

## A New Euthyphro

Glenn Peoples

---

It is my contention that what is generally construed as the *Euthyphro Dilemma* as a reason to deny that moral facts are based on theological facts is one of the worst arguments proposed in philosophy of religion or ethical theory, and that Socrates, the character of the dialogue who poses the dilemma, was both morally bankrupt in his challenge to Euthyphro, but more importantly here, ought to have lost the argument hands down. But in any dialogue, the author controls what people say. Plato was able to easily give Socrates the victory by writing the ending of the story himself, where Euthyphro, believing that piety is what the gods approve of, loses the argument abysmally. The version of events presented here is different. This time, Euthyphro is permitted to offer a reasonable defence of his position, and he has the benefit of having been able to read all that has been said on the Euthyphro dilemma over the last couple of millennia, and especially the last fifty years. Under such circumstances, Socrates does not stand a chance. We arrive at our scene, the steps of the Dunedin High Court, in Dunedin, New Zealand, on a cool mid-winter July morning.

Euthyphro: Why Socrates, what brings you to court today? Are you hounding somebody for money?

Socrates: No, this is no lawsuit of mine. I am accused of a crime.

E: What? You? Who is accusing you of a crime?

S: A young man at the University of Otago named Meletus. Do you know him?

E: No, I'm afraid I don't. What is he accusing you of?

*Socrates  
opposes free  
speech*

S: Hate speech, which shows that he's obviously a very wise young man. We have to nip people who think the wrong way in the bud you know. He says that he knows the danger of us thinkers speaking our mind and influencing people's opinions. If he keeps this up, he will be very good for society. He may even make the UN Security Council.

E: Well, not to worry Socrates. I'm sure you will successfully defend yourself. I'm sure I will be successful as well.

S: You have business in the court? Is someone after you as well?

E: Oh no, far from it. I am prosecuting someone for a crime.

S: Oh, and who is it?

E: Actually, he's my father.

*Socrates  
would let  
relatives  
get away  
with  
murder*

S: Your what? What on earth is wrong with you? You shouldn't accuse family members of a crime!

E: But he *committed* a crime.

S: So what? He's your father! Cover it up, man!

E: Are you serious? Socrates, he murdered somebody!

S: Oh he did, did he? What a wise and all knowing person you must be to presume to bring this against him all the same. *(In a sarcastic voice)* "Oh, look at me, I'm Euthyphro, I'm accusing my father of murder!" He had better have murdered somebody important for you to be doing such an outrageous thing. Did he kill your mother?

E: No.

S: Your brother then?

E: No.

S: Well, was the victim a family member at all?

E: No, not at all. Socrates, this is disturbing. I can't believe that you would make a distinction between murdering a family member and murdering somebody who is not related to you. All that matters is that my father unjustly killed a man. If a person has been killed justly, like in self defence or war or capital punishment, then fine. But if a man unjustly takes the life of another, then even if he *is* your father, you have a duty to see that justice is done.

S: Oh how ridiculously quaint of you, Euthyphro. So who was this man your father killed?

E: Well, I don't pretend that he was a particularly good man. He was a poor man who worked for me. One day at the end of the day while the employees were all getting drunk. He got into a brawl with one of our servants, and this man won, killing the servant. So my father flew into a rage and tied him hand and foot. He threw him into a ditch and left him there for days on end while he went to ask the police what he should do about it. This man died a slow death of hunger and exposure.

S: You're testifying against your father for killing a loser like that?

E: That's exactly what the rest of my family say too, Socrates. They think that it is impious, it is morally wrong, for me to prosecute my own father. It just goes to show what *they* know about morality!

S: And I suppose you think you know better, to the point where you would risk accusing your father?

E: Yes, of course, I know more than most I daresay.

*What is  
piety?*

S: Then I am in luck! I dare not say that I am as wise as you are, so I suppose the best I can do is learn from you. Let's waste no time. Tell me the nature of piety and impiety. What are those things?

E: Well for one thing, piety involves doing just what I am doing now, choosing to prosecute a man who is a murderer, even if he is my father.

S: Well, that's a start. But it's not really what I asked for. You said that prosecuting a murderer is pious.

E: That's right.

S: But I don't just want to know which acts are pious. After all, there are plenty of other pious acts, aren't there?

