

The Positive Role of Elenchus in Plato's *Euthyphro*

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Abstract: This paper offers an interpretation of the method of investigation in Plato earlier dialogues through a careful analysis of the method of elenchus in *Euthyphro*. I argue that elenchus is a method of securing propositional definitions by identifying predicative middle terms that provide a probative explanation for given propositions. In *Euthyphro*, Socrates leads Euthyphro towards uncovering the coextensive properties of piety as being loved by all the gods and being beneficial to human beings. These coextensive middle terms point us toward a positive conclusion that the essence of piety is justice.

Keywords: elenchus, epistemology, *Euthyphro*, Plato.

1. Introduction

In *Euthyphro*, when all of Euthyphro's answers to the "What is piety?" question are refuted, he exits to avoid the embarrassment and discomfort caused by Socrates' probing cross-examinations. Although Socrates remains hopeful at the end of the dialogue about finding a satisfactory answer to this question, no definitive answer is accepted. The dialogue appears to lead both the interlocutor and the reader to a state of perplexity, as it disproves all of Euthyphro's propositions without providing a clear pathway to understanding the nature of piety.

The debate about whether and how the elenchus contributes positively to securing the propositional definitions of subjects under debate is long-standing. Interpreters hold varying views about the form of the elenchus and its function in Plato's earlier dialogues (Vlastos 1993; Benson 1989; Gonzalez 1998; Brickhouse and Smith 1991, 2002; Carpenter and Polansky 2002). Numerous influential works argue for the elenchus's positive role in answering the central "what is?" question in these dialogues. Under this constructivist interpretation, a prominent view is that the elenchus enables interlocutors to recognize and eliminate beliefs leading to inconsistencies. However, eliminating inconsistencies does not necessarily lead to identifying a subject's propositional definition. Therefore, even scholars who support the constructivist interpretation of the elenchus often do not see the elenchus as aiming for propositional definitions (Gonzalez 1998; Smith 2012; Rowett 2018). I believe such interpretation significantly undermines Plato's objective of identifying propositional definitions and the elenchus's inquisitory power. By illustrating how Socrates guides Euthyphro to the propositional definition of piety, I aim to demonstrate how the elenchus, as a method of

investigation, enables interlocutors and readers to uncover the propositional definition of a subject.

In my view, the elenchus in *Euthyphro* is an investigative method aimed at identifying explanatory middle terms for Euthyphro's views on piety. An explanatory middle term is a predicative term capturing a preliminary explanatory principle for a given conclusion. Socrates strategically questions Euthyphro, leading him to discern which elements of his beliefs he's more inclined to relinquish to maintain consistency. Socrates then assists Euthyphro in identifying preliminary explanatory principles for the unrefuted aspects of his beliefs, progressing until they reach the upward limit – the primitive explanatory principle of piety. This process culminates when they conclude that piety is doing what is just. At this juncture, with no further explanation available for piety entails, it is inferred that justice is the essence of piety, elucidating what makes pious actions pious. Therefore, not only is there a positive answer to the "what is piety?" question in *Euthyphro*, but the elenchus is the method of investigation that allows us to find the definition of piety.

2. The Mixing of Two Properties of Piety in Euthyphro's First Answer

When asked about what piety is, Euthyphro first proposes that piety is just what he is doing right now, prosecuting the wrongdoers for their wrongdoings, regardless of their relationship to the prosecutor (5d8-65). Socrates challenges this, suggesting Euthyphro has not provided an adequate account of piety (6d8-e5). However, a deeper analysis of the passage suggests that Euthyphro's response was on the verge of being satisfactory for Socrates. I contend that Socrates perceives a satisfactory answer within Euthyphro's initial response. Yet, Euthyphro's lack of philosophical sophistication prevents him from fully grasping this answer. Therefore, Socrates deliberately steers Euthyphro toward a misleading interpretation of his original answer, with the intention of guiding him towards the correct understanding hidden within it.

A prominent view regarding the cause of Euthyphro's failure is that it is the result of Euthyphro's conception of combative and quarrelsome gods (Weiss 1986, 451; Brickhouse and Smith 2004). This view is correct in the sense that the gods' argumentative nature implies that they do not uphold an objective standard for pious actions. If this is indeed how Euthyphro conceives of the gods, then he clearly cannot produce an objective principle for pious actions. However, while this theory accurately explains why Euthyphro fails to define piety to Socrates' satisfaction, it does not identify the root of Euthyphro's problem. I believe that the source of Euthyphro's failure lies in his being guided (or rather misled) into considering that the attitude of the gods is the cause of piety.

The traditional interpretation of the character Euthyphro does not sufficiently recognize his role in aiding the process of investigating the nature of piety (Heidel 1900; Hoerber 1958; Holland 1982). Even in a more sympathetic reading of Euthyphro's character, Euthyphro is portrayed as holding distinctive, if

not opposite, moral views from Socrates (Beverlsuis 2000). This interpretation, I believe, fails to truly appreciate Euthyphro's value, not only as a pupil, but also as a repository of true beliefs waiting to be mined by Socratic cross-examination. It is misleading to assume that Euthyphro is skeptical of Socrates' method and his ideal for a proper definition simply because he is Euthyphro.

