

Euthyphro’s Elenchus Experience: Ethical Expertise and Self-Knowledge

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Abstract The paper argues that everyday ethical expertise requires an openness to an experience of self-doubt very different from that involved in becoming expert in other skills—namely, an experience of profound vulnerability to the Other similar to that which Emmanuel Levinas has described. Since the experience bears a striking resemblance to that of undergoing cross-examination by Socrates as depicted in Plato’s early dialogues, I illustrate it through a close reading of the Euthyphro, arguing that Euthyphro’s vaunted “expertise” conceals a reluctance to submit himself to the basic process of self-redefinition that results from learning the limits of one’s knowledge. I show how the dialogue itself models the disruptive experience of selfquestioning that leads to moral maturity, providing further evidence that expertise has an important non-cognitive element, as well as casting doubt on the ethical value of seeking “definitions” of the virtues

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Is there such a thing as “ethical expertise?” While this question has provoked controversy in light of claims by professional “ethicists” to offer expert advice in such fields as medicine and law, one finds almost no application of the idea to ordinary everyday ethical experience. The one exception seems to be the non-cognitivist theory of ethical expertise introduced 20 years ago by Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1990). In their view, almost anything we do routinely can become a matter of expertise if this facilitates whatever is less routine in life: “We are all experts at many tasks and our everyday coping skills function smoothly and transparently so as to free us to be aware of other aspects of our lives where we are not so skillful” (1990, p. 243). Moral tasks, they argue, are no exception.¹

¹I use ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ interchangeably. For critical appraisals of the Dreyfus theory, see Selinger and Crease 2002, and Moss 1990. Stichter 2007 finds support in Dreyfus for his skill model of virtue. References to it occasionally appear in the literature on “applied ethics”; for a recent overview, see Steinkamp et al. 2008.

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This paper argues that while there is such a thing as everyday moral expertise, it is not like that which the Dreyfus theory describes.² As it happens, a separate claim made by Hubert Dreyfus provides us with an opening for the argument: namely, his contention that Socrates, in effect, advocated a mistaken cognitivist model of expert knowledge based on context-free rule-based reasoning—later a founding idea of modern artificial intelligence research—because he insisted that his interlocutors be able to *define* any virtue they intelligence to know anything about (Dreyfus 1987, 1988; Dreyfus and Dreyfus 2004a). In Plato’s *Euthyphro*, for example, Socrates makes this allegedly unrealistic demand of a man who professes literally to be an expert on the virtue of piety. Here is how Dreyfus summarizes the dialogue:

Socrates asks Euthyphro to tell him how to recognize piety: “I want to know what is characteristic of piety ... to use as a standard whereby to judge your actions and those of other men.” But instead of revealing his piety-recognizing heuristic, Euthyphro does just what every expert does when cornered by Socrates. He gives him examples from his field of expertise, in this case mythical situations in the past in which men and gods have done things which everyone considers pious. Socrates gets annoyed and demands that Euthyphro, then, tell him his rules for recognizing these cases as examples of *piety*, but although Euthyphro claims he knows how to tell pious acts from impious ones, he cannot state the rules which generate his judgments. Socrates ran into the same problem with craftsmen, poets and even statesmen. They also could not articulate the principles underlying their expertise. Socrates therefore concluded that none of these experts knew anything and he didn’t know anything either. (Dreyfus 1987, p. 19)

On Dreyfus’s reading of the *Euthyphro*, Socrates allegedly lays the groundwork for modern scientific rationalism by pursuing the same quest for definitional knowledge that centuries later would develop into the enterprise known as “knowledge engineering”—the attempt to discover “the rules ... functioning in the expert’s mind whether he is conscious of them or not” (1987, p. 20)—and for Dreyfus, it almost seems, that is *all* that Socrates is doing.³

But where Dreyfus finds in Socrates’ cross-examination of Euthyphro only a misguided effort to force an expert to articulate what no true expert can put into words, I believe we encounter something much more directly and uniquely relevant to ethics: the basis for a phenomenological description of the “self-refutation” process by which a person is led to refine his or her moral intuitions. I shall argue that this process of constructive self-questioning bears a striking resemblance to the experience of undergoing cross-examination by Socrates as Plato depicts it in the early dialogues. The Socratic elenchus has the paradoxical effect of revealing, whatever may have been Plato’s or Socrates’ intentions or their views of the self, an essential feature of our moral experience which

² It is far from my purpose to discredit the Dreyfus theory of expertise as a whole, with which I am in general agreement. I am only claiming that it falls short of describing the ethical.

³ Socrates’ undeniable *ethical* emphasis is more often held to be in conscious opposition to, rather than in sympathy with, “the new scientific outlook” Dreyfus’s Socrates supposedly adopts without question from the pre-Socratics. See Matson and Leite 1991, pp. 148–149. Socrates’ own piety is probably too well established to be dismissed in favor of his being partial to a pre-Socratic worldview that saw little need for the divine (Vlastos 1991, pp. 158–160). The problem here may be that Dreyfus’s reading makes no distinction between the man Gregory Vlastos calls Socrates_E, the Socrates of the early dialogues who cares only about moral issues, and Socrates_M, Plato’s spokesman in the middle dialogues, passionately interested in science and metaphysics (Vlastos 1991, pp. 46–48)—although Vlastos inadvertently concedes something to Dreyfus’s view in claiming that Socrates_E “*rationalizes* the gods by making them moral” (1991, p. 162, my emphasis).

depends on our profound vulnerability to the *other*. Emmanuel Levinas has given us what is arguably one of the most original and penetrating analyses in contemporary philosophy of this moral vulnerability. Having a prior interest in his work, I have chosen to draw upon his phenomenology of the ethical self in what follows, without insisting that it is the only approach available. Although the Dreyfus theory may be essential to an understanding of expertise in general, it will turn out that *ethical* expertise, in the everyday sense, is possible only through a continual openness to an experience of self-doubt reminiscent of Levinas's idea that we are "called into question" by the other, and therefore very different from what is involved in learning to become expert in other skills. Thus, ethical expertise requires one to submit to a distinctive but universal experience of self-redefinition I shall call—in honor of Socrates' legendary concern for moral integrity—the "elenchus experience."

