Socratic Piety: Benefitting Gods and Mortals

Donovan Cox

1 Introduction

Euthyphro seems to end without providing a satisfactory definition of piety. However, some scholars have argued that one of Euthyphro's proposed definitions has the potential to succeed, and that Socrates himself endorses it. This definition, that piety is service to the gods, is introduced near the end of the dialogue, but is discussed incompletely. Despite Socrates' interest in it, Euthyphro moves the discussion away from the service definition before a crucial question about it can be answered.

In this paper, I concur with other scholars who argue the service definition is not abandoned completely by the discussion that overtakes it. The elenchos that concludes the dialogue in fact helps us better understand how to answer the crucial question that causes Euthyphro to demur, namely, what good end does service help the gods achieve?

I will argue that in the last elenchos – a discussion of piety understood as ritual exchange – a framework is established that takes Socratic piety understood as service to be foil and remedy to Euthryphronic piety understood as ritual exchange. The main obstacle to this thesis is that we will have to understand how service can be a beneficial aid to the gods without coming into conflict with Socrates' views on divine *eudaimonia.* I will claim that this can be accomplished by carefully reflecting on the nature of pious service taken to be philosophical activity.

I conclude the paper by showing how my understanding of the connection between the penultimate and ultimate elenchoi allows us to see an overarching unity in the dialogue that has previously been missed.

2 The Constructivist Thesis

Constructivism is the view that *Euthyphro* is not entirely aporetic, and positive Socratic doctrine can be extracted from careful reading of the text; specifically, a conception of Socratic piety. There is an extensive literature on why we should endorse this interpretation, and my aim here will be to outline and supplement the arguments we see in that literature, but not to

engage with its controversies.[1]

Some scholars think that Plato introduces a concept of Socratic piety into the discussion at 13d. Socrates and Euthyphro have agreed that piety may be a type of care for the gods, like justice is care for other human persons (11e7-12e4). Euthyphro attempts to specify what he means by care, thinking at first it might be similar to animal husbandry (*therapeia*) (12e5-13d4). But this idea is rejected because it seems to imply that gods can be improved by mortals, and Euthyphro does not think such improvement is possible (13c6-d2).

Socrates prods Euthyphro to try another specification:

> **Socrates:** Very well, but what kind of care (*therapeia*) of the gods would piety be?
> **Euthyphro:** The kind of care (*therapeia*), Socrates, that slaves take of their masters.
> **Socrates:** I understand. It is likely to be a kind of service (*hupēretikē*) to the gods. (13d4-7)

Constructivists claim that service, *hupēretikē*, represents Socrates' understanding of piety. Why?

The first thing to note is that the answer under examination is more Socrates' suggestion than Euthyphro's. In speaking of the kind of care slaves take of masters, Euthyphro continues to use *therapeia*, a word closely associated with the husbandry model of the previous definition. It is Socrates who offers an alternative term, *hupēretikē*, and the line of questioning that follows tells us what information Socrates associates with that word. He wants to know what goal or aim (*ergon*) we are helping the gods achieve in our service to them (13d9-14a10). Thus most of the content of this definition is provided by Socrates, not Euthyphro.

Here is part of the questioning that follows:

> **Socrates:** Tell me then, by Zeus, what is that excellent aim that the gods achieve, using us as their servants?
> **Euthyphro:** Many fine things, Socrates.
> **Socrates:** So do generals, my friend. Nevertheless, you could easily tell me their main concern, which is to achieve victory in war, it is not?...Well then, how would you sum up the many fine things the gods achieve?

[1] I follow McPherran in the use of this term. Constructivism has also been called *positivism*. Discussions of this issue appear in: Adam (1890, xiii); Allen (1970, 56-58); Brickhouse and Smith (1994, Ch. 6.1); Brickhouse and Smith (1989, Ch. 2.5); Burnet (1924, 56-58); Heidel (1902, 20, 22-25, 83 n. 47); McPherran (1996, 2.2); McPherran (2003, 25-27); Rabinowitz (1958); Reeve (1989, 64-73); A. E. Taylor (1926, 146-156); C.C.W. Taylor (1982); Versényi (1982, 104-112); Vlastos (1991, 174-177); Weiss (1986); Weiss (1994).

> **Euthyphro:** I told you a short while ago, Socrates, that it is a considerable task to acquire any precise knowledge of these things, but, to put it simply, I say that if a man knows how to say and do what is pleasing to the gods at prayer and sacrifice, those are pious actions such as preserve both private houses and public affairs of state. The opposite of these pleasing actions are impious and overturn and destroy everything. (13e10-14b8).

Euthyphro cannot answer Socrates' question, despite being given three distinct attempts, and despite being aided by a host of analogues from Socrates – doctors, shipbuilders, housebuilders, generals, and farmers.[2] He at last abandons the discussion, claiming that precise knowledge of piety is difficult to come by, and offers a new definition instead, that piety is ritual exchange. That the service definition, mostly Socrates' anyway, is not rejected but abandoned, may lead us to think that Plato considers it a contender.[3] But we are pushed farther in this direction by Socrates' response to Euthyphro's turning away:

> You could tell me in far fewer words, if you were willing, the sum of what I asked, Euthyphro, but you are not keen to teach me, that is clear. *You were on the point of doing so*, but you turned away. *If you had given that answer, I should now have acquired from you sufficient knowledge of the nature of piety.* As it is, the lover of inquiry must follow his beloved wherever it may lead him. Once more then, what do you say that piety and the pious are? Are they knowledge of how to sacrifice and pray? (14b8-14c6, my emphasis.)

This chiding has led constructivists to conclude that Plato means us to believe that Socrates favors this answer. If we could specify what excellent aim (*pankalon ergon*, 13e10) mortals assist the gods in achieving, he seems to suggest, we would have completed a correct account of piety. Since Euthyphro's penultimate answer to Socrates' main question remains unrefuted, and since Socrates expresses enthusiasm for this answer, constructivists believe it is the one that reflects Socrates' own view. This answer is that *piety is service to the gods, helping them achieve some noble goal.*

Readers perhaps share Socrates' frustration that the discussion of service is abandoned, and might hope that somehow the service definition is developed in the subsequent discussion. Is there any evidence that could support this hope?

In Euthyphro's turning away, he offers an alternative definition of piety, one that is not obviously connected to the previous discussion:

[2]Cf. McPherran (1996, 53); Rabinowitz (1958, 115).

[3]On unrefuted claims representing positive doctrine, see Adam (1890, xxi); Allen (1970, 6); Bonitz (1866, 233-234); McPherran (1996, 49, n. 54); Versényi (1982, 111, n. 3).

> ...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)

The new (and final) definition suggests that piety is nothing more than ordinary ritual exchange, offering pleasing sacrifices to the gods and saying pleasing things to them in prayer. Euthyphro adds that the performance of these rituals will have consequences: correct performance will result in reciprocal blessings, and incorrect performance will result in reciprocal curses (14b4-7). This definition, sometimes described as representing a *do ut des* ethos – *I give so that you will give* – does not survive elenchic scrutiny.

I will have more to say about why it does not survive just below, but for now let us take note of an interesting remark of Socrates that occurs during the last elenchos, in which he himself invites us to think about this new definition in connection with service. In asking some clarificatory questions about Euthyphro's definition, Socrates describes the performance of ritual as service, saying: "But tell me, what service (*hupēresia*) is this [idea represented by your definition] to the gods? You say it is to beg from them and to give to them?" (14d6) This tells us that the discussion of ritual is, in Socrates' eyes (if not Euthyphro's), meant to be a continuation of the discussion of service.[4]

Some scholars have noticed: A.E. Taylor offers an early attempt to connect the last two definitions. He argues that while it is surely right to think that the discussion of service reveals the "real point of the dialogue,"[5] it would be a mistake to assume that the final conception of piety as reciprocal exchange was meant to be rejected out of hand. He suggests that Euthyphro's particular *do ut des* understanding of such exchange is meant to be seen as problematic, but it is possible to view religious exchange other ways. "If we think rightly of the blessings for which it is proper to pray, it will be a worthy conception of religion that it *is* intercourse between man and God in which we offer 'acceptable' sacrifice and receive in return the true goods of soul and body." In understanding Euthyphro's formulation in a more Socratic sense, we see that "the formula that religion is asking the right things from God and making the right return does not contradict but coincides with the other formula that it is cooperation as agents 'under God' in a great and glorious 'work.' " (Taylor, 1926, 148; 156).

