“What Should Euthyphro Do?”

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Introduction

The *Euthyphro* begins before the court of the King Archon, the site of preliminary hearings for prosecutions of piety.¹ Socrates is present on behalf of an indictment against him for corrupting the young and of not believing in the gods of whom the city believes, but in other new spiritual things.² [Apology 24b8-c1; Grube trans.]

Famously, Plato depicts Socrates’ defense against these charges (and others) in his *Apology*. Euthyphro is present on behalf of a different case and on the other side. He is pursuing a prosecution, the details of which Plato thinks are sufficiently important to recount. Euthyphro is prosecuting his aged father for killing (or letting die) his dependent (πελατης) who had killed one of their household slaves (τον οικτον) in ‘a drunken rage’. Euthyphro explains that his father had had the dependent bound and thrown into a ditch. His father then sent off to the priest (εξηγητου) in Athens to find out what ought to be done. In the meantime the dependent, predictably, died.

This is the offense for which Euthyphro is pursuing a prosecution. As Euthyphro relates, his father and other relatives are angry at him, for they think “it is impious for a son to prosecute his father for murder” (ανοσιον γαρ ειναι το υνον πατρι φονον επεξεταναι; 4d?; Grube trans.). Socrates challenges Euthyphro to teach him the nature of piety, since he asserts that Euthyphro would never have pursued such a prosecution unless he thought that he knew what piety was (4e4-8; repeated at the end of dialogue at 15c11-d8). When Euthyphro agrees, the *Euthyphro*, as we know it, with Socrates’ pursuit of answers to his ‘What is piety?’ question, is off and running. Of course, by the end of the dialogue, whether Euthyphro recognizes it or not, Socrates and Plato’s readers are aware that Euthyphro lacks the knowledge of piety he agreed he had at the

¹See (Adam 1902:29), (Burnet 1924:2–3), and (Weiss 1986:438 n 2).
²See also *Euthyphro* 2c2-8.
beginning. Diogenes Laertius tells us that in this way Socrates turned Euthyphro away (ἀπήγαγε) from the prosecution.

One never knows what to make of these reports from Diogenes. But for the purposes of this essay, we can grant the quasi-historical claim that Euthyphro dropped his prosecution. Even so, one might wonder whether in doing so Euthyphro is engaging in a form of practical reasoning that Socrates would endorse. Diogenes appears to think that he is and Mark McPherran, for one, agrees. As McPherran puts it

..., it seems most dramatically effective on Plato's part to have us think that Euthyphro's sudden departure at the end of the dialogue occurs before the court convenes, so that he thereby forfeits his ill-conceived suit (as later tradition had it; DL 2 29). Socrates’ tactics thus benefit Euthyphro, his father, and his relatives by dissuading Euthyphro from pursuing a potentially damaging course of action. (McPherran 2002, 107)

If McPherran and Diogenes are right, then, the Crito is not the only dialogue in which Socrates confronts “a problem of practical reason: ought he, or ought he not, to take a certain action” Socrates and Euthyphro confront the question whether Euthyphro ought or ought not prosecute his father, and according to McPherran and others, at least part of the point of Socrates’ dialogue with Euthyphro is to turn him away from prosecuting his father. Consequently, if McPherran and Diogenes are right, we might expect that the Euthyphro will provide evidence for the sort of principle or theory of practical reasoning on the basis of which Socrates thinks that Euthyphro, Socrates himself, or anyone else should decide to act.

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3Henceforth, I will not distinguish between what Socrates, i.e. the character in the so-called elenctic dialogues, thinks and what Plato thinks or wants his readers to think, although I am alive to the possibility that they diverge.
4(Burnet 1924:4) takes the prosecution and the conversation to be reasonably historically accurate.
5(Beversluis 2000:176 & 184) points out that the text of the Euthyphro provides no evidence for the truth of Diogenes’ report and takes Euthyphro to be unaffected by his encounter with Socrates. Presumably Beversluis thinks, then, that Euthyphro pursues his prosecution.
6Diogenes offers the Euthyphro example in a list of individuals whom Socrates was able to exhort and dissuade from misguided actions.
7Others who agree with McPherran ...
8See (Lane 1998:313). In fairness to Lane, she may mean that the Crito is the only dialogue in which Socrates confronts a problem of practical reason. It is Euthyphro who is confronting the problem in the Euthyphro. If I understand (Brickhouse and Smith 1990:176–177) correctly, they take Socrates to use his elenchus in practical reasoning. I am skeptical whether Socrates actually uses the elenchos for this purpose (see (Benson 2000:ch. 2), but even if he does the Crito would be the only place we see him doing so. The results of his moral deliberation are frequently described and sometimes depicted, but the deliberation itself is only depicted in the Crito. It is another matter whether that depiction is a depiction of the elenchos or what method of deliberation Socrates employs off camera (so to speak).
In what follows, I maintain that no such principle or theory is to be found. Rather, lacking the relevant expertise himself, Socrates has no substantive advice to offer Euthyphro now that Euthyphro too recognizes (or at least should recognize) his lack of expertise. Socrates neither recommends nor advises Euthyphro to prosecute nor not to prosecute. He simply refrains from that sort of substantive, specific, practical advice. But I do not suppose that Socrates offers no advice at all. We know from his defense speech in the Apology that he takes himself to frequently offer advice; (see, for example, Apology 30b and 31c). Among other things, he advises those he encounters to cease caring “for [their] body or [their] wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of [their] soul.” Or as he asks in the Crito, “ought we in no way to do wrong intentionally, or should we do wrong in some ways but not in others? Or, ..., is it never right or honorable to do wrong? (Οὐ δεν τρόπον ἔχουσα ἄδειατον εἶναι, ἢ τινὸς ἄδειατον τρόπον τινὶ δὲ ὅι, ἢ ὑστατὸς τὸ γε ἄδειατον ὑπὲρ ἁγαθὸν ὑπὲρ καλὸν, ...).” [Crito 49a-b. Change to Grube trans.] But to get from this general advice - roughly to act virtuously - to the more specific advice to drop his prosecution, Euthyphro needs more. He needs to be given reason to think that dropping his prosecution is the virtuous (or more specifically the pious) thing to do. Or, if not that, then he needs an alternative principle of deliberation. And it is just this that I maintain Euthyphro is not given. All Euthyphro is offered in the Euthyphro or anywhere else in the elenctic dialogues is the general advise to act virtuously. But from that general advise a reason for dropping his prosecution is not forthcoming. Or at least, so I will maintain.

Socrates’ General Theory of Practical Reasoning

Let me begin with a very rough sketch of Socrates’ general theory of practical reasoning. I take it to consist of three parts - a principle of deliberation, a value theory, and an epistemic endorsement.

First, the principle of deliberation. According to Socrates, considerations of virtue outweigh or trump any other considerations in deciding what to do. Something like this is what

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9I assume in this essay that Socrates’ professions of ignorance are sincere and rather sweeping. See (Benson 2000:??) for a defense of this assumption. Of course, not everyone would accept this assumption.
Vlastos famously called the sovereignty of virtue, Socrates’ “supreme principle of practical choice”\(^{10}\) and, more recently, Hatzistavrou describes as a ‘principle of pragmatic deliberation’:

In practical deliberations (that is, in deliberations about what one should do, \textit{all things considered}), considerations about the [virtue] of an action should pre-empt considerations about [anything else]; (Hatzistavrou 2005:100–101)

This is apparently what Socrates has in mind in receiving a positive answer to the following questions in the \textit{Crito}:

Do we say that one must never in any way do wrong willingly, or must one do wrong in one way and not in another? Is to do wrong never good or admirable ...? (Οὐδὲν τρόπῳ φαμέν ἑκόντας ἀδικητέον εἶναι, ἤ τινι μὲν ἀδικητέον τρόπῳ τινὶ δὲ οὐ; ἢ οὐδαμῶς τὸ γε ἀδικεῖν οὔτε ἀγαθὸν οὔτε καλὸν, ...) \([\text{Crito } 49a-b. \text{ Grube trans.}]^{11}\)

So, according to the principle of deliberation, when at the end of the \textit{Euthyphro} Euthyphro deliberates concerning whether he should pursue his prosecution or abandon it, he must consider - primarily - the piety, or more generally, the virtue, of the two courses of action open to him.\(^{12}\)

Second, the principle of deliberation is grounded in something like a value theory. According to this theory, the agent’s happiness or \textit{eudaimonia} is (or should be) the object of the agent’s actions; the agent’s happiness or \textit{eudaimonia} consists in (at least primarily) a healthy or virtuous soul; and virtuous actions benefit the agent’s soul and vicious actions harm the agent’s soul. Again, something like this theory is what Vlastos calls the sufficiency of virtue thesis, according to which a virtuous soul suffices for one’s happiness, while a vicious soul suffices for unhappiness, even though the possession of other goods might increase the happiness of a virtuous soul or the decrease the unhappiness of a vicious soul. But for the purposes of this essay I mean the value theory to be compatible with the identity thesis, according to which virtue is

\(^{10}\)(Vlastos 1985, 6).