Euthyphro, to justify his action and to prove that he indeed possesses knowledge of piety, gives multiple answers on what he believes to indicate piousness. His first account suggests that piety is just what he is doing, that is, prosecuting those who have committed wrongs and ensuring they receive their due punishments. Based on Euthyphro's criterion, any action of a similar nature (i.e., to punish wrongdoing) is pious. However, instead of pursuing this principle, Euthyphro immediately turns to the common view. He criticizes the common people for contradicting themselves by accusing him of committing an impious act when they believe Zeus, 'the best and most just of the gods,' has committed a similar act (6a).

Nehamas argued that Euthyphro provided a general principle for justifying his own action – piety is to condemn wrongdoings and prosecute wrongdoers regardless of whether the wrongdoer is a close relative (Nehamas 1999). The problem with Euthyphro's answer is that it is too narrow to encompass all pious actions. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates argues for a similar principle.

He should accuse himself first and foremost, and then too his family and anyone else dear to him who happens to behave unjustly at any time; and that he should not keep his wrongdoing hidden but bring it out into the open, so that he may pay his due and get well...he should be his own chief accuser, and the accuser of other members of his family, and use his oratory for the purpose of getting rid of the worst thing there is, injustice, as the unjust acts are being exposed.¹ (Grg. 479e1-480d4)

Socrates' criticism that Euthyphro offered a type of action, implying a general principle for that type of action, seems to support Nehamas' view:

Socrates: Bear in mind then that I did not bid you tell me **one or two of the many pious actions** but that form itself that makes all pious actions pious, for you agreed that all impious actions are impious and all pious actions pious through one form, or don't you remember? (6d-e)

In a more recent article, Rabbås argued that Euthyphro did not provide a general principle. Rabbås asserted that Euthyphro pointed to a paradigm case that is a clear and important example of piety. Therefore, Euthyphro's answer fails because it does not appropriately explain how the standard of piety in the paradigm case is projected to other cases (Rabbås 2005; see also Edwards 2000). Rabbås' position seems to be supported by textual evidence as well:

Socrates: For now, try to tell me more clearly what I was asking just now, for, my friend, you did not teach me adequately when I asked you what the pious was,

¹ All translations are taken from editions listed in the bibliography.

but you told me that what you are doing now, in prosecuting your father for murder, is pious. (6d)

In this passage, Socrates states that Euthyphro has provided an example of pious action – his action of prosecuting his father – instead of a general principle for what piety is.

I believe both authors are correct, and it is possible to reconcile their views. Euthyphro's account of piety as the sort of actions that involve prosecuting wrongdoers to prevent religious punishment is indeed a general principle too narrow to cover all pious actions. However, if Euthyphro himself does not explicitly identify the explanatory role of this principle, then his answer is ambiguous, and thus susceptible to being interpreted as an example of pious actions.

The problem with Euthyphro's answer lies in his failure to explicitly identify justice as the principle that explains an action's piousness. He does not articulate that 'being just' is what makes pious actions pious, despite his conviction that all unjust actions should be punished. In Euthyphro's view, the more apparent reason to punish the unjust is to avoid religious punishments. However, he does not elaborate on what causes these religious punishments.

Euthyphro's failure to explicitly identify the principle he uses to justify his action makes his account susceptible to be interpreted as a paradigm case of piety instead of a general principle of what piety is. We can see how Euthyphro's answer is prone to misinterpretation through the following passages:

- (1) It is ridiculous, Socrates, for you to think that it makes any difference whether the victim is a stranger or a relative. One should only watch whether the killer acted justly or not; if he acted justly, let him go, but if not, one should prosecute, if, that is to say, the killer shares your hearth and table. The pollution is the same if you knowingly keep company with such a man and do not cleanse yourself and him by bringing him to justice (4c1-d1).
- (2) And observe, Socrates, that I can cite powerful evidence that the law is so. I have already said to others that such actions are right, not to favor the ungodly, whoever they are. These people themselves believe that Zeus is the best and most just of the gods, yet they agree that he bound his father because he unjustly swallowed his sons, and that he in turn castrated his father for similar reasons. But they are angry with me because I am prosecuting my father for his wrongdoing. They contradict themselves in what they say about the gods and about me. (5e1-6b1)

In the first passage, Euthyphro focuses entirely on justice and says nothing about the gods. Based on this account, pollution is a form of religious punishment imposed on those who fail to bring unjust individuals to their deserved punishments. Rabbås correctly argued that Euthyphro's view presumes that there is a universal principle of justice which binds humans and the gods alike (Rabbås 1985; Furley 1985). Euthyphro does not distinguish the principles that govern pious actions from those that dictate right actions in general. Based on this interpretation, Euthyphro shares the correct intuition that justice is what makes

pious actions pious, because humans and the divine are governed by the same principle.