1 Dreyfus, Levinas, and Ethical Expertise

Dreyfus and Dreyfus hold that ethical expertise "expresses itself chiefly in everyday ethical comportment which consists in unreflective, egoless responses to the current interpersonal situation" (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1990, p. 239)—in other words, in actions based not on the application of rules but on recognizing the salient features of the situation in which one is involved and then following one's intuitions about what to do. Even on those rare occasions when our intuitions fail us, we tend not to fall back on rules. Assuming we have not found ourselves in a state of "total breakdown" where nothing seems to make any sense at all,⁴ we typically recognize a sufficient number of familiar features in any ordinary dilemma to enable us to maintain our moral bearings and evaluate potential solutions. By focusing our attention on clues we can recognize or intuit *in the situation itself*—specifically, focusing on *others* rather than on ourselves—we eventually find a perspective from which it becomes clear what needs to be done. As Dreyfus and Dreyfus express it, "in familiar but problematic situations, rather than standing back and applying abstract principles, the expert deliberates about the appropriateness of her intuitions" (1990, p. 248)—that is, she questions her understanding of *the immediate situation*, presumably in light of the interests of the other people involved, rather than withdrawing from that situation, even momentarily, in order to search her theoretical knowledge for an applicable rule. "When faced with a dilemma, the expert does not seek principles but, rather, reflects on and tries to sharpen his or her spontaneous intuitions by getting more information until one decision emerges as obvious" (1990, p. 252).

Appropriate as all of this may be to ethical dilemmas, I will argue that, unlike expertise in driving or chess—examples Dreyfus and Dreyfus use in illustrating the five-stage process of skill acquisition they apply to ethics⁵—one's *moral* intuitions cannot be refined without occasionally placing, not just one's understanding of the situation, but one's very *self* in question, thereby submitting oneself to something like the same ordeal Socrates' interlocutors undergo. A moral decision only a little out of the ordinary can feel like a denial, disruption, or "refutation" of oneself, in that it temporarily calls into question one's usual

⁴ "... an ethical situation could occur so unlike any previous situation that no one would have an expert intuitive response to it. Then no amount of involved deliberation would serve to sharpen the expert's intuitions. In the face of such a total breakdown, and in that case alone, the ethical expert would have to turn to detached reflection" (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1990, p. 258).

⁵ The five stages are: novice, advanced beginner, competence, proficiency, and expertise. See Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1990, pp. 240–243.

image of oneself as someone who can knowledgeably “cope.” We need only be forced a little out of our moral “comfort zone” in order for this to happen. Perhaps we inexplicably hurt someone’s feelings, or we find ourselves in the company of someone whose very different background throws into relief our own ignorance of certain aspects of life. One’s everyday relations with others therefore tend to follow a dialectic of “selving” and “unselving”⁶—of putting oneself forward, at one moment, with tentative ideas about how things stand vis-à-vis oneself and others; at the next having to “take back” something of oneself, or one’s “version” of the world, when things turn out otherwise than projected, as they often do, hence creating a need for revision. This process is not only characteristic of everyday moral experience; in many ways it resembles the ordeal Socrates’ interlocutors undergo: invited to offer their own versions of “how things are” in life (definitions of virtues), they submit *themselves*, and not merely their statements, to “refutation”⁷—after which, having recovered some of their self-confidence, they try again.

What I call the “elenchus experience” is therefore much more than an effect Socrates happens to produce on his interlocutors as a result of his debating style. In the larger world, this experience is the ultimate motivation for any substantial adjustment we make in our usual moral comportment. It can be described as a “disruptive crease” (Sokolowski),⁸ an interruption or *dérangement* (Levinas), a “disturbance” or “moral crisis” dividing one’s life into a “before,” when we did things one way, and an “after,” when we can never do them the same way again.⁹ If the experience is fairly common in life, the reason could be that there is a tension—an “equivocation,” James Hatley calls it—at the very heart of ethics:

[E]thics strives to legislate a world in which the good is done fluidly, as a matter of habituation, if not fact, even as it is recognized that the very thing ethics can never be is an acting that is merely habit or matter of fact. Even as ethics seeks to become familiar, it insists on rendering the world unfamiliar. The emergence of ethical obligation both insists on regularity in one’s conduct and resists that regularity. (Hatley 2006, p. 3)

Hatley neatly summarizes a paradox of mature ethical behavior: (1) ideally, it is second nature, and yet (2) it ought to promote a conscious openness to those very aspects of our neighbors’ actions for which we can never be entirely prepared: the embarrassing, the offensive, the menacing, the “unfamiliar.”

Of course, even in driving a car or playing chess, our world can momentarily turn unfamiliar and disorienting: we almost fail to negotiate a curve under abnormal weather conditions, or we lose a game by falling into a trap we never saw coming. Such moments can

⁶ The terms “selving” (*verselbsten*) and “unselving” (*entselbstigen*) are from Bidney 1988, pp. 6–12, quoting Goethe’s *Poetry and Truth (Hamburger Ausgabe, 9:353)*.