\(^{11}\)See also, for example, \textit{Crito} 48c6-d7, and \textit{Apology} 28b5-9 \([\text{CHECK Laches } 194d, \text{ Protagoras } 361b, \text{ Gorgias } 460b, 479b-e, 507a-513c \& (\text{Brickhouse and Smith } 1994:\text{ch }2.1.6) \text{ and, (McPherran } 1996:180 \text{ n }12)]\) and, for example (Lane 1998:318–320), (Harte 1999:121–122), et al.

\(^{12}\)What else, if anything, Euthyphro should consider should those two actions prove to be equivalent or otherwise indifferent with respect to virtue need not detain us, since the problem Euthyphro faces at the end of the \textit{Euthyphro} has already been joined. As a result we do not need for our present purposes to enter the debate whether considerations of virtue are the only considerations, or merely the over-riding considerations involved is practical deliberations. All agree that considerations of virtue are at least over-riding, and so Euthyphro must first consider the virtue of prosecuting or not.
identical with happiness, and even with the instrumentalist thesis, according to which virtue is instrumentally necessary and sufficient for happiness. Deciding among these theses\textsuperscript{13} is essential for a complete account of Socrates’ theory of practical deliberation, and indeed, where a great deal of scholarly attention has been focused, but it is not necessary for our present purposes. Rather, to address the question what Euthyphro should do at the end of the dialogue it is enough to know that considerations of the virtue or vice of the actions available to Euthyphro trump any other consideration and that this is so because his happiness is the ultimate object of his actions and that his happiness in some way consists in the health of his soul which is fostered by the performance of virtuous actions and the avoidance of vicious ones. That this is so is indicated, for example, in the \textit{Crito} as follows:

Socrates: And is life worth living for us with that part of us corrupted that unjust action harms and just action benefits? Or do we think that part of us, whatever it is, that is concerned with justice and injustice, is inferior to the body?  
Crito: Not at all.  
Socrates: It is more valuable?  
Crito: Much more.

...  
Socrates: And, my admirable friend, that argument that we have gone through remains, I think, as before. Examine the following statement in turn as to whether it stays the same or not, that the most important thing is not life, but the good life.  
Crito: It stays the same.  
Socrates: And the good life, the beautiful life, and the just life are the same; does that still hold, or not?  
Crito: It does hold. (\textit{ΣΩ. Α} ἄλλα μετ’ ἐκεῖνον ἀρ’ ἡμῖν βιωτόν διεφθαρμένου, ὡ τό ἀδικὸν μὲν λοβάται, τὸ δὲ δίκαιον ὄνησιν; ἡ φαυλότερον ἤγομεθα εἶναι τοῦ σώματος ἐκεῖνο, ὡτ’ ἐστὶ τῶν ἡμετέρων, περὶ δ’ ἣ τε ἁδίκια καὶ ἡ δικαιοσύνη ἐστίν; \textit{ΚΡ. Οὐδ’}. \textit{ΣΩ. ἄλλα} τιμῶτερον; \textit{ΚΡ. Πολυ}; \textit{ΣΩ. ἄλλ’}, ὡ θεωρίασε, οὕτως τε ὁ λόγος ὃν διεληλύθαμεν ἐμοὶ ἐκεῖ ἐπὶ ὁμοίως εἶναι καὶ πρότερον· καὶ τὸν δὲ αὐτό σκόπει εἰ ἐπὶ μένει ἡμῖν ἢ οὕ, ὡτ’ οὐ τὸ γίνει περὶ πλεῖστου ποιητέον ἄλλα τὸ εὐ γίνειν. \textit{ΚΡ. ἄλλα} μένει. \textit{ΣΩ.} Τὸ δὲ εὖ καὶ καλὸς καὶ δίκαιος ὁτι ταύτῳ ἐστίν, μένει ἡ οὐ μένει; \textit{ΚΡ. Μένει.}) [\textit{Crito} 47e6-48b10; Grube trans.\textsuperscript{14}]

\textsuperscript{13}Other issues require working out as well. For example, there is a question whether the agent’s happiness is or should be the object of the agent’s actions; see, for example, (Bobonich 2011)’s distinction between psychological and rational eudaemonism. Again, one would like to know more precisely what the relationship is between virtuous and/or vicious souls and virtuous and/or vicious actions; see, for example, (Brickhouse and Smith 1994). And this latter issue is related to whether one takes the connection between virtue (and/or virtuous actions) and the health of the soul to be definitional or stipulative (see (Penner 2011)) or descriptive. Throughout I will be taking virtuous actions to be those actions which benefit the soul and vicious actions to be those actions which harm the soul, whether Socrates intends this to be a stipulative or descriptive claim.

\textsuperscript{14}See also, for example, \textit{Apology} 30a2-b4.
Finally, Socrates appears committed to the view that knowledge of the nature of good and bad (including knowledge of the nature of virtue and the individual virtues, all of which may amount to the same thing - henceforth simply ‘knowledge of the nature of the good’) is somehow relevant to acting virtuously or performing virtuous actions. This component of Socrates’ general theory of practical reasoning corresponds roughly to what has come to be known as Socratic intellectualism according to which knowledge (of the good) is necessary and sufficient for virtue. Once again, however, the details of Socratic intellectualism are controversial.\(^\text{15}\)

On one, perhaps natural, interpretation of Socratic intellectualism the question of what Euthyphro should do in light of what we have called the principle of deliberation looks to be a non-starter. According to this interpretation of Socratic intellectualism, knowledge (of the good) is necessary and sufficient for virtuous action. Given Euthyphro’s (and Socrates’ for that matter) lack of knowledge (of the good),\(^\text{16}\) neither action available to Euthyphro (or Socrates) - neither prosecuting or not prosecuting - will be virtuous, and so beneficial to his soul. Consequently, Socrates’ principle of deliberation offers Euthyphro no guidance. There simply is no virtuous action available to Euthyphro to choose which trumps other considerations. Socrates must have some other principle of deliberation in mind if he thinks Euthyphro should choose to not prosecute. Of course, an alternative response would be to deny what I labelled the natural interpretation of Socratic intellectualism. Instead, knowledge (of the good) is necessary and sufficient for a virtuous soul, not for virtuous activity. Thus, Euthyphro’s (and Socrates’) ignorance rules out their possessing a virtuous soul,\(^\text{17}\) but not their ability to perform virtuous activities.\(^\text{18}\) Consequently, Socrates’ principle of deliberation remains in effect. Indeed, by

\(^{15}\)Perhaps most famously, see the debate between (Penner 1973) and (Vlastos 1981) concerning whether knowledge or wisdom is identical to or necessary and sufficient for the other virtues.

\(^{16}\)We need some sort of argument that lacking knowledge of piety, Socrates and Euthyphro lack knowledge of good and bad. But such an argument should not be too difficult to find; consider, for example, the argument at the end of the *Laches* that knowledge of things to be feared and dared (presumably knowledge of which actions are pious and which are not given the the first and second principles) entails knowledge of good and bad, and so courage (understood as knowledge of things to be feared and dared) is not a part of virtue but the whole of virtue.

\(^{17}\)And so rules out their possessing the primary contributor to their happiness.

