Socrates’ Conception of Piety: 
Teaching the *Euthyphro*

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**Abstract:** For Socrates, philosophy is self-examination. If the *Euthyphro* is still to be philosophy in this sense, it must challenge people living now. This paper offers a reading that does this. First, a better case is made for something like the kind of expertise Euthyphro claims and for his position about piety. Second, Socrates and Euthyphro embody different views about the kind of expertise that would be relevant to discovering and engendering piety. Finally, Socrates’ unorthodox conception of piety is made explicit. With these features highlighted, the *Euthyphro* still possesses the power to provoke and challenge.

The *Euthyphro* is one of the most frequently used texts in introductory philosophy classes. But I think it is commonly undertaught. So, when an issue of *Teaching Philosophy* arrived a few years ago with an article by Robert Talisse on teaching the *Euthyphro*, I knew right away that I had to read it.¹ Talisse has written articles that I admire. But I was disappointed. There are, I think, two basic sources of disappointment. First, Talisse proposes a dialogical reading of the *Euthyphro*, but his reading focuses on the dialogue within the text, largely ignoring the dialogue between the text and the reader. But for Socrates, philosophy is self-examination. So, if any philosophy in the Socratic sense is to happen today in connection with the *Euthyphro*, it must result from a dialogue between the text and us. Second, for Talisse, the *Euthyphro* is about different kinds of experts. While I agree that the issue of kinds of expertise is centrally involved, I thought the dialogue was about piety. Moreover, it seems that the kind of expertise that is relevant to piety might well depend on what piety is. Let’s take these two concerns in order.

*Philosophy and the Euthyphro*

The Socrates of the *Apology* at least is, as he himself proclaimed, a “gadfly” (30e), a questioning examiner of lives who aimed to arouse
us from our sluggish, sleep-walking lives. The important lessons in that dialogue are, as Talisse puts it, “the need to question authority, to examine ourselves and others, and to pursue truth even if at the cost of cherished traditions and comforting pieties” (163). Philosophy, on this view, is primarily a practical activity, not a theoretical enterprise.

But given this conception of philosophy as self-examination, there is a dilemma for teaching this text. The *Euthyphro* might now be only a record of some philosophy that happened long ago in a far away land. If it is only that, studying the *Euthyphro* becomes a scholarly pursuit—worthwhile perhaps, but not philosophical in the Socratic sense. And indeed, for many contemporary theologians and Christian philosophers, the *Euthyphro* may well have lost its Socratic firepower. Contemporary theological positions have been molded by traditions that have been acutely aware of the pitfalls of a view like Euthyphro’s. For other contemporary philosophers, the supposition that frames the entire discussion of the *Euthyphro*—there is a God who wants something of us—may be too dead to provoke self-examination. But no one begins thinking about God, piety and religion with the sophistication of a contemporary theologian or a philosopher skeptic. Many of our students hold views that are still challenged by the *Euthyphro*. It speaks to issues that are very much alive for them.

But this must be shown. Many students are skeptical: after all, the *Euthyphro* is more than 2000 years old. It might well be irrelevant to us because the world has changed so much in the last 2000 years. (Does anyone in the developed world today really hold beliefs about piety like Euthyphro’s?) To make matters worse, Plato did not even know about any of the religions that define piety for contemporary Americans. For all these reasons, many students approach this text with skepticism about whether it can enlighten us about piety or even call into question our views of it. Obviously the issue of whether there is any expertise of the philosophical kind that Socrates defends is also right around the corner. Many students doubt that there is and the fact that we are still reading the *Euthyphro* tends to reinforce these doubts. (If there were philosophical expertise, surely 2000 years later we would know many things that Plato could not have known.)

There are many responses to skepticism about the power of a text like the *Euthyphro*. But if we accept—even for pedagogical purposes—the Socratic view of philosophy, then the *Euthyphro* must be shown to make contact with something central to the way we live our lives. In this paper, I attempt to develop a more sympathetic view of the kind of expertise Euthyphro claims to have and also to make Socrates’ views about piety explicit. The historical figure, Euthyphro, may have been a pompous fool. But the historical Euthyphro need not take the *Euthyphro* down with him. A view like Euthyphro’s can be developed that has more
plausibility and power. When this has been done, Euthyphro’s kind of expertise can be seen to still have many adherents today. And Socrates’ understanding of piety—piety is moral conduct and nothing more—is still controversial and thought-provoking. On this reading, many students find the confrontation between Socrates and a more thoughtful and articulate Euthyphro very thought-provoking and challenging. The exercise of making a stronger case for Euthyphro’s position is also beneficial—learning how to make a better, more insightful case for a position is one of the important skills of philosophy.