Roslyn Weiss has also seen a strong link between the discussion of service and the discussion of ritual:

> Though Euthyphro readily proposes the master-slave model of the divine-human association, there is little likelihood that he has in mind anything remotely resembling Socrates' vision of

[4]Britt (2018, 281); Dimas (2006, 23); McPherran (1996, 56).
[5]Citing Burnet (1924, 57-58).

> men assisting the gods in their *ergon.* Socrates' talk of physicians, shipbuilders, and generals surely distorts what Euthyphro envisioned. While Euthyphro was conjuring up the image of the doting slave fawning on his master, seeking to please him and find favor in his eyes, Socrates presents him with the image of the apprentice aiding the craftsman in producing something. And it is on the assumption of the apprentice-craftsman image that Socrates questions Euthyphro. Euthyphro can hardly be expected to answer along Socratic lines, and so, he tries to get back on his own track: he points to the practice of prayer and sacrifice *to explain what he meant earlier.* (Weiss, 1986, 450, my emphasis.)

Taylor and Weiss[6] suggest that the wrong way to understand piety is as Euthyphro does: slavishly offering obeisance to the gods, and doing so in order to receive benefits in return. They also suggest that the right way to understand piety will point toward service. If service is the remedy for Euthyphro's mistake, that means service represents the proper or correct way to give to the gods. Like obeisance, service is something that is offered, but unlike obeisance, it is not offered as an act of submission, but perhaps, as I will argue later in agreement with Weiss, in a spirit of *cooperation.*

I want to suggest there is an even stronger connection between the service and ritual exchange discussions, however.

3 Ritual Exchange and Voluntarism

An important moment in the discussion of ritual exchange comes when Socrates compares Euthyphro's last definition to a different kind of exchange – 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 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 from them and they receive nothing from us?

[6] Also C.C.W. Taylor (1982, 114): "The first point in favour of [my] interpretation is that it allows even Euthyphro's wrong turning, *when correctly interpreted*, to provide a correct account of *hosiotēs*." The wrong turning is the abandonment of the service discussion to focus on ritual.

> **Euthyphro:** Do you suppose, Socrates, that the gods are benfitted (*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)

Euthyphro doesn't answer Socrates' question about whether his definition implies that gods are benefitted by human gifts, and instead replies with a question of his own. Euthyphro's seemingly evasive response has commonly been interpreted as showing that Euthyphro is trapped in a contradiction with a view he accepted earlier, during the discussion of animal husbandry. There he 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). If Euthyphro accepts that piety is an exchange of benefits, like commerce, that would appear to bring him into conflict with what he agrees to at 13c-d, since he seems to say that we neither benefit the gods nor make them better.

Some, like Gregory Vlastos, see a dilemma here. Socrates seems to offer Euthyphro two models of exchange, and wants to know which best represents his idea. Euthyphro cannot accept the first model, that piety is mutually beneficial exchange, 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". He suggests it is an obvious absurdity that mortals give to gods things of no benefit to them, while receiving beneficial gifts in return.[7] Thus, the last definition is refuted.

I think there are a number of reasons not to interpret the comparison to commerce as Vlastos does, or in any way that treats it as the moment when the ritual exchange definition is refuted.[8] Let us call the two models of the dilemma reading the *symmetrical* and *asymmetrical* models, the symmetry being with respect to the benefits conferred by the gifts offered in the exchange.

I claim that Euthyphro is *not* caught in a dilemma here, but squarely rejects the benefit-symmetrical model *in favor* of the asymmetrical model. My reasons are as follows. First, the view that mortals offered gifts to the gods that were different in kind from what mortals received from gods was widely held by ordinary Greeks.[9] Robert Parker, for example, writes:

> Of all the relations brought under the rubric of reciprocity in this volume [devoted to discussing Greek reciprocity], that between

[7] Vlastos (1991, 174). Also see Biernat (2018, 334-337); Burnet (1924, 61); McPherran (2000, 97); A. E. Taylor (1926, 155, 147-148); Weiss (1986, 266).

[8] Allen (1970, 60-61); Versényi (1982, 117); Walker (1984, 111).

[9] MacLachlan (1993, 33); Mueller (2001, 475); Parker (1998, 118-124).

> humans and gods is perhaps the most unbalanced — a fact that, in many contexts, the Greeks were very far from denying. (1998, 118-124).[10]

It would thus be far more natural for Euthyphro to see in the asymmetrical model a piece of conventional wisdom, rather than an absurdity. And if this model represents convention, it would not make sense for Socrates to offer it to Euthyphro *expecting him to see in it a patent absurdity*, and thus accept that he is caught in a dilemma.

My second reason for not reading as Vlastos does is that if we see the comparison as a refutation of Euthyphro's last definition, we have to explain why the conversation seems to continue beyond this comparison, and why clear textual indicators that the elenchos has concluded occur only later, at 15b1-15c10. At 15b-c, Socrates effects a kind of reduction of Euthyphro's definition to an earlier, already rejected definition, that piety is what is dear to or loved by the gods:

> **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 (*charis*)?
> **Socrates:** The pious is then, Euthyphro, pleasing to the gods, but not beneficial or 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...Do you then not realize now that you are saying that what is dear to the gods is the pious? Is this not the same as the god-loved? Or is it not?
> **Euthyphro:** It certainly is.
> **Socrates:** Either we were wrong when we agreed before, or, if we were right then, we are wrong now.
> **Euthyphro:** That seems to be so.

Seeing in the comparison to commerce a refutation of the 14b exchange definition makes it puzzling why the conversation continues to this reduction, and what purpose the reduction is meant to serve, since it could not in that case be the refuting contradiction.[11]

However, if we read Euthyphro as accepting the asymmetrical model, as seeing in it the conception of piety he meant to capture in his definition, then we get a clear dialectical path to the reductive moment and what seems intended to be the end of the elenchos.

[10] Cf. Versényi (1982, 116).
[11] *Contra* R. E. Allen (1970, 61).

I think it is easy to read the text of the comparison (14e6-15a8) as confirming this. Although it is tempting to read Euthyphro's refusal to answer Socrates' question as an evasion, as a recognition that he is caught in a contradiction or dilemma, there is another equally plausible way to read it.

Though Euthyphro agrees with Socrates that his conception of piety could be called a commercial one, he is not enamored of this description (14e8), seeming to say "We can call it that if *you* want to, Socrates."[12] Neither is Socrates committed to this description, at least not without further exploration of the idea (14e9). I contend that what comes next *is* this exploration, and in it Socrates posits that a defining feature of commerce is its symmetry with respect to benefit. So 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 his 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 asks: "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. He instead moves straightaway to asking Euthyphro what things we give to the gods, 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 (15a7-8). Socrates himself thereby *accepts* Euthyphro's denial of benefit-symmetry, and proceeds to discuss the asymmetrical alternative.

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)[13]

[12] Cf. Walker (1984, 109).

[13] Also McPherran (1996, 56); McPherran (2003, 20-25).

The significance of this for understanding Socratic piety becomes clearer when we see what this asymmetrical model implies about Euthyphronic piety, which, we are supposing, is the degraded form of piety to which the Socratic variant is a remedy. We know that Euthyphro is very concerned about what he receives in return for pious offerings (14b4-7). In fact, he builds a requital clause into his definition, as if to say: "Piety is knowing how to say and do what is pleasing to the gods in prayer and sacrifice. But what do I mean by 'pleasing', you might ask? I mean sufficient to secure reciprocal blessings."

We also know that Plato seems to want us to think that the ritual exchange definition is similar or equivalent to Euthyphro's earlier voluntaristic definition that piety is what all the gods love. Surely that is why he reduces this last definition to the former one.[14] Let us trace out some possible implications of this.

Let us say that Euthyphronic piety is giving things to the gods (knowingly) that will guarantee a reciprocal blessing, but it is not because they benefit the gods that these gifts secure that blessing. It is not their being beneficial that explains why they are pious or why the gods reward the givers with blessings. So what is it that explains this? Euthyphro doesn't tell us, and doesn't seem interested in telling us. Even in giving his list of non-beneficial gifts, he only reminds us of what he has already said about them, that these things are pleasing (*kecharismenon*)(15a9-10). Being pleasing, understood merely as *being sufficient to secure reciprocal blessings*, seems to be the only property Euthyphro associates with pious gifts. Euthyphro is perhaps willing to call anything pious that would have this effect; *whatever* causes the gods to reciprocate will count as pious.