\(^{18}\)Although it may rule out their ability to perform virtuous activities virtuously. On these issues see, for example, (Brickhouse and Smith 2000:??).
choosing virtuous activities and avoiding vicious ones one acts in ways conducive to virtue or health in the soul (that is, benefit the soul) which is the primary contributor to the object of all of one’s actions - happiness. Nevertheless, Euthyphro’s (and Socrates’) ignorance (of piety or the good) does hamper the employment of Socrates’ principle of deliberation. Given Socrates’ commitment to what has been called the priority of definitional knowledge, Euthyphro (and Socrates) fail to know whether prosecuting is pious or not. Consequently, Euthyphro fails to know which of the actions available to him has the property of being virtuous - the property that is supposed to trump all other considerations in deciding what to do. Indeed, it is Euthyphro’s ignorance that makes the question what Euthyphro should do so salient. Socrates’ general theory of practical reasoning is fairly straightforward (although the details remain controversial) for the one with knowledge (of the good). When deciding what to do, do what ones knows to be the virtuous thing. Other features of the situation may come into to play, but virtue trumps them all. In doing the virtuous thing, one promotes the health and/or virtue of one’s soul which is the primary contributor to one’s happiness the object of all of one’s activities. But how does this general theory help one who lacks knowledge (of the good and so virtue)? On one interpretation of the epistemic theory, such an ignorant agent may not even have available an action with the relevant deliberative feature, while on any other interpretation, such an agent will be lacking the knowledge critical to the successful employment of the recommended principle of deliberation. How, if at all then, does this general theory of practical reasoning help those who - like Euthyphro, Socrates, and the rest of us - lack the knowledge that accounts for a virtuous or healthy soul that is the primary contributor to happiness decide what to do?

**Alternative Principles of Deliberations**

Let us turn now to the end of the *Euthyphro*. Here is how McPherran explains the decision not to prosecute

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19 For a defense of Socrates’ commitment to this view see (Benson 1990). But even those who would deny Socrates’ commitment to the priority of definitional knowledge would concede that Euthyphro fails to know whether prosecuting his father is pious or not. For a fairly recent discussion of the state of the debate see (Benson forthcoming).

20 Indeed, one may not be able to avoid choosing the virtuous thing. Consider Socrates’ denial of *akrasia*. 

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... Socrates also seems to hold the view that coming to a general conceptual understanding of piety is advisable, since without grasping and being able to use as a moral yardstick the definition of the one *eidos/idea* by which all pious things are pious (6d9-e7) one ought not to attempt actions whose performance poses a significant danger of impiety (and so injustice and harm) unless one has secure, countervailing reasons (4e4-8; 15d4-16a4); ... (McPherran 2002, 107 n 2)

The idea here seems to be clear enough, given the general theory we have been considering. Lacking knowledge of the nature of piety as Euthyphro does, he should not choose an action that may be impious because it risks harming his soul and so diminishing his happiness. Prosecuting his father for murder may be impious, as Euthyphro’s father and relatives (and perhaps Socrates) think. And if they are right, then, by prosecuting his father Euthyphro will harm his soul. Consequently, Euthyphro should choose not to prosecute.

But wait a minute. Euthyphro might be right that not prosecuting his father would be impious (or at least unjust). It is true that Euthyphro does not explicitly say that not prosecuting would be impious [yes he does see 5d8-e2]. But he does say that he (and perhaps his relatives) will suffer a pollution if he does not prosecute (does not bring his father to justice), and that looks (psychically) harmful.21 So, if Euthyphro is right and not prosecuting is impious, then choosing not to prosecute will harm his soul. If the problem is that Euthyphro lacks the knowledge of the nature of piety, and so does not know whether prosecuting his father is pious, he also does not know that not prosecuting his father is pious either. Whatever he does, he risks harming his soul by mistaking the pious action for the impious one. Lacking knowledge of the nature of piety, he does not know which of the actions available to him will harm his soul. So why should he choose to drop the prosecution rather than pursue it?

Perhaps I am misdescribing Euthyphro’s position. It is not that Euthyphro has to choose between prosecuting or not prosecuting and Socrates is advising him to choose not to prosecute. Rather, Euthyphro can somehow simply not choose. He can walk away from this business of prosecuting his father for murder, and that is what Socrates is recommending. By walking away

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21(Adam 1902:48–49) points out that Euthyphro’s fear of pollution is self-regarding. But it is difficult to see how Socrates fear of impiety and so harming one’s soul is not also self-regarding. See (McPherran 2002:101–111 n 10) for the view that Euthyphro thinks that his prosecution of his father is pious.
he manages to avoid acting piously or impiously and so avoids the possibility of harming his soul. (Of course, he may miss out on an opportunity to benefit his soul; but perhaps that is the best that can be hoped for given Euthyphro’s lack of knowledge.) Moreover, one might think that Socrates\textsuperscript{22} must have been aware of such a way of avoiding vicious behavior in light of the details associated with Euthyphro’s prosecution. Euthyphro and his relatives are portrayed as disagreeing, in part, concerning this very point. Euthyphro’s relatives think that his father should not be prosecuted, again in part, because he did not actually choose to kill the dependent. The death of the dependent was an unintended consequence of his decision not to decide what to do with him and to send off for a decision from the priest (ἐξηγητοῦ). As a result, Euthyphro’s father’s action failed to be impious (or otherwise vicious). Euthyphro, however, thinks that whether his father literally chose to kill the dependent or not is irrelevant when it comes to the impiety and pollution associated with fraternizing with a killer and not bringing him or her to justice. So, the option of not deciding or walking away appears to be an option that Socrates is (or should be) aware of,\textsuperscript{23} and he may be siding with Euthyphro’s relatives here in recommending that by not deciding or by walking away Euthyphro can avoid impiety and the potential harm to his soul. Consequently, we might imagine that Socrates is endorsing something like the following alternative principle of deliberation:

When one lacks the knowledge of which of the actions available to one are virtuous or vicious and so which actions will benefit and which actions will harm one’s soul, avoid deciding or avoid action.\textsuperscript{24}

It is Socrates’ commitment to some such principle that accounts for his advice to drop the prosecution at the end of the \textit{Euthyphro}.

\textsuperscript{22}Or at least Plato. See n. above.
\textsuperscript{23}See also \textit{Apology} 31d2-6 where Socrates describes his \textit{daimonion} as always stopping him from something he was about to do, and never encouraging him to do anything (αἰεὶ ἀποτρέπει μη τὸ τοῦτο ὅ ἂν μέλλει πράττειν, προτρέπει δὲ οὕτως).
\textsuperscript{24}Something like this is what endorsed in (Benson 2000:245–246). Here I acknowledge the error of my ways. (I should have been persuaded by the comments of Brickhouse and Smith concerning my ‘passivist’ account; cf. (Benson 2000:246–247 n 88).) The \textit{Euthydemus} passage (281b6-c3) should be understood as Socrates’ endorsement of preferring not to have the opportunity to decide (cf. also \textit{Gorgias} 469c1-2), not not to thinking one can decide not to act.
I confess that I am rather skeptical about the philosophical plausibility of the option of not deciding or inaction, especially in the circumstances in which Euthyphro finds himself. But fortunately, I do not have to defend my skepticism here. Whether or not the principle is philosophically plausible, Socrates does not endorse this principle for his own behavior. Socrates, who famously professes to lack knowledge not only of what piety is, but also of what courage is, of what temperance is, of what virtue is, indeed of what any of the greatest things are, does not seek to refrain from making decisions or engaging in action. His behavior on the battlefield at Potidaea, Amphipolis, or Delium hardly looks like refraining from decision or action, given his lack of knowledge of the nature of courage, nor does his commitment to continued philosophizing should the jury hypothetically agree to acquit him of the charge of impiety. Again, Socrates can hardly be thought to be not deciding whether to escape from jail in the Crito. He explicitly asserts that he must consider whether in escaping he would be acting justly or unjustly and act accordingly. He, evidently, chose on the side of the law and justice (μετὰ τοῦ νόμου καὶ τοῦ δικαίου) when voting against the Assembly’s desire to try the ten generals who failed to rescue the survivors of the battle of Arginusae in 406 B.C.E. (Apology 32b-c). Even when he goes home rather than fetching Leon when ordered by the Thirty, an action which has never seemed to me to be one Socrates’ finest moments, he does not describe himself as not deciding. Rather he decides against wrongdoing (Apology 32c-e). So if he is to decide to walk away from his prosecution, it must be because he has decided that prosecuting is impious (or otherwise vicious).

