

Robert WALLACE
(Northwestern University)

Plato's First Foray: *Euthyphrô*

What is the purpose of Plato's *Euthyphrô*? Sokrates makes a number of statements which have proved seminal in the history of philosophy but remain inconclusive and controversial, in some cases because they are too brief.

- 1) If everything the gods love is holy and everything holy is loved by the gods, it does not follow that holiness equals (or can be defined by) what the gods love.
- 2) Where there is reverence, there is also fear; but it does not follow that where there is fear there is also reverence. By the same token, where there is holiness, there is also justice; but it does not follow that where there is justice there is also holiness.
- 3) The text twice refers to the *idea* of holy or unholy. If *idea* refers to Plato's theory of ideas, the nature of those ideas remains unclear.
- 4) When Sokrates asks whether what is holy is just, or what is just is holy, this question could raise the more general question of the unity of the virtues. Sokrates does not raise it here, as he does in later dialogues.
- 4) C. C. W. Taylor seeks to clarify Sokrates' and Euthyphro's final definition of *to hosion* as *therapeia* (service) to the gods. However, Taylor's conclusion is not drawn in *Euthyphrô*.
- 5) Peter Geach labeled one famous conclusion in this text "the Socratic fallacy": that one needs to know what something is before one can cite examples of it. Scholars disagree if Geach is right.
- 6) Some say that Plato's early dialogues provide a historical account of Sokrates. Plato's many historical errors are one reason to be cautious.

I shall argue that nearly every sentence of *Euthyphro* bears a complex meaning whose purpose is not historical description but defending Sokrates. However, a number of points – for example, Sokrates twice says that Euthyphro should not prosecute his father for murdering a "thete man" – are unworthy of Plato's Sokrates. Except in Sokrates' hostility to democracy, his open class arrogance may be absent from the rest of Plato. My *Plato's Sokrates Project* (of which this text is a part) argues that, as a masterly writer under Sokrates' spell, Plato fabricated a better

Sokrates than the historical person, while indicating to perceptive readers that this portrait was false.

Euthyphro ends abruptly, wanting a conclusion. Why? As we saw, this dialogue has caused philosophers some difficulties, perhaps including Plato. Some of it gives an unflattering picture of Sokrates, also for example in his relentless irony toward Euthyphro. I suggest that Plato cut this dialogue short because he too was dissatisfied, moving on to write *Apology* and *Crito*, both far better intellectually and as writing, far more appealing defenses of Sokrates, and where most of *Euthyphro*'s defenses recur. I propose that *Euthyphro* was not meant to contribute to philosophy or to history. It was Plato's first attempt at defending Sokrates, which later dialogues improved.