

Commerce and *Charis*: The Logic of the End of *Euthyphro*

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This paper reflects on Euthyphro's final attempt to answer the question "What is piety?" and the discussion that follows. The relevant portion of text runs from 14a11 - 15c10. Compared to other parts of the dialogue, this passage has received scant attention in the last century of Plato scholarship, despite the fact that a number of commentators have noted difficulties with the argument structure.¹

Euthyphro ends by discussing the eponymous interlocutor's suggestion that piety is what is pleasing (*kecharismena*) to the gods in prayer and sacrifice (14b2–4). Common readings of the end of *Euthyphro* suggest that in comparing Euthyphro's final conception of piety to commerce (14e6–15a6), Socrates shows what is wrong with it. But the discussion ends, not with this comparison, but by *collapsing* or *reducing* Euthyphro's last definition to an earlier, already rejected definition (9e1–9e3). Socrates suggests that, because they are the same, the final definition should be rejected as well (15b1–15c10). This creates an interpretive tension: if the comparison to commerce refutes Euthyphro's definition, what purpose does this reduction serve; and if the reduction refutes the definition, what does the comparison show, since it could not, in that case, show that Euthyphro's definition has failed?

In what follows, I will lay out what is problematic about the last elenchus, and explain why the dominant classic readings do not address these problems. I will offer a new analysis of the logic of the passage that will explain how the reduction and final contradiction are connected to the comparison to commerce, and, in light of this connection, say what the general philosophical lesson of the elenchus is meant to be.

The lesson is not that Euthyphronic piety, understood as ritual sacrifice and prayer, is like commerce, and hence problematically transactional. I follow Roslyn Weiss in arguing that ritual is theological voluntarism in practice², and suggest that the last elenchus is an argument intended to make clear that Euthyphro's understanding of ritual suffers from the same

¹Allen (1970, 61), Benson (2000, 64), Geach (1966, 381), McPherran (2003, 2, 20). McPherran, for example, calls this passage "much-neglected", and notes "the structure of the resulting Socratic elenchus of Euthyphro's [last] definition is obscure, and unlike the previous elenchi, there have been few serious attempts to clarify it."

²Weiss (1994, 266)

philosophical fault as his earlier voluntaristic definition of piety. The comparison to commerce is a step in this argument, and an important one, but it is not the conclusion, nor the main point of the elenchus. The comparison clarifies Euthyphro's last definition, and once that clarification is made, the reader can see more easily how that definition resembles the earlier one, and what problem they share in common.

1 Reduction

I will call the elenchus under discussion 'last' to avoid controversy about the number of such discussions in the dialogue.³ I will refer to the most famous discussion in the dialogue as the *third* elenchus (9e1-11b5), in which we get the dilemma:

Is [the pious] being loved then because it is pious, but it is not pious because it is being loved? (10d6-7).⁴

In this elenchus, Socrates suggests, first, that Euthyphro's 9e definition

9e: Piety is what all the gods love (τὸ ὅσιον ὃ ἅν πάντες οἱ θεοὶ φιλοῦσιν)(9e1-3).

implies that the gods' loving things makes these things pious, and second, that this view should be rejected in favor of the view that gods love things on account of their being independently pious (11a6-b1). Consequently, I will assume *Euthyphro* has at least one central thesis, that Euthyphro's *theological voluntarism*, represented by his view that piety is whatever all the gods happen to love, is philosophically misguided and should be rejected. If being loved by the gods is the only thing that causes something to be pious, then any arbitrary thing could be pious, regardless of its other attributes. In urging Euthyphro to reject the second horn of the above dilemma, Socrates suggests that gods will love things on account of their attributes, not in spite of them.⁵

Euthyphro's final attempt to define piety comes at 14b:

14b: ...I say that if a man knows how to say and do what is pleasing (*kecharismena*) to the gods at prayer and sacrifice, those are pious actions...(14b2-4)

...ὅτι ἐὰν μὲν κεχαρισμένα τις ἐπίσταιται τοῖς θεοῖς λέγειν τε καὶ πράττειν εὐχόμενός τε καὶ θύων, ταῦτ' ἔστι τὰ ὅσια...

³Cf. McPherran (2003), Benson (2000), Adam (1890, xxi).

⁴Translations of Greek from *Euthyphro* are from Grube/Cooper (Grube 2002) unless otherwise specified.

⁵Cohen (1971, 13); Irwin (1977, 48, 62); Irwin (1995, 25); McPherran (1996, 45-47); Reeve (1989, 66); Taylor (1926, 151-152); Versényi (1982, 84-86); Vlastos (1991, 165).

Euthyphro's answer is rejected in the end because he concedes that what is pleasing (*kecharismena*) to the gods is also what is dear to the gods (*philos/theophilēs*). But the idea that piety is what is loved by or dear to the gods has already been rejected in the third elenchus, so, in a sense, Euthyphro's last definition does not receive its own elenchus at all. It appears that *somehow* his final answer is equivalent to his third, and since that answer has already been refuted, its elenchus can be recycled here. And indeed Socrates notes this, saying:

You surely remember that earlier the pious and the god-loved (*to theophilēs*) were shown not to be the same but different from each other?...Either we were wrong when we agreed before, or, if we were right then, we are wrong now. (15c1-3, 8-9)

I say 'somehow' because, though we might expect the last elenchus to *argue* that the two definitions are equivalent, it does not, and its main work seems to be toward showing that Euthyphro's definition has a different problem, its resemblance to commercial trading.

Let us look closely at the moment Euthyphro's last answer collapses into his third. I will call this portion of the text *reduction* and Socrates' question that brings about reduction *the reduction question*:

Reduction:

Socrates: The pious is then, Euthyphro, pleasing (*kecharis-menon*) to the gods, but not beneficial (*ōphelimon*) or dear (*philon*) to them?

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

Socrates: So the pious is once again what is dear to the gods.

Euthyphro: Most certainly. (15b1-5)⁶

⁶It is clear that Socrates takes Euthyphro's answer to claim that piety is *definitionally* what is dear to the gods. But it would have been open to Euthyphro to recall what Socrates said in concluding the discussion of his third answer: "...when you were asked what piety is, you did not wish to make its nature clear to me, but you told me an affect or quality of it..." (11a6-b1) Euthyphro might have claimed at 15b that he was not reverting to his previous definition, but merely granting that piety has the quality, affect, or *pathos* of being loved, a view Socrates did not seem to find fault with earlier. Surely Socrates is aware that Euthyphro could say this, and may even mean this, as he was the one who pointed out the distinction between *pathos* and *ousia* before. Why he assumes Euthyphro did not mean this is an additional puzzle, one I will not have much to say about here. If we assume Socrates could have interpreted Euthyphro's answer as an accidental predication, but chose to see in it an essential predication because it is more damning, we attribute some bad dialectical behavior to Socrates. I do not see that there is much to gain, interpretively or philosophically, by assuming this. So I will assume that Socrates operates in good faith here, and sees essential predication in Euthyphro's answer because that is what Euthyphro meant.

ΣΩ. Κεχαρισμένον ἄρα ἐστίν, ὦ Εὐθύφρων, τὸ ὅσιον, ἀλλὰ οὐχὶ
ὠφέλιμον οὐδὲ φίλον τοῖς θεοῖς.
ΕΥΘ. Οἶμαι ἔγωγε πάντων γε μάλιστα φίλον.
ΣΩ. Τοῦτο ἄρ' ἐστὶν αὖ, ὥς ἔοικε, τὸ ὅσιον, τὸ τοῖς θεοῖς φίλον.
ΕΥΘ. Μάλιστά γε.

We should note that this is first use of the terms *theophilēs* (god-loved)⁷ or *philos* (dear) since the third elenchus. These concepts do not feature in the last elenchus prior to the reduction question; they return abruptly only in that question.

We should also notice that the reduction question is disjunctive. Socrates asks Euthyphro to confirm that his newest definition is neither equivalent to saying that piety is what is god-loved, *nor* equivalent to saying that piety benefits gods. The benefit disjunct allows us to link the question to other parts of the dialogue. Earlier at 13c, an attempted definition – that piety is *therapeia*, or caring for the gods – was rejected because it implied the benefit of the gods by humans (12e9-13d4): Euthyphro does not seem to think humans can bestow benefits on gods. The comparison to commerce, which immediately precedes the reduction question, seems to be an attempt to re-visit this topic, and perhaps confirm the earlier result.⁸ We could thus understand the reduction question to be an attempt to summarize the results of the dialogue so far: it has been established that piety is neither benefitting the gods (as proposed at 13a), nor doing what is dear to them (as proposed at 9e). Socrates may be read as asking: “Euthyphro, concerning your latest conception of piety, that it is what is pleasing to the gods, am I to understand that being pleasing is *neither* the same as being beneficial, *nor* dear, in conformity with our earlier results, but some new idea?”

While this explanation motivates Socrates' question, it does not motivate Euthyphro's answer. He has once rejected the view that piety is what the gods love, and he is being reminded of that prior rejection here. Yet, without any further discussion, in his answer to the reduction question, Euthyphro simply reverses his earlier view, and grants that pleasing or *kecharismena* things are ‘of all things’ most dear to or loved by the gods. Why, now, would he so emphatically grant what was so memorably and laboriously refuted before? It is true that Euthyphro seems to learn little from his conversation with Socrates *in general*, but he registers a stronger reaction to the third elenchus than to the others. He emerges from that discussion confused and unsure of how to proceed, experiencing the only moments of (uncharacteristic) self-doubt in the dialogue (11b-e). It would be surprising, Euthyphro's other faults notwithstanding, for him to have forgotten the results of the third elenchus already and to simply re-assert his earlier view.

⁷This is Socrates' substantive for a thing loved by the gods (10d9).

⁸We will analyze the comparison thoroughly later. It will be a major question of this paper whether Euthyphro's view in the comparison is the same as his view in 13c.

There is no *prima facie* reason offered in these last few lines of the passage that could easily explain Euthyphro's reversal: there is no argument here, only a concession. Call the problem of how to understand why Plato has Euthyphro concede that the pleasing is the god-loved the *motivation problem*. While this problem has been noted by commentators, few have treated it as an interpretative problem that requires a solution. McPherran (2003, 24) puts the point well: "Indeed there seem to be no strictly logical grounds for Euthyphro to have answered Socrates' question at [15b] with the claim that the 'pious is [definitionally] what is loved by the gods...' " ⁹ Hugh Benson writes:

Once again the structure of this argument [referring to the entire elenchus] is obscure. In particular, it is very difficult to determine how the subconclusion that the pious is what is dear to the gods is obtained. Some scholars [citing Peter Geach and R.E. Allen] suggest that Socrates simply tricks Euthyphro into asserting it. (Benson, 2000, 64).¹⁰

2 *Charis*

2.1 Semantic Similarity

It is tempting to reply that there is no genuine problem here, only the appearance of a problem. It is very natural for Socrates to ask his reduction question, and for Euthyphro to answer as he does, for the simple reason that Euthyphro's last answer superficially resembles his 9e answer. Unreflectively, there is not much semantic space between being *dear to* and being *pleasing to*. An ordinary English speaker involved in a discussion on this topic could easily be forgiven for thinking the two definitions were extremely similar, if not equivalent. James Adam (1890: 100) suggests that reduction trades on this resemblance; Socrates is perhaps motivated to ask the reduction question because he sees the semantic similarity between 'pleasing to' and 'loved by'. An argument connecting the preceding portion of the elenchus to this question isn't necessary, because the question is a natural one to ask solely on account of the similarity between the two ideas.

⁹Epecially when it was open to Euthyphro to say that piety is only *predicationally* what is loved by the gods (see note 6.) McPherran, however, does go on to offer other types of grounds, besides logical ones, for why Euthyphro concedes this.

¹⁰Geach (1966, 381): "At this point Socrates charges him with going back to the old rejected explanation of pious acts as acts that the Gods love. The charge, as I said, need not be deliberately sophistical, but at least is far from having been logically made to stick." Allen (1970, 61): "[Socrates] goes on to suggest that if holiness is what is [*kecharismenon*], it is not what is loved by the gods, and at this point, caught off balance, and none too clear on the difference between definition and mere connection,...[Euthyphro] suffers relapse." Allen's "he goes on to suggest" is the only link he offers between the reduction question and the preceding discussion.