Even if one thinks that these cases can somehow be accounted for, surely it will not always be the case that one can avoid deciding or choose inaction. Consider the members of jury about to be convened for the case Meletus is bringing against Socrates. Their ignorance of the nature of justice must be presumed. Yet they cannot just decline to decide until they acquire the

25See n. ??? above.
26See Apology 28e and Laches 181a-b.
27See Apology 29b-30b.
knowledge necessary for deciding in a way that will avoid the risk of harming their souls. They have to decide that day. And, yet Socrates seems to think that in deciding incorrectly, they are deciding unjustly. But, he also maintains that in deciding unjustly they are not harming others, but only themselves, i.e. their souls. A principle of deliberation that recommends not deciding or inaction until they acquire the knowledge they need to avoid harming their souls, will do these unfortunate jurors no good. Like Socrates in the *Gorgias* who would prefer neither to suffer injustice nor to commit it, Socrates’ jurors might prefer to not make a decision until they have acquired the knowledge they lack and would suffice to avoid injustice and harm to their soul. But the world does not always work out the way we want. Indeed, it almost never does. We are frequently in positions which require practical decisions prior to acquiring the knowledge necessary to avoid making mistakes. And a principle that recommends not deciding or inaction simply won’t help in many salient circumstances.

Let us return, then, to a suggestion by McPherran. He proposes the following principle of deliberation (although he does not call it that):

> Actions traditionally held to be evil and/or impious ought to be refrained from in the absence of compelling divinatory or ‘secularly’ rational evidence to the contrary. (McPherran 1996, 184)  

I will return to the last bit about “compelling divinatory or ‘secularly’ rational evidence” below. Now I want to focus on the first bit. The idea seems to be that Socrates thinks that when one fails to have the knowledge essential for reliable practical decision-making one should choose the action in agreement with traditional morality (the least controversial action or one in line with what most people think). So, since Euthyphro’s relatives, and presumably almost everyone else including perhaps Socrates,\(^\text{29}\) think it is impious to prosecute one’s father for murder, especially in the circumstances described in the dialogue, Euthyphro, recognizing his lack of knowledge concerning piety, should follow their lead. When one knows what piety is, it is reasonable to act according to that knowledge and choose the action one knows to be pious, which will benefit

\(^{28}\)This is his principle A'.

\(^{29}\)He clearly expresses (ironic?) surprise at Euthyphro’s prosecution.
one’s soul, and which will promote one’s happiness. But, lacking knowledge of the nature of piety, the suggestion is, the reasonable thing to do is to rely on the collective wisdom of the past and one’s fellows (citizens, Greeks, humans, ...). We might, then adapt McPherran’s principle into the following principle:

When one lacks the knowledge of which of the actions available to one are virtuous or vicious and so which actions will benefit and which actions will harm one’s soul, choose the least controversial or most traditional action.  

In order for this principle to do the work it is introduced to do it must be thought that (morally) traditional actions have two features. First, these actions must be thought to (at least roughly) track happiness or failure to harm the soul, at least more than non-traditional ones. If they are not less likely to harm the soul, it is difficult to see what reason one might have for choosing them in light of Socrates’ moral general theory. Second, traditional actions must be thought to be more epistemically tractible than virtuous or vicious actions. Again, if they are not more epistemically tractible, it is difficult to see why one should look to their being traditional, rather than directly at their virtue or vice, in deciding what to do when we lack knowledge. I doubt, however, that Socrates would maintain either of these two features of (morally) traditional actions.

Let’s take the second feature first. William Furley has plausibly argued that Euthyphro must be understood as a traditionalist. As he puts it

For the drama (and pathos) [of the Euthyphro] to work, Euthyphro must be a high-priest of the conventional dogma, against which Socrates is allegedly sinning. His affection and respect for Socrates underline the hollowness of the charge trumped up by Meletus.

Furley feels compelled to make this argument in response to commentators on the Euthyphro who have read Euthyphro in precisely the opposite way. They have seen Euthyphro as a “sectary of some kind” who is a “kindred spirit” to Socrates as the inventor of new gods. That is, 

30In what follows I will focus my comments on the traditional as opposed to the uncontroversial. While there may be a difference between the least controversial action and the most traditional action, it will not effect my reasons for doubting that Socrates would endorse this principle. The same sorts of reasons will apply to both mutatis mutandis.
31See Nehamas who defends a version of the priority of definitional knowledge principle friendly to this sort of picture.
32(Furley 1985:205).
33See (Burnet 1924:5 & 6).
according to Furley, Euthyphro is a traditionalist, and according to his opponents he is a non-traditionalist. I do not mention this to endorse Furley’s argument as opposed to his opponents. Indeed, I think McPherran, himself, has given a rather convincing argument that Euthyphro’s character is composite of the two portrayals - residing someplace between “a paradigm of retrograde traditionalism” and “a non-traditionalist religious innovator.”34 But that is just the point. Is Euthyphro a traditionalist or not? His relatives think he is non-traditional and mad. He thinks he is acting in conformity with a correct understanding of their common religious tradition and every right-thinking person would agree.35 Now that Euthyphro has been (or should have been) persuaded of his ignorance, being advised to choose the traditional action (‘rightly understood’) is no more help than being told to choose the pious action (‘rightly understood’). Euthyphro should be less confident about which of the actions open to him - prosecuting or not - is more traditional than he was at the beginning of the dialogue, but he is in no better position to decide which one is.

Consider Socrates’ own (ignorant) behavior. It might be thought that he always chooses the traditional action over the non-traditional one.36 His decision not to intemperately act when catching a glimpse under Charmides’ cloak looks traditional. Perhaps, even his decisions to vote against trying the ten generals together and to go home rather than fetching Leon for the Thirty may be in conformity with traditional morality, although at least the first example did not look uncontroversial at the time. It is less clear whether his (repeated) decision to philosophize rather than enter politics, to refuse an offer of conditional innocence, indeed apparently even to pursue gainful employment is in keeping with traditional morality. It is fairly clear that some people find it rather suspicious. But his decision to remain in jail and drink the hemlock looks

34See (McPherran 2002:111–112). See also (McPherran 1996:chs 2.1.1 & 4.1.1) and (McPherran 1985:303) where he suggests that Socrates too may be thought to steer an intermediary course.
35Compare what McPherran writes about Socrates’ actions: “Socrates, on the other hand, has engaged in few or no activities that actually violate the traditional code, and (on his own account) has certainly never violated the essential dictates of traditional piety (especially once these are rightly understood)” (my emphasis; (McPherran 1996, 184)).
36McPherran thinks so. See previous note.
considerably less traditional at least as far as Crito is concerned. Crito attempts to persuade Socrates to escape precisely on the grounds that to remain in jail would violate the *lex talionis* - the traditional morality of helping one’s friends and harming one’s enemies. Crito argues that by remaining in jail Socrates will be harming his friends - Crito and his associates will be thought cowardly and cheap for not helping their friend and Socrates’ children will be abandoned - and helping his enemies, who want him to die. Once, again I am not endorsing Crito’s argument. My point is that whether Socrates’ decision to remain in jail is traditional or not is potentially as open to dispute as whether it is just or not. As a result this alternative principle of deliberation will not help Euthyphro or anyone else ignorant of the nature of piety (or virtue or the good).

But let’s suppose this objection can be met. Perhaps, it will be suggested that while it will sometimes be difficult to determine which of the two actions available are in conformity with traditional morality, it will always (or at least usually) be easier to determine that than which of the two actions are virtuous or vicious, when one is ignorant of the good. Even so, we have reason to doubt that Socrates would concede that being traditional tracks what matters. Remember that what matters for Socrates is one’s happiness and benefitting and harming one’s soul. But Socrates’ response to Crito’s argument for escaping in the *Crito* looks directed at maintaining that being traditional does not track what matters.

The argument is familiar. It goes roughly as follows. In matters relating to the body it is not the opinions of the many that track physical well-being, but the opinions of the doctor and the trainer *(ιατρὸς ἐπιστήμη καὶ ἐπαίξτη).* Socrates asks

> if he disobeys the one, disregards his opinion and his praises while valuing those of the many who have no knowledge, will he not suffer harm? [*Crito* 47c1-3; Grube trans.]