In the second passage, Euthyphro says that the common people contradict themselves because (1) they consider Zeus to be just, (2) Zeus has performed an action of the same sort as Euthyphro's, and (3) Euthyphro's action is unjust. Euthyphro's comparison of his own action to that of Zeus' makes his account susceptible to two different interpretations. On one hand, Euthyphro's account could be interpreted, the way I think it should be interpreted, as referring to Zeus' character as the best and most just of the gods (τὸν Δία τῶν θεῶν ἄριστον καὶ δικαιοτάτον), thereby showing his action of prosecuting his father just. On the other hand, Euthyphro's account could be interpreted (wrongly) as merely appealing to the authoritative figure Zeus, and it is the attitude of the authority that dictates the moral value of his action. If the sole reason Euthyphro considers his action pious is because it is something Zeus had done, his justification would face more serious challenges. As Brickhouse suggested:

Euthyphro's comparison of his own case to the myths about Zeus' father and grandfather is shocking. Greek popular myths about the gods often portrayed them behaving in ways that would be abhorred among human beings...The logic of Euthyphro's argument, then, is elusive at best: is he proposing that his family members would not or should not be angry with him if he imprisoned his father? Or is it, rather, that if they deplore what Euthyphro intends, so, too, should they also deplore the actions of the gods? (Brickhouse and Smith 2004, 19-20)

It is clear to me that Euthyphro is arguing that neither he nor Zeus should be deplored. The common people contradict themselves because they think that the type of action Euthyphro committed is wrong. However, Euthyphro committed the sort of action as Zeus, namely, punishing wrongdoers regardless of whether they are close relatives. If Zeus is the best and most just among the gods, he cannot, or at least not likely to, perform an unjust act. Therefore, Euthyphro's action must also be just. In this sense, the common people contradict themselves thinking that Euthyphro's action is impious when his action resembles that of a moral exemplar. This interpretation implies that an action is pious because it is just.

Euthyphro's first attempt to define piety does not properly identify justice as the explanatory principle for piousness, but rather is subject to two different interpretations: (1) piety is doing what is just, and (2) piety is securing the approval of authoritative figures. The first interpretation presents the cause of pious actions, while the second interpretation anticipates a question about the underlying reasons behind the gods' reactions. The first interpretation is the potential correct answer to the "what is piety?" question that Socrates later explicitly brings up to examine its plausibility (12a).

There is another sign that shows Euthyphro fails to identify justice as the explanatory principle:

Socrates: But this thought came to me as you were speaking, and I am examining it, saying to myself: 'If Euthyphro shows me conclusively that all the gods consider such a death unjust, to what greater extent have I learnt from him the nature of piety and impiety? This action would then, it seems, be hated by the gods, but the pious and the impious were not thereby now defined, for what is hated by the gods has also been shown to be loved by them.' (9d)

Socrates states that even if Euthyphro could demonstrate that all the gods love the just and detest the unjust, he still hasn't defined what piety is. This is due to Euthyphro's failure to identify justice as the cause of pious actions, despite his assertion that all the gods love the just and hate the unjust. The principle of punishing the unjust, although crucial to Euthyphro's reasoning, has always been intertwined with elements of divine love or hatred.

We can conclude that Socrates finds Euthyphro's answer unsatisfactory because it fails to reveal the explanatory principle of pious actions. Socrates purposefully directs Euthyphro towards a misinterpretation of his account, suggesting that piety is what is loved by the gods. This enables Socrates to disentangle this conception of piety from Euthyphro's account by demonstrating that it cannot be the proper definition of piety. More importantly, Socrates could guide Euthyphro towards the correct answer by aiding him in discovering the probative explanatory principles behind why piety is being loved by the gods.

3. The Progress of Uncovering Explanatory Middle Terms

Following Socrates' lead, Euthyphro gives another principle to define what piety is. He states that piety is what is loved by the gods (7a). Euthyphro's second answer, though being refuted by Socrates, captures a possible rationale of his first response (piety is prosecuting wrongdoers for their wrongdoings). It is clear that Euthyphro recognizes this answer could provide justification for his initial account, as he says, "And observe, Socrates, that I can cite powerful evidence that the law is so." (5e2) The evidence Euthyphro cites shows that his action would be favorable to Zeus. Therefore, Euthyphro's second account serves as a general principle that provides a preliminary explanation for his first proposition. Socrates, through employing the elenchus, guides Euthyphro to uncover a predicative middle term that not only makes the proposition "piety is prosecuting wrongdoers for their wrongdoings" necessary, but also offers a probative explanation for this proposition:

Prosecuting wrongdoers – Being loved by the gods (predicative middle term) – Piety

Socrates shows Euthyphro that his second answer is problematic because it implies that some actions are both pious and impious, as they may be loved by some gods but not others (8a1-5). Therefore, he guides Euthyphro to refine this definition, suggesting that piety is what is loved by all the gods (9e1). This revised definition eliminates the predicament of actions being both pious and impious, bringing Euthyphro's proposition to its more precise formulation. More

importantly, this definition captures a coextensive property of piety. The religious sense of the term 'ὅσιος' (piety) is the judgement of actions with respect to our relationship to the gods (Peels 2015, 66). Therefore, it is clear that piety has a coextensive property of being loved by (all) the gods from the religious perspective.