**Expertise and the Euthyphro**

For Talisse, the center of the *Euthyphro* is “a contest between two concepts of expertise, namely the *sophistical* and the *philosophical*, one founded on power, the other on *logos*” (165).

[T]he true expertise of Philosophy involve[s] giving the reasons why one holds a particular belief or undertakes a specific action. Unlike the sophisti-cal expert who seeks mere recognition and praise, the Philosopher seeks the ultimate Logos, the perfect account of his beliefs and doings. Like Theseus, the Philosopher tries to retrace the steps of his reasoning in order to correct his thinking and to escape the labyrinth of troubles into which poor and hasty judgments can lead. [By contrast], the aspiring “expert” who is convinced that he “is superior to the majority of men” (5a) because he “knows something of which the majority have no knowledge” (6b) misses the mark of straight thinking and of True Philosophy. (172–73)

The epistemic self-confidence of a Euthyphro might be rare today. But in his unreflective way, Euthyphro embodies a basic, perhaps even inescapable, epistemic self-confidence that generates the need for dialogue—in the literal, multi-person sense. Individually, none of us can escape the persuasive force of our own beliefs and of the arguments that convince us. In theory, we all admit a distinction between good arguments and merely persuasive arguments; in practice, we all count those arguments that persuade us as good ones. This is why, I think, Socrates held that we must test our convictions in a public forum—with others who do not share our beliefs and commitments—so that the test of our convictions can transcend our own, individual (subjective?) conceptions of “good reasons” and, indeed, of Logos. That, I think, is why Socrates *had* to go into the *agora*. It is why he couldn’t accept the suggestion made in his trial that he just shut up and quit bothering his fellow Athenians. Thus, the Socratic kind of expertise is not only logos-driven; it is the result of a *shared* inquiry.

The humility necessary for genuine dialogue requires that we admit both that we might well not know *despite our internal self-examination* and also that this person with whom we are now talking is someone from whom we might learn. Socrates notoriously does not treat his in-
terlocutors as people from whom he might learn. And perhaps dialogue cannot happen for us in our classes, for, like Euthyphro, we are “far advanced in wisdom” (4c) and [we], too know “wonderful things . . . which most [students] . . . do not know” (6b). Many of our students do not resent it if we doubt that we can learn something philosophically important from them. Indeed, if there is philosophical expertise and we’ve been studying philosophy seriously for 20 years, then we certainly should be much further advanced in wisdom than they. Some of our students acknowledge our expertise.

If our expertise is acknowledged, we have what Euthyphro lacks. According to Talisse, “Euthyphro . . . lacks the one thing that is essential to being an expert, namely, recognition” (168). It is this recognition that Euthyphro desperately seeks and it is the quest for recognition, on Talisse’s view, that motivates Euthyphro to undertake the prosecution of his father. “Euthyphro is simply not getting what he, qua expert, desperately needs—recognition” (169). Euthyphro confesses, “people laugh at me and say I am crazy when I say anything in the assembly and foretell the future to them” (3c).

Talisse calls Euthyphro’s conception of expertise “the sophistical view,” because it aims primarily at power and influence (173). Of course, any kind of acknowledged expertise about matters that people consider important—like piety and religious obligation—will confer power and influence. So, the philosopher, too, will enjoy power and influence if her expertise is recognized. And, in fact, Socrates must have had both—one does not get prosecuted for impiety and corrupting the young if he is a nobody or a laughable old fool whom no one takes seriously. But, presumably, unlike those who seek sophistical expertise, the Philosopher does not aim primarily at power and influence. She seeks wisdom, primarily.

Euthyphro’s Expertise and Piety

But is it fair to Euthyphro to say that he seeks “mere recognition and praise” (172)? Does not Euthyphro also seek—and believe he has—wisdom? Of course he does! His claim to have opinions worth taking seriously—and also his frustration when they are not taken seriously—grow out of a belief that he knows “wonderful things . . . which most men do not know” (6b). To claim that he “aims primarily at power and influence” may or may not be correct. But in any case, this reading does not get at the nature of the expertise Euthyphro claims to possess. It also continues the tradition of not taking Euthyphro seriously and thereby exacerbates the problem of taking the Euthyphro seriously. For if this is all there is to Euthyphro, it becomes hard to imagine important truths about piety emerging from a dialogue with the likes
of him. A more sympathetic and interesting reading is possible, one that will lead to closer contact with views about piety often expressed in our classrooms. (This is not, of course, to deny that Euthyphro is frustrated by the lack of public recognition of his expertise, just as an expert of any kind can be.)