But if this similarity is the main motivator of reduction, then we must wonder why Socrates does not ask that question much sooner, perhaps immediately after Euthyphro gives his definition. Imagine the dialogue read as follows from 14b2 (the bracketed portion is my own addition):

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.

[**Socrates:** That the pious is pleasing to the gods, Euthyphro, seems similar to that idea that we mentioned before, that the pious is what is dear to the gods. Do you mean to say the pious is then pleasing to the gods, but not dear to them?]

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

Socrates: So the pious is once again what is dear to the gods.

Here we move from the initial statement of the definition straight to reduction. What, logically, would be missing on this reading? It omits the entirety of the intervening discussion – including the comparison to commerce, which many think is the point of the elenchus¹¹ – yet still achieves reduction by simply trading on the resemblance between ‘pleasing’ and ‘dear’.

The fact that Socrates does not ask this question right away, and does not frame the question in terms of a superficial semantic overlap, suggests that he does not see such an overlap. He does not regard the last definition as a *prima facie* repetition of a previous one, but as something new, worth discussing for its own sake.

I suggest that it is difficult for us to appreciate this point when we use English terms like ‘pleasing’ or ‘gratifying’ to translate the Greek *kecharismena*. I said a moment ago that an ordinary English speaker could be forgiven for taking ‘pleasing’ and ‘dear’ to be near synonyms. But a Greek speaker would not see their originals this way.

2.2 Religious Reciprocity

Euthyphro’s use of *kecharismena* to describe his conception of piety conveys important information, information that is lost when we translate the word as ‘pleasing’ (or ‘gratifying’, or other similar ways). *Charis* and related words like its adjectival *kecharismena* are often used to denote relationships defined by reciprocal exchange, which are governed by a set of social and religious norms. A typical instance of such a relationship might involve giving a gift – usually simply called a *charis* – to initiate a friendship, and thereby creating an expectation of requital – also called a *charis* – that would

¹¹See discussions in: Allen (1970, 61); Biernat (2018, 336); Burnet (1924, 61); McPherran (2000, 97); Taylor (1926, 155, 147-148); Vlastos (1991, 174); Weiss (1986, 266).

be partly constitutive of the ensuing relationship.¹² *Charis*-words, used this way, describe a broad cultural phenomenon of which religious ritual is an instance. While we see the primary definitions of *charis* – graciousness, favor, gratitude – weave through these uses, we also see the word signaling a broader phenomenon that is not reducible to any of those definitions.¹³

Greek literature is replete with descriptions of sacrifices and gifts as *charis*, offered in hope that the gods would do the giver some good turn. Commonly, the gods are reminded of past sacrifices or services. A famous example of this is the prayer of the priest Chryses to Apollo for the return of his daughter, the abducted Chryseis, in the first book of *Iliad*:

If ever I've built a temple that pleased you (χαριέντα...νήον)
Or burnt fat thighbones of bulls and goats –
Grant me this prayer:
Let the Danaans pay for my tears with your arrows!¹⁴
...εἴ ποτέ τοι χαριέντ' ἐπὶ νηὸν ἔρεψα,
ἦ εἰ δὴ ποτέ τοι κατὰ πίονα μηρί' ἔκηνα
ταύρων ἢ δ' αἰγῶν, τὸ δέ μοι κρήνηνον ἐέλδωρ:
τίσειαν Δαναοὶ ἐμὰ δάκρυα σοῖσι βέλεσσιν.
(1.39-41)

Jon Mikalson, on his treatment of *charis* in religious contexts, writes:

One may well feel 'gratitude' upon receipt of such a favour, and for this reason *charis* is often translated simply as 'gratitude'

¹²Think of the exchange of favors between the mouse and the lion in Aesop, or the role that gifts play in the dysfunctional relationship between Achilles and Agamemnon in *Iliad*. See essays in Gill, Postlethwaite, and Seaford (1998); van Berkel (2020), especially Chapter 2; Mueller (2001), pp. 472, 474-476.

¹³Context matters a great deal. The primary sense of *charis* is indeed *gratification*, *pleasure*, or *favor*, and in some contexts, like that of the pastry-baking analogy of *Gorgias* (462c7ff), *charitos* and *charizomai* do just mean to please or gratify. However, as Robert Parker argues:

...the ideas of reciprocity and repayment are associated with *khari*- words, but not in a direct semantic way. One gift or act endowed with *khari*s, power to please, will call forth another, which will in turn evoke yet another...The English expressions 'favour' and 'good turn' work in a similar way: good turns and favours should be repaid in kind, but the words themselves express the sense not of recompense but of benefit. (Parker, 1998, 109)

LSJ's listings for χάρις are mostly along the lines of *grace*, *favor*, *goodwill*, *kindness*, *gratitude* and the like. But it also lists: *a favor done or returned*; χάριν φέρειν τινί: *to do a thing to oblige him*; χάρις ἀποστερεῖν: *to withhold a return for what one has received*; διὰ χάριτων εἶναι or γίγνεσθαι τινι: *to be on terms of friendship or mutual favor with one*.

¹⁴Lombardo's translation, as are all passages from Homer I quote unless otherwise noted (1997, 2).

or ‘thanks’, but this is a misleading oversimplification of the relationship. An individual’s reaction to receiving such a *charis* is to be *κεχαρισμένος* [*kecharismenos*], etymologically related to *charis*, meaning essentially ‘to be put into the *charis* relationship’. Delightful favors, when received by the gods, are *κεχαρισμένα* [*kecharismena*], and here the offerings should be thought not merely as ‘pleasing’, but as ‘pleasing (or acceptable) in the context of the *charis*-relationship between men and gods.’ A *charis* was expected in return for a *charis*, and, in the religious context, what should be emphasized is the relationship based upon continuous mutual and mutually beneficent exchanges of pleasing favors between a human and a god, not merely the ‘gratitude’ or ‘pleasure’ a human or god may feel for a benefit received. There is no simple English word to offer as a translation of this complex of ideas... (Mikalson, 2010, 14-15)

With this in mind, we can conclude that Euthyphro’s last definition is not simply that piety is praying and sacrificing in a way that is pleasing to the gods, but that it is praying and sacrificing in a way that is *reciprocally appropriate*; piety is knowledge of how to establish and maintain a proper reciprocal relationship with the gods. In this way, the definition is both more general and more specific than we had thought at first. It is more general in that it says little about *why* pious things are reciprocally appropriate; it just claims that there is such a property, and pious things will have that property. These things *may* be pleasing to the gods – they likely will be – but it is not by itself that fact which makes them pious. It is instead their being embedded in the right way in a *charis*-cycle, but – and this is a key point we will emphasize heavily later on – Euthyphro’s definition by itself tells us little about what the right way is.

Euthyphro’s answer is also more specific than we noticed at first, insofar as it tells us that we are now onto talking about a particular popularly recognized concept, one that had significant ethical import for Greeks, and resided in the background of many practices, both religious and social. We do not notice this when we understand *charis* merely as ‘pleasing.’¹⁵

In this way, we can see how Euthyphro would not have seen himself, and Plato would not have expected the reader to see Euthyphro, as offering a near synonym of *theophilēs* when he says piety is *kecharismenos*. *Kecharismenos* would be broader than ‘pleasing’, and since this was, as Burnet says, “the regular religious term” (1924, 58), we might also expect this idea to be a starting point for at least one of Euthyphro’s attempted definitions.¹⁶ Semantic *dissimilarity* between *kecharismenos* and *theophilēs* would be built

¹⁵Cf. Biernat (2018, 334).

¹⁶Indeed, we might wonder why it was not his first attempt. Weiss has argued that, in a way, it was (1994, 265). Also see page 26 below.

into the way the former word was ordinarily used. At the same time, because being pleasing –or liked– is one of the properties that might be associated with anything *kecharismenos*, it would still be natural for Euthyphro, when prompted later in the elenchus, to say that *kecharismena* things were dear to the gods.

I draw the reader’s attention to the language of *charis* for two reasons: (i) to argue that there is a genuine motivation problem characterizing reduction that cannot be dissolved by simply noting the similarity between *theophilēs* and *kecharismenos*; and (ii) to lay the foundation for what I will suggest is the solution to the motivation problem. However, before I give that solution, we need to have a closer look at the discussion that intervenes between the 14b definition and reduction, to see why that discussion does not link easily to reduction or provide its motivation.

3 The Comparison to Commerce

3.1 The Function Problem

The intervening discussion comprises lines 14c5-15a6. A common interpretation of the argument structure of this passage has it that the comparison to commerce is the last in a series of inferences showing that Euthyphro’s definition entails that mortals benefit gods with their offerings.¹⁷ Socrates offers a clarification of Euthyphro’s prayer and sacrifice definition: to do what is *kecharismena* in prayer and sacrifice is to ask from the gods things humans need, and to give to the gods things they need. Euthyphro agrees that his definition entails this (14d3). Socrates suggests that from this we can infer that piety and commercial exchange share a common feature:

Comparison to Commerce

Socrates: Piety would then be a trading skill (*emporikē tis technē*) between gods and men?

Euthyphro: Trading yes, if you prefer to call it that.

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

¹⁷Allen (1970, 61); Versényi (1982, 117); Walker (1984, 111).

Euthyphro: Do you suppose, Socrates, that the gods are benefitted (*ōpheleisthai*) by what they receive from us?

Socrates: What could those gifts from us to the gods be, Euthyphro?

Euthyphro: What else, do you think, than honor, reverence, and what I mentioned just now, to please them? (14e6-15a10)

ΣΩ: ἐμπορικὴ ἄρα τις ἂν εἴη, ὥς Εὐθύφρων, τέχνη ἢ ὁσιότης θεοῖς καὶ ἀνθρώποις παρ' ἀλλήλων.

ΕΥΘ: ἐμπορικὴ, εἰ οὕτως ἥδιόν σοι ὀνομάζειν.

ΣΩ: ἀλλ' οὐδὲν ἥδιον ἔμοιγε, εἰ μὴ τυγχάνει ἀληθὲς ὄν. φράσον δέ μοι, τίς ἢ ὠφελία τοῖς θεοῖς τυγχάνει οὕσα ἀπὸ τῶν δώρων ὧν παρ' ἡμῶν λαμβάνουσιν· ἃ μὲν γὰρ διδόασιν παντὶ δῆλον· οὐδὲν γὰρ ἡμῖν ἔστιν ἀγαθὸν ὅτι ἂν μὴ ἐκεῖνοι δῶσιν. ἃ δὲ παρ' ἡμῶν λαμβάνουσιν, τί ὠφελοῦνται· ἢ τοσοῦτον αὐτῶν πλεονεκτοῦμεν κατὰ τὴν ἐμπορίαν, ὥστε πάντα τὰ ἀγαθὰ παρ' αὐτῶν λαμβάνομεν, ἐκεῖνοι δὲ παρ' ἡμῶν οὐδέν·

ΕΥΘ: ἀλλ' οἶμαι, ὥς Σώκρατες, τοὺς θεοὺς ὠφελεῖσθαι ἀπὸ τούτων ἃ παρ' ἡμῶν λαμβάνουσιν·

ΣΩ: ἀλλὰ τί δήποτ' ἂν εἴη ταῦτα, ὥς Εὐθύφρων, τὰ παρ' ἡμῶν δῶρα τοῖς θεοῖς·

ΕΥΘ: τί δ' οἶμι ἄλλο ἢ τιμὴ τε καὶ γέρα καί, ὅπερ ἐγὼ ἄρτι ἔλεγον, χάρις·

Socrates makes clear that the key respect in which Euthyphronic piety may resemble commerce is in being an exchange of benefits (14e9-15a4). When he asks if piety, on Euthyphro's view, would be a sort of trading skill (*emporikē technē*) (14e6-7), he is asking whether Euthyphro thinks pious gifts from mortals are beneficial to gods. If Euthyphro grants that one may call his conception trading, he thereby grants that human offerings benefit their divine recipients. Earlier, Euthyphro denied that piety could be care for the gods (*therapeia*), because that would seem to imply that the gods received the benefit of improvement from such care (13c6-d2). Therefore, if Euthyphro now accepts that piety is an exchange of benefits, like commerce, that would appear to bring him into conflict with what he agreed to at 13c-d, since he seems to think there that we neither benefit the gods nor make them better.

