

PLATO'S 'EUTHYPHRO' AND THE EARLIER THEORY OF FORMS

R. E. Allen

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Volume 1

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1970

This edition first published in 2013

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-415-59194-2 (Set)

eISBN: 978-0-203-10006-6 (Set)

ISBN: 978-0-415-62630-9 (Volume 1)

eISBN: 978-0-203-10169-8 (Volume 1)

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Plato's 'Euthyphro'
and the
Earlier Theory
of Forms

by

R. E. Allen



LONDON
ROUTLEDGE & KEGAN PAUL
NEW YORK: HUMANITIES PRESS

First published 1970
by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd
Broadway House, 68-74 Carter Lane
London, E.C.4
Printed in Great Britain
by Ebenezer Baylis and Son Limited
The Trinity Press, Worcester, and London
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of brief passages in criticism
ISBN 7100 6728 3

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To
LEVI ARNOLD POST
Professor of Greek Emeritus
in
Haverford College

Et melior doctrina imbutus

PREFACE

Between 1880 and 1924 there were seven editions of the *Euthyphro* published in English alone; since 1924 there have been none. Fashions change in scholarship, as in clothes.

Yet the *Euthyphro* is worth studying. It gives as clear a picture as we have of Socratic dialectic in operation, and of the connection of that dialectic with Plato's earlier theory of Forms. It also gives a clear picture of one (*one*) aspect of Greek religion. If these are primarily historical considerations, there is a reason for studying the dialogue which is merely human. The *Euthyphro* is the portrait of an extraordinary mind at work on issues which, though now differently phrased, have not become irrelevant.

This version of the dialogue is a translation with interspersed comment. The comment does not pretend to the status of a commentary; it is meant partly as a help to the Greekless reader in finding his way, and partly as a means of embedding the discussion of the earlier theory of Forms which follows it.

The argument of the second and longer part of this book is that there *is* an earlier theory of Forms, found in the *Euthyphro* and other early dialogues as an essential adjunct of Socratic dialect: the widely held opinion that there is no such theory rests on a variety of misunderstandings and distortions of Plato's text. The theory of Forms in the early dialogues, however, is not the theory of Forms found in middle dialogues such as the *Phaedo* and *Republic*: they differ on the crucial issue of ontological status.

I have not offered a text, believing that the labour of the undertaking would have been out of proportion to its usefulness.

My obligations are various. To Harold Cherniss I owe a debt of friendship and instruction which in the nature of the case I cannot easily repay. I have consulted John Burnet's and W. A. Heidel's editions of the *Euthyphro* often, especially in making the translation, and always with profit; my debt to them is too frequent

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always to be indicated, but those who know their work will know it is there. I have also to thank Gregory Vlastos and David Furley, both for personal kindnesses and for instruction which saved errors. Gates Agnew, William Eddy, and F. W. Householder have offered generous criticism. The Bollingen Foundation provided me with leisure, and the Institute for Advanced Study ideal conditions for work. As always, my greatest debt is to Ann Usilton Allen, my wife.

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ABBREVIATIONS

- Euthyphro* John Burnet, *Plato's Euthyphro, Apology and Crito*, Oxford, 1924.
- ACPA* H. F. Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy*, vol. i, Baltimore, 1944.
- DK* H. Diels, and W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (8th ed.), Berlin, 1956.
- LSJ* Liddell and Scott, Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (9th ed.), Oxford, 1951.
- PC* F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology*, London, 1937.
- PED* R. Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic* (2nd ed.), Oxford, 1948.
- PP* F. M. Cornford, *Plato and Parmenides*, London, 1939.
- PTI* W. D. Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas*, Oxford, 1951.
- PTK* F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, London, 1935.
- REA* H. F. Cherniss, *The Riddle of the Early Academy*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1945.
- SPM* R. E. Allen (ed.), *Studies in Plato's Metaphysics*, London, 1965.

