

# EUTHYPHRO AND THE LOGIC OF MIASMA

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**ABSTRACT:** Euthyphro is a Socratic interlocutor claiming enormous religious expertise, while his portrayal in the eponymous dialogue raises questions the reliability of his beliefs. This paper closely examines how Euthyphro justifies his case against his father, identifying an argument that relies on the concept of miasma (pollution). In so far as miasma is considered in isolation, Euthyphro has a good argument. Unfortunately, there is more than miasma at stake when considering why one could prosecute one's own parent. Introducing the other relevant concepts, honor and shame, we find his case reflects a dilemma at the source of ancient Greek religious thought. It would not be possible for Euthyphro or anyone else to know what to do in his case.

**KEYWORDS:** Plato, Euthyphro, Dilemma, Miasma, Pollution

This is why even now I go around in accordance with the God, seeking out and investigating both citizens and foreigners, any whom I suppose are wise, and when someone doesn't seem so to me, I make it clear they are not wise, assisting the god. (*Appology* 23b)<sup>1</sup>

Euthyphro is a classic Socratic interlocutor, one who claims expertise in religion and is then shown that he does not know what he claims to know. Plato's vivid characterization of Euthyphro's variety of quirks, his claims of superiority, his lack of self-awareness, his susceptibility to Socrates' mocking flattery, the outrageousness of his case, make it easy to lose sight of any philosophically significant elements contained in his claims. While he exemplifies the type of epistemic hubris Socrates is out to cure, it would be a mistake to write him off *ad hominem*. This paper explores the source of Euthyphro's cognitive confidence, an argument he makes to justify prosecuting his father for murder. In the first section of this paper, we look at the particularities of the situation surrounding the case. Then we examine the argument he makes, clarifying his assertions into a more formal format. With this argument clarified, we can consider the available options for interpreting it. In the third section of this paper, Margaret Visser's work on the

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Plato are my own translations.

legal system at Athens in the Classical Period serves as a heuristic for understanding Euthyphro's line of thought—the 'logic of miasma' which epitomizes the Pollution-Avoidance value system. Euthyphro's relatives claim that Euthyphro is acting impiously with their judgment expressing the values of the Honor/Shame system. Applying both value systems to Euthyphro's argument, their clash becomes readily apparent. The fourth section of the paper addresses the complication emerging from this clash of value systems found in the *Oresteia* and the dilemma Orestes faces in this tragedy. It turns out the Euthyphro's case is a version of this insolvable problem. Euthyphro's case serves to introduce the main problem for the dialogue as a whole. The concepts operating in ancient Greek religion, expressed by the poets, create the very problem that Euthyphro hopes could be resolved in the trial against his father. The Athenian legal system would require an *independent* conception of piety to prosecute religious cases.

### 1. An Unfortunate Series of Events

After greeting Socrates at the start of the dialogue, Euthyphro explains to Socrates that he is prosecuting someone he's thought insane to be prosecuting—his own father (3e through 4e). Socrates is surprised by this admission, noting that the crime would have to be quite serious for such a situation to transpire. At Athens, family members were not expected to prosecute each other in court, and when this happened the crime usually involved other family members, as Socrates mentions. There was no Athenian law explicitly prohibiting the prosecution of a parent for, yet religious and social norms obligated children to honor their parents.<sup>2</sup>

In Aristophanes' "Clouds," Socrates' 'teachings' at the Thinkery result in the denouement in which a son, Pheidippides, beats his father, Strepsiades. Pheidippides, transformed into a Sophist by Socrates over the course of the comedy, argues for a son's right to beat his own father—and mother as well.<sup>3</sup> Ancient Greek mythology conveys the message of honoring one's parents. In fact, the remark Socrates makes at about the defendant being a 'flight-risk' (4a) alludes to one such myth, the myth

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<sup>2</sup> Socrates, shocked by the revelation that Euthyphro is prosecuting his own father, expresses that only a very serious inter-familial legal situation that might justify this action: "Then, is the man your father killed a relative? Clearly so, because you wouldn't prosecute your own father for the murder of a stranger (4b)."

<sup>3</sup> Ronna Burger makes a strong case for interpreting Plato's *Euthyphro* as a reply and corrective to Aristophanes' "Clouds" in her book *On Plato's Euthyphro* (Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung: Munich, 2015), 13 (where thesis is first presented).

of Icarus. References to Daedalus reappear later on in the dialogue (11b through d), reinforcing this theme. Icarus was the son of the legendary artificer, Daedalus. Trapped with his father in the labyrinth of the Minotaur, they both escape using wings Daedalus makes. Although Daedalus warns his son not to fly too low or too high, the son disregards this warning, flying too close to the sun and falling to his death. Euthyphro appears to be disregarding the warnings he receives with similar hubris.