And Crito responds ‘Of course.’ So, it is the opinions of the ones who know not the opinions of many that ought to be ‘paid attention to’, ‘honored’, ‘persuasive’ in matters relating to the body.

37See Vlastos’ famous argument for Socrates’ rejection of this traditional and uncontroversial moral principle.
The same holds, Socrates maintains, in other matters, and so in matters relating to the soul, whose well-being, as we have seen, is even more valuable than the body. Consequently,

[we] should not then think so much of what the majority will say about us, but what he will say who understands justice and injustice, the one, that is, and the truth itself. So that, in the first place, you were wrong to believe that we should care for the opinion of the many about what is just, beautiful, good, and their opposites. [Crito 48a5-10; Grube trans.]

This hardly looks like someone who thinks that that traditional opinions track psychic well-being and avoidance of psychic harm.

Of course, one might object, Socrates thinks that one ought to follow the advice of the one who knows rather than tradition or the many. But no such individual is available at the end of the Euthyphro. Socrates lacks this knowledge and now Euthyphro recognizes (or at least should) that he does as well. So, what is Euthyphro to do when no moral expert is available? For all the argument in the Crito shows in such a case Socrates would advise following the opinions of the tradition and the many. When a moral expert is available, follow her advice. When not, follow the tradition.

But if there was ever a place to make that point, it would be in the next argument of the Crito. Socrates has long ago accepted his ignorance of the nature of justice and the good, and it is not likely that he takes Crito to be a moral expert. Moreover, Socrates faces a decision that materially effects the well-being of his soul (and his body). As a result, if Socrates believed that in such circumstances one should choose and act in accordance with traditional morality, this would be a perfect time to make that point. But not only, does Socrates fail to make that point in the argument that immediately follows at 48b3-50a5, he actively pursues an argument against

38I suspect that some will object to my identification of the tradition with the opinions of the many, on the grounds perhaps that the former are diachronic in a way that the latter are not. Perhaps. But I am hard pressed to find evidence that Socrates takes such a distinction to be salient, and moreover, if there was ever a place to indicate that he does here in the Crito would be the place to do it, especially in the argument that follows. But as I will suggest no such evidence can be found there.
39See n. 777 above.
40Crito explicitly admits his ignorance later at 50a. But in light of the arguments Crito has offered on behalf or escaping and Socrates initial response at 46c-48b and 48b-50a it is difficult to believe that Socrates takes Crito’s opinions to track moral truth.
41It might be thought that he does in the speech of the laws to which we will turn in a moment.
the traditional morality that Crito had been appealing to in his argument on behalf of escape. The argument is brief and perhaps question-begging, but it is there nonetheless. According to Socrates, since it is never right to do harm, it follows that it is never right to return harm for harm and so never right to harm one’s enemies, contrary to the traditional *lex talionis* upon which Crito had based his argument for escape. Rather than recommending following traditional morality given his lack of knowledge, Socrates recommends pursuing the decision procedure he claims to always pursue - to follow the *logos* where it leads and

For us, however, since our argument leads to this, the only valid consideration, as we were saying just now, is whether we should be acting rightly in giving money and gratitude to those who will lead me out of here, and ourselves helping with the escape, or whether in truth we shall do wrong in doing all this. If it appears that we shall be acting unjustly, then we have no need at all to take into account whether we shall have to die if we stay here and keep quiet, or suffer in another way, rather than do wrong. [48c7-6; Grube trans.]

Indeed, throughout this passage Socrates continually dismisses what the many say or believe (...). This hardly looks like a man who recommends considering traditional morality when one lacks the knowledge of the virtuous thing to do. Rather he recommends examining oneself what the virtuous thing to do is and doing what one decides despite one’s lack of knowledge. But, how does that recommend that Euthyphro should abandon his prosecution?42

Perhaps, I have cut off Socrates’ argument beginning at *Crito* 48b3 too soon. It is true that Socrates argues that the only (or primary and guiding) relevant consideration in practical decision-making is which action one judges to be virtuous, not whether it is traditional. But he goes on to argue in the speech of the Laws that the way to get at what is virtuous is by doing what the law demands. And this might be taken to indicate yet another alternative principle of deliberation as follows:

When one lacks the knowledge of which of the actions available to one are virtuous or vicious and so which actions will benefit and which actions will harm one’s soul, choose the action consistent with the law.

42 It is also difficult to see how this principle will help Socrates’ jurors, even if all else can be resolved. Is it more in keeping with traditional morality to find in favor of Socrates’ prosecutors or in favor of Socrates?
This principle may be thought either as replacing the previous principle and offering a new feature that should guide our behavior when we lack knowledge of the good, or as a corollary of the previous principle. In the latter case, the idea is that traditional morality demands obedience to the law. Understood in this way the speech of Laws is a continuation of the argument beginning at 48b3. Socrates advises that when one lacks knowledge one should always seek to act virtuously or avoid acting viciously by following traditional morality and obeying the law.

Here we have entered the confines of a long-standing and enormous debate - Socrates’ views concerning the authority of the law. Does Socrates endorse some form of legal authoritarianism here in the *Crito*, and if so what kind? Or, rather, does Socrates offer the speech of the Laws in order to persuade Crito, without endorsing, indeed, even rejecting, it himself? How one comes down on this issue will depend in part on how compatible one thinks the argument of the Laws is with Socrates’ own behavior, especially in the three cases he describes in the *Apology* and which we have been referring to throughout - the ten generals case, the Leon case, that the continuing to philosophize case. Now is not the time to enter into this debate. Obviously to the extent that one doubts Socrates’ commitment to the argument of the Laws or the compatibility of Socrates’ own behavior with that argument the new principle of deliberation will be a non-starter. The principle has legs only for those who think Socrates is committed to the argument of the Laws and so his behavior is consistent with that argument. But compelling defenses of this view have been put forward, so we need to consider whether the current principle will suffice for recommending dropping the prosecution.

Perhaps in putting the issue as I have the answer will seem obvious. Advising Euthyphro to choose in conformity with the law, now that he recognizes (or should recognize) that he lacks

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43 See, for example, (Vlastos 1974), (Woozley 1979), (Santas 1979), and (Kraut 1984). (Brickhouse and Smith 1984) and (Brickhouse and Smith 1989) defend a strong version of this approach.

44 See, for example. (Weiss 1998), (Harte 1999), and the next note.

45 See (Brickhouse and Smith 1989) for perhaps the best and most complete defense of this position. I have recently become less sanguine about Socrates’ commitment to the argument of the Laws (see, (Weiss 1998), (Harte 1999), and (Brickhouse and Smith 2006:570 n 6) for others) in recent years, and I have never been sanguine about the compatibility of Socrates’ behavior and that argument (despite (Brickhouse and Smith 1989) forceful defense). But to defend the absence of my sanguinuity is a completely different essay, of considerable length. For a nice short outline of the various issues involved in this debate see (Brickhouse and Smith 2006).
the appropriate knowledge, offers no help. Neither prosecuting his father nor not prosecuting is against Athenian law. So Euthyphro can receive no guidance from our new principle. It turns out, however, that things are not so clear. Some scholars have suggested that Euthyphro’s suit on behalf of a dependent may not be legal under Athenian law. But understanding Socrates’ advice to drop the prosecution as depending on such an understanding of Athenian law looks a bit unmotivated and ad hoc.

Even if one can generate a plausible argument that Euthyphro only had one action open to him compatible with law, this will not be generally true. Socrates’ decision to philosophize or not, if it is constrained by the law at all, would seem to go in the other direction. That is, according to Meletus, Anytus, Lycon and a majority of the jurors, Socrates’ philosophizing is contrary to the law. No one has argued that the law requires Socrates to philosophize, not even Socrates. The point, of course, is that those who have defended Socrates’ commitment to the argument of Laws and the compatibility of his behavior with that argument have been concerned (as they should) to show that his behavior is not contrary to the law. They have not been concerned to show (as indeed they should not) that his behavior is required by the law. Socrates and his fellow Athenians will frequently face practical decisions in which more than one of the actions open to them is compatible with the laws of Athens, and in these cases our new principle will be of no help.