⁷ As Nicias warns his friends in the *Laches*, anyone drawn into a discussion with Socrates “will be continually carried round and round by him, until at last he finds that he has to give an account both of his present and past life, and when he is once entangled, Socrates will not let him go until he has completely and thoroughly sifted him” (187e–188a). (All translations of Plato herein are based on Cooper 1961 and Fowler 1966.) See also *Protagoras* 331c–d.

⁸ In any moral performance, “I have to set things in motion—by a bodily intervention, by saying something, by signing something, by handing something over—and I must thereby crease the world” (Sokolowski 1985, p. 57).

⁹ I use the word “crisis” in a weaker sense than Dreyfus and Dreyfus appear to when they deny that “the development of the self requires crises”; such an idea, they say, “goes with an intellectualist view of theory change that may well be true for science but which has nothing to do with selves” (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1990, p. 263n47). But their example, of “women [who] are led into traps concerning success and need crises to get out of them,” illustrates a more “global” personal crisis than the localized, everyday experiences I am seeking to characterize by means of the Socratic elenchus.

lead us to comport ourselves differently from that point on by placing our understanding of some area of life into question and compelling us to revise our intuitions in order to maintain our integrity as “expert.” But in ethics, much more than in such activities as driving or chess where the effect need not be so personal,¹⁰ it is one’s *self* that is placed in question—momentarily “refuted” or denied, one might even say. Dreyfus and Dreyfus do some justice to this idea when they insist that ethical expertise only develops from a *self-critical* commitment to improving one’s conduct in light of past behavior, “the ability to remember with involvement the original situation while emotionally experiencing one’s success or failure” (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1990, p. 246). But involved self-criticism is part of learning to do *anything* well. Something beyond this must characterize ethics per se, for what is to be ethically improved is not just a skill but one’s “moral character,” the whole person—one’s “soul,” as Socrates might have said. It is an experience I believe Emmanuel Levinas has been particularly effective in describing phenomenologically.

While ethics depends on self-questioning to a degree unique among forms of expertise, nothing so serious as a “moral crisis” in the popular sense is necessary.¹¹ All that is required, in Levinas’s terms, is the “proximity” of the Other, the mere presence of the other person who “speaks” to me simply in her “approach.” Even before she says anything to me audibly, my neighbor *calls me into question* simply as another human being “living from” (*vivre de*) a worldview not my own (Levinas 1969, p. 110). The Other, while in one sense *in* my world, nevertheless remains radically *outside*, “exterior,” challenging my understanding of reality, always on the verge of disrupting my version of things, my working assumptions, and placing in doubt my freedom to respond to the world in the way I presently think best. Hence the first lesson the neighbor can “teach” me is that, in my ignorance of what is best for her, I am continually in her moral debt. As though with the *elenchus* in mind, Levinas calls the social milieu in which this occurs “conversation” (*discours*). Hence Socrates, I would argue, merely as one person addressing another and wholly in spite of any agenda he may have, cannot help but play the role of Other vis-à-vis his interlocutor, thereby teaching him, Platonic theories of knowledge or Socratic views of the self aside, what *every* Other teaches us by bringing us to the boundaries of what we experience as the comfortable and “same.” In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas explains what exactly he means by “teaching”:

The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is ... an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a *teaching* [*enseignement*]. Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me *more than I contain*. (Levinas 1969, p. 51, emphasis added)

Teaching signifies the whole infinity of exteriority. And the whole infinity of exteriority is not first produced, to then teach: *teaching is its very production*. The first teaching teaches this very height, tantamount to its exteriority, the ethical. (1969, p. 171, emphasis added)¹²

¹⁰ Arguably, when it *is* felt to be personal this happens because an extraneous ethical element is present: our pride is hurt, a vulnerability we had kept hidden from ourselves is exposed, or the situation reveals that we have an unconscious animosity towards others.

¹¹ In fact, the *elenchus* experience may not be an appropriate way to understand truly *major* crises which threaten one’s entire worldview.

¹² The fact that the “teaching” is not maieutic naturally signals a departure from Plato. In Levinas’s later works, the metaphor shifts from “height” or “distance” to “proximity,” but the basic idea remains the same: the Other is *other* because he radically challenges my self-understanding; he is always more than I can comprehend or “contain,” and the ethical challenge he represents comes to me as though from something absolute, transcending myself.

In other words, the “first teaching,” a teaching which *signifies* ethics,¹³ is nothing other than the neighbor-relation, insofar as I learn through it the infinitude of the Other, an infinitude expressed in the fact that my ethical responsibility seems to *increase* the more of it I take on (Levinas 1969, p. 244). I cannot learn this lesson from any teacher in the ordinary sense. It is only “produced” through *the very experience* of what Levinas calls the Other’s “exteriority.”

If this plausibly describes our relation to the other, then it would seem that a truly ethical response to the “current interpersonal situation” cannot help but be influenced by the fact that the Other calls my very *self* into question. Only by leaving myself open to self-questioning can my response to the other become appropriately *responsive*—that is, *responsive*. Thus, notwithstanding that Dreyfus and Dreyfus rightly emphasize the importance of staying “involved” and maintaining what Carol Gilligan calls a “care perspective” towards others (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1990, p. 253), Levinas’s work suggests that ethical expertise also entails a fundamental concern for what this involvement implies ethically for the agent—namely, an openness to gaining unexpected knowledge about *oneself*.