13c:

Socrates: Is piety then, which is care (*therapeia*) for the gods, also to benefit (*ōphelia*) the gods and make them better (*beltious*

tous theous poiei)? Would you agree that when you do something pious you make some one of the gods better (*beltiō tina tōn theōn apergazai*)?

Euthyphro: By Zeus, no.

Socrates: Nor do I think that this is what you mean – far from it – but that is why I asked you what you meant by the care of the gods, because I did not believe you mean this kind of care. (13c6-d2)

ΣΩ. Ἡ οὖν καὶ ἡ ὁσιότης θεραπεία οὔσα θεῶν ὠφελία τέ ἐστι θεῶν καὶ βελτίους τοὺς θεοὺς ποιεῖ· καὶ σὺ τοῦτο συγχωρήσας ἄν, ὥς ἐπειδὴν τι ὅσιον ποιῇς, βελτίω τινὰ τῶν θεῶν ἀπεργάζῃ.

ΕΥΘ. Μὰ Δί' οὐκ ἔγωγε.

ΣΩ. Οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐγώ, ὦ Εὐθύφρων, οἶμαι σε τοῦτο λέγειν — πολλοῦ καὶ δέω—ἀλλὰ τούτου δὴ ἔνεκα καὶ ἀνηρόμην τίνα ποτὲ λόγοις τὴν θεραπείαν τῶν θεῶν, οὐχ ἡγούμενός σε τοιαύτην λέγειν.

So we ask: does Euthyphro accept the inference Socrates offers at 14e6? Although Euthyphro initially seems to grant that piety is skill at trading, he does so with some reluctance, emphasizing that the label is applied at Socrates' preference. But when he is asked directly whether human gifts can benefit divine beings, he does not answer, and instead replies with a question of his own. This response can be seen as evasion, and when coupled with Euthyphro's initial reluctance, may suggest that Euthyphro now sees he is caught in a contradiction with his earlier position, and wants to avoid admitting it.

If this is true, if Euthyphro accepts the inference Socrates offers (despite not saying as much explicitly), the comparison has produced a contradiction that refutes Euthyphros' 14b definition by the time we reach 15a. Many commentators see this passage as representing the *raison d'être* of the elenchus, as being Plato's main criticism of Euthyphronic piety: it is somehow too commercial or transactional in implying that piety is an exchange of benefits.¹⁸

But if the definition Euthyphro offered at 14b is refuted by 15a, then what do we make of what we thought was the rest of the elenchus? Reduction, its relation to the logic of the rest of the passage already foggy, now appears to be completely unnecessary: while before it was unmotivated, now it appears to be superfluous.

¹⁸See Allen (1970, 61); Biernat (2018, 336); Burnet (1924, 61); McPherran (2000, 97); Vlastos (1991, 174); Weiss (1986, 266). A. E. Taylor goes so far as to say that this is the point of the entire *dialogue* (1926, 147-148). Versényi (1982, 115) argues that the comparison to commerce is important in a different way. Plato's point is to show that Euthyphronic piety is indeed transactional, but Euthyphro does not have the knowledge needed to participate in these transactions successfully.

The answer Allen et al.¹⁹ give is to say that the reduction is the conclusion of a entirely distinct elenchus comprising 15a7-15c10. Between the comparison to commerce and the reduction is a list, prompted by a question from Socrates. Socrates asks: “What could those gifts from us to the gods be, Euthyphro,” and Euthyphro replies with a list of three things. Allen reads these lines as follows: having shown that Euthyphro’s 14b answer is refuted, Socrates now asks Euthyphro to give yet another definition of piety. Since what we give to the gods cannot be things that benefit them, the question implies, what do we give them *instead*? The items on Euthyphro’s list thus represent a *new* answer to the original question, and reduction reduces this answer, not the previous one, to the answer from 9e.²⁰

I call any view that takes the definition Euthyphro offers at 14b to be refuted by the comparison to commerce at 15a *Early Refutation*. As my tententious label suggests, I think these readings locate the main contradiction in the wrong place.²¹ I think reduction, not the comparison to commerce, is meant to be the refutation of Euthyphro’s 14b definition, and that Euthyphro’s list does not represent a new answer to the original question.

Let me give my reasons. First is the language of the passage. Let us look at the list, wherein Euthyphro’s new definition is supposed to be offered. He lists three things: honor, reverence, and *charis*.²² His 14b definition said that piety is what is *kecharismena* with respect to the gods. Recall what we said earlier about the relationship between *kecharismena* and *charis*, that the former means something along the lines of ‘characterized by *charis*’, where the latter is understood to be describing a broad set of reciprocal norms. This strongly suggests that Euthyphro is not offering a new definition in his list, but reminding us of his 14b definition, perhaps with the intent to clarify. And in fact, here is his complete answer to Socrates’ question:

List:

Euthyphro: What else do you think, than honor, reverence, and what I said just now (*arti*), *charis*.

¹⁹ Allen (1970, 61); Versényi (1982, 117); Walker (1984, 111)

²⁰ A view like this is also supported by the disjunctive structure of the reduction question we mentioned above: having rejected that piety is dear to the gods, and that piety is beneficial to the gods, Socrates wants to know if Euthyphro is offering a new kind of definition in his list. The key thing to note on this interpretation is that the list is not seen as a reiteration or further clarification of the original 14b definition, but as a new attempt to define piety.

²¹ Benson seems to agree. (2000, 65, n. 26).

²² I revert to the Greek here, partly on account of our observations about *charis* above, but also because some translators obscure the point I am making here by translating inconsistently between 14b and 15a. For example, McPherran renders *kecharismena* at 14b and in the reduction question as ‘gratifying’, and *charis* in the list both as ‘gratitude’ and (later in his analysis) ‘favor’. (2003, 20-22). Also see Walker (1984, 109).

EΥΘ: Τί δ' οἶσι ἄλλο ἢ τιμή τε καὶ γέρα καὶ, ὅπερ ἐγὼ ἄρτι ἔλεγον, χάρις. (15a9-10)

Euthyphro emphasizes that what he is saying now, *charis*, he has already said. There is no use of *charis* or derivatives at any point in the dialogue prior to his definition at 14b, so Euthyphro could only be referring to his statement there. The intent of Euthyphro's list appears to be to give Socrates examples of the kinds of things he meant when he called pious offerings *kecharismena*; these will be things like honor and reverence. Though the list contains three items, I do not think they are of equal weight. Euthyphro is not mating *charis*, the main component of his definition, to two other notions. Rather, *timē* (honor) and *gera* (reverence) are meant to fall under *charis*: Euthyphro is giving examples – an approach he is partial to – of things he has all along taken to fall under his 14b definition.²³ Socrates also seems to take this to be Euthyphro's meaning, since he treats, in his next question – the reduction question – the single term *kecharismenon* as equivalent to the entire list Euthyphro has just given:

ΣΩ: Κεχαρισμένον ἄρα ἐστίν, ὃ Εὐθύφρων, τὸ ὅσιον, ἀλλ' οὐχὶ ὠφέλιμον οὐδὲ φίλον τοῖς θεοῖς.

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

I think this continuity of language from the 14b definition to reduction is a good reason to think Plato wants us to consider *that* definition, and not a new one, still under examination at 15b.

Besides ignoring this continuity, early refutation has the additional drawback of making the motivation of reduction even less clear than we have already seen it to be. As we have already noted, there is no argument in the reduction; it is a mere concession. If reduction is an elenchus unto itself, it is philosophically vacuous. It contains no line of reasoning and no clear philosophical lesson. It is hard to see why Plato would include it at all, much less present it in such a place of prominence, as the closing word of the dialogue.

So there is a puzzle concerning what role the comparison to commerce and the inferences leading to it play in the elenchus. If we say that they refute, on their own, Euthyphro's definition, then we exacerbate the motivation problem: reduction becomes an empty addendum which seems to serve no substantial role in the dialogue.²⁴ But if we say Euthyphro's definition survives the comparison, then we need to explain what the comparison

²³Reading Euthyphro's second καὶ as epexegetical would yield this result.

²⁴It does serve the purpose of bringing the conversation neatly and stylishly full-circle. But I want to argue is that it is more than just a stylistic device. See McPherran (2003) for an argument that makes such a stylistic loop philosophically important.

shows, since it does not show that Euthyphro's definition has failed. Call the problem of understanding the role or purpose of the comparison the *function problem*.

3.2 Vlastos' Dilemma

Readings like Allen's take Euthyphro to accept – however reluctantly – the inference from his 14b definition to the claim that human gifts benefit gods. Gregory Vlastos offers an interesting variation on this idea, seeing the comparison to commerce as representing a *reductio ad absurdum* of Euthyphro's definition:

Sniffing out here [in Euthyphro's final definition] the age-old *do ut des* conception of worship – swapping gifts of sacrifice for prayed for benefits – Socrates rebuffs it brutally. He says that, if so, piety would be “an art of commercial exchanges between gods and men”, exchanges that would make no sense since they would be so one-sided...if piety is holy barter it is a bargain for us, a swindle for the gods. (Vlastos, 1991, 174)²⁵

Vlastos' remarks imply he sees Socrates as presenting Euthyphro with a dilemma. He offers Euthyphro two models of exchange, and wants to know which best represents his idea. Socrates wants to know whether Euthyphro thinks that piety is a *symmetrical*, mutually beneficial exchange, like commerce, or is instead an *asymmetrical* exchange. Euthyphro cannot accept the first model because of what he has said at 13c-d; but neither can he accept the alternative Socrates offers, because, as Vlastos says, it “would make no sense”. Vlastos suggests it is an obvious absurdity that mortals would give to gods things of no benefit to the latter, while receiving beneficial gifts in return. So Euthyphro faces a choice: he either accepts that his model of piety is like ordinary commerce, and is caught in a contradiction with his earlier position, or he concedes that his model represents an extraordinary kind of exchange and a patent absurdity. Either way, his definition is refuted.²⁶

²⁵Also see Biernat (2018, 334-337); Burnet (1924, 61); McPherran (2000, 97); A. E. Taylor (1926, 155, 147-148); Weiss (1986, 266).

²⁶Though he does not give his view on how the rest of the elenchus should be read, Vlastos' reading would have to largely follow the Allen reading we gave above: Euthyphro's list of pious gifts would be regarded as a new answer to the initial question. Vlastos would then have trouble explaining the point of continuing the discussion after the presentation of a damning dilemma. On an Allen-like reading, I assume that the items on Euthyphro's list are not beneficial gifts, and so avoid conflict with 13c. Vlastos' position is that giving non-beneficial gifts to the gods is presented as an obvious absurdity, and so it would be odd for the discussion to continue by exploring such a hypothesis.

3.2.1 Benefit-Asymmetry and *Charis*

Noticing that Socrates offers an alternative model for Euthyphro to consider is an important interpretive move.²⁷ However, we should reject the idea that the second model is meant to represent a patent absurdity that Euthyphro cannot or would not accept. I claim that Euthyphro is *not* caught in a dilemma here, but squarely rejects the benefit-symmetrical model *in favor* of the asymmetrical model.

We have learned that *charis*-words singled out things that were to be given to the gods in order to meet religious obligations, as a kind of payment for reciprocal favors. However, an additional thing we should note about general reciprocity is that exchanges of *charis* need not be of equal value, and in fact often will not be. Many *charis*-relationships preclude equal exchange: that between parents and children, rulers and subjects, and most emphatically, gods and mortals. A parent might give to her child something the child needs, like food and shelter, but the child might return only obedience, respect, or affection. So, in certain cases, asymmetrical exchange was taken for granted as an inevitable, but morally proper, mode of *charis*. Religious *charis* is the most asymmetrical of *charis* relations, as Robert Parker notes:

Of all the relations brought under the rubric of reciprocity in this volume [on Greek reciprocity], that between humans and gods is perhaps the most unbalanced – a fact that, in many contexts, the Greeks were very far from denying. (1998, 124).²⁸

As an example, consider Chryses in the first book of *Iliad*. He asks for the destruction of his enemies through plague, and in return he burns thigh bones and builds temples, or offers prescribed words in prayer to remind Apollo that he has burnt thighbones and built temples in the past.²⁹ Implicit in the most basic understanding of Greek ritual is the idea that we ask the gods for things that benefit us, whereas the gods require in return things from us that show devotion or signal acquiescence to divine will.