Socrates does not criticize the answer that piety is loved by all the gods. Instead, he asks Euthyphro, "Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?" His question prompts Euthyphro to consider whether there is an underlying rationale for an action being loved by the gods. To help Euthyphro better understand his question, Socrates lists some passive states like 'being led,' 'being carried,' and 'being seen.' The underlying idea is that these passive states are the results of active states like 'leading,' 'carrying,' and 'seeing,' and the active states are the causes of passive states that explain why they take place. The argument presented in 10d-11a indicates that if Euthyphro concedes that 'being loved by all the gods' is an effect, while 'piety' is the cause of this effect, then 'being loved by all the gods' and 'piety' cannot be considered identical (Irwin 2006, 60). Hence, Euthyphro cannot assert that 'being loved by the gods' is the proper definition of piety, as it is a coextensive attribute of piety that requires further explanation.

Through illustrating the distinction between an effect and its cause to Euthyphro, Socrates enables him to recognize the inadequacy of his definition. Frede correctly pointed out that Socrates' examples must have made Euthyphro realize the 'triviality and vacuousness' of taking "something is loved because someone loves it" as an explanation for piety is being loved by all the gods (Frede 2022, 301).

Euthyphro's agreement that piousness is what makes an action being loved by the gods implies that he shares the intuition that 'being loved by all the gods' cannot be the proper definition of piety.

Socrates: What then do we say about the pious, Euthyphro? Surely that it is being loved by all the gods, according to what you say?

Euthyphro: Yes.

Socrates: Is it being loved because it is pious, or for some other reason?

Euthyphro: For no other reason.

Socrates: It is being loved then because it is pious, but it is not pious because it is being loved by the gods?

Euthyphro: Of course. (10d1-7)

Socrates successfully lures Euthyphro to express his real opinion: there is a cause for something being loved by the gods. Therefore, their quest for this explanatory principle must continue (11b2-5). It is sometimes thought that Euthyphro's belief "piety is what is being loved by the gods" indicates that Euthyphro is a divine command theorist (or a divine voluntarist), and Socrates

tricks Euthyphro into accepting a proposition that a divine voluntarist would never assent to, i.e., the gods love the pious because it is pious (Allen 2014; Beversluis 2000; Shorey 1934). However, I believe this interpretation is misguided. First, nothing in the text indicates that Euthyphro is a divine voluntarist. Euthyphro's proposition that "the pious is what is being loved by the gods" seems to be his summary of a characteristic present in the action that he believes to be pious, namely, prosecuting wrongdoers. It is motivated by Socrates' request for Euthyphro to provide a general characterization of what pious actions have in common. Hence, Euthyphro gives an account that could characterize his behavior. This is far from claiming that Euthyphro is a divine voluntarist who believes that 'being loved by the gods' is the sole reason for the piousness of his action. More importantly, even if Euthyphro is a divine voluntarist, Socrates' questioning could reveal that Euthyphro is mistaken about this. Socrates' question is not meant to trick Euthyphro to concede to an account to which he would not normally agree. On the contrary, Socrates asks the question to draw out what the latter latently believes. Clearly, Euthyphro must intuit that the gods love the pious for some ulterior reason for Socrates to win his consent that the gods love the pious for some reason other than their loving it. It is hard to believe that Euthyphro, if he were a divine voluntarist who believes the pious is pious solely by virtue of the gods' loving it, would misunderstand his position so much to the point where he would agree that "the gods love the pious because it is pious." Especially after Socrates has gone through the effort of distinguishing between an effect and a cause.

Socrates' cross-examination thus far guides Euthyphro to fully elaborate a view in his initial account, that is, the intimate connection between divine affection and the pious. We can observe progress in Euthyphro's attempts to define piety. First, Socrates guides Euthyphro to the coextensive property of piety – that it is loved by all the gods. What this means is that all the pious actions share the quality of being loved by all the gods. He then helps Euthyphro understand that since "piety is being loved by all the gods" is a coextensive property of piety that admits further explanation, it cannot be the definition of piety. Given that "piety is what is loved by all the gods" cannot serve as the suitable definition of piety, Euthyphro's initial account is distilled down to the concept that justice is what makes pious actions pious. This is the part of Euthyphro's first account of piety that is left unrefuted.

Since Euthyphro agrees with Socrates that beauty, good, and the just constitute the reason why the gods might disagree about whether an action should be loved (7e), justice could be the reason why all the gods love the pious.