While Plato’s early dialogues often treat self-knowledge as an important philosophical theme, they are also literary works that can illustrate, through example, how people actually *acquire* such knowledge. From a Levinasian perspective, one acquires self-knowledge not so much by comprehending new facts about a “phenomenon” (the “self”) as by confronting a “disturbance” or “enigma” in the form of a moral “exigency”—in Euthyphro’s case, a conversation with Socrates—which then forces one to question one’s self-definition.¹⁴ The true ethical expert is the person willing to undergo this experience whenever circumstances in life happen to call for it—potentially at any moment, since one is always in the “presence” of the Other who calls one into question. Because the experience is “enigmatic” in the sense that, with the temporary failure of one’s moral intuitions, it effectively makes one a puzzle to oneself, it follows that it cannot be resolved by rule-following or definitional knowledge, but only by an adjustment that feels like a redefinition of *oneself*.

A phenomenological reading of the *Euthyphro* would therefore center on the elenchus, the *medium*, rather than on a *message*—an elusive definition of “piety” or an intellectualist theory of virtue. It would focus on how the dialogue itself illustrates the experience or “disturbance” which leads to virtue through self-questioning. Insofar as virtue is taken to be a matter of *self*-definition, a continual learning *process* and not a *possession* of qualities one might be able to define in general terms, the aporetic embarrassment with which many of the early dialogues end may have greater significance as an invitation to a personal ethical task than as a philosophical puzzle or failure. In its emphasis on a single dramatic action by one moral agent, the *Euthyphro* is exceptional as an example of how an individual is confronted by such a task. Hence the dialogue becomes less important as an attempt at defining a virtue (however appropriate, it so happens, that the virtue is piety) than as an illustration of how one learns to define *oneself* through making constructive use of a certain kind of experience. Because it is an account of that experience, showing how an

¹³ In Levinas’s terms, the “face” of the Other “signifies” my responsibility for her, a signifying beyond language. This is what Levinas means when he says that “the face speaks” (Levinas 1969, p. 66). Of course, for Levinas, our response to this signifying, whether we are conscious of it or not, is *continual*, since at every moment we are in the Other’s presence. What I am exploring here are the implications this has for the more intermittent “higher level” dilemmas we tend explicitly to think of as “moral.”

¹⁴ “The Other alone eludes thematization. . . . The welcoming of the Other is ipso facto the consciousness of my own injustice.... [T]he movement of thematization is inverted. But this inversion does not amount to ‘knowing oneself’ as a theme attended to by the Other, but rather in submitting oneself to an exigency, to a morality” (Levinas 1969, p. 86).

encounter with Socrates' "teaching" (*discours*) is "exteriority's very production," the dialogue *itself* is the "lesson."¹⁵

It is even possible to imagine a Socrates who anticipates the dialogue's aporetic outcome for something like this very reason—knowing that it is the only possible result that can teach his interlocutor the true ethical task. But while this would make it less likely that he was merely trying to put an expert on the spot, textual evidence for such a motive is lacking,¹⁶ and it makes Socrates too Levinasian: Socrates is not at all likely to have viewed the self as something defined primarily by its relation to the other. Hence we cannot in this way absolve Socrates from blame for initiating "the general movement towards calculative rationality in our culture" which Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus rightly claim "brings with it great dangers" (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 2004b). Still, there is no denying that Plato's literary character in the early dialogues is endowed with a rare gift for showing others how a lack of *self-knowledge* has its own great dangers. Clearly *this* Socrates has much to teach us about "moral maturity" even if, as some have claimed, he was a failure at teaching virtue directly.¹⁷ He need only be capable of inducing the elenchus experience in almost everyone he met, whether he consciously intended to or not, in order to be the most effective "teacher" of virtue one could wish to have. Such a talent would in itself go a long way toward explaining Socrates' reputation as a great moral teacher.

My purpose here is not to argue for a non-intellectualist "version" of Socrates, but to demonstrate how, whatever version one accepts, the elenchus can be viewed as modeling a characteristic of ordinary ethical expertise. Almost any reading of Socratic intellectualism ought to be compatible with such a goal, but the one I find most applicable to the notion of ethical expertise is Naomi Reshotko's. According to Reshotko, "scientific knowledge," in the "general and ancient sense" of "craft-like knowledge" involving "careful and methodical thinking about both the natural world and what lies beyond it" (Reshotko 2006, p. 5) is the knowledge Socrates equates with virtue. This includes all forms of practical or prudential know-how. Her essential point is that the knowledge Socrates equates with virtue is by no means specifically *moral*—Socrates, she argues, recognizes no such knowledge—but it is simply any knowledge that might help us determine the best course of action in any given moral dilemma. What this implies is that Socrates holds a *descriptive*, not a *prescriptive* moral theory; he does not tell us which actions are "right" so much as which methods for discovering them happen to *work best* as a matter of empirical fact:

Rather than citing universal moral principles from which we derive the prescription for action, Socrates has proposed that all human beings have a natural and objective goal toward which they are inevitably driven—their own happiness. Scientific appreciation of what it would mean to actualize this goal ... allows us to deliberate about our actions strictly on the basis of whether or not they will further us on this mission. This is the sole criterion that determines which actions and objects are either good or bad (2006, p. 190).

For Reshotko, the only unconditional goods are happiness (*eudaimonia* or "human flourishing") and knowledge; the only unconditional evils, misery and ignorance. All else

¹⁵ Similarly, Sayre 1995 proposes that many of the dialogues instruct us not so much in philosophical doctrines as in the *practice* of philosophy.