Of course, it may be at this point that one would want to defend the new principle as merely a corollary of the previous one referring to traditional morality. When one lacks the relevant knowledge and the options available are not constrained by the law, choose the action (most) in line with traditional morality (with all of the difficulties attendant on such a recommendation which we rehearsed earlier). Consequently, assuming that Socrates is committed to the argument of the Laws and that his behavior is compatible with that argument, appealing to the laws of Athens in deciding what to do when one lacks knowledge of the nature

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46See, for example, (Gagarin 1997) cited by (McPherran 2002:109) in the course of providing a series of considerations for doubting that Euthyphro’s suit is portrayed as illegal in the Euthyphro.
of the good, may help one avoid harming one’s soul and diminishing one’s happiness in a variety of cases. But, we will face many decisions where this advice will be otiose. And we will be left to rely on our own judgment concerning which actions will benefit and harm our souls. Euthyphro, *modulo* the scholarly legal debate, having recognized his ignorance of the nature of piety will have been given no reason to choose prosecution or not.

Let us finally turn, as promised, to the last bit of ‘McPherran’s principle of deliberation’ - the “compelling divinatory or ‘secularly’ rational evidence” bit. In appealing to compelling divinatory evidence, McPherran has in mind those passages in which Socrates appeals to the evidence of dreams, oracles, and his *daimonion* in deciding what to do. Thus, famously Socrates appeals to the oracle at Delphi on behalf of his decision to continue philosophizing despite incurring the hatred of others and the reputation for wisdom (22e7-23a5). Again, at *Apology* 33c4-7 he asserts that he has been “enjoined upon ... by god, by means of oracles and dreams, and in every other way that a divine manifestation has ever ordered a man do anything” (προστέτακται ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ πράττειν καὶ ἐκ μαντείων καὶ ἐξ ένυπνίων καὶ παντὶ τρόπῳ ὄπερ τίς ποτε καὶ ἄλλη θεία μοίρα ἄνθρωπῳ καὶ ὀτιοῦν προσέταξε πράττειν; Grube trans.) to examine those who think they are wise, but are not (τοῖς οἰομένοις μὲν εἶναι σοφοῖς, οὖσι δὲ οὖ). And of course, he repeatedly appeals to a divine voice (δαίμόνιον) that stops him from doing things he had evidently decided to do (ἄει ἀποτρέπει με τοῦτο δ ἀν μέλλω πράττειν, προτρέπει δὲ οὕποτε), like engage in politics (τὰ πολιτικὰ πράττειν; *Apology* 31d2-6).47 All of this might be taken to encourage a new principle of deliberation as follows:

When one lacks the knowledge of which of the actions available to one are virtuous or vicious and so which actions will benefit and which actions will harm one’s soul, choose the action recommended by the divinatory evidence (i.e., do what the god commands).

Socrates clearly appeals to such evidence in deciding what to do and so would presumably encourage others, like Euthyphro, to do so as well. But, equally clearly, he takes

47Note
such evidence to require (rational) interpretation.\textsuperscript{48} Thus, it takes Socrates a number of interviews of various people (politicians, poets, and craftsmen) before he comes to understand the Delphic oracle’s report that no one is wiser than Socrates as a divine mission to continue to philosophize despite what it costs him (\textit{Apology} 20e3-23a1).\textsuperscript{49} Again, at the beginning of the \textit{Phaedo} Socrates describes a dream that he had often had which he had always interpreted as advising and instructing (παρακελεύεσθαι τε και ἐπικελεῦειν) him to practice philosophy. Nevertheless, this particular morning he decided to compose a poem in case that is how the dream should have been interpreted.\textsuperscript{50} Consider also Socrates’ attitude towards poetry and the poets. Very generally, the idea is that what the poets say is true, because inspired by the gods, and yet they fail to understand it (\textit{Apology} 22b9-c4).\textsuperscript{51} It requires (rational) interpretation perhaps of the sort we see Protagoras and Socrates performing on the Simonides poem in the \textit{Protagoras} (338e-347a). This indicates, then, first, that Socrates would concede that divinatory evidence tracks what is important in decision making because it is inspired by the gods who reveal the truth\textsuperscript{52} and are moral.\textsuperscript{53} But, second, what that divinatory evidence encourages us to do is may be as difficult to make out as what the virtuous thing to do is. It fails to be epistemically more tractible. Indeed, this last point has lead some commentators to simply

\textsuperscript{48}It is, however, considerably less clear whether Socrates’ \textit{daimonion}, as opposed to other sorts of divinatory evidence, requires interpretation. See, especially, (McPherran 1991), (Vlastos 1989), (Brickhouse and Smith 2000), and (Vlastos, Brickhouse, McPherran, et al. 2000). But even if the \textit{daimonion} does not require rational interpretation (serving simply as an alarm bell that stops Socrates from doing what he intended to do), this won’t help Euthyphro since the \textit{daimonion} is unique to Socrates. It is not the \textit{daimonion} that stops Euthyphro’s from continuing with the prosecution. N.B. that \textit{daimonion} stops Socrates from doing what he intended to do, presumably something which in fact would have harmed his soul. Consequently, whatever principle of deliberation Socrates employs, it must not be infallible - presumably given his ignorance.

\textsuperscript{49}This does not in any way deny that he immediately takes what the oracle asserted to be true. See below. But he does not immediately understand what it means. Indeed, given his assumption that it is true, he takes his initial interpretation that it means he has more knowledge of important things than others to be mistaken. As it turns out, his investigations indicate that his initial interpretation was not far from the mark. In a sense, Socrates has more ‘knowledge’ than others, but not because he knows so much, but because others know so little. I put the word ‘knowledge’ in scare quotes to avoid entering the the controversy whether Socrates is committed to knowing that he knows nothing valuable or simply to failing to believe that he knows anything valuable. For our present purposes this controversy is beside the point.

\textsuperscript{50}See also the dream at the beginning of the \textit{Crito}, whose interpretation is evidently all too clear (44a5-b4).

\textsuperscript{51}See also the \textit{Ion}.

\textsuperscript{52}See, for example, \textit{Apology} 21b6.

\textsuperscript{53}That Socrates endorses what has been claimed to be a non-traditional conception of moral gods is suggested at, for example, \textit{Apology} 21b and \textit{Phaedo} 62d-63c.
identify the reasoning employed to interpret the divinatory evidence with the reasoning employed to choose the virtuous action. Of course, even if this difficulty of interpretation did not arise, it is far from clear that this principle would help Euthyphro. Nothing suggests that Euthyphro has divinatory evidence that prosecuting his father is impious, or that not prosecuting is pious.

**Follow Socrates’ Advice**

Perhaps, this would be a good time to take stock. I began by wondering what Euthyphro should do at the end of the *Euthyphro* concerning pursuing his prosecution of his father, on the counter-factual assumption that he now recognizes his ignorance concerning the nature of piety. Should he pursue the prosecution or drop it, as McPherran and Diogenes think Socrates is advising? Based on a crudely described general theory of practical reasoning, I maintained that Socrates thinks that Euthyphro should choose the action that is virtuous (or pious) and avoid the action that is vicious (or impious), on the grounds that the virtuous action would benefit his soul and the vicious action would harm it, and the care of his soul should outweigh any other consideration in determining what to do. Moreover, I indicated that since Euthyphro failed to know the nature of piety he failed to know which of the two actions open to him (prosecuting or not prosecuting) was pious or impious. Consequently, I began looking for principles appealing to features other than the piety of the available actions which Euthyphro might appeal to in making a decision. And I wanted those principles to be generalizable to other agents in Euthyphro’s epistemological situation - including Socrates and, for example, the jurors of Socrates’ trial. I considered principles that appealed to inaction, to tradition, to the law, and to the gods. In every case, I suggested that these principles failed in at least one of three ways. Some failed to sufficiently tract what matters (virtue, care of the soul, and/or happiness). Others failed to be sufficiently epistemically tractible to warrant employing them rather than simply evaluating the virtue (or piety) of the available actions. And others failed to be sufficiently generalizable - either failing to explain Socrates’ behavior or what Euthyphro, the jurors, or others in a variety of

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54 See, especially, (Vlastos 1991:283–285) and (Weiss 1998, 11). A similar view was suggested by paper by Christopher Rowe at a conference in honor of Malcolm Schofield at Cambridge, 2011.
circumstances should do. Consequently, if Socrates does think that Euthyphro should drop his prosecution as McPherran and Diogenes think, it is difficult to know what principle Socrates thinks should have led Euthyphro to do so.