I

INTRODUCTION

I. THE PLACE OF THE *Euthyphro* IN PLATO'S DIALOGUES

The *Euthyphro* is an early dialogue, written after the death of Socrates in 399 B.C., and before Plato's first visit to Italy and Sicily in 388-7. It ranks, then, with the *Apology*, *Crito*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Charmides*, *Hippias Major* and *Minor*, *Ion*, *Euthydemus*, and *Protagoras*, other works of Plato's early period.¹

It is difficult to assign even a probable order of composition to these dialogues: considerations of style and language will not serve, and there is little else in the way of direct evidence. But the *Protagoras*, which is by far the longest and most artistically complex, should be put late in the period, and the *Euthydemus*, by reason of content and similar structure, probably belongs with it; both dialogues are narrated, with dramatic introductions – an experiment Plato was to repeat again, flawlessly, in the *Phaedo*. The *Euthyphro*, by contrast, is cast in simple dramatic form throughout, and for that reason, and perhaps also because it was placed first in the first tetralogy by Thrasyllus, who edited Plato's works in the reign of Tiberius, it has come to be regarded as one of the earliest dialogues Plato wrote, and perhaps even the first. But the Thrasylllean arrangement is not based on order of composition,² and if complexity argues lateness, it hardly follows that

¹ This list is conjectural, and its order for the most part arbitrary. For a summary of other conjectures, by no means exhaustive, see *PTI*, ch. i.

The inclusion of the *Hippias Major* here is open to particular question. I shall treat it as authentic and early, but it has been suspect on both counts, and no point in the argument will be allowed to turn on its unsupported evidence.

² As Burnet remarked, '(The *Euthyphro*'s) position as the first dialogue of the first tetralogy is due solely to the consideration that, in the story of the trial and death of Socrates, it comes before the *Apology*, just as the *Crito* comes after it' (*Euthyphro*, p. 4).

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what is simple is therefore early. It is enough to know that the *Euthyphro* was probably written in the first decade of the fourth century, when Plato was in his thirties. Whatever its exact date, he was already master of his craft.

2. THE TEXT

The text of the *Euthyphro* here used is Burnet's. I have departed from it at 14c, 3-4, where conflict in the manuscript tradition indicates antique corruption, and Burnet's editorial conservatism has produced, in this case, a poor sense. The reading here adopted is Schanz's; it is supported by Ficino,¹ and by Burnet's *versio Armeniaca*. I have also accepted, on grounds of sense, a conjecture of Heidel's in 8d, 10.

The present state of Plato's text, at least for the first seven tetralogies, has been described by Professor Dodds as follows:²

To this day no one can say with certainty how many primary witnesses to the text there are, or how they are related to each other and to the secondary MSS. The main cause of this ignorance is the lack of trustworthy collations. There are at least 64 extant MSS. which contain the *Gorgias* or part of it. Of these only two, B and T, have been accurately collated in their entirety. In *Gorgias*, a third primary witness, W, has hitherto been known only from a few selected readings; a fourth, F, has been gravely misreported. For most of the remaining MSS. we are still dependent on the notoriously unreliable collations of Bekker and Stallbaum; some have never been collated at all.

An unfortunate situation, which Professor Dodd's own edition of the *Gorgias*, and the late R. S. Bluck's of the *Meno*, have done much to correct. But it does not follow from the fact that the evidential basis for Plato's text is incompletely established, and sometimes falsely reported, that the text itself is in any radical way unsound. It is in fact one of the least corrupt of any which have come down from classical antiquity, and future editions, though they will improve its *apparatus criticus*, are unlikely to much alter

¹ Perhaps evidence, which R. S. Bluck (*Plato's Meno*, p. 145) failed to find for the *Meno*, that Ficino had access to sources independent of the traditions represented by BTWPF.

² E. R. Dodds, *Plato's Gorgias*, p. 34.

INTRODUCTION

understanding of its sense.¹ There are, at least, no issues of importance to the interpretation of the *Euthyphro* which hinge on a question of text.

3. TRANSLATION

I have attempted to render the *Euthyphro* simply, in English of no particular date or place, and in rhythms approximating those of speech. The translation is not meant to be colloquial. Those who believe that when Euthyphro says πάνυ γε he means 'Uh huh,' or that κινδυνεύει may on occasion be rendered 'Um . . . ah . . . yes,' may hie themselves to Professor Richards,² where they will find an overset more in the swing of things.

To translate is to interpret, well or ill. There is really no such thing as literalness. But where Plato's language bears on the reader's understanding of the theory of Forms, I have attempted to let the Greek show itself through the English, and bring the meaning out of the text as directly and neutrally as possible. Thus, for example, adjectival abstracts may be formed in Greek as we form them in English, by adding a suffix which does the work of '-ness' to the adjective stem; or they may be formed by the neuter singular adjective and its agreeing article; or even, sometimes, by the neuter singular adjective alone. I have undertaken to render the Greek with an English expression formed in a parallel way, by, for example, 'holiness', 'the holy' or 'holy', as the case requires.