¹⁶ A Socrates who was interested in subjecting his interlocutors to the elenchus simply in order to reveal their personal ethical task would, for many commentators, be a non-intellectualist and therefore somewhat implausible Socrates.

¹⁷ Nehamas 1999 gives a useful discussion of this debate in the course of arguing that Socrates never claimed to be a teacher of virtue at all.

comes under the heading of the “neither-good-nor-bad.” Virtue consists in applying our knowledge to the task of turning the neither-good-nor-bad into the conditionally good—that is, into whatever brings us closer to the one “unconditional, self-generated good” of happiness (2006, p. 125). “To be as virtuous as possible is simply to accumulate as much knowledge as possible ... the same in kind as the knowledge required to perform any other task successfully” (2006, p. 14). Up to a point, this sounds like a description of Dreyfus-style ethical expertise. I would only add that to be truly ethical it must involve *self*-knowledge gained from a certain kind of self-refuting experience. But this is not a trivial addition.

On the whole, Reshotko’s Socrates is better equipped to illustrate ethical expertise than is Dreyfus’s, for all its resemblance to his. Hers is a Socrates more concerned, for example, with *context*: “Socrates often counsels his contemporaries to resist the urge to evaluate actions and objects in the absence of information about the context in which they are performed or used. ... Socrates saw this sort of abstract evaluation in the absence of contextual information as a sign of the worst kind of ignorance” (Reshotko 2006, p. 8). This could suggest that Socrates seeks definitions in order to educate his interlocutors on the difference between the sort of context-free “general knowledge” the sophists and other “experts” like Euthyphro claim to possess, on the one hand, and the more practical “scientific” (and self-) knowledge necessary for true ethical expertise, on the other. Alternatively, since “Socrates thinks that human virtue and human good are to be discovered empirically and that their relationship is a contingent one” (Reshotko 2006, pp. 6–7), Socrates might seek definitions in order simply to gain empirical knowledge about life. Thus if someone claimed to be an expert on piety, he would take this to mean that they claimed to know, better than most people, how piety is related to human flourishing. This would explain his personal interest in Euthyphro’s expertise. Reshotko does not discuss the *elenchus* or Socrates’ search for definitions, but later I suggest how she does give us good reason to believe that the virtues cannot be defined.

2 Euthyphro’s Lesson in Ethical Expertise

In the literature, there are almost as many versions of Euthyphro as there are of Socrates. Aside from Dreyfus’s, we have, for example, Euthyphro as a genuine, perhaps Orphic prophet who “sees further than the ordinary Athenian” (Edwards 2000, p. 213); Peter Geach’s “Mr. Right-Mind,” who, rather than give in to Socrates’ tricks, “was not to be led a-wandering from the straight path” (Geach 1972, p. 44); and, of course, numerous less flattering versions which see him as dogmatic, conceited, confused, or absurd. Here we can remain neutral on the “Euthyphro question,” as it might be called, since Euthyphro’s Socratic experience can prove instructive whatever he brings to the encounter by way of personal strengths or weaknesses.

The *Euthyphro* is the only one of Plato’s early dialogues, aside from the *Crito*, in which Socrates converses with just one other interlocutor who is, moreover, on the verge of committing a morally questionable act. It is therefore almost unique in illustrating how Socratic ethics might apply directly to a particular individual’s personal moral dilemma—even if Euthyphro never gives the slightest sign that he views his situation as a dilemma or that his decision cost him any sleep. Here the questionable act is Euthyphro’s prosecution of his father for the death, through neglect, of a hired laborer who had killed a household slave—by the standards of

the time, a highly unusual legal action on Euthyphro's part, whatever version of the man we accept.¹⁸ It is usually assumed that his motivation is to free himself of the religious pollution (*miasma*) his father's act has caused, but even could we appreciate so archaic a motive, we would still find Euthyphro's absolute, self-assured reliance on his expert knowledge deeply troubling—as Socrates, too, apparently finds it (4a–b, e).

Homicide fell under sacred law in ancient Athens,¹⁹ hence it is natural that “piety” or “holiness” would be the subject of conversation once Euthyphro informed Socrates of his legal suit upon meeting him outside the law court. Having expressed doubt that Euthyphro would initiate so serious a proceeding against his own father unless his knowledge of the holy were “very far advanced indeed” (4b)—a remark almost certainly meant ironically, but one which Euthyphro promptly accepts as a compliment—Socrates asks him for “the essential form of holiness, ... so that, with my eye on it, and using it as a standard, I can say that any action done by you or anybody else is holy if it resembles this ideal, or, if it does not, can deny that it is holy” (6d–e). Whatever the merit of Socrates' arguments against Euthyphro's subsequent definitions of “the holy”—first as “what I am now doing” (5d), then as “what the gods love” (6e), and finally as “what *all* the gods love” (9e), provoking Socrates' famous query, “Is a thing holy because the gods love it, or do the gods love it because it is holy?”—the ultimate effect on Euthyphro is little more than frustration, and in the so-called “aporetic interlude” (11b–e) he accuses Socrates of making their statements “run in circles.” While Euthyphro's irritation, from his own point of view, might conceivably be that of an expert asked impossibly to summarize his expertise, there is evidence later in the dialogue suggesting a deeper cause.²⁰

Socrates now resorts to giving Euthyphro hints, beginning with the suggestion (11e) that the holy might be a part of *justice*.²¹ The question now becomes, *what part* of justice? After a false start, Euthyphro proposes that it is the part having to do with offering the gods the *service* they are due (13d), much as a servant owes service to his master. But under further questioning, Euthyphro is unable to say just what the result of that service is supposed to be. He could easily have replied that divine ways are beyond human understanding, yet he chooses instead to break off this line of inquiry with a cryptic reference to the special nature of his own expertise, claiming that “it is not a light task to learn precisely how all these matters stand” (14b).

