further, the characters’ preoccupation with their respective trials may also help to explain the ways in which they argue and respond, in particular if we are willing to view Socrates as harboring genuine concern about his fate before the jury.

Ultimately, the *Euthyphro* is primarily concerned with the arguments made by Socrates and his interlocutor about piety and the proper manner of understanding and dealing with

⁵¹ It should be acknowledged that one could offer an alternative explanation for Socrates’ parting remark: that he is in fact joking. This view aligns with the traditional perception that Socrates holds a flippant attitude toward his own death, as reflected in other works such as the *Apology* and *Crito*. I have hoped to demonstrate that there is sufficient internal evidence in the dialogue to read Socrates’ interactions with Euthyphro as sincere. However, even if it is conceivable to read sarcasm into Socrates’ words, entertaining the possibility of seriousness adds a rich element of pathos and tragedy to the text (especially when considering that Plato and the reader already know his fate).

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the divine; by considering the implications of context for both the speakers themselves and for the audience, my intention is not at all to diminish the text's philosophical meaning, but rather to deepen our understanding of its internal dynamics and of what we can infer of Plato's authorial intent. We must never lose sight of the reasons why a work such as the *Euthyphro* takes the shape that it does. My conclusion that the ending of the dialogue represents a tragic irony thus places the *Euthyphro's* meaning firmly within two broader themes which are entirely characteristic of Plato's work: first, that the death of Socrates was a great moral calamity and, further, that the responsibility lay squarely at the feet of Athenian society.

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Appendix: Structural Outline of the *Euthyphro*

- 2a-5b: Introduction
 - o 2a-3e: Description of Socrates' trial
 - o 3e-5b: Description of Euthyphro's trial
 - 5a-b: Socrates asks to become Euthyphro's student to learn about piety

- 5c-6e: First attempt to define piety
 - o 5c-d: Socrates explains his criteria for a valid definition
 - o 5d-6e: Euthyphro says that the pious is what he is currently doing (prosecuting wrongdoers); Socrates objects that this is merely an example and not a definition

- 7a-11b: Second attempt to define piety
 - o 7a: Euthyphro says that the pious is whatever is loved by the gods
 - o 7b-8b: Socrates explains that if the gods are in a state of strife, they must not all love the same things
 - o 8b-9d: Euthyphro responds that no god could possibly hate what he is doing by prosecuting his father; Socrates concedes this point and there is a revised second definition – the pious is whatever **all** gods love
 - o 9d-11b: Discussion on whether a loved thing is such because it is loved or whether it is loved because it is the kind of thing to be loved; Socrates eventually demonstrates that the pious and the god-loved cannot be the same

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- 11b-11e: Digression on whether Socrates or Euthyphro is responsible for making their arguments go in circles
- 11e-14b: Third attempt to define piety
 - o 11e-12e: Socrates asks if piety is part of justice and, if so, which part it is
 - o 12e-14b: Euthyphro explains that piety is the part of justice which concerns the care of the gods; Socrates tries to analyze what exactly he means by “care”
- 14b-15d: Breakdown of the conversation; Euthyphro says that piety is knowing how to act properly toward the gods and doing things which they love (thus returning to his second definition)
- 15d-16a: Conclusion; Socrates claims that he wants to begin again so that he can learn the nature of piety, but Euthyphro departs

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