Perhaps Socrates does not think that Euthyphro should drop the prosecution on the basis of some yet to be identified principle of deliberation. Rather, Socrates encourages Euthyphro to drop the prosecution because Socrates believes that such a prosecution is impious and so by pursuing it Euthyphro will be harming his soul. This raises two questions. First, why should we think that Socrates thinks that Euthyphro’s prosecution of his father is impious and second why should we think that Socrates thinks that his views about the piety or impiety of Euthyphro’s prosecution should influence Euthyphro’s behavior?

Let’s take up the first question first. One might think, in line with our familiarity with the so-called definitional dialogues, that if we are to make headway on deciding which of the two actions available to Euthyphro Socrates takes to be pious or impious we will need to examine what Socrates thinks piety is. Many commentators who take Socrates’ professions of ignorance seriously do so in part because they take Socrates’ inability to say what piety is in the Euthyphro and elsewhere to indicate that Socrates is genuinely at a loss concerning the nature of piety. Consequently, Socrates has no doxastically coherent general account of piety on the basis of which to decide whether Euthyphro’s prosecution is pious or not. But other commentators have forcefully argued that a Socratic account of piety can be uncovered in the Euthyphro. Perhaps, most plausibly Socrates has been thought to endorse some version of the fifth definition (by my count) according to which piety is the part of justice concerned with service to the gods in the pursuit of their ergon which we humans cannot know. If, then, this or something like it is

55I will just concede for now that Socrates cares about whether Euthyphro harms his soul. Many passages such that Socrates does care about whether others harm their souls. But it is not obvious how this is compatible with other passages which indicate that Socrates cares primarily about his own happiness.

56Of course, Socrates might have an account of piety on the basis of which to decide about Euthyphro’s prosecution, even if he does not have one that doxastically coherent. In that case, he does not differ from Euthyphro. See below. For those who doubt that Socrates has a constructive account of piety, see, for example, (Allen 1970:67).

57See (McPherran 1985:283 n 2) for list of those commentators who have uncovered a more positive Socratic account of piety in the Euthyphro as of 1985. More recent commentators include ...

58See, especially, (McPherran 1985) and (Weiss 1986:437 n 1) and B&S ....
Socrates’ account of piety, we should ask which of the actions available to Euthyphro - prosecuting his father for murdering the dependent or not prosecuting him - falls under this account of piety, i.e., which of these actions constitute service to the gods in pursuit of their *ergon*. But once this question is raised, it becomes exceedingly difficult to answer. I can see no independent reason to think that Socrates thinks that dropping the prosecution would amount to service to the gods or that continuing the prosecution would somehow obstruct or interfere with such service. We simply are not given any indication one way or the other.

Of course perhaps that is the point. That is, given the account of piety that Socrates endorses, the *Euthyphro* is meant to show (in part) that, contrary to the tradition and the laws, prosecutions for murder are simply not a matter of piety. They have nothing to do with service to the gods. They neither promote it nor interfere with it. Prosecutions for murder concern justice. They concern relations among humans, not between humans and the gods. Consequently, Euthyphro’s justification for his prosecution is undermined. He justified his prosecution on the grounds that is was pious and Socrates has shown that it has nothing to do with piety. But, this account of piety also undermines Euthyphro’s relatives’ justification for not prosecuting. Remember in their view Euthyphro’s prosecution was impious. Moreover, undermining Euthyphro’s justification for his prosecution only informs Euthyphro that his reasons for prosecuting are invalid, but it does not inform Euthyphro what he should do now given that he has become aware (or should have become aware) that his reasons are invalid. But, most importantly, pointing out that Euthyphro’s prosecution is a matter of justice not piety, only shifts the question to which of the two actions available to Euthyphro is just - prosecuting or not prosecuting. And here things are even more difficult because what Socrates’ account of justice is (in the elenctic dialogues at least) is more obscure than what his account of piety is.

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60 The *Crito* might be thought to endorse an account of justice according to which harming another is unjust (or at least not just). Consequently, in pursuing the prosecution and so harming his father, Euthyphro acts unjustly. But, if not prosecuting is unjust, then by dropping the prosecution Euthyphro will be harming his own soul and perhaps his father and those who associate with his father. Two questions need to be pursued here. First, whose harm takes priority, the agent’s or the patient’s (so to speak)? Socrates’ theory of value suggests the former, but the account of justice allegedly found in the *Crito* would seem to suggest the latter. Second, in my view more difficultly, is the harm (whether the agent’s or the patient’s) associated with the act (definitionally) prior to the virtue of the act or the
Consequently, what Socrates thinks about the virtue of the two actions available to Euthyphro is virtually inscrutable.

But suppose I am just wrong about this. Suppose that it is sufficiently clear that Socrates thinks that the virtuous thing (whether that is the pious thing or the just thing or something else) for Euthyphro to do is to drop the prosecution. This raises the second question mentioned above: why should we think that Socrates thinks that his views about the piety or impiety (justice or injustice, virtue or vice) of Euthyphro’s prosecution should influence Euthyphro’s behavior or decision procedure? The *Crito* argues (46b-48b) that if Socrates knew the nature of piety, or justice, or if he were in some other way an expert concerning these matters, then, Socrates’ views (indeed knowledge) about the piety or impiety (justice or injustice, virtue or vice) of Euthyphro’s prosecution should influence Euthyphro’s behavior or decision procedure. But I have been proceeding on the assumption that Socrates, like Euthyphro, lacks and recognizes that he lacks such knowledge or expertise. Nor does Socrates thinks that he is in some way more reliable on these matters than Euthyphro and consequently should be listened to. There have been plenty of opportunities in the elenctic dialogues for Socrates to make this point and he never does. In fact, he continually professes that he is not a teacher of virtue. Indeed, at the end of the *Laches* when Laches’ and Nicias’ lack of moral expertise has been sufficiently established and the two generals encourage the two fathers to solicit Socrates’ advice on how to educate their sons, Socrates refuses to give such advice precisely on the grounds that he too is no expert. Rather he encourages all of them (the two generals and the two fathers) to join him in the search for someone whose advice should be listened to. It would be odd if Socrates thought at the end of the *Euthyphro* that Euthyphro should seek Socrates’ advice on whether he should prosecute and follow it, rather than pursue the question for himself.

**Follow the Logos**

other way round?

61 See n. ??? above. Even those who see Socrates as possessing elenctic or some other form of non-robust knowledge would not concede that he possesses knowledge or expertise being referred to in the *Crito* argument.
In fact this last point is key. Pursuing the question for oneself looks to be the procedure that Socrates follows. As Socrates famously professes in the *Crito* when facing the question whether to escape or not:

> We must therefore examine whether we should act in this way or not, as not only now but at all times I am the kind of man who listens to nothing within me but the *logos* that on reflection seems best to me. (σκοπεῖσθαι οὗν χρή ἡμᾶς εἶτε ταύτα πρακτέον εἶτε μή· ὡς ἐγὼ οὗ νῦν πρῶτον ἄλλα καὶ ἀεὶ τοιοῦτος οἷος τὸν ἐμὸν μηδενὶ ἄλλῳ πείθεσθαι ἢ τῷ λόγῳ δὲ ἂν μοι λογίζομένῳ βέλτιστος φαίνεται.) [*Crito* 46b1-6; adapted from Grube trans.]

And we know from our earlier account of Socrates’ general theory that the *logos* that seems best is the one which reveals the virtuous action. Socrates does not here indicate that when faced with the need to apply his general theory to a particular action he looks to the tradition, the law, or the gods, but rather to whether the action is virtuous. Indeed, much of the evidence for this general theory of deliberation derives from the dialogue in which Socrates is facing the need to apply it in circumstances similar to Euthyphro’s. And the argument to this point indicates that Socrates may be right. Appealing to traditional morality may be no more helpful than simply considering the virtue of the action itself, and may not be virtuous activity any way. Appealing to the law or the gods may track virtue but may it be equally difficult to discern what the law and the gods propose. Moreover, neither the law nor the gods look sufficiently ubiquitous to suffice in the vast majority of decisions. Directly examining or investigating the virtue of the actions available to one looks like a plausible view in light of these difficulties.