I submit that precisely here, at the point in the dialogue where the prospects for a definition seem most remote, we encounter the sort of knowledge leading to virtue—and perhaps, although it is not critical to my argument, Socrates' own view of piety as well, for somewhat mysteriously he intimates at 14b8–c6 that Euthyphro has just “slipped away” from giving him “the answer.” Following up on this hint, Mark McPherran has suggested that Socrates might have been expecting something like the following: “Piety is that part of justice that is a service of humans to gods, assisting the gods in their work [*ergon*], a work

¹⁸ “Scholars agree that Euthyphro would not have found it easy to persuade an Athenian jury. ... What would arouse revulsion in the jury ... is that Euthyphro has voluntarily engaged in the persecution of his father” (Edwards 2000, p. 216). See also Kidd 1990, pp. 213–221. Euthyphro is repudiating a widely respected tradition. In the sayings of Confucius, for example, we find: “... a father covers up for his son, a son covers up for his father, and there is integrity in what they do” (*Analects* 13/18).

¹⁹ The standard work on this subject appears to be MacDowell 1978.

²⁰ Some commentators have preferred to ascribe Euthyphro's annoyance to the inordinate lengths to which Socrates will go just to win an argument. My diagnosis of his frustration, however, would have validity even if so unscrupulous a Socrates actually cared very little about Euthyphro's moral well-being or “soul.”

²¹ Perhaps Socrates does this in order to introduce his own ideas, although this need not mean that Socrates considers piety to be only a *part* of justice, as we shall see.

that produces some good results” (McPherran 1996, p. 54).²² As McPherran notes, this “definition” is incomplete so long as we do not know the *ergon* of the gods. But Socrates not only disavowed any such knowledge himself, he often denied that it was humanly possible, and therefore at the foundation of the definition Socrates may have been looking for on McPherran’s reading, we find only an acknowledgment of human ignorance. While in Socrates’ day it was evidently unconventional to suggest that human beings assist the gods in their work,²³ the “definition” points to a more basic truth, one Euthyphro seems to miss on almost any reading of the dialogue: namely, that true piety demands the humble admission of one’s limits.

The dialogue gives us no reason to expect anything better; certainly no definition having greater *practical* utility lies anywhere remotely on the horizon. For suppose we assume, as Socrates evidently did, that the gods are good²⁴ and that the divine *ergon* includes the “virtuous happiness” of humanity. In that case, the definition implies that the human *practice* of piety encompasses the very same task to which Socrates, on virtually all accounts, devoted his life: that of making ourselves and others better and happier, notwithstanding that our efforts are inevitably provisional and always vulnerable to “refutation.”²⁵ Whatever Socrates’ view of the relation between virtue and knowledge, the “know-how” relevant to such a task appears at a minimum to include an ability to let oneself be “refuted”—very different from the specialized knowledge Euthyphro professes. Ethically valuable—that is, *human*—knowledge about matters having reference to piety, or any other virtue, is necessarily incomplete, so much so that what one “knows” is closer to being a self-negating and self-redefining *experience* (the experience, for example, of one’s ignorance) than a matter of content. To have confidence in such “knowledge”—in one’s “piety,” if that is what we should decide piety means—would therefore be an egregious misunderstanding of its true nature.

The broadness of this definition accords with what we know about Athenian “piety.” An unusually comprehensive virtue, it was quite different from anything we now associate with the word, involving one’s proper conduct in almost every sphere of life—loyalties and obligations not only to the gods but to parents, fellow citizens, civil authority, the dead, one’s city (McPherran 1996, p. 28n1). It had very little to do with our idea of a private, personal religious faith. By some accounts it was practically synonymous with “justice,” a sort of “all inclusive virtue,” simply “what is done,” and hence it has sometimes been interpreted as the foundation of *all* the virtues.²⁶ Thus the *Euthyphro* could very well teach us that the most important knowledge relevant to *any* virtue, once one has acquired ethical expertise, is the knowledge, or rather the *experience*, of one’s human limits—equivalently, in Socratic terms, one’s ignorance of the inscrutable *ergon* of the gods—generally held to be Socrates’ own understanding of wisdom (cf. *Apology* 23b). Such a lesson is easily compatible with Reshotko’s view of Socratic virtue. One could argue that while “scientific” knowledge is

²² See Vlastos 1991, pp. 174–76, for a similar proposal, and Howland 2011, p. 216.

²³ “[T]he notion that the gods have work to do, work in which human beings could assist them, is foreign to Greek religion” (Vlastos 1991, p. 175).

²⁴ At 15a, he declares: “No good that we possess but is given by them.” Cf. *Republic* 379b, a passage which Vlastos considers wholly characteristic of the Socrates of the earlier dialogues (Vlastos 1991, p. 163n27).

²⁵ This is very close to McPherran’s position, except that the role he assigns to the elenchus includes the more conventional one of helping us acquire true *intellectual* beliefs about the nature of the virtues. For a somewhat different argument leading to a conclusion similar to McPherran’s, see Parry 1994. See also Howland 2011, p. 192.