If this sounds familiar, it should. Euthyphro has already in this dialogue, in his most famous moment, defined piety as *whatever* all the gods love (9e1-9e3). So it is easy to understand why Socrates would see what Euthyphro is saying here as very similar to what he has said before, and why Plato would construct the elenchos so that the main problem with the ritual exchange definition is just that it is Euthyphro's theological voluntarism all over again (Weiss, 1994).[15] The comparison to commerce is just a step that leads to this endpoint, not a refutation in itself. Having invited us to reflect on the problems with a voluntaristic definition already, Plato now leads the reader to conclude (for herself) that the entire apparatus of Greek ritual suffers from the same problem.

What is this problem? Let us say that what voluntaristic conceptions of

[14] Cf. Weiss (1994). I also argue for this at length elsewhere.

[15] She argues: "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, and by extension of holiness conceived generally as τὸ θεοφιλές, is the tit-for-tat of the commercial venture." (Weiss, 1994, 266)

piety or moral goodness lack is a proper explanation of why things are pious or good. Voluntaristic conceptions define goodness relationally: anything can be good if it stands in a certain relation to something; in this case, if it stands in the *loved by* or *pleasing to* relation to the gods. But Socrates, and by extension Plato, do not think these types of explanations are philosophically adequate. Socrates tells us early in the dialogue what sort of answer to his question he will find satisfactory (and Euthyphro himself agrees that this is the sort of answer they should be looking for):

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

Socrates thinks that not just anything can be pious, but whatever is pious will be so on account of having certain features *itself*, non-relationally, that it will share with any other pious thing. A definition of piety that doesn't tell us what these features are will therefore constitute a kind of *explanatory failure*; it will not truly explain why anything pious is pious.[16]

Let us now take stock of the key observations that have emerged:

1. Service has been offered as the correct way to understand Socratic piety (the thesis of constructivism).

2. Socratic piety is a foil or remedy to Euthyphronic piety (following Weiss and Taylor).

3. Euthyphronic piety is represented by the benefit-asymmetrical model of sacrifice (embracing Vlastos' dilemma, but rejecting his conclusion)

4. Euthyphronic piety is characterized by explanatory failure.

Claims 2 and 3 invite us to assimilate Socratic piety to the *symmetrical* model of giving, since that model is offered as the alternative to the one that represents Euthyphronic piety. Notice how that would strengthen the sense in which Socratic piety is a foil to Euthyphronic. On the symmetrical model, benefit is traded for benefit, and something's being beneficial explains why it is offered as a gift. If service is offered so as to benefit the gods in some way, we would have an *explanation* for why it is offered, an explanation of exactly the sort Euthyphro cannot provide on his account. Moreover, this would unite the ultimate and penultimate elenchoi into one discussion, a discussion of pious service.

[16]Cf. Cohen (1971, 175); Dimas (2006, 13-14); McPherran (1996, 38)

On this view, service is aid to the gods toward the achievement of some noble goal (yet to be specified), and this service is offered to the gods because it, in some way, confers a benefit on them.[17] A qualified version of this idea is the thesis I will defend in the remainder of this paper.

I said a bit earlier in this section that it is interesting that when Euthyphro asks Socrates if he thinks gods can be benefitted by human gifts, Socrates ignores the question. This would make sense if Socrates held the unconventional view that I want to attribute to him, as a component of his also unexpressed view that piety is service. There is a major difficulty that must be overcome for my thesis to be plausible, however. Would Socrates endorse a position that implied that humans could confer benefits on gods? *Prima facie* he would not. I will now make a few remarks about Socrates' position on this issue, and then, in light of these remarks, I will suggest a refinement of my thesis that will make it plausible.

4 Socrates' Gods

As we mentioned above, there is evidence that it was a commonplace of Greek thought that ritual exchange was not taken to be exchange of mutually beneficial things, as in commerce.[18] His acceptance of this thinking may be what leads Euthyphro to say that he does not think piety is to "benefit the gods and make them better" (13c10). Let us now ask whether Socrates also accepts this view.

Brickhouse and Smith straightforwardly say that Socrates agrees with Euthyphro at 13c: "But no one can improve a god," they say in summarizing the argument. "Once again, Socrates agrees." (1994, 66) McPherran concurs: "...Socrates gives some indication (13c-d) that he too would find [this idea] objectionable for the same reasons [as Euthyphro]." (1996, 53) What likely pushes them this direction are their views on what Socrates' gods are like. If those gods were such that they could not be bettered in any way, for example, then it would make no sense to think that mortals could improve or benefit them. Of this passage, James Adam says, "The absurdity here consists in supposing that the gods are not already in the best condition possible." (1890, 97, n. 38.) He seems to suggest that the idea of gods who could be improved or benefitted at all is an absurdity that would have been recognized as such by both Socrates and Euthyphro, and that is why the elenchos ends as it does at 13c.

What evidence do we have that Socrates thought of his gods as gods that could not be bettered? Commonly cited passages suggest that Socrates believed the gods are good and wise, and better and wiser than us:

[17] Similarly, Versényi (1982, 115-117) holds that Socrates thinks gods can benefitted as a part of pious exchange.

[18] See notes on p. 6

> What is probable, gentlemen, is that *the god is wise* and that his oracular response meant that *human wisdom is worth little or nothing...* (23a5-7, my emphases)

The emphasized text amounts to a comparative claim about divine and mortal wisdom: gods are wise, and humans have little or no wisdom. But such passages do not clearly license the inference that Socrates thought the gods were "thoroughly good beings, and toward humanity have an entirely benevolent and caring attitude" or had "superlative wisdom, knowledge, and power," making them "perfect exemplars for us imperfect mortals" (McPherran, 1996, 272).[19] Passages like this do not show by themselves that Socrates thought the gods were in the "best condition possible."

Other considerations have led scholars to the stronger conclusion, though. Firstly, consider Socrates' remarks about the gods in *Euthyphro.* He suggests at 6a6-c4 that he does not believe traditional stories about disagreement amongst the gods. At 7c10-7e4, he suggests that what Euthyphro's gods disagree over are questions that cannot be resolved through measurement, i.e., questions concerning matters like beauty, justice, and goodness. These are thus the very things that *Socrates' gods agree about.* Amongst disagreeing gods, some or all of them would have to be wrong in their judgments – they couldn't all be right if their views conflict – and gods that can be wrong are gods that are deficient in wisdom. So in rejecting divine discord, Socrates hints that he believes in gods that cannot be wrong, and hence will not disagree. Gods who cannot be wrong are perfectly wise.[20]

Secondly, some claim that if Socrates' gods are perfectly wise, then they must also be perfectly good, since for Socrates, perfect wisdom is practical wisdom, and if one *knows* what is good, necessarily, one *does* what is good.[21]

Thirdly, some scholars have argued that Socrates' chief religious innovation was to think the gods were better than they were thought to be popularly. As it was convention to regard the gods as eudaimonaically superior to mortals,[22] a natural conclusion to draw is that Socrates' innovations would have it that the gods were flawless and without eudaimonaic deficiency.

We should note that Socrates only shows concern with certain traits of the gods, namely their wisdom and moral goodness. He is famously unconcerned to engage in theology to any degree beyond this.[23] So any conclusions we draw about Socrates' views on divine attributes will have to be limited to these two respects.

---

[19] Cf. Dimas (2006, 12).

[20] Cf. McPherran (1996, 38-41); Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 179-180).

[21] Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 179-180); McPherran (1996, 272); Vlastos (1991, 162-165). *Republic* II.379b1-c7 and *Republic* 2.381b4 are sometimes cited in conjunction with this idea.

[22] *Iliad* 2.485-6; *Theogony* 886-905, *et al.*

[23] Vlastos (1991, 47, n. 12; 160-162; 237, n. 5); Aristotle, *Met.* A 987b1.

I think it is difficult to draw strong conclusions about how good or wise Socrates thought his gods were on the basis of the textual considerations, like those above, that are commonly cited in this regard. But we can see in these passages a general tendency in Socrates' thought that would make it surprising to learn that Socrates believed Gods could be improved or benefitted by mortals. For example, if Euthyphro, at 13c, thinks gods cannot be made better by mortals, and Socrates has a *higher* opinion of the goodness and wisdom of the gods than Euthyphro (as suggested by 7c10-7e4), then Euthyphro's own view here is a rough guide to what Socrates thinks. If Euthyphro thinks the gods cannot be benefitted by humans, Socrates does too, regardless of what specific degree of eudaimonaic perfection Socrates may predicate of the gods.