Socrates: What subject of difference would make us angry and hostile to each other if we were unable to come to a decision? Perhaps you do not have an answer ready, but examine as I tell you whether these subjects are the just and the unjust, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad. Are these not the subjects of difference about which, when we are unable to come to a satisfactory decision, you and I and other men become hostile to each other whenever we do?

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Euthyphro: That is the difference, Socrates, about those subjects.

Socrates: What about the gods, Euthyphro? If indeed they have differences, will it not be about these subjects?

Euthyphro: It certainly must be so. (7d1-e1)

It is worth noting that Socrates uses human attitude as the criterion for determining whether something could be favorable to the gods. This further illustrates that Socrates considers the gods follow the same set of principles as human beings. Therefore, what they need to figure out is what causes humans to love or hate something.

We can extract and formalize an argument in a three-lined syllogism:

1. All the gods love the just, the beautiful, and the good, but hate the unjust, the ugly, and the bad.
2. Piety is what is just, beautiful, and good. (Explanatory principle)
3. Therefore, all the gods love what is pious.

It is evident from this argument that the proposition “the pious is what is just, beautiful, and good” serves as a principle that explains Euthyphro’s previous proposition, namely, piety is what is loved by all the gods.

If Euthyphro recognizes that the cause of divine love is the constitution of justice,² he would have followed Socrates’ lead to investigate what makes just action just. He seemed so close to the right answer that even Socrates agreed:

Socrates: Come now, my dear friend Euthyphro, tell me, too, that I may become wiser, what proof you have that all the gods consider that man to have been killed unjustly who became a murderer while in your service, was bound by the master of his victim, and died in his bonds before the one who bound him found out from the seers what was to be done with him, and that it is right (ὀρθῶς) for a son to denounce and to prosecute his father on behalf of such a man. Come, try to show me a clear sign that all the gods definitely believe this action to be right. If you can give me adequate proof of this, I shall never cease to extol your wisdom. (9a-b)

Socrates explicitly says that he would never stop praising Euthyphro’s wisdom if the latter could prove his action just. This shows that Socrates not only concedes that justice constitutes the reason for why an action might be approved or disapproved by the gods, he also points out a direction of investigation – what makes an action just.

I believe that Plato attributes to Socrates the view that the just, the beautiful, and the good are coextensive. They share the coextensive property of being truly beneficial by virtue of being genuine knowledge. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates suggests that wisdom, temperance, courage, justice, and holiness are coextensive

² “Euthyphro: I think, Socrates, that on this subject no gods would differ from one another, that whoever has killed anyone unjustly should pay the penalty.” (8b6-8)

by virtue of being knowledge (*Prt.* 349b-350d). In the *Laches*, Socrates suggests that endurance is only beautiful (*kalon*) and good (*agathos*) when it is conjoined with wisdom (*Lch.* 192c). In the *Gorgias*, Socrates suggests that the ‘fairness’ of an object cannot lie beyond the limit of being beneficial or pleasant (*Grg.* 474e), and that the just, the beautiful and the good are coextensive in terms of being beneficial (*Grg.* 477a). In this dialogue, justice is closest to what Euthyphro can comprehend since it is already a crucial element in his accounts. It is also more relevant to the discussion of the nature of piety, as both piety and justice are concerned with how we should treat others. Therefore, it is reasonable for Socrates to select justice, rather than beauty or good, as the predicative middle term that reveals the explanatory principle of why something might be loved by the gods:

Being loved by the gods – Justice (predicative middle term) – Piety

Following this interpretation, we can see why Socrates invites Euthyphro to investigate the part-whole relationship between piety and justice. Through the elenchus, Socrates guides Euthyphro to uncover the preliminary explanatory principles of his accounts, which ultimately leads him to the focus on an idea implicit in his original account, namely, piety and justice are intimately related. In the subsequent sections, I argue that justice and piety are coextensive, and hence justice is the potential positive result of the dialogue which captures the essence of piety.

4. Against the Interpretation that Piety is a Part of Justice

Many commentators cite the discussion of the part-whole relationship between piety and justice as strong evidence for piety being a part of justice, specifically concerning our relationship with the gods (Brickhouse and Smith 1997; McPherran 1995). A prominent reason for accepting this view is that it is Socrates himself who proposes it. He elucidates the relationship between piety and justice by drawing parallels with the relationships between shame and fear, as well as between oddness and numbers.

Socrates: See what comes next: if the pious is a part of the just, we must, it seems, find out what part of the just it is. Now if you asked me something of what we mentioned just now, such as what part of number is even, and what number that is, I would say it is the number that is divisible into two equal, not unequal, parts. Or do you not think so? (12d5-9)

However, Socrates does not explicitly state that “piety is a part of justice,” just as he does not proactively advocate for any proposition elsewhere in the dialogue. He raises the account in the form of a question that is consistent with the general style of elenchus. Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that Plato depicts Socrates with the intention of cross-examining the interlocutor’s beliefs. We can compare Socrates’ approach here to his earlier approach when he examined whether “piety is loved by all the gods” could serve as the definition of piety. On

that occasion, Socrates enables Euthyphro to understand the distinction between a passive state and a cause through a list of examples (9d-10c). Socrates' example of shame and oddness could perform a similar pedagogical function, helping Euthyphro understand what he means when he says that piety is a part of justice. This does not necessarily imply that piety and justice share a similar relationship like shame and fear, or oddness and number.