The reason we did not adopt this approach for Euthyphro at the end of the *Euthyphro* was because we were assuming counter-factually that Euthyphro recognized that he lacked the knowledge necessary for knowing which of the actions opened to him was virtuous. But, as I have just indicated, lack of the relevant moral knowledge does not keep *Socrates* from making decisions by asking which action is virtuous, rather than which action is traditional, legal, or divinely sanctioned. This does not mean that these other features are irrelevant to Socrates’ decision making. To the extent that the problems associated with these features can be overcome they may very well form part of one’s decision procedure. The point, however, is that the principle of deliberation that Socrates recommends that Euthyphro use is the following.
When one lacks the knowledge of which of the actions available to one are virtuous or vicious and so which actions will benefit and which actions will harm one’s soul, choose the action that rational reflection reveals is virtuous (or not vicious).

Having recognized one’s ignorance and faced with a decision between two actions, one should rationally examine which of the two is virtuous and choose the action revealed as virtuous by that rational examination. Of course, Socrates does not tell us much about how to engage in such rational reflection other than generalizations like - choose the action which will benefit or not harm one’s soul, will promote one’s happiness, maybe even will do no harm (to whom?), but none of these considerations will help Euthyphro. Indeed, Euthyphro took himself to be making something like that very decision at the beginning of the *Euthyphro*. He had decided on the action which he judged to be pious. Of course, at the beginning of the *Euthyphro* he thought he knew which action was pious, and now at the end he does (or should) not. But the advice from Socrates remains the same. Choose the action one’s rational reflection reveals to be pious or virtuous. It is just that Socrates has offered very little guidance along the way concerning which of the two actions available to Euthyphro is the pious or virtuous one. And if he gets it wrong he will harm his soul, as will Socrates if he gets it wrong in the *Crito*. If, then, we ask what does Socrates advises Euthyphro to do at the end of the *Euthyphro* the answer is

[Euthyphro] must ... examine whether [he] should [prosecute] in this way or not, as not only now but at all times [Euthyphro should be] the kind of man who listens to nothing within [him] but the *logos* that on reflection seems best to [him]. [*Crito* 46b1-6; adapted from Grube trans.]

Now that Euthyphro recognizes (or should recognize) that he lacks the knowledge of which of the actions available to him is pious or impious his confidence in his decision is (or should be) considerably diminished. But the decision he must make remains - whether prosecuting his father is pious or not. Despite being clear that the choice Euthyphro makes is incredibly important, Socrates has little further useful specific advice to offer. Whether Euthyphro has made the right decision in dropping the prosecution (assuming the accuracy of Diogenes’ report) only Euthyphro, it appears, will have known.

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62 Here of course Socrates’ *daimonion* might be particularly useful to Socrates, but of no help to Euthyphro.
Conclusion

In conclusion, it may seem that Socrates’ account of practical reasoning at least when it comes to specific actions is rather disappointing. It appears to offer little more than the advice to follow the dictates of one’s own reasoning and act accordingly. He does, of course, advise acting according to what one judges virtuous and to that extent his advice may be substantive. Not everyone, one assumes, would have been inclined to decide in that way. Callicles and Thrasymachus, for example, might not be inclined to follow such advice. And, of course, Socrates testifies that his mission as commanded by the god (at least as Socrates interprets it) consists in

> go[ing] 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 brings about wealth and all other private and public blessings for men, both individually and collectively.’ [Apology 30ba7-b4; Grube trans.]

Evidently, not every Athenian has adopted the general principle of deliberation, i.e., that considerations of virtue trumps consideration of anything else in deciding what to do. But, to repeat, this principle will not help Euthyphro. He was already persuaded that considerations of piety should trump family relationships, hatred, or anything else in deciding whether to prosecute. He does not require the advice to do what is pious or virtuous. Rather, he needs advice about which of the actions available to him is pious or virtuous, and it is here that I maintain Socrates is robustly silent. All we seem to get is the recommendation to examine which of the actions available is virtuous and choose the action that upon rational reflection seems virtuous. That’s what Socrates does.

63 Although this may be more controversial than it appears. One way to understand the disagreement between the Socratic and Thrasymachean positions is that disagree over what is morality right; another way is that they disagree over whether moral rightness is conducive to one’s happiness. (Santas 1979:191): “At [Gorgias] 509e [Socrates asserts a related part of the moral paradox ] - that no one does injustice willingly, but that all who do injustice do so involuntarily - ... ... when Polus brings up examples of extreme wrongdoers such as Archelaus, the dispute is not whether this man knew or believed that what he did was unjust (indeed this issue never comes up!), but whether he was better off doing injustice, as he himself believed. This suggests that one explanation that Plato would give as to why people do wrong is that they do not know that it is worse for them. Of course, on the interpretation that is presented here Plato can give either one or both general explanations as to why people do wrong (when they are not forced to); that they do not know that it is wrong, or that they do not know it is worse for them; whereas on the interpretation I am criticizing, only the first of these explanations is available to Plato.”
But actually Socrates does more than that. He seeks the knowledge he lacks. He seeks the knowledge of the expert whose advice ought to be followed in the *Crito*. He seeks the knowledge that would enable him to know which action is virtuous, which action will benefit his soul and which action will harm it. And he advises others to do the same.\(^{64}\) This is not advice to engage in some academic - ivory tower - pursuit.\(^{65}\) It is a pragmatic pursuit. Lacking such knowledge (or other moral experts whose advice can be followed) one cannot rely on inaction, traditional morality, the law, or the gods to avoid harming one's soul.\(^{66}\) And it is important to see that one cannot. It is important to see the value of the knowledge one lacks.

One thing we should be confident about is that Socrates takes the care of his soul to be paramount and he advises us to do the same. The best way to care for the soul is to know the good. In the meantime one simply makes the best rational decision one can.

So what advice does Socrates have for Euthyphro at the end of their conversation? Euthyphro must examine whether prosecuting is pious or not and choose the action that upon rational reflection seems to him to be virtuous. But as a result of his lack of knowledge (and the lack of other moral experts whose advice can be followed), whatever he chooses to do he risks harming his soul. Consequently, he must also join Socrates in the pursuit of the knowledge he and Socrates lack - the knowledge of the good - which will keep him from harming his soul. One

\(^{64}\)See, for example, *Charmides* 166c7-d4, *Gorgias* 453c1-4, 457e1-458a5, and 505e4-6, and *Protagoras* 360e3-8. That Socrates encourages others to seek the knowledge they lack is also indicated by his desire to persuade his interlocutors of their ignorance; see *Apology* 23b4-7. He does this in order to persuade them to join him in the search for the knowledge they, like he, lack. See, *Meno* 84a3-c6 and *Symposium* 204a1-7. This also helps explain why Socrates is depicted as continuing his elenctic examination of various interlocutors (cf., especially, Euthyphro) when it has become clear to everyone (except Euthyphro) that they lack the knowledge they professed to have. For a more complete defense of this account of the Socratic mission as portrayed in the elenctic dialogues, see (Benson 2000:ch. 2, esp. 17–23). For others who recognize this aspect of the Socratic mission, see, for example, (Scolnicov 1988:17), (Brickhouse and Smith 1999:170), (Brickhouse and Smith 1994:17), (Smith 1997:xviii), (Matthews 1999:29), (Woolf 2002:243), (Sedley 2003:63), and (Sedley 2004:8). I take the overriding goal of philosophy for Socrates as depicted in the dialogues and for Plato to be the acquisition of knowledge or wisdom, whether or not they think that goal can be achieved. See (Benson 2000:23–29 & 180–185).

\(^{65}\)Although Aristotle might disagree.

\(^{66}\)Once again, Socrates’ *daimonion* may keep Socrates’ soul from harm lacking knowledge, but the rest of us are out of luck. Despite Socrates’ confidence that his *daimonion* will keep his soul from harm (see esp. *Apology* 40a-c), Socrates apparently thinks that knowledge of the good would be more reliable.
suspects that whatever else Euthyphro goes on to do with his prosecution, whether he drops it or continues the prosecution, he does not follow Socrates’ more important practical advice.