Rather than endorse a specific view on Socrates' gods that would require more defense than I could give it here, I will say that whatever position I attribute to Socrates as part of the thesis of this paper must avoid implying the following:

> **Divine Eudaimonaic Deficiency (DED):** the gods are eudaimonaically deficient *in some way that can be compensated for or remedied by mortals.*

By way of explanation, let me also define:

Eudaimonaic Elevation: I will say that some individual is *eudaimonaically elevated* when her status is improved with respect to some good, where we understand 'good' in the broad way associated with Greek ethical thought.[24] Goods will be defined with respect to the flourishing of the beings they are goods for. Someone can be eudaimonaically elevated when she becomes morally better, when her reputation or material circumstances improve, when she acquires a skill, or perhaps even when she experiences good luck. It will be useful to divide the ways one can be eudaimonaically elevated into two broad categories. One corresponds to improvements in character or person – call this *personal improvement* – and one corresponds to improvements in material condition or environment, or *situational improvement.*

Eudaimonaic Sufficiency: I will say that some individual is *eudaimonaically sufficient* when her status cannot be improved with respect to any good, because she is not deficient in any good. A eudaimonaically sufficient being will not admit of eudaimonaic elevation. A *eudaimonaically deficient* being is a being that is not eudaimonaically sufficient.

Any position that avoids implying DED is a position we can attribute to Socrates, regardless of which particular view he holds on the perfection

[24]See Irwin (1977, 15-18); also Adkins (1960, 31-46), Adkins (1971), and Long (1970).

of the gods. If he thinks gods are characterized by complete eudaimonaic sufficiency, then we will not have fallen afoul of this commitment in taking a view that implies no eudaimonaic deficiency of any sort. But the same will be true even if Socrates holds weaker commitments.

In what follows, I will take the position that there is some human-conferred good that explains why pious service is offered to the gods, but that benefit does not accrue to the gods themselves. Nonetheless, there is still a sense, I will argue, in which the service can be said to be an *ōpheleia* – the word translated as 'benefit' in our passages– to the gods. In order to make this case, I will draw attention to nuances in meaning and use of the Greek *ōpheleia*. Then I will argue that this service, offered as *ōpheleia*, does not in any way imply DED insofar as it is a form of assistance or aid, on account of the particular nature of the activity constituting this service. All this together will yield my main thesis, without attributing to Socrates a view inconsistent with any variety of position he may have concerning the perfection of the gods.

5 Benefitting the Gods?

5.1 Benefit Qualified

Let us begin by reflecting on the passage wherein Euthyphro initially voices his rejection of the view that mortals can benefit gods:

> **Socrates:** Is piety then, which is care (*therapeia*) for the gods, also to benefit (*ōphelia*) the gods and (*kai...te*) 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)

The model of care that is under discussion, *therapeia*, is exemplified by husbandry, along the lines made famous in *Apology* (24c-25c). There, it is clear that the main task of one who cares for horses is to *improve* them or make them better, as opposed to *corrupting* them. Socrates is equally clear that is the relevant sense of 'care' here.

Euthyphro denies that piety is care, if care entails making the gods better, as though it were husbandry. I think we are warranted in taking Socrates to be largely in agreement with Euthyphro on this score: piety is

not husbandry, and piety does not make the gods better.[25] But in saying that Socrates largely concurs with Euthyphro here, we must exercise some caution. If Socrates does not think we can *make the gods better*, does he also think we cannot *benefit gods?* Let me try to explain why it is important to distinguish between these two things.

The conclusion of argument at 13c10 is that piety is not making the gods better. The reason, presumably, is that the gods *cannot* be made better (or be made better by us). So why think this argument tells us anything about *benefit*, when its conclusion is only about *improvement*? There is the obvious fact that to improve someone is to confer a benefit on her. But we might also note that Socrates *conjoins* the terms 'benefit' and 'make better' in line 13c7. It is easy to read this conjoining as an identity, as if he were asking about one thing under two different descriptions. So if the argument concludes that gods cannot be made better by us, it also concludes that the gods cannot be benefitted by us.

Though it is possible to read the conjunctive *kai* as indicating synonymy, it is also possible to read it as *epexegetical*. An epexegetical *kai* would mean that the second conjunct is being offered as a commentary or explanation of the first conjunct, as if Socrates were saying: "Euthyphro, when you say that piety is care for the gods, do you mean that piety is to benefit (*ōpheleō*) the gods *by making them better* (*poieō beltion*)?"[26] Socrates is offering in his second conjunct an explanation or further account of what he means by 'benefit'; *poieō beltion* describes a specific means by which one may be benefitted. This seems to be confirmed when, repeating his question, he narrows his focus to only the second conjunct, now excluding mention of benefit: "Would you agree that when you do something pious you make some one of the gods better?"

On this reading, what Euthyphro emphatically and unequivocally denies ("By Zeus, no") is not that we can benefit gods, but that we can benefit them when that benefit comes in the form of changing them for the better. Likewise, if we take Socrates to be in agreement with Euthyphro in this passage, we should take him only to be in agreement with the qualified disavowal of benefit – benefit by making better – not an unconditional one.

Accordingly, we should interpret any careful framing of the question such as this by Socrates as a hint as to what view he holds himself. I suggest that Socrates has framed his question to bracket some sense of 'benefit' that he thinks could characterize things mortals offer to gods. This would have to

[25] Cf. Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 66); (1989, 92); McPherran (1996, 53).

[26] Further evidence is the τέ...καί construction, which often implies a distinction between two similar terms, rather than synonymy. Smyth claims the τέ...καί construction "will not easily bear the translation *both...and*" (2974) and that the construction can be used to describe "actions standing in causal relation to each another" (2975). Accordingly, I claim that in this passage ποιέω βελτίους is intended to describe a specific means by which one may be benefited, i.e., it is a *cause* of benefit.

be some sense of 'benefit' that does not entail DED.

The most obvious way to move forward on this hypothesis is to note that there are many ways to confer benefits that do not involve making someone better, or what we have called personal improvement. Situational improvements are also beneficial. But of course this cannot be what Socrates has in mind, if we were correct in our assumption earlier. Improvements in situation caused by mortals would seem to count as eudaimonaic deficiencies remedied by human agency, and hence entail DED.

It is worth noting, in this connection, that some commentators read the language of this passage as explicitly excluding both personal and situational improvement. *Poieō beltious* – 'make them better'[27] – is the expression Socrates uses in the second conjunct of the 13c passage,[28] the conjunct I claim is a qualifier for the first conjunct, *ōpheleō* – 'to benefit'. This phrase is used in *Apology* to describe what horse-breeders do to horses, and what happens through education to youth (24d3; 25b1); it is the expression Socrates uses to indicate improvement of the self. But some have suggested the phrase be understood more broadly than we are likely to do in English. Returning to Adams' idea, which we referenced above:

> Βελτίω is primarily not of character, but of condition (prosperity and the like): but in the Greek view character is improved by improved circumstances ...The absurdity here [in the passage 13c6-10] consists in supposing that the gods are not already in the best condition possible. (Adam, 1890, p. 97, n. 38)

So, independently of our assumption about DED, we may have an explicit textual reason to say that Socrates thinks the gods cannot be benefitted by either personal or situational improvement.

I have suggested that the phrase *poieō beltion* acts as some kind of qualifying phrase: it indicates the kind of benefit that humans cannot bestow on gods. Piety cannot be benefit understood as *poieō beltion*. But if *poieō beltion* rules out both personal and situational improvement, what other type of benefit is left? If there is none, then my suggestion that *poieō beltion* is a qualifying phrase is implausible. Nonetheless, I think there is a sense of 'benefit' Socrates wants to bracket and accept as part of his understanding of pious service. To see this, let us shift our attention to his term for benefit: ὠφελέω [*ōpheleō*].

5.2 Instrumental Ὠφέλεια

A common translation of *ōpheleō* is 'to benefit', and this is also the word we see used throughout the discussion of ritual to indicate what gifts to the

[27] *Beltiōn* is the comparative of *agathos*, which typically means 'good' or indicates admirable or desirable qualities.

[28] Though he uses a variant in the last clause, βελτίω τινὰ τῶν θεῶν ἀπεργάζῃ.

gods, according to Euthyphro, *are not* (on my reading).