So, while much social *charis* is marked by attempts to exchange things of proportionate value, religious *charis* was widely accepted to be asymmetrical, since humans cannot bestow benefits on gods like those gods bestow on us. Thus, when offered a choice between a symmetrical and an asymmetrical model of exchange, Euthyphro would have seen the latter as the conventionally correct model, not as an absurdity to be avoided.³⁰

²⁷Thanks to Vanessa de Harven for helping me see the importance of this in discussion.

²⁸In fact, Parker argues that *Euthyphro* is one of the contexts in which we see an affirmation of this (118-124). Also see: van Berkel (2020, ...); MacLachlan (1993, 33); Mueller (2001, 475); Versényi (1982, 116).

²⁹Parker (1998, 106).

³⁰In this way, we can see Euthyphro's rejection of the view that we can benefit gods from

I am not suggesting here that neither Plato nor Socrates found the asymmetrical model absurd. They likely did, as I will discuss below, and this may explain the somewhat derisive tone with which this model is presented to Euthyphro. My point is that Socrates does not present this model to Euthyphro (or Plato to an ancient reader) with the expectation that Euthyphro (or the reader) will see in it obvious absurdity, and thus realize the dialectical game is up. As I will argue, Socrates anticipates that Euthyphro will accept the asymmetrical model as a representation of his thinking, and then leads him to reflect on what might be problematic about such a model by suggesting a comparison to the voluntarism of the third elenchus. Socrates (and Plato) do indeed find Euthyphro's transactional notion of piety problematic, but their aim is to invite Euthyphro (and the reader) to see this upon reflection, not take its problematic nature for granted as obvious. I will make this case in detail in what remains of this paper.

With all this in mind, let us reflect again on the text. Though Euthyphro agrees with Socrates that his conception of piety could be called a commercial one, he is not enamored of this description, as we noted earlier, saying to Socrates, "Yes...if you prefer to call it that" (14e8).³¹ Neither is Socrates committed to this description, at least not without further reflection on the idea to see whether it is true, saying "I prefer [not to call it trading], unless it is true" (14e9). I contend that what comes next *is* this reflection, and what Socrates notices in it is that a defining feature of commerce is its symmetry with respect to benefit. If Euthyphro thought his model of piety was truly like commerce, he'd also think that his model entailed a symmetrical exchange of benefits. However, both the tone and substance of Euthyphro's reply suggest that he is happy to own the model that Socrates offers as an alternative. Unlike his tepid reception of the idea that ritual is commerce, Euthyphro embraces the idea that ritual is an asymmetrical exchange. Rather than give Socrates a simple answer to his question, he challenges Socrates with a question of his own. His aim is not to *evade* Socrates' question, but to emphasize the obviousness of his answer to it: only someone who thought that mortals *could* benefit gods would bother to ask this question at all, rather than assume asymmetry from the beginning. His question is to the effect: "So should I conclude, Socrates, because you have asked this question, that *you* think mortals can benefit gods?" (15a5-6) Euthyphro insinuates that it should be *obvious* that humans do not benefit gods in the ways gods benefit us, and that, far from being an unanticipated problem with his conception of piety, this is an intended consequence.

It is also interesting to note that Socrates does not answer Euthyphro's question of challenge. He instead moves straightaway to asking Euthyphro

13c as a doctrinal companion to his thinking here. It is not *merely* because Euthyphro has already rejected such benefit that he cannot accept the view here.

³¹Cf. van Berkel (2020, ...); Walker (1984, 109).

what things we give to the gods (15a7-8), suggesting that he would like to know the nature of these gifts given as part of asymmetrical exchange, gifts that somehow fail to benefit while nonetheless being gift-worthy. Socrates himself thereby *accepts* Euthyphro's denial of benefit-symmetry, and proceeds to discuss the asymmetrical alternative. Moreover, when Socrates asks the reduction question a few lines later, he affirms that the discussion has now moved beyond considering views in which human gifts to gods are beneficial. In asking "The pious is then, Euthyphro, *kecharismenon*, but not beneficial or dear to them?" (15b1-2) Socrates is asking Euthyphro to re-iterate that his definition – that piety is what is *kecharismenon* – does not involve saying that piety is (definitionally) beneficial.³²

There is some scholarly precedent for this view. Parker's reading is bolder, but along the same lines: "Under pressure from Sokrates, Euthyphro eventually bursts out in some anger: of course the gods do not need our gifts, it is all a matter of 'honour and recognition and *kharis*'." (1998, 121) Weiss reads similarly: "Euthyphro insists that the gods gain no advantage from dealing with men (15a5-6); what they get is honor (*timē*, *gera*) and good will (*charis*) (15a9-10)." (1986, 450)³³

Vlastos' dilemma is thus an attempt to discover whether, after initially unenthusiastically agreeing to it, Euthyphro still accepts that piety is like commerce, once the implications of that view are made clear. I contend that he does not, and thereby endorses the asymmetrical model of piety as the one that best expresses his definition.

Notice that now we have opened a path from the comparison to commerce to the reduction. The elenchus does not end with the comparison; instead, Euthyphro's 14b definition emerges from it in a clarified form: the things we offer to the gods in ritual are different in kind from the things we get from them. Piety involves offering things that are *kecharismena*, but not beneficial, in exchange for things that benefit us. But what exactly does this mean?

4 Empty Reciprocity

4.1 Prompting Reciprocation

Vlastos' suggestion that it is absurd to give unbeneficial gifts in exchange for beneficial ones raises an important question. If I am correct, Euthyphro

³²Here we again note the disjunctive structure of the question, but this time the first disjunct refers, not to the earlier elenchus ending at 13c, but to the current elenchus, confirming the outcome of comparing Euthyphro's 14b definition to commerce. See page 4 and note 20.

³³Also McPherran (1996, 56); McPherran (2003, 20-25). That the conversation has moved in the direction of discussing non-beneficial gifts is something even Allen-like readers agree on; the point of disagreement is whether this new direction is a part of the elenchus begun at 14b or a new one.

contends that correct ritual giving, giving that conforms to religious *charis*-norms, does not involve giving gifts that are beneficial to the recipient. But what else could make a gift *kecharismena*, a correct form of sacrifice, but that it does some good for the recipient?³⁴ This question, we should note, is a variant of the central question of the elenchus. Euthyphro begins the discussion by saying that piety is what is reciprocally correct, what is *kecharismena*. What the reader, and surely Socrates, wants to know next is what explains why something would conform to *charis*-norms; what properties must a thing have to be *kecharismena*? Socrates proposes that being beneficial to the recipient might be the desired explanans, but on my reading Euthyphro rejects this idea.

Charis-norms are norms of reciprocity; built into the very idea of a norm of reciprocity is that something that conforms to such norms will be sufficient to prompt requital. I claim that there is nothing more to Euthyphro's 14b conception of piety than this bare idea, that anything that stands in the *prompts-reciprocation*-relation to the gods would count as pious, regardless of what kind of thing it is (beneficial or not). Euthyphro confirms that standing in this relation is an important component of his thinking by his focus on it in the original statement of his definition. There he emphasizes that *kecharismena* actions will cause a beneficial response from the gods, and actions opposite to these will prompt negative requital:

Euthyphro: ...I say that if a man knows how to say and do what is *kecharismena* 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 [*tōn kecharismenōn*] actions are impious and overturn and destroy everything (13e10-14b8).

What we want to know is: what makes something sufficient to prompt divine requital, particularly of the positive sort? We learn that Euthyphro does not believe benefit is the answer to this question. He has an opportunity to enlighten us about what he might think is the answer with his list of non-beneficial gifts like honor and reverence. To review:

Socrates: What could those [non-beneficial] gift from us to the gods be, Euthyphro?

Euthyphro: What else do you think, than honor, reverence, and what I said just now, *charis*. 15a8-10)

³⁴See McPherran (2003, 22-26) for an account of how gifts can fail to be beneficial, yet still be appropriate offerings. My concern will not be to explain how this is possible, but to emphasize that Euthyphro is not in a position to explain it, and this is an important interpretive datum.

But his focus in this list does not seem to be helping Socrates understand why these particular things are on the list, but rather to emphasize that anything that happens to be on it is on it because it conforms to *charis*-norms. He seems to say: “Non-beneficial pious gifts are, as I have already said, (ὅπερ ἐγὼ ἄρτι ἔλεγον,) things that conform to *charis*-norms, like these well-known examples, honor and reverence.”³⁵ Honor and reverence are not offered to help us understand what unites things on this list; rather, they are token examples of things conventionally understood to be on a list of items held together *solely by the fact that they are popularly understood to prompt divine requital*.³⁶ In other words, Euthyphro’s aim in the list seems to be to simply *repeat* the idea that Socrates wanted *explained*.

4.1.1 I Give So That You Will Give

Euthyphro is clearly outlining a *do ut des* model of piety in the last elenchus. The Latin phrase *do ut des*, ‘I give so that you will give’, is often used to describe ancient transactional religious practices like those under discussion here. In such practices, humans sacrifice to the gods primarily in order to coerce them to benefit us in return. For all the attention paid to the capricious and arbitrary nature of Homeric gods, they do behave in regular and predictable ways when it comes to honoring the expectations of ritual. As Parker notes:

If one looks at the theology of Homer in terms of *kharis*, the accusation so often made that Homer’s gods are arbitrary seems quite misplaced. In Greek terms, the ultimate and intolerable arbitrariness on the part of the gods would be indifference to the whole system of sacrifice and offering and prayer; but this is not how they are portrayed in the poem as a whole. (Parker, 1998, 117)³⁷

A Euthyphronic gift creates a strong expectation that the gods will return a favor, perhaps amounting to perceived obligation: Euthyphro “conceives of gods and men as bound by compact to give and take reciprocally.” (Adam, 1890, xxi). In this way, Euthyphronic giving is, in some respects, like honoring contractual obligations: I don’t pay the rent to enable my landlord to buy a boat; I pay the rent so that she does not evict me. I do not pay a certain amount in rent because I think it is a sum helpful to the landlord; I pay that amount because the landlord has stipulated that is how

³⁵ Again reading καὶ as epexegetical. See discussion on page 13.

³⁶ ...about honor and reverence as conventional descriptors of external *charis*...

³⁷ He argues that even when *charis* agreements are broken “...there is always a clear reason in terms of the divine politics of the poem, or larger divine plans, why the sacrifice must be spurned, or the favourite hero surrendered. Simple indifference is never the explanation.” (Parker, 1998, 117).

much I shall pay in return for being allowed to remain on the premises. In meeting my rental obligation, my motive is not to benefit the landlord – though it *may* happen that the landlord is benefited by my paying the rent – but instead to benefit myself by creating an obligation for the landlord to hold up her end of the deal.³⁸ It is of course true that the landlord has likely arranged the lease so that when I meet its terms for my own gain, I thereby also benefit her. But the description under which I think of my rent is not as something that benefits the landlord, but as something that secures for me housing. What is rent for a tenant? Rent is a sum that when paid secures the reciprocal benefit of housing for the tenant, as specified by previous mutually agreed upon contract. How much is it? No specific amount is essential to the idea of rent: it is whatever amount the landlord requests.

Euthyphro's situation is different in that the gifts he gives, while not intended to benefit the gods, *could not* do so, even accidentally, if Euthyphro's assumption at 13c was right. But the point is that Euthyphronic sacrifice does not concern itself with the specific content or nature of the things given, except insofar as they fall under the broad, extrinsic description of being what is required by the gods to prompt reciprocation.