Furthermore, it is clear to me that Socrates is portrayed as trying to guide Euthyphro to see for himself that piety and justice are coextensive. We can observe this through his argument against Euthyphro's definition of piety as the knowledge of prayer and sacrifice.

Euthyphro: I say that if a man knows how to say and do what is pleasing to the gods at prayer and sacrifice, those are pious actions such as preserve both private houses and public affairs of state. The opposite of these pleasing actions are impious and overturn and destroy everything. (14b2-5)

In this passage, Euthyphro says that piety is to please the gods in order to benefit human beings in terms of allowing them to preserve private houses and public affairs of the state.

In response to Euthyphro's answer, Socrates says:

Socrates: I prefer nothing, unless it is true. But tell me, what benefit do the gods derive from the gifts they receive from us? What they gave us is obvious to all. There is for us no good that we do not receive from them, but how they are benefited by what they receive from us? Or do we have such an advantage over them in the trade that we receive all our blessings from them and they receive nothing from us?

Socrates: The pious is then, Euthyphro, pleasing to the gods, but not beneficial or dear to them?

Euthyphro: I think it is all things most dear to them.

Socrates: So the pious is once again what is dear to the gods. (14e8-15b2)

We should note that Socrates does not criticize Euthyphro's view that piety is beneficial. He's criticism only questions the gods' involvement in pious actions. Suppose piety is indeed beneficial, but should it be beneficial to humans or to the gods? What if the things that are beneficial to the gods, if there were any, are detrimental to human beings? On this note, I believe what Plato tries to accomplish through this objection is to disentangle the religious element from the definition of piety. Socrates' objection presumes that pleasing the gods involves benefiting them through providing what they might need from us. Since there is nothing we can do to benefit the gods, we cannot please the gods. Euthyphro tries to respond to Socrates' criticism suggesting that we can please the gods without benefiting them. We could simply offer the gods what they love. However, it has already been established that there is a cause for something's being dear to the gods (10a1-11b5). Therefore, we cannot please the gods by offering what is dear to them without identifying what causes them to love something first. On this note,

the essence of piety lies in the principles that cause the gods to love something. We should recall that in 7d1-e1 Socrates uses the causes of human love and hatred as criteria to discern what might be loved or hated by the gods, implying that the love or hatred of humans and the gods have the same cause. Hence, we can conclude that Socrates' criticism works towards redirecting Euthyphro's attention to the beneficial quality of piety towards human beings. It points us to a coextensive property of piety that leads us to identify the essence of piety, that is, piety is beneficial to human beings.

Beneficial to human beings – ? – Piety

Based on Socrates' argument, we can neither benefit nor please the gods. Therefore, piety should not involve benefiting or pleasing the gods. Socrates criticizes Euthyphro for describing piety as the skill to correctly give to and beg from the gods. However, he doesn't criticize Euthyphro's ideas that (1) piety is some sort of knowledge, and (2) pious actions are beneficial to human beings. If we remove the element in Euthyphro's statement that implies piety is what we do to please the gods, what remains is the notion that piety involves benefiting human beings. If the goal of piety is to benefit human beings, it is coextensive with justice. Justice is what enables human beings to foster a proper relationship among each other, thereby benefiting humanity.

In this sense, piety is not a part of justice. Piety and justice are coextensive.

5. The Positive Role of Elenchus

From our previous examination, it is apparent that some aspects of Euthyphro's beliefs are depicted as true, but he fails to recognize these true aspects of his beliefs. Socrates' cross-examination allows Euthyphro to deepen his understanding of his beliefs, thus bringing him closer to the knowledge of piety. Tuoizzo correctly argued that the interlocutors' views capture some aspects of truth, while Socrates seeks to direct the interlocutors' attention on the kernel truth by getting them to formulate their beliefs more adequately (Tuoizzo 2011, 136). I believe Tuoizzo's general depiction of the role of the dialectic is correct. However, Tuoizzo does not elaborate on how Socrates guides the interlocutors to progress closer to the unqualified truth.

In my view, the elenchus serves as a method of investigation that leads the interlocutor to uncover the propositional definition of something step-by-step. Socrates exposes inconsistencies in his interlocutors' beliefs, directing them to aspects of their beliefs that cause these inconsistencies. Even though these shards of beliefs cause inconsistencies in an interlocutor's thinking, there are some truths within them that make them worthy of further development.