Euthyphro's case against his father is not a straightforward one—as he explains to Socrates:

The person who was killed was a hired day laborer of mine. When we were farming in Naxos he worked for us there. In a fit of drunken rage he'd cut the throat of one of our household slaves, so my father bound his hands and his feet together, threw him in some ditch, and then sent a man here to Athens to inquire from the head seer what needed to be done. During that time my father made little account of—and even completely neglected—the bound man, it being no matter whether he suffered because he was a murderer. Hunger, cold and the bonds caused his death before the messenger returned from the seer. Both my father and my other kinsmen are angry with me because I'm prosecuting my father for murder on behalf of a murderer when he hadn't really killed him, so they say. And even if it were true he had killed him, the dead man, being a murderer, doesn't need consideration because it is impious for a son to prosecute his father for murder. But, Socrates, they wrongfully perceive what the divine law holds in regard to piety and impiety. (4c-e)

His father appears to have unintentionally, through *neglect* as Euthyphro states, caused the death of a laborer who had killed a slave. While drunk, the laborer fought with the slave, violently killing him. He was bound and thrown into a ditch while still raging and intoxicated. Euthyphro's father sent to the head seer at Athens and while waiting for the messenger to return the laborer, left bound in a ditch, dies.<sup>4</sup> Euthyphro has decided that the laborer's death was wrongfully caused and his father needs to be brought to justice. As a point of law in Athens, only relatives

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<sup>4</sup> The manner in which Euthyphro's father sends to Athens to the head seer there and does not ask his son, the local seer and religious expert, strongly suggests that Euthyphro was motivated to bring his case against his father on account of this disrespect, Euthyphro's father, like the Athenians in the Assembly that laugh at him when he prophesizes (3 b-c), does not appear to take him seriously. Robert Talisse, in his article, "Teaching Plato's Euthyphro Dialogically," *Teaching Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (June 2003): 163-175, argues that the dramatic details in this dialogue are Plato's means of showing that Euthyphro's case is made for the sake of recognition and incorporate revenge against his father for not recognizing him.

would charge a suspected killer for the murder of one of their kinsman: The identity of the victim *does matter* in a murder trial, contrary to what Euthyphro later claims.<sup>5</sup> He indicates that the laborer whom his father killed was a ‘dependent’ of his, yet Euthyphro’s move to prosecute a case on his behalf is a stretch under Athenian law. The slave that was murdered by the laborer had no rights at all at Athens. The dispute between Euthyphro and his father concerns the laborer, and Euthyphro’s decision to prosecute his father for murdering the laborer causes a dispute between him and his relatives.

Euthyphro makes a legal and religious claim—he is concerned with justice (*dikaiosune*) as well as pollution (*miasma*).<sup>6</sup> Murder is unjust *and* causes pollution. According to Euthyphro, a murderer should be legally prosecuted, regardless of who he or she is or whom he or she kills. Even if tradition holds that it is impious to prosecute, injure or dishonor a parent, Euthyphro believes that this tradition is not the right way to achieve justice—and incurs pollution. It seems that Euthyphro wishes to introduce new principles in the Athenian legal system. First, the identity of the victim is irrelevant for prosecuting someone. One can prosecute a case on behalf of someone outside your kin group. And second, one must be bring wrongdoers to justice regardless of one’s personal relationships. There are no legal

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<sup>5</sup> Alban D. Winspear discusses the changes in meaning the term ‘*dike*’ (justice) undergoes in Ancient Greek culture in his book, *The Genesis of Plato’s Thought* (New York: S.A. Russell, 1940), 37–64. The term for justice, ‘dike,’ in the Homeric period regarded ‘the way of things.’ In this period, it referred to customs, which were right simply because they were the ways in which things were done. A change in the meaning of the term arose between Homer and the poet Hesiod. Communal, tribal ownership of land passed into landed aristocracy and the city-state, and blood-ties were no longer a means to successfully regulate communal relationships. The idea of justice becomes more abstract. It becomes an ‘eternal principle’ that stands outside of human relationships and is not identified with custom (the relationships themselves). The idea of ‘*nomos*’ (law) as pertaining to human custom and convention, while ‘*dike*’ regards an abstract standard of what is right emerges. Euthyphro’s view about justice and pollution is an interesting hybrid of the more abstract notion of justice found in Hesiod (and afterwards), with the ancient idea of *miasma*. In opposing his relatives’ views, he opposes custom equated with what is right, the earlier view of *dike*. In this way, it seems that Euthyphro’s idea of justice and piety is ‘innovative’ in that he combines the current notion of justice in Athenian culture with an ancient religious idea.