Ōpheleō primarily indicates something offered or done instrumentally, as aid or assistance toward the achievement of a goal, as something useful to the recipient.[29] Vlastos claims that 'benefit' and related terms "Socrates reserves for whatever gives direct, unconditional, support or enhancement to our happiness" (1991, 230, n. 100). Such terms do not describe *constituents* of happiness, like virtue or wisdom, but things that stand in a supporting relation to goods that constitute happiness.[30] Similarly, Panos Dimas argues that things that Socrates describes as *ōphelimos* – goods like health, wealth, and beauty – are 'facilitators' of happiness, in that they increase activity that, when directed by wisdom, will lead to happiness (2002).[31] With this in mind, let us underline the *instrumentality* of *ōpheleō* in Socrates' use of the term: the value of the assistance, support, or facilitation will be determined by what it helps achieve. For example:

> **Socrates:**...The thing you're saying now, evidently, is that some pleasures are good (*agathai*) while others are bad. Is that right?
> **Callicles:** Yes.
> **Socrates:** Are the good ones the beneficial ones (*ōphelimoi*), and the bad ones the harmful ones?
> **Callicles:** Yes, that's right.
> **Socrates:** And the beneficial ones (*ōphelimoi*) are those that produce some good (*agathon ti poiousai*), while the bad ones are those that produce some evil? (*Gorgias* 499c6-d3)

Here, Socrates suggests that if we label something *ōphelimos*, we do so because it produces or results in some good, some *agathon* or *kalon*. It is *in virtue of* the good that it produces that we think of the *ōpheleia* as something worth pursuing. What Socrates wishes Callicles to see in the passage above, and Meno in a similar passage at 87e-88e, is that some things – pleasure, or in the case of the *Meno* passage, health, strength, beauty, and wealth – can *either* harm us or be beneficial to us. They will be *ōphelimos* only when they are used knowledgeably, to produce good. Accordingly, an aid, help, or support we provide to someone will be *ōphelimos* if it is instrumental in achieving some *agathon* or *kalon*.

There is similar thinking evident in *Euthydemus* 280c-281d. There Socrates and Cleinias agree that what we pursue as good (*agatha*) would not lead to happiness, and thus would not be worth pursuing, if they were not *ōphelimos*, and in turn, what makes these things *ōphelimos* is that we use

[29]LSJ: to help, aid, assist, succour, to be of use or service to any one.

[30]For Vlastos, virtue is sufficient for happiness, but external goods, used wisely, can yet add to happiness incrementally (1991, Ch. 8). Thus, beneficial things can not only support, but enhance, happiness.

[31]See Christopher Bobonich (1995) for a different account, and p. 11 of Dimas (2002) for an argument against it.

them (*chrōimetha*). Wisdom tells us how to use them well, and is thus required in order to pursue the good. Certain things often regarded as good in themselves – wealth, health, and beauty – are in fact only good when used beneficially. Wisdom tells us how to use these things to good end.

This observation is meant to emphasize that Socrates typically thinks of *ōpheleō* and *ōphelimos* as explanatorily incomplete, as requiring (implicitly or explicitly) some further account of what good the *ōpheleia* brings about, in virtue of which it can itself be thought of as worth pursuing. Call this further good an explanatory *completer*.[32]

One type of completer for an *ōpheleia* might be that it makes one personally or situationally better, which is to say, it falls under the *poieō beltious* qualifier. What the horse-breeder or educator provides is help at becoming better, and so the help is properly beneficial, because it leads to some *agathon*.[33] Thus, in the husbandry passage (13c6-d2), I take Socrates to ask Euthyphro whether we can *aid or support* the gods (*ōphelia*), and then he specifies the good we would be achieving by means of that aid, using *poieō beltious*. Euthyphro, and by our assumption, Socrates, end the passage by denying that we can aid the gods in a way that results in *poieō beltious. Poieō beltious*, understood as either improvement in person or improvement in situation, is not an admissible completer for *ōpheleō* when the gods, rather than horses, are the target of our aid.

But that does not mean that there is not an admissible qualifier. To see what one could be, we need to specify a completer for the *ōpheleia* in question, which we are assuming is pious service. To specify the completer in this case will also be to specify the *kalon ergon* or noble goal that service

[32]What I say here implies that Socrates sees a distinction between *ōphelimos* and *agathon*/*kalon*, since the latter terms describe what explanatorily completes that described by former term. This is *contra* Donald Zeyl, who in a footnote to his translation of *Gorgias* claims that *agathos* and *ophelimos* are "virtually synonymous." (Zeyl, 1987, 40). Also Zeyl (1982, 230). Zeyl follows Santas (1979, 185) and Adkins (1960, 250). There is not space to defend my full view here, but I think these positions can be reconciled with mine by understanding Socrates' remarks on these terms to be an attempt at disambiguation. Popular usage is broad, and confusedly uses *agathos* to refer to both an *ōphelimon* and the independently good constituents of happiness: wisdom is *agathos*, but so is wealth. This happens because popular usage doesn't countenance the logical relationship between these concepts. I suggest there is a narrow use of *agathos* used to describe a completer for something that is *ōphelimos*. However, since an *ōphelimon* can inherit the value of the good it supports or leads to, we can also yet describe an *ōphelimon* as *agathos*, We thus retain a broad use *agathos*, but one based on an understanding of the explanatory relationship between the two concepts. Thus we can call health 'good' when it is used correctly, and thus beneficially, in a way that leads to happiness. Also relevant: Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 106-110) and Michael Ferejohn (1984, 115).

[33]And eventually to happiness. My understanding of *ōphelimos* allows it to be used of anything that leads ultimately to a constituent of happiness, even if there are intervening links in the chain, each link of which could be described as both *ōphelimos* (insofar as it is in need of a completer) and *agathos* (insofar as it serves as a completer for a distinct *ōphelimon*).

achieves. I will do this in the next section, and then return to the question of how this is a completer of the sort we are looking for.

6 The *Kalon Ergon*

6.1 Souls in the Best Possible State

Let us now turn our attention to the aim or goal of Socratic piety understood as service. Though what I will say here is in general inspired by other accounts,[34] the details are largely my own.

We said earlier that the brief discussion of service breaks off when Euthyphro turns away from the topic (14b). Socrates had only managed to elicit from Euthyphro that piety might be service to the gods, helping them achieve some fine or noble work (13e). Socrates suggests in his chiding remarks to Euthyphro that, had he been able to say what fine things the gods achieve with our help, he would have correctly specified the nature of piety (14c).

Since Socrates uses the language of service in *Apology* to describe his characteristic philosophical activity, some have looked there to see how we might complete the account on Euthyphro's behalf.[35] Having recounted the story of the oracle, Socrates summarizes what he thinks its message, and hence his mission, is in a famous passage at 23a5-c1. The oracle seemed to be praising Socrates' epistemic humility, counting it a kind of wisdom, and suggesting that others would do well to be like Socrates in knowing what they don't know. Socrates undertakes to bring about this state of affairs, one in which his fellow citizens possess epistemic humility, by testing, through elenchus, the wisdom of those who profess to have it. And if they do not have the wisdom they profess, Socrates tries to help them see this about themselves. He describes all this as 'coming to the assistance' of the god, and as 'service to the god.'[36]

The activity that constitutes Socratic service is philosophical investigation in the form of elenchus. But what should we say is its goal, what end is it aiming to achieve, and is this the *kalon ergon* of *Euthyphro*? Given what

[34]Brickhouse and Smith (1989, 88-96), Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 64-68), C.C.W. Taylor (1982, 113-114), Vlastos (1991, 174-178), and in some respects, McPherran (1996, 65-68).

[35]Some constructivists, like Burnet (1924, 57) and McPherran (1996, 65-68), are agnostic about the *kalon ergon*, arguing that Socrates does not think we can specify it. I concur with those like Brickhouse and Smith (1989, 88-96), Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 64-64), Taylor (1982, 113-114), and Vlastos (1991, 174-178), who see a straightforward specification of the *ergon* in *Apology*. Also see Bonitz (1866, 234); Heidel (1902, 20, 22-25, 83 n. 47).

[36]He does not use *hupēretikē* here but *boētheō* and *latreia*, respectively. *Hupēretikē* returns at 30a7. Cf. Brickhouse and Smith (1989, 94, n. 75); McPherran (1996, 55, n. 76).

