

Philosophy 25A

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Coextensiveness and Explanation: An Analysis of Socrates' Argument in *Euthyphro*

In Plato's *Euthyphro*, Socrates investigates the nature of piety and, in doing so, illuminates the division between coextensive and explanatory definitions. His argument focuses on the connection between what is god-loved and what is pious, and he continually returns to the fact that Euthyphro has not given a sufficient definition of what piety *is*. Socrates claims that Euthyphro has instead given him an affect or quality of piety and that this is distinctly different from piety's nature. Socrates believes that knowing only a quality of piety is not enough for Euthyphro to justify prosecuting his father for murder, and that Euthyphro must know piety's nature to uphold his argument in court.

In this essay, I will attempt to explain what Socrates means when he claims that Euthyphro has only provided "an affect or quality" of piety, and how this is distinctly different from providing insight into piety's form (*Euthyphro* 11b). In doing so, I will use Socrates and Euthyphro's discussion on the difference between the pious and the god-loved to evaluate the distinction between a coextensive and explanatory definition. I will conclude with the argument that in Euthyphro's case, understanding the nature of piety is unnecessary as long as he knows that prosecuting his father is god-loved and that the god-loved is coextensive with what is pious.

The debate over piety's nature begins with Euthyphro's acceptance of Socrates' statement: "all impious actions are impious and all pious actions pious through one form" (*Euthyphro* 6e). Socrates and Euthyphro define this form as "what all the gods love" (*Euthyphro* 9e). They then distinguish two statements that they consider true: (1) the gods love the pious

because it is pious, and (2) the god-loved is god-loved because the gods love it. Taking the pre-established definition of piety as “what all the gods love” (Euthyphro 9e), Socrates applies it to statement 2. If the pious was the same as the god-loved, then substituting “pious” for “god-loved” would produce a true statement. Instead, the substitution yields a statement Euthyphro considers false: the pious is pious because the gods love it. For his definition of piety – that which is loved by all the gods – to be true, Euthyphro would have to give up his belief that the gods love piety because it is pious. By substituting “pious” for “god-loved” Socrates shows that Euthyphro’s two explanatory definitions for piety and god-loved don’t agree. Since the pious and the god-loved are pious and god-loved for different reasons, Euthyphro has only given an affect of piety when he says that it is “what all the gods love” (Euthyphro 9e).

The importance of Socrates’ substitution method lies in the use of explanatory statements to define piety. Socrates shows that what makes piety pious is different than what makes the god-loved loved by the gods. This proves that the pious and the god-loved are not the same but coextensive. Although the pious has the quality of being god-loved, and the god-loved has the quality of being pious, being god-loved doesn’t explain why something is pious. Another example of coextensiveness can be found in defining the difference between a kidney and a heart. These two organs are coextensive: everything that has a heart has a kidney, and everything that has a kidney has a heart. However, something doesn’t have a heart because it has a kidney. While Socrates never argues that the pious and the god-loved aren’t coextensive, he is not looking for all the instances in which something is pious *and* god-loved. Instead, Socrates wants to know what feature *makes* something pious. For Euthyphro’s definition of piety as what all the gods love to be correct, being god-loved would have to be that feature.

According to Socrates, for X and Z to be defined as the same in nature, wherever X exists Z must also exist (coextensive definition) *and* being X must explain why something is Z

(explanatory definition). Although Euthyphro satisfies the coextensive requirement of a Socratic definition, he doesn't agree that piety is pious because the gods love it, instead basing why the gods love piety on an objective principle of piety.

For Euthyphro's third definition to be truly explanatory, Euthyphro would have to agree that the pious is pious because the gods love it. Instead of basing why the gods love piety on an objective element of piety, Euthyphro could have relied on the active-explains-passive principle to explain piety's nature. He could have used the fact that "the gods consider different things to be just, beautiful, ugly, good, and bad" (Euthyphro 7e) to argue that piety is like being tasty: its nature is subject to the taste buds of the gods. For Socrates, this would be an acceptable explanatory definition of the nature of piety. Although he wouldn't agree, Socrates would not be able to make the claim that Euthyphro has only given him an affect or quality of piety. However, Euthyphro accepts that the gods love piety because it is pious. Therefore, "[the god-loved] is such as to be loved because it is being loved, [while the pious] is being loved because it is such as to be loved" (Euthyphro 11b). Since Euthyphro's explanatory definitions of piety and god-loved don't align (as shown through substitution), the god-loved and the pious are not the same in nature. Euthyphro has therefore given Socrates only an affect or quality of piety.

Although Euthyphro has not given Socrates a truly explanatory definition of the nature of piety, this does not mean that Euthyphro needs an explanatory definition of piety to prosecute his father. Although it would provide a more stable support structure for his argument, if Euthyphro knows that the pious and the god-loved are coextensive and that prosecuting his father is god-loved, then Euthyphro doesn't need further justification. In addition, by the end of the text Socrates and Euthyphro are unable to find piety's objective nature, and return to the conclusion that "what is dear to the gods is the pious" (Euthyphro 15e). Therefore, it is only necessary for Euthyphro to understand the properties of piety and their coextensiveness with his decision to

prosecute his father.

A Socratic defendant might argue that if an action were unconventional to the generally assumed properties of piety, one would need to know what makes it pious to defend the action. In the case of Euthyphro, this proves to be a valid point. Prosecuting one's father is definitely an unconventional action. In hearing Euthyphro's plan, Socrates proclaims, "Good heavens! Certainly Euthyphro, most men would not know how they could do this and be right" (Euthyphro 4b). However, while understanding what makes pious actions pious would be especially helpful, it is still unnecessary. As long as Euthyphro knows that the pious and the god-loved are coextensive – to which Socrates never disagrees – and that prosecuting his father is god-loved, then knowing the explanatory nature of piety is only superfluous to his case.

In conclusion, when Socrates claims that Euthyphro has only given him an affect or quality of piety, Socrates means that an explanatory statement of piety's nature is required *in addition* to piety's coextensiveness with the god-loved. Since Euthyphro's explanatory definitions of piety and god-loved don't allow for substitution, the god-loved and the pious are not the same in nature, and Euthyphro has only given Socrates an affect or quality of piety. However, since Euthyphro knows that prosecuting his father is god-loved, and that the god-loved and the pious are coextensive, deeper knowledge of what makes things pious is unnecessary.

Works Cited

Plato. *Euthyphro*. Trans. G. M. A. Grube. 2002. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.