<sup>6</sup> From Euthyphro’s greeting to Socrates in the first line of the dialogue “What innovation brings you here to the King Archon’s porch?” the idea of ‘innovation’ is highlighted (2a). Socrates is never at the courts, hence this greeting, but innovation about religion (*kainotheism*) is an element of the charges he faces. It is important to note that Euthyphro is also there at the porch innovating with his own case.

precedents for Euthyphro to rely upon. Besides the tangled issue of prosecuting someone for the murder of a murderer, his relatives think Euthyphro is acting impiously in prosecuting his own father. The details of the case suggest that the situation is far from clear, that his father may be guilty of manslaughter, unintentionally killing the murderer while attempting to seek expert religious advice.

## 2. Euthyphro's Argument

Taking a closer look at how Euthyphro presents his case to Socrates, we can find an argument. This argument helps explain the source of Euthyphro's confidence. We know he is overconfident in his abilities as a seer (he is laughed at in the Assembly when he prophesizes), however there's a line of argument that he's developed and may be rehearsing with Socrates when he articulates it. He states:

It's very amusing, Socrates, that you, of all people, think it makes a difference whether the victim is a stranger or relative, and not bear in mind one thing, whether the killer acted justly. If he acted justly, let him go, but if not, one should prosecute, especially if he shares your hearth and eats at the same table with you. The pollution is the same if, being aware of what's right, you keep company with such a man and don't purify yourself and him from pollution by bringing him to justice. (4b-c)

We can clean this up more formally:

– Unstated Premise: Murder produces pollution (*miasma*).

- 1) The identity of the person killed makes no difference.
- 2) If a killer acted justly, he must be let go.
- 3) If a killer acted unjustly (murdered), they must be prosecuted.
- 4) Pollution is the same (for all parties) if one keeps company with someone one knows has killed unjustly.
- 5) If a killer acted unjustly they must be prosecuted on account of their pollution and pollution of their household.

Therefore:

- 6) One must prosecute (even) someone from one's own household, if one knows that they have killed unjustly, in order to avoid pollution.

With this argument set out, we can examine how particularities in ancient Greek religion affect the perceived truth-values of the premises, gaining insight into Euthyphro's thought process.

## 3. The Logic of *Miasma*

The work of Margaret Visser provides a helpful heuristic for interpreting Euthyphro's argument.<sup>7</sup> She identifies three value systems at large in Athenian society: (1) The Honor/Shame system, which applies to familial relations and community status. The preservation of familial honor is prioritized within a kin-group and externally in terms of maintaining a kin-group's social status in the community.<sup>8</sup> (2) The Legal System, providing publically known laws and a system for enforcing them. The Athenian legal system also interacts with the kin-based Honor/Shame system and religious observances.<sup>9</sup> (3) The Pollution—Avoidance system is a religious value system that prioritizes maintaining a state ritual purity such that members of the community can form a unified religious community. Procedures of ritual cleansing are required to maintain the bonds of this community. Expiation procedures include religious rituals that cleanse a polluted and quarantined subject permitting them to rejoin the community. Euthyphro's father was following just such a procedure in quarantining the laborer after he murdered the slave. In a state of bloodguilt, the laborer could not be kept with other people. The messenger from the Head Seer (*Mantis*) at Athens would have provided information about the required ritual cleansing.

Euthyphro's move is to select just one of these systems, following its 'logic' to the bitter end. Visser notes "Pollution, in ancient Greece, was another self-contained system with what could be considered a logic of its own."<sup>10</sup> For contemporary readers, the concept of pollution or bloodguilt may be somewhat obscure. While pollution bears some similarity to 'sinfulness' in Christian traditions, it is unhelpful comparatively—especially for understanding Euthyphro's argument. This is because *miasma* has a distinctive characteristic of *contagion*. Without expiation, other

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<sup>7</sup> Margaret Visser, "Vengeance and Pollution in Classical Athens," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (April–June, 1984): 193-206.

<sup>8</sup> The honor of a family is preserved in bringing the criminal to justice in the legal system. There is no public prosecutor. The honor-bound unity of male family members is the mechanism that brings criminals to justice. Just as bloodguilt causes pollution (*miasma*), the blight of shame (*aidos*) is brought upon families. Vengeance (*poine*) is expressed and moderated through the legal system (*dike*) to remove shame.