In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates first prompts Euthyphro to find the preliminary explanatory principle for his belief that his action of prosecuting his father is pious. To justify his belief, Euthyphro provides a general property of piety, that it is loved by the gods. This property of piety is modified by Socrates to "being loved by all

the gods," which is a coextensive property of piety. In search for the cause of something's being loved by the gods, they reveal another coextensive property of piety, that it is beneficial. Given the presumption that the same principles govern the gods and humans' love of something, the beneficial quality of piety explains why something might be loved the gods and humans alike. However, since we cannot benefit or please the gods, the elements of the gods can be eliminated from our conception of piety. Finally, since piety involves doing what is beneficial to human beings, and justice is what enables humans to benefit humanity, justice is the explanatory principle of piety.

Justice, as the coextensive explanatory term, provides a reasonable explanation for all the propositions Euthyphro brought up about piety. It explains why Euthyphro might think his action of prosecuting his father pious – this is what Euthyphro believes to be the just thing to do. It also explains the common belief that piety is being loved by the gods. Since the gods are infallible moral exemplars, they sure would love all that is just. Furthermore, since the gods aim at what is objectively good and justice is always beneficial, we can form a proper relationship with the gods by simply acting justly. Finally, the beneficial quality of justice explains how we can fare well in both public and private matters.

We can observe a model of investigation of the nature of piety that aims at uncovering the coextensive explanatory principles of the properties of piety:

1. Euthyphro asserts his action of prosecuting his own father is pious.
2. Socrates leads Euthyphro to uncover a preliminary principle – the pious is loved by the gods that could explain why Euthyphro's action is pious.
3. Socrates leads Euthyphro to identify a coextensive property of pious actions, i.e., piety is loved by all the gods, through modifying his previous account.
4. Socrates leads Euthyphro to the possibility that justice constitutes the reason why an action is being loved by all the gods.
- 5*. Socrates tries to lead Euthyphro to realize that justice is coextensive with piety. Therefore, it is possible that justice identifies the nature of piety.
- 6*. If piety and justice are identical, then justice captures the essence of piety.

5* and 6* are not presented in the dialogue. I argued for 5* in the previous section that justice and piety are coextensive, and I will argue in the following section that piety and justice are identical.

6. Why Justice and Piety Are Identical

The greatest difficulty in defining piety as justice lies in the necessity for justice to be identical to piety. The challenge of accepting this view lies in, as Brickhouse mentioned, reconciling how Socrates can be justified in holding that justice and piety are distinguishable, while concurrently maintaining that they are the same thing, that is, knowledge. To address this challenge, Brickhouse argued that while the goal of justice is to benefit others, the goal of piety is to serve the chief end of

the gods (Brickhouse 1997). McPherran argued for a similar view suggesting that generic virtue can be divided into two sub-species, like how shipbuilding and housebuilding are sub-crafts distinguished primarily by their circumstances of practice and distinguishable product (McPherran 1985).³ The goal of justice is to benefit others, while the goal of piety is to aid the gods in their work of benefiting others. Based on this interpretation, piety and justice are the same thing, namely, knowledge, but they are different kinds of knowledge. Therefore, they are distinctive in terms of their defining features. However, I believe this view misinterprets Plato's view about our relationship with the gods.

Socrates' analogy comparing our service to the gods with services provided to doctors, shipbuilders, and housebuilders (13d-e) could offer a different perspective on our relationship with the gods. He clarifies that the services provided to doctors, housebuilders, or shipbuilders aim at achieving health, constructing houses, or building ships (13e). In this light, I believe the relationship between humans and the gods is similar to that of an apprentice and his master. Although it is true that apprentices provide services to their masters, it is not the case that they do so merely for the sake of providing services. The reason why apprentices serve their master is because they lack the skills to perform the tasks their master can execute. Thus, an apprentice in shipbuilding is a shipbuilder in training, an apprentice in housebuilding is a housebuilder in training, and so on. On this note, it is plausible that we serve the gods to achieve their goals precisely because they possess infallible judgement, rooted in their knowledge of what is truly beneficial. Being mortal, we may lack clarity on what is truly beneficial for us and others. Nevertheless, we share the same goals as the gods, and our service to them aligns with our pursuit of these goals. Thus, our service to the gods is a means of identifying and achieving our own goals.

Socrates' suggestion that we should discern the gods' *erga* (13d-14e) does not necessarily mean that we must know the gods' works so that we could serve them to fulfil their *erga*, which implies that piety is serving the gods to achieve their goals.⁴ Rather, it could indicate that we are obligated to know these *erga* are

³ Devereux argued for an opposing view that all virtues belong to the same form of knowledge, distinguishable by some distinctive features apart from the knowledge involved (Devereux 1992).

⁴ This seems to be what Devereux is implying in his work. Devereux quoted a passage in Laches and argued this passage clearly shows that Plato recognized that virtues must be distinguishable.

S. Well, in that case, my good friend, let's not look at virtue as a whole straight away – that might be a rather lengthy undertaking. Let's examine a part of it first of all, and see whether we're in a position to know about that. We'll probably find this makes our inquiry easier.