²⁶ Versenyi argues this in Versenyi 1982, pp. 1–7. It may also have been Plato’s view, as the *Protagoras* suggests.

indispensable to *acquiring* and *practicing* one's expertise, such knowledge would need to be supplemented in problem or "crisis" situations by a humble appreciation of one's vulnerability. Often only this kind of self-knowledge leads one to try the uncharacteristic perspective that finally solves the moral problem. This takes us beyond "scientific" expertise in Reshotko's sense, but still it does not presume the need for the "universal moral principles" usually held to be essential in such cases, general rules she argues are quite irrelevant to an understanding of Socratic ethics (Reshotko 2006, p. 190). Euthyphro might then be said to have missed the expected "definition" precisely because he lacks true "piety," in that he fails to see that "care of one's soul"—or what we might call "moral maturity"—consists not in knowing rules and definitions, much less esoterica about the gods, but in knowing that one is always in need of greater *self*-definition, a mundane form of knowledge indispensable for the practice of *any* of the virtues.²⁷

With Euthyphro's failure, the dialogue takes a detour—as though in deference to his self-image as expert—"from a consideration of the nature of pious *acts*, the dialogue's primary concern, to that of the *knowledge* pious *persons* would have" (McPherran 1996, p. 57).²⁸ This knowledge, Euthyphro now informs us, is "the science of asking from the gods and giving to them" (14d), a kind of commercial knowledge (*emporikè*, 14e) of how to do business with the gods. Here Euthyphro is so far from offering anything new that in fact he brings the dialogue full circle. His *first* proposed definition had been that "the holy is what I am now doing" (5d). Now he is saying in effect that piety is a certain *technical expertise* he of course possesses; he is again saying that the holy is what an expert like himself would do. Moreover, he seems ready to repeat the entire dialogue, claiming a few lines later that "the holy is that which the gods love" (15b), thus renewing the *second* proposed and rejected definition from 6e. Even the dialogue's circularity models an important feature of the elenchus experience, as we shall see.²⁹ But, for its two participants, each of whom is undoubtedly disappointed in the other, this is where the conversation ends.

It may seem that Euthyphro has gained very little from it, given that he shows no signs of having seen a need to reconsider either his course of action or his self-image. We should nonetheless resist dismissing him as simply a "hard case." What guarantee is there that he would have reacted differently even had he been less certain about piety, and readier to confess ignorance, than he apparently was?—especially when Socrates seems to have enlisted him in a definition-search almost guaranteed to come up empty-handed by the very nature of the virtue involved, if piety was indeed as vague a virtue as scholars have implied.³⁰ Whatever Socrates may have hoped from the affair, its only remaining benefit for Euthyphro might very well be *the experience itself*, to the extent that it leads him to question himself later. He is a "hard case" only if this never happens. To settle for such a conclusion is not simply to make the best of a disappointing outcome. The main point of the experience, for us as well as for Euthyphro, lies in appreciating how great a benefit this is.

²⁷ On this last point, see Parry 1994, p. 535.

²⁸ Many of the early dialogues make this shift from considering the character of moral *acts* to considering that of moral *persons*. See Vasilou 2008, pp. 143–144. In Euthyphro's case, the change in direction seems to have little effect on the outcome.

²⁹ Thus, Jacob Howland contrasts Socrates, a self-critical "circle thinker," with Euthyphro, who is an unquestioning "straight thinker" (Howland 2011, p. 162–63).

³⁰ As Vasilou observes, however, there is an important sense in which Euthyphro fails to see that his *lawsuit* is a "hard case," in that the issue is not injustice or impiety in general, but whether *his father's act* was unjust (Vasilou 2008, p. 154). Hence we cannot rule out the possibility that had Euthyphro been less certain about his own piety, he might have been quicker to appreciate that he had not faced the real dilemma: namely, how he could know that he was acting rightly *in this particular case*.

Once one has learned one's moral "basics"—a process admittedly involving cognition in important ways—"virtue" is not piety, justice, courage, or any other desirable personal "quality," much less a form of knowledge expressible in definitions or rules, so much as it is a general willingness to endure the experience of having our qualities subjected to doubt. For Socrates, according to Reshotko, the only knowledge relevant to "moral" issues is the practical "scientific" knowledge needed to determine the course of action most likely to lead to happiness (Reshotko 2006, p. 157). This knowledge is specific to the situation in which one finds oneself; no *general* knowledge applies, other than the "knowledge"—that is, the *experience*—of one's radical finitude, one's vulnerability to the challenge posed by every encounter with the Other.

Thus the elenchus experience might be classified as "an experience *in the strongest sense of the term*: a contact with a reality that does not fit into any a priori idea," a contact that places one "ever more in question" (Levinas 1998, pp. 59, 58, my emphasis). Here Levinas seems to mean *any* "a priori idea" at all, whether about oneself, the Other, or life in general. Notwithstanding that success in dealing with unfamiliar situations depends fundamentally on "gaining more information" and "staying involved," there is a sense in which the ultimate question posed by the Other is not one we are ever in a position to answer, no matter how much knowledge we possess and whatever its sources. For Levinas, it is a fact of human life that all "information gathering," however necessary, inevitably reduces the Other to the Same and hence cannot help but deny the Other's transcendence—subverting, to some degree, the very point of ethics. However important gaining empirical knowledge may be to resolving moral dilemmas, *this* single question, the basic question posed by the Other, calls for a different response altogether, one not requiring expertise in any ordinary sense of the word. I have tried to show that a Socratic dialogue can illustrate how one "responds" to it by accepting a kind of radical responsibility for one's neighbors—simply by remaining open to the elenchus experience. This may be the best "definition" of piety we can hope for: if anything, a "definition" of the *self* rather than of virtue. It is towards this goal of redefining one's self as fundamentally self-questioning that the elenchus, whether with Socrates' conscious intention or without it, was leading a reluctant Euthyphro.³¹

