

# Philosophy of Religion

SELECTED READINGS



FIFTH EDITION

2014

Edited by

Michael Peterson  
*Asbury Theological Seminary*

William Hasker  
*Huntington University*

Bruce Reichenbach  
*Augsburg College*

David Basinger  
*Roberts Wesleyan College*

New York      Oxford

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Plato*

## The Relation of Good to the Divine Will



Is what is morally good commanded by God because it is morally good, or is it morally good because it is commanded by God? In this reading from Plato's *Euthyphro*, Socrates (469–399 B.C.) sets forth the prima facie dilemma inherent in this question. If God's commands are based on what is morally good (holy), then it appears that what is morally good has its basis independent of God. On the other hand, if what is morally good (holy) is such simply because God commands it, then what is deemed good at one point might not be deemed good at another point and we thus have no objective standard for determining whether anything is inherently good (holy). From Socrates' perspective, we must conclude that God's commands are based on what is, in fact, morally good, although he acknowledges that this alone does not help us understand the nature of moral goodness.

SOCRATES: But shall we . . . say that whatever all the gods hate is unholy, and whatever they all *love* is holy: while whatever some of them love, and others hate, is either both or neither? Do you wish us now to define holiness and unholiness in this manner?

EUTHYPHRO: Why not, Socrates?

SOCR.: There is no reason why I should not, Euthyphro. It is for you to consider whether that definition will help you to instruct me as you promised.

EUTH.: Well, I should say that holiness is what all the gods *love*, and that unholiness is what they all hate.

SOCR.: Are we to examine this definition, Euthyphro, and see if it is a good one? Or are we to be content to accept the bare assertions of other men, or of

ourselves, without asking any questions? Or must we examine the assertions?

EUTH.: We must examine them. But for my part I think that the definition is right this time.

SOCR.: We shall know that better in a little while, my good friend. Now consider this question. Do the gods *love* holiness because it is holy, or is it holy because they *love* it?

EUTH.: I do not understand you, Socrates.

SOCR.: I will try to explain myself: we speak of a thing being carried and carrying, and being led and leading, and being seen and seeing; and you understand that all such expressions mean different things, and what the difference is.

---

Plato, "Euthyphro," trans. Benjamin Jowett, 1892.

EUTH.: Yes, I think I understand.

SOCR.: And we talk of a thing being loved, and, which is different; of a thing loving?

EUTH.: Of course.

SOCR.: Now tell me: is a thing which is being carried in a state of being carried, because it is carried, or for some other reason?

EUTH.: No, because it is carried.

SOCR.: And a thing is in a state of being led, because it is led, and of being seen, because it is seen?

EUTH.: Certainly.

SOCR.: Then a thing is not seen because it is in a state of being seen; it is in a state of being seen because it is seen; and a thing is not led because it is in a state of being led; it is in a state of being led because it is led: and a thing is not carried because it is in a state of being carried; it is in a state of being carried because it is carried. Is my meaning clear now, Euthyphro? I mean this: if anything becomes, or is affected, it does not become because it is in a state of becoming; it is in a state of becoming because it becomes; and it is not affected because it is in a state of being affected; it is in a state of being affected because it is affected. Do you not agree?

EUTH.: I do.

SOCR.: Is not that which is being *loved* in a state, either of becoming, or of being affected in some way by something?

EUTH.: Certainly.

SOCR.: Then the same is true here as in the former cases. A thing is not *loved* by those who *love* it because it is in a state of being *loved*. It is in a state of being *loved* because they *love* it.

EUTH.: Necessarily.

SOCR.: Well, then, Euthyphro, what do we say about holiness? Is it not loved by all the gods, according to your definition?

EUTH.: Yes.

SOCR.: Because it is holy, or for some other reason?

EUTH.: No, because it is holy.

SOCR.: Then it is loved by the gods because it is holy; it is not holy because it is loved by them?

EUTH.: It seems so.

SOCR.: But then what is pleasing to the gods is pleasing to them, and is in a state of being loved by them, because they love it?

EUTH.: Of course.

SOCR.: Then holiness is not what is pleasing to the gods, and what is pleasing to the gods is not holy, as you say, Euthyphro. They are different things.

EUTH.: And why, Socrates?

SOCR.: Because we are agreed that the gods love holiness because it is holy; and that it is not holy because they love it. Is not this so?

EUTH.: Yes.

SOCR.: And that what is pleasing to the gods because they love it, is pleasing to them by reason of the same love; and that they do not love it because it is pleasing to them.

EUTH.: True.

SOCR.: Then, my dear Euthyphro, holiness, and what is pleasing to the gods, are different things. If the gods had loved holiness because it is holy, they would also have loved what is pleasing to them because it is pleasing to them; but if what is pleasing to them had been pleasing to them because they loved it, then holiness too would have been holiness, because they loved it. But now you see that they are opposite things, and wholly different from each other. For the one is of a sort to be loved because it is loved: while the other is loved, because it is of a sort to be loved. My question, Euthyphro, was, What is holiness? But it turns out that you have not explained to me the essence of holiness; you have been content to mention an attribute which belongs to it, namely, that all the gods love it. You have not yet told me what is its essence. Do not, if you please, keep from me what holiness is; begin again and tell me that. Never mind whether the gods love it, or whether it has other attributes: we shall not differ on that point. Do your best to make it clear to me what is holiness and what is unholiness.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Briefly outline what you see as the strongest and weakest aspects of Socrates' argument for the claim that "the gods love holiness because it is holy" and not vice versa—that the basis for what is holy must be seen as independent from "what is pleasing to the [gods]."
2. Which response to this dilemma—to the question of how goodness is related to God—seems to you the most reasonable for a religious person to accept? Why?