Socrates says throughout *Apology* 22 and 23, and his persistent disavowal of knowledge, we might think that awareness of one's own ignorance is the final goal of philosophical activity. But Socrates' more detailed descriptions of his mission suggest there is more we might hope to gain through inquiry. At 36c, Socrates suggests that he has conferred the "greatest benefit" (μεγίστην εὐεργεσίαν) on his fellow citizens by "trying to persuade him not to care for any of his belongings before caring that he himself should be as good and as wise as possible" (36c4-5). And at 29d he says:

> I shall not cease to practice philosophy, to exhort you...to point out to any one of you I happen to meet:...are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation, and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul. (29d5-30a2)

These passages suggest that part of Socrates' aim is to disillusion his fellow citizens concerning what they take to be goods in life, and thus shatter their pretenses to knowledge.[37] But he does this in order to make it possible for them to discover what really is good and valuable, and to move closer to wisdom and truth:

> Be sure that this is what the god orders me to do, and I think there is no greater blessing for the city than my service (*hupēresian*) to the god. For I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul, as I say to you: Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence makes wealth and everything good for men, both individually and collectively. (30a5-b4)

So while Socrates does have the negative goal of helping people see their own ignorance, there is a positive goal that it is instrumental in achieving: helping people eventually become wise, and come to understand excellence. Let us then say that the ultimate goal of Socrates' activity is to help people achieve the "best possible state of their souls", and this state will be characterized by the wisdom that allows them to act virtuously and live excellently.[38] So we might say that the *kalon ergon* the gods try to achieve with human help is human souls in the best possible state. I think we can do slightly better than this: the gods want a community of good human souls, or a community of people working together to bring about good human souls through philosophical inquiry. Again recalling the passage at *Apology* 23a: the gods hold up Socrates as a model to be emulated. Surely he is to be emulated not just with respect to his epistemic humility, but also with respect

[37] Cf. Brickhouse and Smith (1989, 88), McPherran (1996, 55).

[38] See Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 37-38), and section 6.2 below.

to the means by which he has arrived at that humility, and the means by which he helps others to arrive at it. The oracle is surely suggesting that we all live as Socrates lives, devoting our lives to the improvement of ourselves *and our peers* through interactive philosophical activity.[39] Socrates himself suggests that living an examined life will involve *reciprocal* testing when he famously says:

> ...if I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and *testing myself and others*, for the unexamined life is not worth living for men, you will believe me even less. (38a1-6, my emphasis)[40]

Socrates' model of piety assumes a *cooperative*, rather than a *subordinate* relationship to the gods. As Weiss has so insightfully observed, Euthyphro cannot get his head around such a model. He defaults to slavery as the paradigm for aiding the gods, while all of Socrates' examples of service are of craft apprenticeship. This contrast further exemplifies the difference between Socratic and Euthyphronic piety. Euthyphro, as a voluntarist, does not think that there is any good apart from divine will, and there are no independent reasons that explain why any good thing is good. Accordingly, blind submission is our only mode of relation to the gods: we wait for them to tell us what to do, and we do it, not because we see good in what the gods command, but in order to meet our obligations to them and reap rewards. *Of course* Euthyphro cannot say what the *kalon ergon* is, because he does not think there are things we could recognize as independently good. The only answer he can give to the question "What do we help the gods achieve?" is "many fine things," which is tantamount to saying what he has said in other ways elsewhere: "We help the gods achieve whatever they tell us to, whatever goals they deem worthwhile, and those goals will be fine (*kalon*) in virtue of having been deemed so."

On the other hand, Socratic piety assumes good things have natures that explain why they are good, and it is possible to recognize them as such. Accordingly, it is possible both for us and the gods to recognize goals worth striving for, and to desire their achievement on account of the fact that they are good.[41]

---

[39] On Socrates as an example: McPherran (1996, 227); Stokes (1992, 42-50). On a call to service for *all*: McPherran (1996, 228-229, 234-235); Reeve (1989, 72); Vlastos (1991, ch. 6, 173-178).

[40] There is similar language at 28e6.

[41] Though Socrates does often use language of subordination, he seldom expects *that* the gods have commanded him to do something to be the sole reason to do it. See Brickhouse and Smith (1989, 88-100); McPherran (1996, 228).

6.2 Wisdom, Insight, and Pedagogy

If Socratic piety is *cooperation* with the gods to achieve better human souls, we might wonder why this cooperation is necessary. In relying on us to talk one another into goodness the gods employ a haphazard and inefficient technique. Surely the Socratic gods for whom it is of the utmost importance for us to acquire knowledge of goodness could take better steps to ensure that we gain it. They could impart it to us directly, perhaps, by making the knowledge innate, or present it to us unambiguously in a pithy, guileless oracle or an unequivocal sacred text.

If we say they could have done these things, and did not, and if we say our cooperation with them was intended as the remedy for this, we seem to imply DED: we say the gods are deficient in some way for which we can compensate. Surely a god who could not bring about some desired goal, or some good end required by divine wisdom, is eudaimonaically deficient. Such a god lacks the means to flourish, god-like. We should thus investigate whether it is correct to say that the gods could have, if they were better, made a world in which in our path to virtue were more direct and easily navigable.[42]

I suggested a moment ago that the gods could have just handed over the knowledge they want us to have. But could they have? It is true that *information* can be directly imparted this way. I can write down a list of true propositions and hand them over to you to digest and perhaps memorize. But the transmission of true propositions is not necessarily the same as the transmission of knowledge, and certainly not the same as what Socrates would call wisdom. Let us assume that the attainment of wisdom is what puts our souls in the best possible state, and thus that such attainment is the goal of service.

Importantly, Socratic wisdom has practical ramifications, in that possession of it will enable one to reliably and consistently make good decisions and live excellently. This suggests that Socratic wisdom is more than just complete knowledge of propositions and why they are true; it is an ability to draw further conclusions on the basis of those propositions, to make judgments that issue in correct actions. This is what makes craft knowledge a good analogue for Socratic wisdom:[43]

> The true cobbler is not the one who is able to make one good pair of shoes, or even a few good pairs. To be a true craftsman, the cobbler must understand *what it is* for a pair of shoes to be a good pair of shoes, and also *be able to employ* that knowledge in *making* and *judging* all sorts of good shoes. (Brickhouse and Smith, 1994, 37)

[42] Cf. McPherran (1996, 60, 68-69).

[43] I largely follow Brickhouse and Smith in my understanding of Socratic wisdom (1994, 33-38; 61-64).

Moral wisdom thus involves more than the mere possession of data or the memorizing of rules to live by.[44] Even granted such rules, independent judgment is required for the application of these rules to particular instances. Merely knowing what the rules are is not enough. Socrates, in *Protagoras*, argues that virtue is the "art of measurement" (357), a skill for sorting out things that are truly good from those that merely appear so. Even in *Euthyphro*, Socrates desires knowledge of the form or template of piety so that he can "look upon it, and using it as a model, say that any action of yours or another's that is of that kind is pious, and if it is not that it is not" (6e3-6). Knowing what virtue is, this passage suggests, is but the first step in being virtuous, albeit a step of crucial importance. The bulk of the work will come after, in making judgments about whether some instance conforms to the model.[45]

The possession of true wisdom is thus the possession of a skill, and the wise person will be skilled at making inferences, at drawing out the implications of moral definitions. Accordingly, I contend that Socratic wisdom cannot be directly imparted from one agent to another the way raw data or information can. Thus the gods, however much they might like to do so, cannot give us the answers to moral questions, because the process of reasoning that leads to them is crucial to understanding those answers, and reasoning is a first-person process, one in which the subject is actively engaged.[46]

Consider the process of learning to solve a mathematical problem. No math teacher can directly impart to the student the knowledge of how to solve a math problem (especially an advanced one). The student plays an indispensable role in acquiring knowledge of how to solve the problem, by attempting to trace out the reasoning the teacher uses to arrive at the solution. The math teacher tries to help the student in this endeavor by doing many example problems and explaining the process behind solving them, but the ultimate goal of the teacher's work is to get the student *to see for herself* how to do the problem. The good math teacher is trying to *trigger insight* in the student, insight that will enable the student to exercise independent mathematical judgment on future problems. But we should note that there is nothing the teacher can do that guarantees this will happen. In the end, the student must work to produce a *eureka*[47] moment for herself. The teacher can pave the way, and pave it well, but the student must still undertake to walk it.

This paving work, trying to trigger insight, is Socrates' role in the story of Meno's slave (82a-85e), whom I shall call Epiphanes.[48] In this dialogue,

[44]Cf. Annas (2004, 64-66); Hursthouse (1999).

[45]Kraut (1983, 283-284) suggests that Socratic wisdom involves the possession of an entire moral theory. Also compare Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 61-64).

[46]Cf. Annas (2004, 70).

[47]Greek for 'I have seen!'