<sup>9</sup> The porch of the King Archon, the magistrate in charge if determining whether or not the *graphe* (written accusations) for cases of murder and impiety move forward to trial, had stele that were inscribed with the laws of Athens as well as the religious calendar. The laws and religion were not separate at Athens.

<sup>10</sup> Visser, "Vengeance and Pollution in Classical Athens," 198.

members of a household and community incur miasma. It is viral in nature. One doesn't merely expiate pollution for oneself, but for the sake of the community.

Miasma left unchecked can overshoot legal justice and ordinary motivations of personal vengeance (*poine*). Innocent people can be affected by miasma, people who are neither responsible for a crime nor guilty of any criminal or moral association. In fact, "knowingly sharing a table with a polluted person" will incur miasma but unknowingly doing so as well, magnifying Euthyphro's claim. Oedipus, *not knowing* he has killed his father and married his mother, incurs miasma and unknowingly brings miasma upon the entire city of Thebes. Pollution is powerful force that is difficult to control.

Euthyphro believes that certain premises of his argument are true, given what miasma entails. We can review premises of his argument to see this.

**1) The identity of the person killed makes no difference.**

The identity of the victim does not matter is in terms of incurring miasma, just as Euthyphro claims. Bloodguilt causes pollution. This is ground zero with respect to any instance of pollution in a community. Euthyphro is not considering an abstract conception of justice with respect to this premise. While we might agree with Euthyphro that the identity of a victim is irrelevant in a case of murder, Euthyphro's argument hinges on the nature of pollution and it's why he would assert this premise. Given the contagious nature of miasma, it also doesn't matter whom the criminal is either. Thus, he also asserts premise (4):

**4) Pollution is the same (for all parties) if one keeps company with someone one knows has killed unjustly.**

It's important to keep in mind that the *identical state of pollution* asserted erases the difference between someone guilty of murder and someone that is an accomplice after the fact or obstructs justice. From this premises, Euthyphro asserts:

**5) If a killer acted unjustly they must be prosecuted on account of their pollution and pollution of their household.**

Here, Euthyphro follows the logic of miasma to cases like his own, where, on account of miasma he is forced to do 'housekeeping.' Any polluted member of a household poses a danger to that whole family. The conclusion Euthyphro arrives at, (6) One must prosecute (even) someone from one's own household, if one knows that they have killed unjustly, in order to avoid pollution, is derived from the *indiscriminate power* of miasma over an entire household. It is why Euthyphro

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believes he needs to prosecute his father for murder. According the logic of miasma, he would be correct.

#### 4. All in the Family

Euthyphro has generated a justification for prosecuting his father keeping narrowly focused on the concept of miasma and its workings. But when we examine his argument in light of the Honor/Shame value system things no longer work smoothly. It's not much of an argument anymore.

- 1) Murder produces pollution. (True in the Pollution—Avoidance system).
- 2) Prosecuting one's own parent brings shame. (True in the Honor/Shame system.).
- 3) The identity of the person killed makes no difference. (True in the Pollution-Avoidance system and False in the Honor/Shame system)
- 4) If a killer acted justly, he must be let go. (True)
- 5) If a killer acted unjustly (murdered), they must be prosecuted. (True)
- 6) Pollution is the same (for all parties) if one keeps company with someone one knows has killed unjustly. (True in the Pollution-Avoidance system, False in the Honor/Shame system given (2))
- 7) If a killer acted unjustly they must be prosecuted on account of their pollution and pollution of their household. (True in the Pollution—Avoidance system, False in the Honor/Shame system given (2))

Therefore:

- 8) One must prosecute (even) someone from one's own household, if one knows that they have killed unjustly, in order to avoid pollution. (True in Pollution/Avoidance system, False in Honor/Shame system given (2))

Once the Honor/Shame System is in play, prosecuting one's parent for murder will bring shame to one's family. Euthyphro's miasma-specific assertions are falsified with its introduction. However, premise (3), which is now falsified, is false for significant reasons that merit a closer look:

#### **3) The identity of someone who is killed makes no difference.**

While true following the logic of miasma, this premise has a notorious place in the Honor/Shame System. The paradigm case is presented in Aeschylus' "Oresteia," where we find the Orestes Dilemma. Orestes' mother, Queen Clytemnestra, murders Orestes' father, King Agamemnon. (She murders him on account of his sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigenia, in order to continue sailing to Troy.) Orestes is faced with a dilemma, He must avenge the death of his father to



avoid shame, but he must murder his mother, incurring pollution as a matricide in order to do so. Orestes murders his mother, avoiding shame, but then is placed in the impossible situation of committing a polluting act, the murder of his mother, in order to expiate the bloodguilt of her polluting act of murder of his father.

