

Euthyphro: Hello there Socrates!

Socrates: Hello, Euthyphro. Are you just leaving the trial at which you accused your father?

Euthyphro: Yes, indeed. And despite our very confusing conversation beforehand, I won the case. My father is to be exiled within the week.

Socrates: Ah. Should I congratulate you then? Has justice been meted out?

Euthyphro: Certainly. My father's place in the city for the life of the man he killed through negligence.

Socrates: But I wonder Euthyphro, you being a well-educated and well-spoken man, as demonstrated by your victory in this trial just now, if you would consent to teach me the definition of justice, much as you did the definition of piety earlier today?

Euthyphro: I don't know, Socrates. If you remember our conversation, I don't think that we ever did discover just how to state the nature of piety, though I still fancy I know it.

Socrates: Well, come now, Euthyphro, surely justice is easier to define than piety. Piety deals with the gods themselves, but we encounter justice every day in the courts. Surely we must be able to say what it is that we do, that you just did, here!

Euthyphro: Very well Socrates, let us make the attempt. I would say that justice is a certain reflection of actions back upon their doers, a balancing of the scales, if you will. My father killed a man, and so he will be exiled.

Socrates: But is this not an unbalanced exchange, Euthyphro? Should not your father be killed, for killing?

Euthyphro: No, Socrates, certainly not! We must take into account that he killed not through direct action but through negligence in the care of my worker.

Socrates: Very well. So suppose we accept that allowances must be made for the circumstances of the actions when we weigh them. Accounting for this, would you agree that justice is every action having an equal reaction upon the agent? If a man kills he is killed, but if a man shows exemplary valor in war, he is rewarded in amount equal to his deeds, whether in honor, coin, or otherwise? This is the definition you gave before, is it not?

Euthyphro: That sounds like a very reasonable definition to me, Socrates.

Socrates: To me as well, Euthyphro my friend. But, one thing still troubles me. Suppose that a man kicks a stone, must he then be kicked?

Euthyphro: Certainly not.

Socrates: And if a man slaughters his goat for a meal, must he be killed?

Euthyphro: It would be the height of injustice!

Socrates: But in both of these cases is there not a reaction upon the agent equal to the action he perpetrated?

Euthyphro: But Socrates, surely you do not really think this! Why, you have forgotten that when we speak of actions which must be judged, we speak of actions against other men. Actions against dumb stones or animals are not placed upon the scales.

Socrates: Ah, this is a very tidy solution to our dilemma. But Euthyphro, I must say, though it pains me, that while you were talking just now another problem occurred to me.

Euthyphro: What is it then? Let us dispose of it as we did the last.

Socrates: Well, the men of the assembly, whose inestimable company I have just left, have sentenced me to die by the drinking of hemlock. Do you think, dear Euthyphro, that this means that each of them must in turn be killed, to balance the scales in light of my forthcoming death?

Euthyphro: Socrates! You did not say that the outcome of your trial was so dire! Please, dear friend, let me assist you! Surely you are innocent of whatever misdeeds they have accused you of.

Socrates: Please, Euthyphro, I implore you, unhand my robe, and regain your calm. Do not let this small event distract us from the conversation at hand, which is both more important and more interesting.

Euthyphro: I... very well Socrates, if you truly wish it so. What... of what were we speaking?

Socrates: I had asked you if you think that the members of the assembly must be put to death, when they sentence someone to die?

Euthyphro: Oh, why, certainly not! That cannot be right.

Socrates: But why not? We must answer this question before we can rest easy with our definition.

Euthyphro: Well, luckily for you Socrates, I think I have the solution at hand. You see, the assembly was repairing the unbalanced scales, and when their work is complete the scales are level. There is no more balancing to be done in this case.

Socrates: Ah, an excellent answer, Euthyphro! But it occurs to me that your father was doing the very same thing, that is, leveling previously unbalanced scales, when he killed a man who had killed another. Is your father then blameless?

Euthyphro: Now Socrates, this is really a most silly problem you have invented. My father did not repair a wrong with a right by what he did, but did wrong twice over, because he did not follow the proper course in seeking the death of the worker. He ought to have come before the assembly, as I just did, and sued the man for his actions, rather than taken the matter into his own hands.

Socrates: So then, Euthyphro, our definition is somewhat altered. It is not just a balancing of the scales of human action, but a balancing of the scales performed *by the government*.

Euthyphro: I see nothing wrong with this modification.

Socrates: Neither do I, Euthyphro, neither do I. Well, except for one thing - suppose the government becomes corrupted? Within living memory our own democratic system was displaced by a tyrannical oligarchy. Yet surely many of the actions they took were unjust in the extreme.

Euthyphro: Again, Socrates, the ease with which I can dismiss your objection surprises me. Surely we can simply say that only the actions of a *legitimate* government can be called just.

Socrates: Well, Euthyphro, I don't think that this distinction between legitimate and illegitimate governments is quite as simple as you suppose. But let us pass by that, for it is a somewhat different matter, and consider a further problem.

Euthyphro: And what would that be, Socrates?

Socrates: Consider, friend, a case which is brought before the assembly, like mine or yours that was just heard. How does the assembly judge the worthiness of the accusers, and the worthiness of the defendants? How do they decide whose position ultimately prevails?

Euthyphro: They weigh the concerns of both sides, the evidence of both sides, and make a judgment as to who is more correct. I don't know quite how to answer this question, Socrates, for

it seems to me that the workings of the assembly require no explanation to someone like yourself.

Socrates: Let me put the question more clearly, then. Does the assembly try to choose the course of action which is just, or the course of action which is unjust?

Euthyphro: Of course they try to choose the course of action which is most just.

Socrates: Of course. But, tell me, Euthyphro, how does the assembly decide what is just and unjust?

Euthyphro: In just the way we have been discussing, by determining the proper action to be taken in order to balance the scales against the defendant, after deciding what, exactly, he is guilty of.

Socrates: Yes, but did we not also just specify that part of the definition of justice is that which the government does?

Euthyphro: We did do that, yes.

Socrates: Well, how can the government know what it does before it does it? How can it know what is just when its own actions define the term?

Euthyphro: I... Socrates, this objection is proving a bit more troublesome than the last few.

Socrates: Well friend, it is of little consequence. You have won your case, and I have lost mine, and now we can go our separate ways in peace.

Euthyphro: Socrates, wait! How can you be at peace when you walk towards your death?

Socrates: My friend, we are all walking towards our deaths. I merely know the hour and manner of mine, which is a gift most men lack.