[48]I think it is time we extend the most minimal gesture of respect to this central figure

Socrates articulates a model of knowledge that harmonizes with the outline of wisdom we gave above. Socrates suggests we have knowledge when we accept a true proposition (have a true opinion) that is "tied down" by an "account of the reason why" (98a24). He says the account is recollection, and recollection is the name Socrates gave earlier in the dialogue to the reasoning process by which Epiphanes solved a problem in geometry, with Socrates' help. When Socrates says he does not teach Epiphanes, he means he does not give him new information (82e, 84d, 85d). But he aids Epiphanes in asking him questions that allow him to see what the answer is for himself. Though he would have been less likely to reach the answer if not for Socrates' questions, it is in the end still Epiphanes that produces the answer, and his answer is the outcome of a process of reasoning. When we aid the gods, we play Socrates' part, asking questions that encourage inquiry, that encourage people to walk through the process of reasoning that allows them to see things for themselves, and without which they would not see those things.[49]

It is important to note that though the gods cannot directly impart wisdom to us, this does not imply a deficiency or limitation of the gods that we are remedying in our aid to them. The difference between a good math teacher and poor one is not that the good one can directly impart mathematical insight while the poor one cannot. The good one will just be more effective at triggering insight in the student than the poor one. Even a perfect math teacher could not change the basic mechanics of learning math: it would still not be memorization.[50] The perfect math teacher would just be maximally efficient at triggering mathematical insight. Even a god could not turn learning math into memorization.

So there is perhaps a sense after all in which our help is indispensable in bringing about the *kalon ergon* the gods want to achieve, but it is not indispensable because the gods are inept or incapable, or because we have some eudaimonaic advantage that they lack.[51] It is indispensable because achieving the *ergon* requires our participation as learners and teachers, by turns.

---

in western intellectual history, and give Meno's slave a name.

[49]The description of knowledge given in *Meno* accommodates the model of inquiry embodied by Socratic elenchus nicely (Gentzler, 1994). Also of interest in this connection may be some recent literature on understanding, and the role that first-person grasping plays in it: Ahlstrom-Vij and Grimm (2013); Kvanvig (2003); Pritchard (2009). For specifics on how such accounts may resemble those of Greek philosophers, especially Plato, see Grimm (2020); Kotsonis (2021); Malik (2023).

[50]These remarks are intended to apply to mathematical problem-solving, not, obviously, the learning of multiplication tables and such like.

[51]C.C.W. Taylor has a similar view: "There is one good product [the gods] can't produce without human assistance, namely, good human souls." (Taylor, 1982, 113) Also see Vlastos (1991, 175). McPherran argues that gods may well have left human souls incomplete, and left it up to us to complete them, though having the ability to complete them if they wanted. (McPherran, 1996, 60, 68-69).

6.3 A Completer, Filial Piety, and Divine *Eudaimonia*

Brickhouse and Smith (1989, 91-92) say this about service:[52]

> Just as the aim of the slave is not the improvement of his master but the carrying out of the master's wishes, so the aim of the pious man is not the improvement of the gods but the carrying out of the gods' wishes...Socrates sees the pious man as a craftsman who justly *serves the gods by producing some truly beneficial end that the gods desire* (my emphasis).

They suggest that the benefit that explains why pious service is good is not one that accrues to the gods, but rather one that they desire to accrue to us.[53] As Vlastos says: "Piety is doing god's work to benefit human beings."(1991, 176)

Accordingly, I suggest that the explanatory completer we need to describe service as an *ōpheleia*, the good that such service leads to, is *our* good: a community of reciprocally self-improving human souls. Our aid to the gods thus does not imply the benefit of the gods in any way that would run afoul of Socrates' views, as far as we can tell what those views are, because it does not imply they have some eudaimonaic deficiency we are remedying through our agency. This aid can nonetheless be described as a benefit, in the sense of *ōphelimos*, because of the good it is instrumental in achieving.

But we cannot rest there. Let us recall why we want to say that service is an *ōpheleia*. I suggested earlier that Socratic piety is represented by benefit-symmetry, as a foil to Euthyphro's benefit-asymmetrical conception. The gods give us all manner of good things, and Socrates wants to know if it could make sense to think we reciprocate by offering benefits to them. The suggestion of this paper is that he does, privately, think it could make sense, and a complete account of Socratic piety as service will include an explanation of this.

But surely we do not achieve the symmetry we want if service is to be described as an *ōpheleia* because of the good it does for *us*. The gods' gifts to us promote or support *our* happiness, so a symmetrical exchange would involve us somehow offering things that support *their* eudaimonaic status. While it is correct to describe my friend's money as a benefit *generally* when it is conducive to her happiness, it would be misleading to say that in so doing I have given an explanation for how that money is a benefit with respect *to me*.

McPherran notes that philosophical activity which promotes our own moral and intellectual good can still be thought of as a good offered to the

[52]Though they fail to distinguish slavery from service as Weiss and I do.

[53]Also see Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 71); Irwin (1977, 49-50); McPherran (1996, 80); McPherran (2003, 26).

gods in a spirit of filial piety, if the gods desire our moral and intellectual improvement (1996, 63);(2005, 20). If a parent wants only what is good for her children, then someone who promotes that good is thereby also promoting the good of the parent, even if the one so promoting is herself a child of that parent. In this way, Socratic piety is an unusual type of *ōpheleia*. Any goodness it brings to the gods is *due to* the goodness it brings to us. Thus it can be a benefit to the gods while having its proper completer be our good.

But doesn't this lead us right back to our earlier point of departure? If the gods want something that they do not have, isn't this a eudaimonaic deficiency, and if we can give them this thing through our service, thereby benefitting them, isn't that a clear instantiation of DED?

Recall Adams' claim that it is absurd to suppose the gods are not already in the best state possible. I suggest we take this to mean that the gods are already in the best state it is possible for them to be in through their own agency or because of their own natures, and this state is sufficient for eudaimonia. As we have seen, the gods could not make us good through their own agency, but this is not due to some limitation on it. Without our actions, the gods are happy; they are not deficient in some eudaimonaic respect. They are nonetheless in some sense better off when we improve our own souls, because it is something they want. What the gods want, perhaps, is not so much good human souls, as us *undertaking* to improve our own souls, and even limitless divine agency cannot bring that about.

Vlastos' remark about Socrates' use of *ōpheleō* comes in the context of the argument for his Sufficiency Thesis, the idea that for Socrates, virtue is sufficient for happiness, but the virtuous person can nonetheless be made incrementally more or less happy by the addition or subtraction of dependent or external goods (1991, Ch. 8). A virtuous person is happy, but she can be a bit happier if she has wisely acquired and used wealth, for example. He calls external goods that can add to the happiness of a virtuous person 'mini-goods.'

Perhaps the existence of a community of reciprocal self-improvers is, for the gods, something like a mini-good. The gods are perfectly happy without such a community, but they are nonetheless happier with it.

7 Conclusions

Recall the four observations from the beginning of the paper (section 3):

1. Service has been offered as the correct way to understand Socratic piety.

2. Socratic piety is a foil or remedy to Euthyphronic piety (following Weiss and Taylor).

3. Euthyphronic piety is represented by the benefit-asymmetrical model of giving.

4. Euthyphronic piety is characterized by explanatory failure.

I claimed that if we understood Socratic-piety-as-service as instantiating the benefit-symmetrical model of giving, and thus that conferring some benefit was what explained why service was offered to the gods, we would strengthen the sense in which Socratic piety is foil and remedy to explanatorily deficient Euthyphronic piety. At the time, we assumed the benefit provided by service must be one that accrued to the gods, since the service was offered to the gods, and that posed a problem because it is unlikely Socrates would have held a view in which mortals could benefit gods. But we have seen that the benefit provided by divine service accrues not to gods but to mortals, and moreover, that such a model conforms to how Socrates often describes benefit (under the head of *ōphelimos*). Lastly, we have seen that the nature of service implies neither the deficiency of the gods nor the superiority of mortals to gods in some respect, and so does not conflict with any view that could plausibly be attributed to Socrates about the the nature of gods.

I also claimed earlier that my thesis would allow us to see the ultimate and penultimate elenchoi as a single discussion of pious service – hinted at by the text anyway (see p. 4) – rather than as discussions of two separate ideas.

In closing, I want to suggest that reading *Euthyphro* as I've suggested allows us to see an even larger unity in the dialogue that we otherwise miss.