Note that if I am trying to give you something that will produce a certain effect in you, the best way to do that is to have you tell me what will produce that effect. I can try to guess, or rationally enquire; but if I believe you to be capricious and arbitrary, this will not be very effective. It is better to just do what you ask. This will get me the result I want even if there is no consistency to your desires, no coherence to the things that you want, like, or that will otherwise prompt your reciprocation (if that is the effect I aim to produce).

This allows us to say that in thinking that pious gifts are whatever will prompt divine reciprocation, Euthyphro also likely thinks of these gifts as things *required or requested* by the gods as conditions for such reciprocation. Euthyphronic piety involves giving to the gods what they happen to want so as to prompt their beneficial requital.

4.1.2 Commercial vs. Transactional

The idea that Euthyphro's model of piety is *do ut des*, and that Socrates might object to it on those grounds, is not new. The main reason that the comparison to commerce is so frequently taken to be the point of refutation of Euthyphro's last definition is that in comparing it to commerce, Socrates means to highlight the problematically transactional nature of it. Recall Vlastos, emphasizing the one-sided nature of Euthyphronic exchange:

³⁸Likewise, the landlord does not aim for my flourishing or comfort in providing me a home, but to oblige me to pay rent.

Sniffing out here [in Euthyphro’s final definition] the age-old *do ut des* conception of worship – swapping gifts of sacrifice for prayed for benefits – Socrates rebuffs it brutally. (Vlastos, 1991, 174).

But also notice McPherran:

...it was typical to accompany a prayer of request with an offering of some sort designed to establish a claim on the “helper”...As Euthyphro confesses to Socrates (*Euth* 14c-15a), this *do ut des* – “I give so that you will give” – conception of reciprocity between gods and humans is rather like an art of commerce (*emporikē*; 14e8). These practices appear to rest on the traditional and fundamental assumption that justice consists in reciprocation, in repayment in kind. (McPherran, 2000, 92)

A. E. Taylor calls the passage between 14e6 and 15a4 “gentile satire on the unworthy conception of religion as a trade-enterprise carried on by God and man for their mutual benefit,” and says “...this is a view of religion thoroughly in keeping with the more sordid side of the ancient State cultus, which was very much regulated on the *do ut des* principle.” (Taylor, 1926, 155, 147-148).³⁹

Allen-like readings, recall, claim that the comparison to commerce refutes Euthyphro’s definition by forcing him into a contradiction with his position at 13c. The commentators above go further than this, though, and claim that there is a deeper philosophical or doctrinal objection to Euthyphro’s view that Socrates wants to highlight. It is not just that Euthyphro is inconsistent; he holds a view Socrates objects to on some independent ground.

Many commentators express that ground by describing it both as commercial and *do ut des*, as the previous passages show. But if ‘commercial’ implies a mutual exchange of benefits, as Socrates suggests, then being commercial and being *do ut des* are not the same. Euthyphro imagines that he gives things to the gods in order to reap reciprocal benefits, making his piety *do ut des*, but the things he gives are not of the same type as the ones he receives in return, making his piety not commercial in the relevant sense.⁴⁰ I do think Euthyphronic piety is nonetheless *transactional* insofar as it involves exchanging ritual gifts for benefits bestowed on humans *in return*; but as my previous remarks imply, we should distinguish being *transactional* from being *commercial* in the context of the comparison to

³⁹Also see Biernat (2018, 336); Burnet (1924, 61); Weiss (1986, 266).

⁴⁰Taylor clearly assumes that the view being satirized is benefit-symmetrical in saying that it is carried on for ‘mutual benefit’, as does McPherran in saying ‘repayment in kind.’

commerce.⁴¹

I am in agreement with these commentators that the *do ut des*, transactional nature of Euthyphronic piety is problematic for Socrates and for Plato, and I indeed think that the point of the elenchus as a whole is to highlight that problem. But I depart from these scholars in the following respects: (i) Showing that Euthyphronic piety is *do ut des* is not to show that it is like commerce and involves a symmetrical exchange of benefits. Euthyphro denies the latter, but does not thereby deny the former. (ii) Making a companion point to what I have argued earlier, I do not think that being transactional or *do ut des* is meant to be *self-evidently* problematic, representing an obviously absurd position in Euthyphro's eyes or the eyes of an ancient contemporary.⁴² (iii) While the comparison to commerce may bring out the *specific way* in which Euthyphronic piety is transactional – by offering the gods any sort of thing that will prompt their reciprocation, regardless of its ability to benefit – the comparison has not thereby shown exactly what Socrates (or Plato) find problematic about such transactionality. To see that, we need to see how this transactionality leads us, conceptually, back to the third elenchus.

5 *To Theophilēs*

5.1 Ritual and Voluntarism

If what I have argued is correct, for Euthyphro, correct sacrifice will involve giving what is expected or required by the gods, whatever that turns out to be, with little or no concern for whether the things given are beneficial or otherwise independently valuable to the gods. This means any explanation of correct giving on this model will make no essential reference to what is given; the specific nature of what is given will be beside the point. All that

⁴¹There has been a lot of scholarly discussion about the degree to which *charis* is fully transactional in the Classical period, since it may have been to only a lesser degree earlier, or whether older *charis*-norms are slowly being displaced by more commercial values in the Classical period. See discussions in van Berkel (2020); Gill, Postelthwaite, and Seaford (1998).

⁴²Versenyi (1982, 115-116) goes so far as to say that even Socrates would not have seen a problem with the transactional aspect of Euthyphro's definition. I do not agree, but if his idea is plausible, it is because of what I have argued herein, that transactional ritual was a widely-accepted social commonplace. By Versenyi's lights, it was so widely accepted that even Socrates did not question it: "This conception of piety as *emporikē*, doing business with the gods for the mutual benefit of both gods and men, has aroused much righteous indignation and pious horror in some modern interpreters who regard it an utter debasement of the very notion of holiness and a 'malicious characterization' which Socrates employs for its 'gruesome shock effect' but could not possibly take seriously. Such reactions seem to me totally anachronistic. However expressive they may be of modern religious sensibilities, they must not be imported into the Greek context; they cannot even be ascribed to Socrates himself, let alone his orthodox contemporaries."

matters for explaining the correctness of the sacrifice is that the requirements of the gods are met.

This accords with traditional accounts, not only of Greek religion, but other ancient religions as well. I recall being puzzled in my youth at stories from the Old Testament involving burnt offerings, often thinking: *why* are the characters in these stories burning animals as offerings? Does god eat the meat? What purpose could this sacrifice serve; what use could god have for this activity? But the practical futility of the sacrifice, one might argue, was entirely the point. It was a show of devotion, a display designed to demonstrate that the god's followers were willing to obey, regardless of what they were asked to do. The content of the devotional act is deliberately severed from the reason the act is performed, precisely to emphasize that reason: I do not do this, the acolyte might say, because of what it accomplishes on its own; I do it *solely* as a display of obedience and devotion. Consider the case made famous by Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*, in which god commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. No alternative practical explanation can be offered here for why *this* sacrifice is appropriate; it is appropriate because god commanded it, and he commanded it to force a show of devotion (Genesis 22:1-14).

Greek religion called for the sacrifice of similarly arbitrary things, like the paradigmatic *kecharismena mēria* – ritually-appropriate thighs of cattle⁴³ – things that gods want us to give but have no obvious purpose or benefit outside of a show of devotion. They are just things the gods happen to require or request.

In my opening remarks, I suggested that the rejection of theological voluntarism is meant to be one thesis of *Euthyphro*. Let this be the view:

Theological Voluntarism (TV): things are made pious, moral, or otherwise good by an act of divine will.

Euthyphro's third answer (9e1-9e3) says that the pious is (definitionally) what is loved by all the gods. Taking his answer to be an expression of TV, he claims that what *causes* a pious thing to be that way is that the gods are fond of it; their loving that thing is what makes it pious. This means that there are no pious things independently of the love of the gods, and that *anything whatever* that is loved by the gods will be pious. If this weren't the case, then the love of the gods would not be the explanation for why things are pious. This, of course, is the same thinking that lies behind Divine Command Theory, the view that whatever a divine being commands

⁴³To underscore the point made earlier (p. 8): if we adopt the standard approach to translation with the *this* phrase, we get the somewhat comic result 'pleasing thighs.' But this rendering is also inadequately informative. An English speaker might have lingering questions about what sorts of things these were and why they were pleasing, but a Greek speaker would have no such questions. She would clearly understand the intended referent of the phrase. See Parker (1998, 106).

is a moral act, since the sole explanation of moral goodness is divine will. This kind of thinking results in counterintuitive scenarios like Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Human sacrifice, we think, is wrong for reasons of its own, reasons having to do with the kind of action that it is, and those reasons cannot be overridden by an act of will, divine or otherwise. God's commanding Abraham to sacrifice Isaac does not change the fundamental nature of the act itself, and if it is wrong because of what kind of act it is, then it will not be the sort of action that a morally perfect being *would* command. If, then, it is true that gods cannot make any arbitrary thing holy or good by an act of will, that some things are holy or good independently of divine will, then TV is false.

In the third elenchus (9e4-11b5), famously, Euthyphro tries to have it both ways, driven by entrenchment in the conventional voluntarism of Homer and Hesiod, on the one hand, but on the other, presumably, by the same intuition that makes us balk over the suggestion that what makes human sacrifice wrong is merely divine preference. He claims that pious actions are made pious through divine love, but also claims that the gods love things because they are antecedently pious (10d1-8). There could be no independently pious things if his definition were true, so in claiming that gods love things as a consequence of the antecedent piety of those things, he contradicts himself. Socrates suggests that Euthyphro abandon the former view, equivalent to TV, possibly implying Socrates' own acceptance of the latter one.⁴⁴

Euthyphro's *do ut des* model of piety suffers from the same flaw as his 9e definition: it is voluntaristic. What makes a gift appropriate, and hence pious, is not *what the gift is*, but whether or not it is required by the gods. We do not give the gods what is *kecharismenos* by giving them things that benefit them; we give things that are *kecharismenos* by giving them things they require, request, or command that we give them. We do not need to understand why they want them; it need not even be the case that they want them for any particular reason. The only thing that matters is that we give them what they say we ought to give them. In this way, just as theological voluntarism denies that things are pious because of how they are, but claims they are pious solely in virtue of being willed or loved, Euthyphro's conception of pious giving denies that things are appropriate gifts because of how they are, and claims they are appropriate solely in virtue of being required or requested. Just as voluntarism makes no essential reference to the particular natures of putatively pious things in explaining why they are pious, Euthyphronic giving makes no essential reference to the particular natures of offered things in explaining why they are offered.

⁴⁴Cohen (1971, p. 13); Irwin (1977, pp. 48, 62); Irwin (1995, p. 25); McPherran (1996, pp. 45-47); Reeve (1989, p. 66); Taylor (1926, pp. 151-152); Versényi (1982, pp. 84-86); Vlastos (1991, p. 165).

There is no necessary connection between the content of the gift and the reason it is given.

This does not mean, of course, that Euthyphro's gods would accept just any offering. As a matter of contingent fact, they expected some things, like thighbones, and not others. But as I noted above, it is precisely in demanding that we do things that have no independent motivation that gods can effectively test obedience. If the only reason I give a thighbone is that it has been commanded I do so, my giving is a purer display of devotion and obedience than otherwise. So the fact that there were conventions specifying that some things were acceptable sacrifices and not others doesn't undermine the general point I am making here, which is that in principle, it could have been anything that the gods demanded. The thighbones were just symbols of the obligation these gifts were meant to discharge.⁴⁵

5.2 Explanatory Failure

Having noted the conceptual connection between voluntarism and Euthyphro's understanding of ritual, we can now see how this connection informs the structure of the last elenchus. I have said that in giving a list of non-beneficial but *kecharismena* things at 15a, Euthyphro effectively repeats his definition rather than explaining it. He gives token examples of things on his list of pious gifts, but does not explain why they are on that list. It is tempting, given what we know of him from the rest of the dialogue, to conclude not only that Euthyphro is ignorant of what properties unite the items on his list, but that he does not recognize the philosophical importance of finding any such unity. I suggest that is exactly the conclusion that Socrates draws, following Euthyphro's presentation of his list. Recall Socrates' response to Euthyphro the first time he gave a list rather than an explanation (5d8-5e2), in his initial attempt to answer the question that motivates the whole dialogue: what is piety?