L. By all means, Socrates.

so that we can achieve them ourselves. An apprentice of a shipbuilder will never become a shipbuilder himself unless he understands what constitutes an excellent ship – he needs to grasp the goal of his master so that he can eventually accomplish the task himself. In this sense, it is plausible to regard piety as justice carried out in its lesser form due to the limited abilities of its performers.⁵

Therefore, I assert that justice and piety are identical in nature as they both aim at what is objectively good and beneficial. They are only superficially distinct due to their specific applications in different contexts or conditions.⁶ A truly

S. So which part of virtue are we to choose? Clearly, I think, the one to which the subject of military training pertains – and that, I imagine, is generally supposed to be courage. Isn't that so?

L. Yes, it certainly is. (190c-d)

Devereux suggested that since Socrates rejected Nicias' definition of courage on the ground that it conflicts with the initial premise that courage is a part of virtue, Socrates seems to be committed to the idea that courage is a part of virtue (Devereux 1992). However, I believe Devereux's interpretation is inconclusive at best. For starters, Socrates made it clear that he and Laches should examine a part of virtue to make their inquiry easier. This initial premise serves an inquisitory purpose that might lead them to a better understanding of what virtue as a whole is. It is crucial that we understand how does studying a part of virtue, in this instance courage, makes the inquiry of virtue as a whole easier. If each part of virtue is distinguishable and not identical to the whole of virtue, it cannot be the case that studying a part of virtue makes inquiring virtue as whole easier; in fact, it could be utterly misleading. Isn't Socrates himself who insists that we must know what a virtue is before blindly accepting its instances or properties? The properties of a virtue are also parts of a virtue, being fearless in battle is a part of courage. Without the general awareness of what a virtue itself is, we might make false judgements about its parts. How could the same man also believe that studying a part of virtue will make inquiring virtue as a whole easier if he does not also believe that each part of virtue is identical to the whole? Plato should recognize that this claim is inconsistent with the Socratic method of inquiry. Furthermore, this premise could serve an inquisitory role other than directly increase our understanding of virtue as a whole. It could, as I have argued in the paper, enhance our understanding indirectly through eliminating the false elements from an interlocutor's beliefs. Even Devereux acknowledges that the text is neutral regarding to the claims (1) Socrates rejects Nicias' definition and (2) he rejects the premise that courage is a proper part of virtue. If Socrates is genuinely unhappy with Nicias' definition, why would he reject it on the ground of violating a presumptuous premise? Socrates says, "let's examine a part of it first of all, and see whether we're in a position to know about." If Socrates is uncertain about whether he and Nicias are in a position to know about this part of virtue, how can he be certain in knowing that it is indeed a part of virtue? On this remark, it is probable that Socrates is not genuinely unhappy with Nicias' definition. He simply meant to have Nicias find out on his own that courage is just the knowledge of good and evil.

⁵ This raises a question about whether all virtues are the same. I believe they are identical in terms of being the knowledge of good and evil, but manifest in different forms when that knowledge is embodied in different individuals under different circumstances. I do not intend to defend this view in this paper.

⁶ Penner argued for a similar position. Penner argued that the same psychological state lies behind each individual virtue (Penner 1973). Taylor also argued that the same type of knowledge underlies all virtues, manifesting differently in various contexts (Taylor 1982). For

virtuous person need not consider if their action is just or pious. They only need to ensure that their actions are genuinely beneficial, and such actions would naturally turn out to be just and pious.

Given that justice and piety are coextensive and identical, with justice serving as the explanatory principle of piety, it is clear that justice is not the genus of piety, but what piety is. The dialogue points us toward a positive answer to the “What is piety?” question.

7. Conclusion

The method of elenchus is not merely a destructive device that aims to eliminate the interlocutors’ false conceit of knowledge, hopefully redirecting them to the right course of finding genuine knowledge. This is not the goal of elenchus; it is only a byproduct of elenchus where any reasonable person would give up their false conceit of knowledge when they grasp something closer to the truth.

Plato portrays Socrates as employing an investigative method that distills the truth from the interlocutors’ apparently false claims in the search for the explanatory principle for the true aspect of their beliefs. He guides the interlocutor to recognize elements of truth embedded in their accounts through producing increasingly more precise formulations of their beliefs. These revised propositions will get closer to primitive principles as they lead to intermediate explanatory principles that move farther away from common opinions, but closer to the unqualified truth.

In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates is trying to guide his interlocutor to the conclusion that justice identifies the essence of piety, explaining what makes pious actions pious. Therefore, despite the seemingly aporetic nature of the dialogue, there is a hidden correct answer to Socrates “what is piety?” question that can be acquired through the elenchus.

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similar views that justice and piety are identical, see Calef (1995); Irwin (2006); Woodruff (1995). For the view that piety is a proper part of justice, see Brickhouse and Smith (1997); McPherran (2000).

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