3 Defining the Virtues

In this final section, I return to the perennial question of why Socrates pursued definitions. Reshotko's Socrates is clearly less concerned with defining the virtues as general entities in themselves than with "how we might work with the way that the world is, in order to bring about our ultimate goal. We are virtuous if we are experts in this" (Reshotko 2006, p. 191). Going somewhat beyond Reshotko, I have argued that "virtue" is in fact the application of ordinary knowledge, cognitive and non-cognitive, to the task of achieving better *self*-definition. Virtue shows itself chiefly in the genuineness of our "ethical expertise" as we become more self-knowledgeable. This may go beyond Socrates as well, for it seems to imply that there is no ethical point to seeking definitions of the virtues.³² But we neither need, nor should want, to define courage, temperance, or justice, if any virtue's ethical substance lies in how one applies

³¹ It should be noted that the belief that self-questioning is fundamental is not incompatible with strong convictions about oneself such as those which Socrates displays in the *Apology*. The certainty that one is doing the right thing in a given situation is consistent with a knowledge that all (or almost all) of one's beliefs about oneself could be defeasible.

³² Although perhaps not beyond Reshotko's Socrates, if definitions constitute "moral" knowledge.

one's practical knowledge to whatever situation one is facing. "Courage" is simply applying one's knowledge appropriately in situations where one is in some personal danger; "temperance," in situations where one needs to exercise self-control; and "justice," its application insofar as one takes into account what one owes others. The perfectly virtuous person would simply be the fully aware person, the person on whom absolutely *nothing* would be lost (to paraphrase Henry James). Thus, "for Socrates, there was only one thing to know—everything" (Reshotko 2006, p. 158), and therefore, it would seem, only one virtue—the appreciation of how far one always falls short of such complete knowledge.

If there is a specifically "moral" knowledge, it can only be self-knowledge, but the latter is so far from being strictly cognitive that Kierkegaard, to take an exceptionally clear case, refused even to call it "knowledge": "Insofar as the ethical could be said to have a knowledge in itself, it is 'self-knowledge', but this is improperly regarded as a knowledge." Rather than acquiring it directly from others in terms of principles or rules, one learns it solely by "doing it oneself": "The rule for the communication of capability is: begin immediately to do it. If the learner says: I can't, the teacher answers: Nonsense, do it as well as you can. With that the instruction begins. Its end result is: to be able. But it is not knowledge which is communicated" (Kierkegaard 1967–78, I-653:30, 653:4). The instruction is *self*-instruction—not only because it is instruction *of* the "self" but also because one must do the "instructing" oneself, through *doing* that which *is* the "instruction."³³ The goal is not to reach a stage where one can begin to do some particular thing about which one has finally acquired a clear conceptual idea—one does not first need to "produce" a context-free cognitive understanding. The goal is rather the *experience* of trying to act so as to lend clarity to whatever moral problem one is faced with. This is almost always how difficult problems are solved anyway. As a byproduct, one acquires clarity about one's self as well—the "production," in Levinas's sense, of all the "moral knowledge" one needs.

From a practical standpoint, what "it" is that one must *do* in any given situation admittedly depends in part on one's imperfect cognitive understanding of whatever one is attempting—Kierkegaard is hardly claiming that cognition plays no role at all—but it depends much more on one's current *self*-understanding: in particular on the realization that, among other things, one lacks the experience that comes solely from giving "it" a try. One gives it a try precisely in order to learn what "it" *is*—and also what one is oneself.

Thus both Kierkegaard and Levinas would agree that self-knowledge is not "thematic"; it is not a result of turning one's attention to the "self." It results from the hermeneutic process of discovering, with the aid of what one has learned so far, how little one knows about either oneself or one's neighbor—how lacking in clarity, how inevitably unreliable and unpredictable one is, in the course of dealing with others. Self-knowledge is not a comprehension of the "self" yielding an account or definition of oneself in some particular respect; it is a deepening realization of how ill-defined one is in *all* respects, of how much *room* there always remains for "virtue"—that is, for self-refutation and self-redefinition. What one needs most of all is the desire to keep the process going. Hence the seemingly pointless circularity of Plato's *Euthyphro* is deceptive, since Socrates almost hints that he would have been willing to go over the same ground repeatedly (15c) had Euthyphro shown any desire to know himself better.³⁴

³³ Versenyi makes a similar point about self-knowledge (Versenyi 1982, p. 92).

³⁴ Reshotko offers an original reading of Socratic self-knowledge by arguing, against the popular view, that even the knowledge we think we have about our own desires and actions is aporetic (Reshotko 2006, pp. 91, 171–172). Nothing is so immediately obvious that it cannot initiate self-doubt: "The way things seem to us is not, somehow, pure and pre-theoretical. ... We must embrace *aporia*. ... [O]ur realization that we know nothing is the first step to moving in a positive direction" (2006, p. 90).

On this view, the learner is *not* allowed to say that he cannot practice piety until he first learns what piety is. While precisely such knowledge is usually held to have been Socrates' principal aim, the actual course of the *Euthyphro* and other aporetic dialogues suggests that in practice the Socratic elenchus results in nothing more than the superficially unproductive experience of "self-refutation." But perhaps we ought to consider this to be more than enough. Self-refutation is sufficient all on its own to bring the person who experiences it closer to whatever we should want to call virtue.³⁵

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