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...Tell me then what this form itself is, so that I may look upon it and, using it as a model, say that any

⁴⁵Though I stress the arbitrariness of the gods here, I remarked earlier that there seems to be one respect in which they were not popularly seen as arbitrary, and that is in honoring *charis* obligations. I used this observation to explain why someone like Euthyphro would give in the spirit of *do ut des*: he believes the gods will reliably give him benefits if he sacrifices what they require. I want to stress here that the reliability of the gods in this respect, and their otherwise being capricious, are not inconsistent traits, but reinforce one another. The more arbitrary the command or obligatory request, the more devotion is displayed by the acolyte who complies. It is unsurprising that a voluntaristic framework would have it that arbitrary gods would reward those who obey their arbitrary commands, and reward them with a non-arbitrary regularity.

action of yours or another's that is of that kind is pious, and if it is not, that it is not. (6d9-6e6).

This shows us that an important concern for Socrates (and Plato) in the dialogue is *explanatory adequacy*. Socrates thinks that whatever is pious will be so on account of having certain features that it will share with any other pious thing. A definition of piety that doesn't tell us what these features are will therefore suffer from a kind of *explanatory failure*; it will not truly explain why anything pious is pious. Additionally, we learn later in the third elenchus that certain types of relational properties will not serve as adequate explanations for piety. The putative lesson of the third elenchus is that voluntaristic accounts of piety or moral goodness do not provide philosophically adequate explanations, because they allow for any arbitrary thing to be pious, regardless of its intrinsic properties. I suggest Socrates recognizes Euthyphro is making his characteristic blunder once again in the last elenchus, in suggesting that piety is giving to the gods whatever they require so as to prompt reciprocation.

Roslyn Weiss has argued that this conception of piety, that it is giving the gods what guarantees a beneficial return, is a theme that unites many of Euthyphro's definitions. Despite his expressed concern with impartial justice near the beginning of the dialogue (4b7-9), Euthyphro betrays that his real concern in prosecuting his father is to reap the reciprocal benefit of being cleared of the pollution he believes his father's "murder" has caused to fall on his household. He hopes to reap this benefit through a kind of blind mimicry of divine precedents (5d8-6a2). "The means he employs for the preservation of his safety is pleasing the gods by imitating them..." (Weiss, 1994, 265). I add to this that Euthyphro imitates because he has no conception of what *types* of actions might get him what he wants, so he hopes that by repeating the specific things he believes the gods themselves have done, whatever that turns out to be, he will be successful.

Weiss concludes that we see this idea emerge again in the last elenchus, suggesting that the 14b definition is essentially Euthyphro's voluntarism all over again:

By linking this late definition with the earlier ones, Socrates makes clear that Euthyphro's late and early definitions of holiness share a common essence: what is at the heart of holiness conceived as prayer and sacrifice is at the heart of all conceptions of holiness that appeal to what is 'dear to the gods'. What is at the heart of holiness conceived as prayer and sacrifice, and by extension of holiness conceived generally as τὸ θεοφιλέες, is the tit-for-tat of the commercial venture. Socrates' characterization of prayer and sacrifice as an ἐμπορικὴ τέχνη, an art of commerce, is a characterization that fits all conceptions of holiness in which

holiness is but the means for advancing one's own interests by satisfying the 'interests' of the gods. (Weiss, 1994, 266)

While Weiss emphasizes the common element of exchange, I emphasize that Euthyphro's third and last definitions suffer from the same type of explanatory failure: they both fail to give us the non-relational properties that explain what makes a pious action or offering pious. And while we might have noticed the exchange element without the comparison to commerce,⁴⁶ we need the comparison, interpreted as I have done, to highlight that Euthyphro does not have an explanation for why pious gifts are offered to the gods, except to insist that they are the sorts of things that prompt requital. The comparison to commerce highlights this feature of Euthyphro's thinking by showing that he rejects the most plausible explanation, that pious gifts benefit gods.

Upon that rejection, Socrates now suspects that Euthyphro is falling back on his voluntaristic thinking, and it is this suspicion that prompts him to return to the conversation the language of *theophilēs*. In his reduction question, he asks: "Euthyphro, in saying that the pious is what is reciprocally appropriate, but denying that what makes it so is that it is beneficial, are you not falling back on the same thinking you used before? If divine reciprocation is not explained by giving what is beneficial to the gods, then how do we get them to reciprocate? By giving them whatever they like?" And Euthyphro seems to agree: what is *kecharismenon* is "of all things most dear to them."

Notice that we have now solved the two problems that began this paper. We have assigned a clear role to the comparison to commerce that is not the refutation of the 14b definition, and we have linked the reduction to the rest of the elenchus and given it a proper motivation. The comparison serves to show that Euthyphro rejects the most plausible explanation for divine reciprocation and fails to offer an alternative. This reveals to Socrates that Euthyphro has fallen back to the voluntaristic thinking that characterized his earlier definition, and he notes this by re-introducing the language of that definition in his reduction question. Euthyphro's concession is Plato's way of signaling to the reader that the two definitions suffer from the same philosophical problem, explanatory inadequacy.

This reading, however, gives rise to a new problem. To see what it is, and to see how I solve it, we need to have a close look at the formal structure

⁴⁶Weiss, in another paper, seems to read the comparison as I do, with Euthyphro's endorsement of the idea that humans give gods non-beneficial things (Weiss, 1986, 121). It is important to note that whether humans give gods beneficial or non-beneficial things, these things are given in exchange for things beneficial to mortals. So the general point she makes here stands on either reading, that the 14b definition essentially involves exchange. I differ from her in attaching more importance to the fact that Euthyphro prefers the asymmetrical model of exchange. It is this preference that shows Socrates we are back to voluntarism.

of the whole elenchus.

6 The Logical Structure of the Last Elenchus

My breakdown of uncontroversial inferences largely follows Benson (2000, 64) and McPherran (2003, 20-22). Let us begin here:

Definition

1. Piety is knowledge of how to say what is *kecharismena* to the gods in prayer and give what is *kecharismena* in sacrifice. (14a11-14b7)

What follows the presentation of the definition is a series of questions intended to clarify Euthyphro's meaning. These questions assume when Euthyphro calls piety a kind of knowledge (*epistētai*), he implies that piety requires skill (it is *technē*) and thus that one can do it correctly (*orthos*) or incorrectly.⁴⁷ I contend that the use of *kecharismena* also implies this: to give or request in accord with *charis*-norms is to do it the right way, knowledgeably and therefore skillfully. So we get:

Clarification

2. To sacrifice is to give to the gods. (14c8)
3. To pray is to request from the gods. (14c8-9)
- ∴ 4. So, piety is knowledge of how to request from and give to the gods. (14d1-2) – From 1, 2, and 3.
- ∴ 5. So, piety is to correctly request from and give to the gods. – From the fact that doing something knowledgeably implies that we do it skillfully and hence correctly.
6. To request from the gods correctly is to ask them for things we need (δεόμεθα). (14d9-10)
7. To give to the gods correctly is to give them things they need (δεόμενοι). (14e1-3)

What immediately follows this clarification is the comparison to commerce. That comparison begins with what looks like a conclusion (denoted by the use of ἄρα),⁴⁸ though as we noted before, Socrates frames it as a question, wanting to know if Euthyphro accepts that this conclusion follows from what he has already agreed to:

⁴⁷Socrates links these ideas thus: “And to give correctly (ὀρθῶς) is to give [the gods] what they need from us, for it would not be skillful (τεχνικόν) to bring gifts to anyone that are in no way needed.” (14e1-5). See Allen (1970, 58); McPherran (2003, 20).

⁴⁸Benson (2000, 64); McPherran (2003, 20); Vlastos (1991, 74); Walker (1984, 111).

Comparison to Commerce

∴ 8. “Piety would then (ἁγία) be a trading skill or an art of commercial exchange (ἐμπορικὴ τις τέχνη) between gods and men?” (14e6-7)

But there are clearly suppressed premises between 7 and 8. Some of those we can extract from the lines that follow 8, in which Socrates makes clear the respect in which piety and commerce might resemble one another, being a mutual exchange of benefits. To review:

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 give us is obvious to all. There is no good that we do not receive from them, but how are they 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? (14e10-15a4)

How exactly we construe these premises will depend on the interpretation we give of the passage. Let us use Allen’s reading as our base case, to mirror our preceding discussion. I suggest his construal should go like this:⁴⁹

7.1 Commercial exchange essentially involves reciprocal exchange of benefits (assumption from 14e10-15a4).

7.2 If piety essentially involves reciprocal exchange of benefits, then it resembles commerce (plausible intuition).

7.3 Piety essentially involves reciprocal exchange of benefits.

∴ 8. Therefore, piety resembles commercial exchange (paraphrase of 14e6-7.)

On an Allen-reading, Euthyphro tries to avoid admitting that he accepts 8 by asking a diversionary question. But the implication is that he must accept 8 given what he has already agreed to, and that would then bring him into conflict with

13c: Humans can do nothing to benefit gods (from 13c6-d2)⁵⁰

since reciprocal exchange of benefits entails giving beneficial things to gods.

On this reading, 7.3 is the load-bearing premise. But where does it come from? We should note that what Euthyphro agrees to at 6 and 7 is that piety

⁴⁹Allen does not give a step-by-step breakdown, but skips to an explanation of the important inferences at the end (1970, 60-61). Cf. Walker (1984, 111).

⁵⁰See p. 11.

is involves reciprocal exchange of *needed* things (using *deomai* to describe both what we ask for and what we give to the gods), but in the comparison to commerce, Socrates has shifted to talk of *benefit* (*ōpheleisthai*). We thus require some bridging principle to link the clarification section to the comparison, to justify the slide from ‘need’ to ‘benefit’. Allen suggests that “...surely, if the gods need a thing, they must benefit from getting it...” (1970, 61).⁵¹ Let this be an instance of a more general principle, and name it:

Allen’s Principle (AP): if one needs a thing, then one benefits from getting that thing.

AP and 7 give us:

7_{AP}: To give to the gods correctly is to give them things they benefit from.

Once we have this, we can reason smoothly from 5 to 8, since 7.3 is now clearly derivable from 5, 6, and 7.

An interesting consequence of this construal is that Euthyphro’s 14b definition is effectively refuted as soon as he agrees to 7, if AP is an operative background assumption of this discussion. 7 plus AP yields 7_{AP} and the latter claim already contradicts 13c, *even without the comparison to commerce* (the outcome of which is 8). I said before that Allen-like readings reach the refuting contradiction too early, leaving off the reduction and what is clearly intended to be the end of the elenchus. But now we see that such readings may reach refutation *even earlier*, and leave off the comparison to commerce, typically thought to be the soul of the elenchus.

This is not, in my view, a difficult problem for an Allen-reader to deal with. The comparison, one might argue, serves to highlight the contradiction already implicit at 7_{AP} by making explicit the immanently plausible shift from *need* to *benefit*. The comparison, such a reader might say, does not produce the refuting contradiction, but serves to explain why Euthyphro plausibly slipped into it.

But a version of this problem is more damning for my reading. To see why, let us first re-construe the comparison according to Vlastos’ interpretation (7.1 and 7.2 remain unchanged from the previous version):

7.1 Commercial exchange essentially involves reciprocal exchange of benefits (assumption from 14e10-15a4).

7.2 If piety essentially involves reciprocal exchange of benefits, then it resembles commerce (plausible intuition).

⁵¹Also Walker (1984, 111).

- 7.3 Piety essentially involves reciprocal exchange of benefits *or* piety essentially involves one-sided exchange (Vlastos' dilemma, from his reading of 14e10-15a4).
- 7.4 Piety does not essentially involve reciprocal exchange of benefits (from 13c).
- 7.5 Piety does not essentially involve one-sided exchange (because this is a patent absurdity).