Given that Euthyphro, too, claims a kind of expertise, we come to basic questions: What kind of expertise is relevant to piety? Are reasons relevant in the area of religious conviction? If so, what role do they play? Is an approach via reasons and arguments most likely to get us the best and truest account of piety? And what is the relation between knowledge of what piety is and piety itself? Do arguments create piety? (Perhaps virtue is not knowledge.) What, after all, is piety? Many of our students would deny that reasoning will get us to knowledge of piety, much less to piety itself. Some also deny that there can be expertise of any kind about something as personal as one’s relation to God.

The famous Euthyphro Dilemma reflects different conceptions of religious expertise. Socrates’ and Euthyphro’s “conceptions [of expertise] are replicated in the horns of the dilemma” (173–74). But this leads us directly to the question of the nature of piety. For if the pious is pious because it is loved by God, then only insight into the mind of God could yield knowledge of piety. Euthyphro cannot be budged from the view that piety is what pleases God. And if his claim to expertise is represented by this horn of the dilemma, it must rest on knowledge of what God approves or loves.

So, how would we get insight into the mind of God? Does it come through rational argumentation, through the method of Logos? God must look at things this way and want us to act that way because all the arguments point in that direction? God is rational; God couldn’t be God for a being wouldn’t be perfect if not supremely rational. So, our primary access to the mind and will of God is through Logos. We can think our way into the mind of God because God is a rational being, the supreme rational being. That’s a plausible answer, perhaps an ingredient in Socrates’ conception of piety. It may also be the idol of the philosophers. Certainly, it would be the way philosophers would make God in our own image. But there are other theological traditions. Perhaps Euthyphro embodies an alternative that, more fully articulated, would be worth considering.5

Suppose, then, that we are not able to think our way into the mind of God. There are many reasons—including our finitude and the possibility that there are higher things than rationality—for thinking that arguments might not be the way to know God. And even more reasons for thinking that dialectic may not be the way to become pious. One alternative route to the mind of God is revelation. God must reveal Herself; God must tell us what God wants. Otherwise, assuming still
that we cannot figure out what God wants of us, there can be no expertise about piety and we will all be shooting in the dark when we seek to please God. And shooting in the dark, too, when we seek piety, if piety is what is pleasing to God.

There is, of course, textual evidence that suggests this is precisely Euthyphro’s position. He tells stories about the gods (5e) and his claim to expertise rests on knowledge of those stories. The stories Euthyphro tells are from Homer, and Homer was thought to be an especially inspired poet. Euthyphro is telling his cultural equivalent of Bible stories. Socrates himself calls them “sacred stories” (6c). Euthyphro also believes he has the Athenian equivalent of Biblical authority for prosecuting his father (6a). Yet the Athenians who accept these stories doubt that Euthyphro is doing well when he emulates the actions of the gods as portrayed in them. This, surely, is another source of Euthyphro’s frustration.6

So, we have the contrast between divinely revealed stories and rational argument as the method for learning about piety and for becoming pious. Socrates is, of course, dismissive of these stories—“this is the reason why I am a defendant in the case, because I find it hard to accept things like that being said of the gods” (6a). Socrates does not say that he finds it hard to accept the existence of the gods. A statement like that would reframe the entire discussion of piety. Socrates says he finds it hard to accept things like that being said of the gods. Why? I think it is because these stories portray the gods as doing flagrantly immoral things. If that is correct, Socrates is proposing a moral criterion for revelation. We need some sort of criterion because all kinds of things—both texts and personal experiences—present themselves as revelations from God. Since these alleged revelations are not consistent with each other (again, the supposition that God must be rational), not all can be genuine revelations regardless of how convincing ( revelatory?) they may be to those who believe in them. Socrates is raising a question that is foreign to the true believer: How can you tell that the sacred text or transformative experience upon which you base your life is a genuine revelation?