This does not make for idiomatic English. It is rather an example of that mixture of English vocabulary and Greek syntax which produces the various dialects of Translatorese. But it is not meaningless, as has sometimes been maintained, and there is a reason for it. Unless it is done, much of the difficulty Euthyphro has in satisfying Socrates' demand to know what the holy is will seem quite unintelligible. Expressions such as ὅσιον and

¹ Thus, for example, Bluck's text of the *Meno* differs from Burnet's in something over thirty readings. Only a few of these were prompted by fresh evidence, as distinct from editorial opinion, and none produces a change in sense likely to affect interpretation. Dodds, in the Preface to his edition of the *Gorgias*, remarks: 'I am conscious that very few of the textual problems I have discussed affect our understanding of Plato's thought.'

² I. A. Richards, *Why So, Socrates?*

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τὸ ἅγιον have a range of meaning, and a pattern of emphasis within that range, which corresponding abstract nouns in English lack; but the use of these expressions is not so remote that it cannot be caught, and at the risk of some clumsiness it has seemed best to try to catch it. If the reader finds talk of 'holy' or 'the holy' sometimes puzzling, he may reflect that Euthyphro finds it sometimes puzzling too.

There is a further point. Euthyphro and Socrates are 2,500 years distant from us in time, and their patterns of thought are different from our own. It is no disservice to them or to ourselves if they are made to speak in such a way as to recall that fact. It is not wrong to give their speech the accent of remoteness. It has been said that the right aim of translation is to produce that effect upon the reader which the author intended for the original. In the case of ancient authors, this is one ideal which is often a good deal the worse for being unrealizable; ancient authors did not write for modern readers, but for men of their own time, and a smooth modern version will often distort by making familiar what is in fact strange.

The passage of time has given Plato's dialogues, and especially the early ones, a quality they did not originally have: they have come to be parts of that peculiar species of poetry which the late G. M. Trevelyan called the poetry of history:¹

The poetry of history lies in the quasi-miraculous fact that once, on this earth, once, on this familiar spot of ground, walked other men and women, as actual as we are today, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions, but now all gone, one generation vanishing after another, gone as utterly as we ourselves shall shortly be gone like ghost at cock-crow. This is the most familiar and certain fact about life, but it is also the most poetical, and the knowledge of it has never ceased to entrance me, and to throw a halo of poetry round the dustiest record that Dryasdust can bring to light.

Trevelyan found in the offerings of Dryasdust a thing Keats found in a Grecian urn, and a thing many readers of Plato – especially those whose sensibilities have not been hardened by professional study – find in the early dialogues. The *Euthyphro* is a work of philosophy; but it is also a foster-child of Silence and slow Time, and in the translation which follows I have tried, with

¹ G. M. Trevelyan, *An Autobiography*, p. 13.

INTRODUCTION

what success I cannot say, to preserve something of the poetry of its pastness.

4. DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

The structure of the *Euthyphro* is serial. After a lengthy introduction – lengthy in relation to the total bulk of the dialogue – Socrates introduces the question, ‘What is the holy?’ When the ground has been cleared of the attempt to answer that question by naming examples, Euthyphro offers four definitions: that the holy is what is loved by the gods; that it is what is loved by all the gods; that it is service to the gods; and that it is an art of prayer and sacrifice. The second and fourth definitions are dialectically derivative, respectively, from the first and third, to which they are conjoined. There is an interlude between the second and third definitions, followed by a discussion of what proper definition requires. There is a further break between the first and second definitions, which I have called an interlude, but which also serves to advance discussion.

It may be asked what bearing, if any, this structure has on the interpretation of the dialogue. Julius Stenzel held that,¹

It suits Plato’s temperament to insinuate part of his meaning by artistic, or formal, devices. His whole meaning is not always conveyed in plain words, as it is with a thinker who regards expression as a secondary matter.

This is surely sometimes true, and the interpretation of dialogues such as the *Parmenides* and *Sophist*, or, for that matter, the *Meno* and *Protagoras*, has suffered for ignoring it. But if it is sometimes true, it is not always true. It goes without saying that literary analysis may be relevant to the interpretation of any of the dialogues. But that literary analysis will prove to have philosophical implications is a matter to be settled on the merits of individual cases, which is to say, on the basis of evidence. *Formgeschichte* is not a universal panacea, and it cannot be mechanically applied. So far as the *Euthyphro* is concerned, its relevance is slight: no substantive issue in the interpretation of the dialogue turns on it.

¹ As summarized by D. J. Allan, *Plato’s Method of Dialectic*, p. viii.