And then let us vary that to construe my reading (only 7.5 changes):

- 7.1 Commercial exchange essentially involves reciprocal exchange of benefits (assumption from 14e10-15a4).
- 7.2 If piety essentially involves reciprocal exchange of benefits, then it resembles commerce (plausible intuition).
- 7.3 Piety essentially involves reciprocal exchange of benefits *or* piety essentially involves one-sided exchange (Vlastos' dilemma, from his reading of 14e10-15a4).
- 7.4 Piety does not essentially involve reciprocal exchange of benefits (from 13c).
- 7.5 Therefore piety essentially involves one-sided exchange (and therefore does not resemble commercial exchange. From Euthyphro's emphatic question at 15a.)

I have argued that Euthyphro denies that piety is giving beneficial things to the gods and accepts the alternative, and the alternative is then shown to be problematic in the reduction, making all parts of the elenchus logically necessary and coherently linked. But if AP is an operative assumption in the elenchus, Euthyphro *has already committed himself* to the idea that piety involves giving beneficial things to the gods, by his acceptance of 7. Thus, he is not free to make the moves I attribute to him at 7.4 and 7.5, and if he does endorse 7.4, then his 14b definition is once again refuted *before* reduction, precisely the result my account was supposed to avoid.

6.1 Need, Benefit, and Allen's Principle

To solve this problem, I need to show that AP is not an assumption that governs all uses of 'need' in the elenchus; specifically, I need to show that it does not constrain premise 7. This will require two steps: (i) I need to show that there is a plausible denial of AP: that sometimes needs, in some sense of the word, do not confer benefits; (ii) I need to show that such a denial is

plausibly at work as a background assumption in the discussion of premise 7.

First let us recall premise 7:

7. To give to the gods correctly is to give them things they need (*de-omenoi*). (14e1-3)⁵²

We should read this as a biconditional:

7. x is correctly given iff x is needed.⁵³

If AP governs 7, then we can get:

- 7_B. x is correctly given iff x is beneficial.

If Euthyphro later claims or implies that gifts to the gods are non-beneficial, then by *modus tollens*, those gifts will not be correctly given, and hence not pious according to his 14b definition.

6.1.1 *Deomai*

It is certainly true that many needs are naturally tied to benefits: food, shelter, companionship, money, transportation. There are many things we need, and when we get those things, we are better off in some way. Moreover, in premise 6, the prior counterpart to premise 7, the use of ‘need’ clearly intended is one like this, one governed by AP:

“And to request correctly would be to ask from [the gods] things that we need δεόμεθα [*deometha*]?” (14d9-10)

⁵²Καὶ αὖ τὸ διδόναι ὀρθῶς, ὧν ἐκείνοι τυγχάνουσιν δεόμενοι παρ’ ἡμῶν...

⁵³“And to give correctly is to give them what they (happen to) need from us...” surely gives us one side of this:

If x fulfills a need, then x is correctly given.

If we meet the condition of giving the gods what they need, then we have given correctly. But Socrates goes on to add, by way of explaining the link between correct or skillful giving and meeting needs: “...for it would not be skillful to bring gifts to anyone that are in no way needed.” (14e3-4) It is hard to read this any other way than as the following conditional:

If x does not fulfill a need, then to give x is not skillful (and therefore not correctly given).

Contraposition gives us

If x is correctly given, then x fulfills a need.

All this together gives us a biconditional.

We can conclude this not only because precisely the sort of things humans need from gods are things that are (perceived as) good for us, but because the text goes on to say that what we get from the gods is beneficial for us: “There is for us no good (*agathon*) we do not receive from them...” and “we receive all our blessings (*ta agatha*) from them...” (15a1-4). It is thus natural to assume that if ‘need’ in premise 6 is an Allen-use of the term, then so is ‘need’ in premise 7.

I will argue that when Euthyphro agrees to premise 7, he has a different sense of ‘need’ in mind than what elicits his consent to premise 6, a sense not governed by AP, and Socrates anticipates this in the language he uses to couch the question representing our premise 7. To see this, we need to look in some detail at the Greek originals.

Most translate Socrates’ δεόμενοι [*deomenoi*] – third-person plural of *deomai* – in premise 7 at 14e1-3 as ‘they need’.⁵⁴ But it is important to note that Greek *deomai* often has a shade of meaning that English ‘need’ lacks. While *deomai* does often mean to lack or stand in need of, it can also mean simply to request or ask for.⁵⁵ This makes it easy to produce counterexamples to AP: one can request things that are not beneficial (or even perceived as beneficial). If gods did this, we could describe those things as *deomenoi* (things they request) without implying that these were things they benefitted from. Of course, typically, *people* ask for things that benefit them, as we have said. But if gods wanted things from us, things that could not by definition benefit them, we might yet describe their requests using *deomai*.⁵⁶

Additionally, in English, there are uses of ‘need’ and ‘necessity’ that describe a bare relation of dependence: we can express that *x* is a conditional requirement for *y* by saying that *x* is necessary for *y*. In contexts like these, what is necessary does not have to be something that confers a benefit, but only something that satisfies a requirement, regardless of whether what it is required for is beneficial. Suppose someone expressed concern over the penalty for a minor legal infraction, and her friend replied, “You shouldn’t worry about going to prison over a parking ticket, because you would need

⁵⁴Antecedent at 13d6: τοῖς θεοῖς – ‘the gods’.

⁵⁵LSJ δέω_(B) II.2. Δέωμαι/*deomai* is the middle/passive voice form of δέω/*deō*. Middle voice verbs often have an active voice sense, but since they share a grammatical form with their passive counterparts, context is sometimes necessary to determine how they should be translated.

⁵⁶There is some intuitive sense in which anytime one gets what they ask for, they are benefitted solely in virtue of having a desire satisfied. If this is necessarily true, and if it is true of Euthyphro’s gods that they cannot be benefitted by mortals in way, then to maintain consistency, Euthyphro may have to give up the idea that his gods can even make requests of humans. There is not space here to explore this possible additional inconsistency in Euthyphro’s thinking. I will assume that somehow, even if Euthyphro’s gods cannot be benefitted by mortals in any way, it still makes sense for them to ask for and receive things from humans. Relatedly, see McPherran on the notion of a *non-eudaimonia-furthering-gift* and its relevance to this topic (2003, 20-25).

to commit a felony for that punishment to be appropriate.”

I raise the point about English because Greek *deomai* has uses like this as well. $\Delta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\tau\alpha\iota$ [*deitai*] is the third person singular middle/passive form of *deomai/deō*, and so often means ‘he/she/it lacks or is in need of.’ But this form is also used to express the same idea impersonally, as if to say ‘there is need of’ or ‘it is necessary.’ The third person active form of *deō*, $\delta\epsilon\acute{\iota}$ [*dei*] – ‘he/she/it needs’ – is the standard and most common way to express impersonal necessity, or to say the Greek equivalent of ‘it is necessary.’⁵⁷ I think it is in these impersonal examples that we come closest to seeing a mirror of the ambiguity in English ‘necessity.’ To say ‘it is necessary that *x*’ in English could mean either ‘*x* is required for some valued or beneficial outcome’ or simply ‘*x* is required’.⁵⁸

Finally, there is a special instance of this kind of necessity or requirement that is of particular relevance for our discussion: obligatory necessity. Suppose I am late on a rent payment, and the landlord’s management company leaves me a message that says:

Rent: The landlord needs the rent.

This of course means that it is necessary that I meet the terms of my rental contract; I should yield to the landlord what she needs from me, given our agreement. But, in this context, it does not mean (though it might in other contexts):

Rent_(E1): I should yield to the landlord what she requires for survival or flourishing.

Nor:

Rent_(E2): I should yield to the landlord what is required to benefit her.

Rather, **Rent** means:

Rent_(O1): I should yield to the landlord what she requires so that I may stay housed.

Or:

Rent_(O2): I should yield to the landlord what she requires in order that she confer a benefit on me (that of remaining housed).

⁵⁷ $\delta\epsilon\acute{\iota}$ II.

⁵⁸English ‘deontic,’ used especially in philosophical discourse to describe obligations, derives from *deō*. In fact, *deon* is a participial form of *dei*, denoting a thing that is necessary/lacked/required/requested, and is yet another common way of expressing impersonal necessity.

We might call the the first pair *eudaimonaic* uses of ‘need’ and the second pair *obligational*. The eudaimonaic uses describe cases in which my paying the rent is required in order for the landlord to be benefitted; they describe what I must do in order promote her good. These are uses of ‘need’ governed by Allen’s principle. The obligational uses describe something different. They describe what I must do, given my contractual obligations, to secure a benefit for myself. It is of course true that my rent payment *may* be beneficial to the landlord, as we have noted, but the obligational use of ‘need’ does not describe this fact. It might be that the landlord is so fabulously wealthy that my rent payment is entirely trivial to her, and she throws it in the garbage as soon as she receives it. In the obligational use, none of this matters. It would still be true that I am required to pay her rent, because that is what our contract necessitates; that is my legal obligation. What motivates me to care about payment is the beneficial behavior I am trying to oblige her to perform toward me reciprocally, completely independently of what other effects, beneficial or not, my rent payment might have on her.

AP will not hold for uses of *deomai* that (i) mean simply to ask or request; (ii) describe bare relations of dependence; (iii) *a fortiori*, describe obligations where the aim of meeting those requirements is to secure a benefit for the giver, regardless of what effect the giving has on the recipient. So we must now ask, in what sense does Euthyphro take *deomai* in the question Socrates asks to produce premise 7?

I have argued that Euthyphro thinks that mortals sacrifice to gods in order to reap reciprocal benefits, and does not concern himself with what use the gods have for the the things that prompt that requital. In this way, ritual sacrifice is for Euthyphro much like paying the rent to a very wealthy landlord who does not benefit from the money. If we understand Euthyphronic piety as I suggested earlier, it is easy to imagine Euthyphro thinking that he is giving to the gods things they need, *in the obligational sense*, when he makes sacrifices to them. And if this is why he agrees to Socrates’ question, then he understands the sense of *deomai* in premise 7 *differently from* the how he understands it in premise 6, where it is clearly eudaimonaic.

It is also plausible that Euthyphro’s obligational use of *deomai* is infused with a hint of its ‘to ask or request’ meaning. Euthyphro’s pious gifts satisfy ritual obligations, but, as we noted earlier, he is otherwise not concerned with what characteristics such gifts have. The landlord sets the price, and provided I can afford it, I give her what price she sets. Similarly, Euthyphro, in being unconcerned with what effect pious gifts have on gods apart from causing them to release benefits to mortals, Euthyphro will give them whatever they ask for. Whatever the gods request, whatever conditions they set for requital, those will be the things that count as pious for Euthyphro.⁵⁹

⁵⁹We should note that *deometha* in the premise 6 question is clearly not ‘ask or request’,

It thus is interesting to note the original full text of Socrates' premise 7 question:

ΣΩ. Καὶ αὖ τὸ διδόναι ὀρθῶς, ὧν ἑκεῖνοι **τυγχάνουσιν δεόμενοι** παρ' ἡμῶν, **ταῦτα ἑκείνοις αὖ ἀντιδωρεῖσθαι**; οὐ γάρ που τεχνικόν γ' ἂν εἴη δωροφορεῖν διδόντα τῷ ταῦτα ὧν οὐδεν δεῖται. (my emphasis) (14e1-3)

Socrates modifies his *deomenoi* with a word often omitted in English translation, *tunchanousin*, which here could have the sense of “by chance” or “happen [to].” If Socrates intended to hint that Euthyphro's conception of sacrifice might involve giving gods things they capriciously demanded, rather than things tied to their needs or well-being, it would make sense for him to add this *tunchanousin*. The addition is more striking because he does not use the modifier when describing the human needs we ask the gods for in prayer in the premise 6 question.

Also sometimes omitted in English translation,⁶⁰ is Socrates' use of the phrase *tauta ekeinois au antidoreisthai*, again to modify the description of things humans give to gods. These things are “given in return”, presumably for the beneficial things that we get from the gods in answer to our prayers of request. Putting all this together, we can understand the idea Socrates offers for Euthyphro's approval as:

And to give correctly is to give them what they **happen to request or require** from us, **these things being given in return**, for it would not be skillful to bring gifts to anyone that are in no way requested or required.