Socrates’ moral criterion for a revelation goes something like this: If a text or experience portrays God as doing something immoral or as approving of something immoral, then that cannot be a truth about God. Morality precedes and circumscribes religious obligation. Ethics is more basic than theology. Of course, some students quickly realize that this criterion would establish that our bibles, too, are not genuine revelations. At least not through and through. Our bibles, too, portray God as doing and approving many things that we find morally reprehensible. Should we accept our canonical texts or should we accept Socrates’ moral criterion for a revelation?
Again, there are theological traditions other than the Socratic. Martin Luther, for example, wrote:

For were His justice such as could be adjudged as just by the human understanding, it were manifestly not divine, and would differ in nothing from human justice. But since God is true and simple, yea in His entirety incomprehensible and inaccessible to human reason, it is right, nay it follows necessarily, that his justice is also incomprehensible.\footnote{7}

If God’s morality is much higher than our own and incomprehensible to us, we cannot use our sense of morality as a test for alleged revelations. To do so would be to require God to march to our ethical drummer. It would also effectively rule out a revelation that is morally revelatory. What pleases God may be conduct that we find morally offensive. There is no evidence that Euthyphro believes that prosecuting his father is morally correct. But he claims it is pious. Religious obligations supersede moral obligations. On this view of piety (which could well be Euthyphro’s), questions of expertise about piety would not be, as Talisse has it, “two concepts of moral expertise” (165), for Euthyphro would be claiming expertise about something that transcends morality.

Euthyphro is not adept at dialectic and Socrates has no trouble tying him in knots. But if Euthyphro’s kind of expertise rests on insight into the meaning of revealed stories, he may not be very much concerned with dialectic. Dialectic is not, on his view, the path to piety. Euthyphro is certainly not alone in this conviction; there are all kinds of religious traditions that would claim that the truths of piety are not rationally demonstrable, perhaps not even expressible in words. So, we should not be overly concerned if we lack the kind of expertise prized by philosophers. Refutations, on this view, count for little and we ought not be deterred by them.

Socrates’ Conception of Piety

The \textit{Euthyphro} is inconclusive in the sense that Socrates and Euthyphro never do agree about the nature of piety. Euthyphro reverts to his claim that piety is what is pleasing to God. However, the \textit{Euthyphro} does give a pretty clear indication of Socrates’ conception of piety, founded on the other horn of the \textit{Euthyphro} Dilemma, “God loves piety because it is pious.” Socrates offers a fairly well-developed argument for his conception of piety, as well.

Socrates’ argument departs from the claim that there are two parts of justice, roughly “care of God” and “care of men” (12e). But for Socrates, it just doesn’t stand to reason that we can do anything for God, certainly not if “care of the gods [would be] to benefit the gods and make them better” (13c). For this reason, he cannot make sense of
Euthyphro’s view of piety as a kind of barter or trade between people and God. For Socrates, the view that we can do anything to benefit God is impious, or at least insulting to God. “Prayer and sacrifice” (14b)—the staples of many forms of piety—are not beneficial to God. God doesn’t need our acknowledgement; God already knows that She is God and that She gives us every good thing. It doesn’t help God if we tell God that. If, prayer, thanksgiving, praise, worship, belief in God, and the like are beneficial at all, they are beneficial to the believer. This is very disturbing terrain for many students, especially as the implications of this view emerge.  

Recall the two parts of justice—care of God and care of our fellows. If we can do nothing to benefit God—not even having faith in God or acknowledging God’s presence—then the first part of justice is completely empty. There is nothing we can do to care for God; God doesn’t need or want anything from us. We may have here a precursor of the doctrine that God, in order to be God, must be all-powerful and self-sufficient. In any case, the view that we can do nothing to benefit God is pivotal.  

If we are to help God in any way, we must help God with God’s work. Like slaves or servants of a master (13d). But, Socrates inquires, what is God’s work? Euthyphro cannot answer. The best he can do is to say that “many fine things” (13d) are the work of God. Socrates characteristically presses for the essential, unifying feature of all these things and Euthyphro cannot give him one. Then comes a passage that is the key. Socrates says, “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” (14c—my emphasis). The divine work that we are to help God with cannot be designed to benefit God. So it must be designed to benefit God’s creation, or in the terms of the Euthyphro, our fellow men. The conclusion is that piety reduces to morality. What pleases God is simply the other part of justice, lives lived to benefit our fellow humans.  