Let me explain by first noting what Weiss has said about Euthyphro's prosecution of his father. She emphasizes Euthyphro's selfishness under the guise of piety. Though he claims his prosecution of his father is motivated by an impartial devotion to justice (4b7-9), a careful look at his language suggests this is not really the case.[54] Instead:

> Euthyphro's intention in prosecuting his father is, then, not to serve the cause of justice but rather to help himself by removing the threat posed by the religious pollution that he believes to have settled on his household. The means he employs for the preservation of his safety is pleasing the gods by imitating them... (1994, 265)

Euthyphro hopes to reap the reciprocal benefit of being cleared of pollution by doing what the gods expect him to do in a situation like this, and he draws a conclusion about their expectations from Zeus' own behavior. This is what he tells us in his first attempt to answer Socrates' *what is piety* question. He replies:

[54] "Euthyphro does not advocate prosecuting just any unjust killer but specifically the unjust killer who is a member of one's household." (1994, 265)

> I say that the pious is to do what I am doing now, to prosecute the wrongdoer...whether the wrongdoer is your father or your mother or anyone else; ...I can cite powerful evidence that the law is so...Zeus is the best and most just of gods, yet they agree he bound his father because he unjustly swallowed his sons... (5d8-6a2)

In reading Euthyphro's first answer this way, Weiss links it to both his third voluntaristic answer, and his last ritual exchange answer. Euthyphro's emulation of Zeus is just another form of appeasing the gods or meeting their demands in order to reap a return.

When we read like this, Euthyphro's voluntarism spans the dialogue, beginning to middle to end, linking together his first, third, and last answers. His second answer is just a draft of his third ('what the gods love' vs. 'what *all* the gods love'), and his fourth (care for the gods as husbandry) bears a similar relationship to the fifth (care for the gods as service). Thus all of Euthyphro's *rejected* answers (the service definition is not rejected) have the same basic philosophical flaw: they all explicitly or implicitly deny that piety has an explicable nature we can capture in a definition of the type Socrates has demanded. The *entire dialogue* then boils down to a sustained examination of a central idea. This is in keeping with the tradition of scholarship that has always assigned central importance to the famous dilemma of the dialogue's third elenchos, but now we have reasons to think that the other elenchoi are not topically isolated or even ancillary players supporting a bigger part; instead they are all rejections of a single theological framework, Euthyphro's voluntarism. All, that is, except the unrefuted service definition.

So what role does the service definition, on the assumption that it is a definition Socrates would have accepted, play in such a strong thesis about the doctrinal unity of the dialogue? The service definition is not just an alternative definition of piety that Socrates happens to prefer. It is the direct rival of and antithesis to Euthyphro's voluntarism. The entire dialogue is thus a contest between the Euthyphronic view that piety is voluntaristic ritual-slavery and the Socratic view that piety is service, and this only becomes clear when we see the doctrinal themes that run through all the elenchoi, culminating in the last one. It is in the last one where we see the two models of piety pitted directly against one another.

References

J. Adam. *Platonis Euthyphro.* Cambridge at the University Press, 1890.

A. W. H. Adkins. *Merit and Responsibility.* Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1960.

A. W. H. Adkins. Homeric Values and Homeric Society. *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, (91):1–14, 1971.

K. Ahlstrom-Vij and S. R. Grimm. Getting It Right. *Philosophical Studies*, (166):329–347, 2013.

R.E. Allen. *Plato's Euthyphro and the Earlier Theory of Forms*. London, 1970.

Julia Annas. Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 78(2):61–75, November 2004.

Przemysław Biernat. Sacrifice in Euthyphro 14A-15B. *Classical Philology*, 3(113):330–340, July 2018.

Christopher Bobonich. Plato's Theory of Goods in the *Laws* and *Philebus*. *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, (11): 109–139, 1995.

Hermann Bonitz. *Platonische Studien*. Franz Vahlen, Berlin, 1866.

Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith. *Socrates on Trial*. Oxford and Princeton, 1989.

Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith. *Plato's Socrates*. Oxford University Press, 1994.

Will Britt. Philosophical Piety in Response to Euthyphro's Hubris. *Ancient Philosophy*, 2(38):265–287, 2018.

John Burnet. *Plato's Euthyhpro, Apology of Socrates, and Crito*. Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1924.

S. M. Cohen. Socrates on the Defintion of Piety: *Euthyphro* 10a-11b. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 9(1):1–13, January 1971.

Panos Dimas. Happiness in *Euthydemus*. *Phronesis*, 47(1):1–27, 2002.

Panos Dimas. Euthyphro's Thesis Revisited. *Phronesis*, 51(1):1–28, 2006.

Michael Ferejohn. Socratic Thought-Experiments and the Unity of Virtue Paradox. *Phronesis*, 29(2):105–122, 1984.

Jyl Gentzler. Recollection and "The Problem of the Socratic Elenchus". *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium of Ancient Philosophy*, 10(1): 257–295, 1994.

S. R. Grimm. Transmitting Understanding and Know-How. In S. Hetherington and Nicholas D. Smith, editors, *What the Ancients Offer to Contemporary Epistemology*, pages 124–139. Routledge, 2020.

William Arthur Heidel. *Plato's Euthyphro*. American Book Company, 1902.

Hesiod. *Works and Days and Theogony*. Hackett, Indianapolis, 1993. Stanley Lombardo, trans.

Homer. *Iliad*. Hackett, Indianapolis, 1997. Stanley Lombardo, trans.

Rosalind Hursthouse. *On Virtue Ethics*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1999.

Terence Irwin. *Plato's Moral Theory*. Oxford University Press, 1977.

A. Kotsonis. The Platonic Conception of Intellectual Virtues: Its Significance for Virtue Epistemology. *Synthese*, (198):2045–2060, 2021.

Richard Kraut. *Socrates and the State*. Princeton University Press, 1983.

J. Kvanvig. *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*. Cambridge, Cambridge, 2003.

A. A. Long. Morals and Values in Homer. *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, (90): 121–139, 1970.

Bonnie MacLachlan. *The Age of Grace: Charis in Early Greek Poetry*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993.

Abida Malik. The Value of Understanding in Plato's *Republic*. *Unpublished Manuscipt*, 2023.

Mark McPherran. *The Religion of Socrates*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, PA, 1996.

Mark McPherran. Does Piety Pay: Socrates and Plato on Prayer and Sacrifice. In Nicholas D. Smith and Paul B. Woodruff, editors, *Reason and Religion in Socratic Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

Mark McPherran. The Aporetic Interlude and Fifth Elenchus of Plato's *Euthyphro*. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 25:1–37, 2003.

Mark McPherran. 'What Even a Child WOuld Know': Socrates, Luck, and Providence at *Euthydemus* 277d-282e. *Ancient Philosophy*, 25:49–63, 2005.

Melissa Mueller. The Language of Reciprocity in Euripides' *Medea*. *The American Journal of Philology*, 122(4):471–504, Winter 2001.

Robert Parker. Pleasing Thighs: Reciprocity in Greek Religion. In Christopher Gill, Norman Postlethwaite, and Richard Seaford, editors, *Reciprocity in Ancient Greece*, pages 105–125. Oxford University Press, 1998.

Duncan Pritchard. Knowledge, Understanding and Epistemic Value. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, (64):19–43, 2009.

W.G. Rabinowitz. Platonic Piety: An Essay Toward the Solution of an Enigma. *Phronesis*, (3):108–120, 1958.

C.D.C. Reeve. *Socrates in the Apology*. Hackett, 1989.

Gerasimos Santas. *Philosophy in Plato's Early Dialogues*. London; Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1979.

Herbert Weir Smyth. *Greek Grammar for Colleges*. American Book Company, 1920.

Michael Stokes. Socrates' Mission. In Barry Gower and Michael Stokes, editors, *Socratic Questions: New Essays on the Philosophy of Socrates and its Significance*. Routledge, 1992.

A.E. Taylor. *Plato: The Man and His Work*. Routledge, London, 1926.

C.C.W. Taylor. The End of the *Euthyphro*. *Phronesis*, 27(2):109–118, 1982.

Laszlo Versényi. *Holiness and Justice: An Interpretation of Plato's Euthyphro*. University Press of America, 1982.

Gregory Vlastos. *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1991.

I. Walker. *Plato's Euthyphro*. Chico, California, 1984.

Roslyn Weiss. Euthyphro's Failure. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 24(4):437–452, October 1986.

Roslyn Weiss. Virtue without Knowledge: Socrates' Conception of Holiness in Plato's *Euthyphro*. *Ancient Philosophy*, (14), 1994.

Donald J. Zeyl. Socratic Virtue and Happiness. *Archiv für Geshcichte der Philosophie*, 64(3):225–238, 1982.

Donald J. Zeyl, editor. *Gorgias*. Hackett, Indianapolis, 1987.