I want to suggest that we read the dialectic as follows. Socrates recognizes the potential ambiguity of *deomenoi* that we have noted.⁶¹ He would like to know exactly what Euthyphro might have in mind in agreeing that piety is correct giving insofar as it is giving what is *deomenoi*. Does he mean, Socrates wonders, ‘need’ in the more usual sense, the sense governed by AP, and the sense that describes what we ask for from gods, even though that would be problematic for Euthyphro, given his 13c commitment?

I suggest that Socrates anticipates the position I have ascribed to Euthyphro emerging from the comparison to commerce, that pious gifts are simply

since that would render as ‘we ask them for what we ask for’ (αἰτεῖν ἂν εἴη ὧ δεόμεθα παρ' ἑκείνων), which is redundant.

⁶⁰E.g. Grube/Cooper and Fowler. However, the phrase is duly noted in renderings by Allen (1970, 61), Benson (2000, 64), Jowett (1953), Reeve (1989), and McPherran (2003, 20).

⁶¹Adam specifically mentions this ambiguity in connection with this passage, suggesting he may think it is relevant to how it is interpreted, claiming: “There is the same ambiguity in *δεόμενοι* as in English ‘wanting.’” (1890, 103). He does not elaborate further.

whatever prompts divine reciprocation, and describes it with appropriate, if ambiguous, language here, language to which Euthyphro consents (“True, Socrates.”) But precisely because *deomenoi* is ambiguous, Socrates needs to confirm Euthyphro’s meaning, and the comparison to commerce serves as this confirmation. In that comparison, Socrates offers two models, one in which the needed things are beneficial on both sides of the exchange, and hence fully within the scope as AP; and one in which there is benefit on only one side. I have suggested that Euthyphro chooses the latter model, a model in which the things we give to the gods are in some sense needed by the gods (requested in order to meet *charis* obligations), but are not beneficial to them. Thus we see that when Euthyphro agrees to premise 7 he has a different sense of *deomai* in mind than when he agreed to premise 6. It is likely this shifting of sense by Euthyphro is inchoate, and Socrates’ comparison to commerce is an attempt to bring it to the surface.

It is worth noting that Socrates makes a similar move in a previous elenchus, the one that generates the important claim at 13c, and there, he is quite explicit about what he is doing:

Socrates: Is piety then, which is the care [*therapeia*] for the gods, also to benefit the gods and make them better? Would you agree that when you do something pious you make some one of the gods better?

Euthyphro: By Zeus, no.

Socrates: Nor do I think that this is what you mean – far from it – but that is why I asked you what you meant by the care of gods, because I did not believe you meant this kind of care. (13c6-13d2).

Here Socrates confirms that he saw well before Euthyphro that his answer was ambiguous, and that he had predicted that Euthyphro surely did not intend one possible sense of *therapeia*. The text between 13a and 13d is devoted entirely to Socrates’ attempt to confirm his prediction. Here we see that the type of disambiguation maneuver I claim is represented by the comparison to commerce has been used by Socrates in the dialogue shortly before.⁶²

If this is correct, Euthyphro’s denial that pious gifts benefit gods is not inconsistent with what he agrees to at premise 7, since, even if inchoately, what he has in mind at premise 7 is that we give to the gods things that they require of us in order to meet the *charis* obligations that will prompt them to return beneficial blessings.

In summary, I suggest that the last elenchus is an argument intended to make clear that Euthyphro’s conventional understanding of ritual as asym-

⁶²The very proximity of the second instance to the first may by itself explain why Socrates is not explicit about what he is doing the second time.

metrical *charis* suffers from the same fault as his earlier voluntaristic definition of piety. The comparison to commerce plays an important role in achieving this aim, but is not the main lesson of the elenchus. The comparison serves to clarify an ambiguity in Euthyphro's last definition – what he means when he says that we give the gods things they need, and whether or not this entails the benefit of the gods. Once that clarification is made, Plato places the last definition side-by-side with the earlier voluntaristic one, and has Socrates signal to the reader that reflection will show that they are problematic for similar reasons. Thus, the comparison to commerce shows us what Euthyphro's 14b definition amounts to, and puts it in a form that allows us to make the connection to the 9e definition. Although Euthyphro's concession at 15b3 is still merely a concession, we can perhaps now see why Plato would have him make this concession at this particular point in the discussion.⁶³ On this reading we have assigned a clear role to each of the comparison to commerce and reduction, and we can see how those roles are complimentary, leading to a single moment of refutation.

6.2 The Complete Elenchus

With all the pieces now in place, let me lay out my complete position on what the inference structure of the last elenchus is.

I begin by noting a few general points. First, let us recall that Euthyphro does not intend to define piety by means of so specific a formula as *what is pleasing to the gods in ritual*. Rather, his *kecharismena* means something broader and, at the beginning of the elenchus, much less precise, something along the lines of *reciprocally appropriate*. Second, the clarification section is Socrates' attempt to elicit from Euthyphro a more precise formula, some explanation of what makes things reciprocally appropriate. The clarification section establishes that *kecharismena* will describe things correctly given to the gods and correctly requested from them (I omit the latter hereafter, as Socrates does, because there is no controversy about this part of the definition.) Clarification establishes that correctly given things are things needed, but as we have noted, there is an important ambiguity in this language, and this is where my analysis departs from most others.

From the beginning:

Definition

1. Piety is knowledge of how to say and do what is *kecharismena* in prayer and sacrifice. (14a11-14b7)

⁶³Earlier (p. 4), I said that it would be odd for Euthyphro to simply make this concession, since doing so without argument would amount to re-assertion of his earlier position of 9e, as if he had forgotten that he had abandoned it. This would be a weighty consideration if there were no overriding philosophical reason why Plato might have chosen to write the dialogue this way. This paper attempts to provide that reason.

Clarification

2. To sacrifice is to give to the gods. (14c8)
3. To pray is to request from the gods. (14c8-9)
- ∴ 4. So, piety is knowledge of how to request from and give to the gods. (14d1-2, from 1, 2, and 3).
- ∴ 5. So, piety is to correctly request from and give to the gods. – From the fact that doing something knowledgeably implies that we do it skillfully and hence correctly.
6. To request correctly is to ask for things we need (*deometha*) from them. (14d9-10)
7. To give correctly is to give to the gods things they need (*deomenoi*) from us. (14e1-2)

Here we encounter the two senses of *deomai*. Let us call them as follows, extending our labels *obligational* and *eudaimonaic* from earlier:

deomai_O: describes what is requested or required by obligation for divine reciprocation.

deomai_E: describes a need that, when met, confers a benefit, one governed by Allen's Principle.

Note that since correct giving is an attempt specify what *kecharismena* means, and *deomai* is an attempt to specify what it means to give correctly, the two senses of *deomai* will generate two specifications of *kecharismena*, which I will also use the subscripts *R* and *O* to name:

kecharismena_O: what makes a gift appropriate is that it satisfies a request or requirement and thus prompts divine reciprocation.

kecharismena_E: what makes a gift appropriate is that it confers a benefit on the recipient.

I have argued that the comparison to commerce is an attempt to determine which sense of *deomai* Euthyphro intends. Accordingly, this moment of the elenchus is best seen as an extension of clarification, rather than as establishing a point of its own. Socrates floats the idea that piety is like commerce, and Euthyphro unenthusiastically agrees. But when Socrates invokes the symmetry of benefit to specify the respect in which he thinks piety might be like commerce, Euthyphro is incredulous that anyone would have such a view. Since he rejects that we symmetrically give the gods things like

they give us (things *deomai_E*), Socrates wants to know what we give them as alternatives. Euthyphro's list represents his idea of *charis*, giving things that are not beneficial, but represent the gods' demands and oblige them to do favors for us. These things are honor and reverence. Disambiguation thus shows that Euthyphro does not think piety involves giving things *kecharismena_E*, but rather *kecharismena_O*. This also shows us that, while he was not aware of it at the time, Euthyphro meant, and Socrates suspected he meant, *deomai_O* back at premise 7.

Let us re-name these moments of the elenchus 'Disambiguation', and re-cast the three premises they produce as follows. Because we are extracting information from them that is not entirely explicit in the text, some paraphrasing will be necessary:

Disambiguation

8. To give what is *deomenoi* is either to give what is *deomenoi_O* or what is *deomenoi_E*. If the latter, piety resembles commerce. (from 14e6-15a6, 15a9-10).
9. It is not to give what is *deomenoi_E*. (from 15a1-2, with support from 15b1-2 and 13c6-d2).
- ∴ 10. So, to give correctly is to give to the gods things they *deomenoi_O* from us (from 7, 8, and 9.)

The next step in the argument is reduction, but let us add a sub-argument to bridge the shift in language between the beginning of the elenchus and the reduction:

Reduction

- 10.1. Piety is to give to the gods things they *deomenoi_O* from us (from 1-10).
- 10.2. Examples of these things are honor and reverence, which Euthyphro emphasizes are typical forms of *charis* (15a9-10)
- ∴ 11. So, to give to the gods things they *deomenoi_O* from us is to do what is *kecharismena_O* (from 5b1-2, where Socrates subsumes Euthyphro's non-beneficial gifts from 10.2 under the head of his original term, *kecharismenos*).
12. What is *kecharismena_O* is also dear to the gods (*to philon tois theois*). (15b1-3).
- ∴ 13. So, the pious is what is dear to the gods (15b4-5, from 10.1, 11, and 12).

14. The pious and the god-loved (*to theophilēs*) are not the same, but different (15c1-2).

- This is the conclusion of the third elenchus.

∴ 15. Then either what was agreed before (in the third elenchus) was wrong or this is. (15c8-9)

In our initial discussion, we noted that premise 12 seems undermotivated: Euthyphro concedes this point when prompted, but it doesn't emerge logically from the preceding argument. Given the load it bears in reaching the conclusion, this makes Euthyphro's concession seem uncomfortably convenient for an antagonist. But we now know that Plato treats these notions – *kecharismena*_O and *to theophilēs* – as equivalent, not just because Euthyphro concedes their equivalence, but on account of their similar explanatory deficiency. I have suggested that there is a suppressed argument linking *kecharismena*_O and *to theophilēs*. On this reading, Euthyphro's definition emerges from clarification and disambiguation in a form that makes it possible to see what it has in common with theological voluntarism. Though Plato is not explicit about the reasoning behind this link, he nonetheless makes the link an indispensable part of the argument, and Euthyphro's definition is at last refuted by contradiction.

Lest we be bothered that such an important philosophical moment is inexplicit and left to the reader as an exercise, it is worth noting that the third elenchus has a similar structure. The philosophical lesson most scholars extract from that discussion, that things are either moral due to properties had by the things themselves, or they are merely arbitrarily labelled moral by gods, is never articulated in the dialogue itself. The closest Socrates comes is to say that:

I'm afraid, Euthyphro, that when you were asked what piety is, you did not wish to make its nature clear to me, but you told me an affect or quality of it, that the pious has the quality of being loved by all the gods, but you have not yet told me what the pious is (11a6-b1).

But this itself is an affect or consequence of accepting one side of the dilemma (the non-voluntaristic side), and Socrates never makes clear what is philosophically at stake in the dilemma itself. Socrates elicits a contradiction from Euthyphro without ever making him reflect on the inconsistency of his two lemmas. In fact, much like in the reduction and premise 12, Euthyphro merely concedes upon prompt that the gods love the pious because it is pious (10d4–8) – after having defined piety in an incompatible way – without ever being led there by argument. The reflective reader knows that Euthyphro should not concede what he does at 10d, but Socrates never explains this to

him.⁶⁴ The third and last elenchus thus share another link, this time in the form of structural similarity. Just as the reflective reader who understands what is at issue can spot Euthyphro's mistake when he makes it in the third elenchus, the same reader, armed with the awareness gleaned from reflection on reduction, can spot the problem with Euthyphro's last definition.

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⁶⁴The mechanism by which Socrates produces a contradiction relies on the introduction of a third lemma, derived from the discussion of seeing, carrying, and leading (10a5-10c5), resulting in an inconsistent triad. My reading of this passage would be closest to Cohen (1971), but also see Brown (1964), Geach (1966, 375-380) Hall (1968), Sharvy (1972).

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