This highly charged premise, so devastating within the Honor/Shame System is part of Euthyphro's argument. The identity of the victim very much matters. If your mother happens to kill your father, it matters a great deal. Orestes is driven insane and chased by the Erinyes seeking vengeance for his matricide. The goddess Athena appears *deus ex machina* in order finally free Orestes from this vicious cycle of pollution that has fallen on the House of Atreus. She establishes trial by jury at Athens to decide the case of the Erinyes against Orestes, although this is insufficient to determine the matter. Only Athena can break the tie. Euthyphro is ironically bringing to trial the very type of case that *failed to be decided* by jury according to Aeschylus.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. The Tangled Web

The name "Euthyphro" means 'straight-thinker' and it seems to reflect a Platonic irony since the dialogue moves in a circle. Yet, it fairly accurately describes Euthyphro's thinking, which is very much straight and narrowly focused on miasma. Socrates wants to know how Euthyphro can be so sure he is right:

With Zeus as a witness, Euthyphro, do you believe you understand what religion maintains and what is pious and impious so accurately that, as far as those things you say happened, you're not afraid of possibly doing something impious by bringing your father to trial? (4e)

Euthyphro has profound, even comic, certainty in his superior wisdom. He states, "[t]here would be no use for me, Socrates, and Euthyphro would not surpass the majority of men, if I didn't accurately know all such things." (4e-5a) Euthyphro's claim to be superior to all other people and possess accurate knowledge about religion has the marking of *hubris*—arrogance regarding one's position or abilities

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<sup>11</sup> Rory B. Egan in "Tragic Piety in Plato's *Euthyphro*," *Dionysius*, 7 (1983): 17-32, suggests that Euthyphro's character and his case amount to a parody of the characters from Greek tragedy driven not of concern for piety to act impiously. The hero, Orestes, is a paradigmatic example of this dilemma. Egan's thesis is that the dialogue is a comic attack upon the poet's account of piety. I agree with this view, although I find that Plato casts a much wider net in terms of literary associations that can be made with the dialogue. These include the myth of Daedalus, as well as Aristophanes' "Clouds."

that overlooks one's limitations. It is *hubris* that causes Icarus to fall to his death. Epistemic *hubris*, claiming to know when one does not know, typically serves as a spur to philosophical discussion in the early group of Platonic dialogues. In the *Apology*, Socrates' mission is to question those claiming to be knowledgeable, in order to cure their epistemic hubris. Euthyphro makes himself an open target for the Socratic investigation into his wisdom that follows.

Euthyphro's case against his father sets the stage for this inquiry. For all his hubris and lack of self-awareness, he has managed to construct as clear an argument for indicting his father as one could possibly make by focusing on miasma. Although miasma can be conceptually treated as a closed system, it interacts with the Honor/Shame System and the Legal System in non-ideal scenarios (as Plato depicts in the dialogue). In fact, these systems are viciously interlocking when it comes to an Orestes' Dilemma type cases of which Euthyphro's belongs.

The Pollution-Avoidance value system dictates that Euthyphro must prosecute whomever the wrongdoer is while, at the same time, doing so violates the Honor/Shame system. According to the tragic poet Aeschylus, trial by jury was established to thwart the Erinyes' claim on Orestes for matricide. However, as Euthyphro's case reveals, miasma still gives rise to such dilemmas. Ancient Greek religion lacks the conceptual resources to resolve these problems from within. As long as the Legal System is intertwined with religion, nothing can be settled. Neither Euthyphro nor his relatives are ultimately right. Most importantly, one could know everything there is to know about religion—as Euthyphro claims—yet have no way to make sense of whether he or his relatives are correct. The poets, ranging from Homer and Hesiod to the tragic playwrights, are the sources for his religious views, but they have provided adherents with insoluble problems.<sup>12</sup> The philosophical dissection of the concept of piety (*hosion*) in the rest of the dialogue is not only a corrective to Aristophanes' portrait of Socrates in the "Clouds," but is also a roadmap for what would have to be understood to legally adjudicate religious infractions without the influence of the accounts of the poets.

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<sup>12</sup> Socrates admits that the stories of the poets are a problem for him: "Indeed, Euthyphro, can this be the reason I'm under indictment, because whenever such things are said about the gods I find them so difficult to accept? It seems that because of this I will be told that I do wrong." (6b)