

Reading Guide to Plato's *Euthyphro*

Merlin Philosophy Read-In Group
November 2019

In Plato's *Euthyphro*, we find Socrates and his friend Euthyphro outside the lawcourts of Athens, each faced with a challenging situation: Socrates is facing legal charges of impiety and corrupting the youth of the city, while Euthyphro is bringing a charge of murder against his own father.

Before they enter their respective trials, the two friends have a conversation about the virtue that in our book is translated as "holiness," but which other versions often translate as "piety." For the ancient Greeks, it was one of five major virtues, along with justice, courage, moderation, and wisdom. This is a tricky concept to get hold of, as our characters discover.

The dialogue opens with a conversation that shows us the setting and context, and then moves on to watch the two characters try to figure out what this virtue of holiness/piety is, as they suggest, examine, and reject roughly half a dozen definitions.

Our big question, over the entire text, will be:

- What does "holiness" (or "piety") mean?

And as we extend this to our own lives, we might ask:

- How is holiness (or piety) connected to other virtues?

Since the setting is outside a courtroom, the virtue of justice in particular might be particularly relevant. For example, when the characters wonder whether something is holy because the Gods love it, or vice versa (that the Gods love it because it's holy), we can ask the same question for justice: Is something just because the laws command it, or do the laws command it because it's just?

For smaller, more nitty-gritty things, start by taking note of the half-dozen (or so) different definitions or explanations of holiness/piety.

- What are they? (And where in the text are they?)
- How does each definition solve the problems with the definition before it?
- What is wrong with it?
- What is right with it? What does it teach us? (This one might be the hardest of all, and will probably require going beyond just what's written on the page, with our own reflections.)

Two final, big-picture questions that we might want to consider at the end:

- What are the *rules* or guidelines that our characters use, when they try to decide which definitions are good or bad, helpful or unhelpful? In other words, even beyond the question of holiness:
 - What are Plato's requirements for a good definition?
 - Do those requirements themselves seem right to us? Or is he asking too much, or leaving something out?

- Euthyphro is a professional diviner: someone whose job is to interpret messages from the Gods. Socrates, meanwhile, is a philosopher, but he got started on that career because of an oracle from the God Apollo, which said that Socrates was the wisest person in Athens—a message that Socrates himself had a hard time believing! How do we see their characters and life-histories reflected in the positions they take, and the arguments they give?