This conclusion squares nicely with Socrates’ puzzling statements in the Apology that he is on a divine mission (28e, 29e, 33c) and also with his claim that “there is no greater blessing” (30a) than provoking people to self-examination. If our confidence in our beliefs about the good life (which are often false) is the main obstacle to human fulfillment, then the life of the gadfly will be the life lived to benefit our fellow humans. Regardless of how much everyone dislikes being examined about our lives and the beliefs we base them on, this examination will be “the greatest benefit” (36c). The life of dialogue is the pious life.
Who, then, is pious? Who is pleasing to God? Those who believe in God? No, for that would mean that God wants/needs our belief. The desire for acknowledgement or gratitude are, on this view, signs of self-doubt or insecurity and hence imperfections. Unlike Euthyphro and other very human experts, God does not need recognition. Our piety cannot benefit God in any way. For Socrates, our reverence, our rituals, our faithfulness to sacred texts are all at best a means to strengthen us in our resolve to benefit our fellow humans. To the extent that they distract us from benefiting our fellows, they are impious.

Consider, then, four classes of people: 1) those who believe in God and help their fellows, 2) those who believe in God but do not help their fellows, 3) those who do not believe in God and help their fellows (anyway), and 4) those who do not believe in God and also do not help their fellows. Most of our students have been taught that God is pleased by the first group, possibly also by the second (perhaps if accompanied by repentance). Many of our students have been taught that belief in God is the **sine qua non**, so members of the third and fourth groups have no chance to please God. But for Socrates, it’s the first and third groups that please God. God doesn’t care whether we believe in Her—unless that belief makes us more loving to our neighbors.

If there is a heaven with rewards for those who have pleased God, Socrates expects to find atheists there. Since we cannot benefit God, all God can want of us is moral conduct. Piety is morality—care of our fellows. That and nothing more. This is the Socratic conception of piety, at least as portrayed in the *Euthyphro*. Returning briefly to the issue of the kind of expertise that is relevant to piety, we can note that this may well be the conception of piety that will emerge from rational argumentation. It may be the conclusion you are driven to if you begin with the method of Logos and thus, this finding about the nature of piety may have been implicit in the choice of philosophical expertise. This may be the piety of the philosophers.

However that may be, this is very powerful stuff indeed for many students and very nearly as challenging today as it was two millennia ago. **Atheists can be pious? If there is a God, God is pleased by atheists?** Once they grasp this Socratic view of piety, some students would be prepared to prosecute him for impiety and corrupting the young. Others, attempting to evade the force of Socrates’ argument, are busy trying to figure out what we could do for an all-powerful God. Some are wondering whether the mistake was to bring philosophical method into the domain of piety. Still others are wondering whether there can be genuine piety without metaphysical convictions. At this point, deep questions about the nature and function of piety have emerged. Read in this way, the *Euthyphro* is very much alive today. It is still the site of Socratic philosophy—it prompts real self-examination.
Notes

I wish to thank anonymous referees of *Teaching Philosophy* for helpful comments. This is a better paper for their suggestions.

1. Robert Talisse, “Teaching Plato’s *Euthyphro* Dialogically,” *Teaching Philosophy* 26:2 (June 2003): 163–75. All page numbers refer to this article.


4. Distinguishing philosophical expertise from the kind of expertise Euthyphro claims in terms of their aims is quite different from distinguishing them in terms of their methods, as Talisse also does. “The true expertise of Philosophy involve[s] giving the reasons why one holds a particular belief or undertakes a specific answer. . . . [T]he Philosopher seeks the ultimate Logos, the perfect account of his beliefs and doings” (172–73). Given these two contrasts—one in terms of aims, the other in terms of method—there are *four* types of persons, not two: 1) the person who seeks the ultimate Logos and is not primarily concerned with power and influence, 2) the person who seeks the ultimate Logos primarily because of the power and influence it will bring, 3) one who seeks “knowledge of the most important things” but through some other method than Logos, and 4) one who seeks that knowledge because of the power and influence it will bring.

5. In this paper, I am attempting to put the *Euthyphro* into conversation with views that students commonly express in the classroom, not with contemporary theology. I use as an example a generic Christianity only because far more students in the U.S. identify themselves as Christian than any other religion. I am certainly not claiming that Euthyphro’s views would be embraced by contemporary theologians or Christian philosophers. Quite the opposite: most contemporary theologians will have read the *Euthyphro* and their views will be sensitive to the problems with Euthyphro’s position.

6. We are on familiar ground here—people believe in Christianity, but they get upset when someone attempts to carry, say, the injunctions of Jesus into practice in a straightforward way. I once had a student who honestly believed that we should try always to love our enemies and that we should always turn the other cheek. The Christians in the class were appalled and they ridiculed him.


8. This view does have some Biblical support, however: “‘I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.’” (Amos 5:21–24, RSV).

9. Again, there is some Biblical support for this view. Jesus said to his disciple, Peter: “‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ . . . And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep.’” (John 21:17 RSV).


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