E: Yes, there are.

S: Well we don't have time for you to list them all. So I asked, not "which actions are pious," but what is piety itself? Tell me what piety is, so that I will know the standard by which all acts are deemed pious or impious.

E: Ah, I see what you mean. Alright then I'll tell you.

S: I'm waiting.

E: Piety is the quality of doing what God wills. Impiety is the quality of doing what God wills against.<sup>1</sup>

S: Excellent, Euthyphro. That is what I was looking for. Now, let's see if the answer is acceptable.

E: As you wish.

S: Euthyphro, when we humans make judgements about things, like measurements of distance, for example, we might disagree with each other sometimes. Right?

E: Yes, sometimes.

S: Right. And when we disagree, we can resolve the disagreement by appealing to a measuring device like a tape measure. Can we not?

E: Yes, we can and do.

S: And if we disagree about weight, we can appeal to a set of scales?

E: Correct.

S: So if we disagree about moral issues, like, say, whether an act is pious or not, the answer lies in whether or not God wills us to do it or not?

E: Right, that's exactly what I meant.

S: Then I have you already, Euthyphro!

E: How so? I'm afraid you've lost me.

S: Well, you'll admit, won't you, that the gods disagree and fight with each other about what is pious and what is not? So you cannot appeal to their judgement, because they disagree as much as we do about other things, and so they must have recourse to a higher standard!

---

<sup>1</sup> This is essentially the same position advanced by Plato's Euthyphro. When the position is stated this way, Euthyphro reveals that he is a kind of divine command theorist. In particular his version of divine command ethics is the same as that of, among other people, Robert Merrihue Adams and William Alston. See Adams, "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again," and Alston "Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists," both of which were compiled in Michael Beaty (ed.), *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990). According to this version, being morally right is the same thing as – i.e. it is identical with – being commanded by God.

E: Socrates, that's absurd. I'm a monotheist.

S: A what?

E: A monotheist. I don't believe in many Gods, just one. And he doesn't disagree with himself.

S: You don't believe in the gods?

E: No, only one.

*Socrates' first argument fails against monotheism*

S: But... Euthyphro, my goodness! Not only does that make you nearly an atheist, it means that my rebuttal doesn't apply at all!<sup>2</sup>

E: You are quite right, Socrates, it doesn't apply. And I'm hardly an atheist. You simply believe in many gods who are not, on their own, sovereign over all things, whereas I believe in something you do not: A God who is sovereign over all, who holds all things together and who has no competitors.

S: So this means it would do no good to try to reduce you to absurdity by saying that since the gods themselves will different things, and since you think that what is pious is that which the gods will and what is impious is that which the gods will against, you are thereby committed to the view that some actions are both pious and impious.

E: Well, you might have said that if I were a polytheist and if I also believed that the gods disagreed with each other, but as it is, you can't use that argument.

S: So it would seem. So then, piety is the quality of doing what *God* wills, and impiety is the quality of doing what *God* wills against, and not the gods.

E: That's what I said before.

S: Right, then. Let's start afresh now that this view of piety is clear. Since it is the 21<sup>st</sup> century, let us dispense with talk of "piety." Can we talk instead of what the right thing to do is?

E: Let's do that.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Strange though it may sound, Roman polytheists considered the first Christians to be atheists, because they denied the existence of the Roman gods. See for example Rousas John Rushdoony, *The "Atheism" of the Early Church* (Vallecito: Ross House Books, 2000).

S: Very good. I'd like you to explain something for me, Euthyphro. Does God will us to do things because they are right, or are things right because God wills us to do with them?

E: Can you elaborate?

S: Well, God wills what is right, right?

E: Yes, that's right.

S: So does God will things because they are right?

E: Why has our subject changed so quickly?

*Socrates  
confuses  
identity  
with  
causation*

S: Whatever do you mean, Euthyphro? We are talking about what makes actions right.

E: Well, clearly we are *now*. But we weren't a few moments ago. You started by asking me what piety *is*, which we have agreed to call rightness. But telling you what that rightness *is* the quality of being that which God commands just isn't the same as telling you that things are right *because* God commands them.

S: Most Excellent Euthyphro, like a true philosopher you have caught me changing the type of question I began with!<sup>4</sup>

E: Indeed! I said that rightness *is* that quality of being willed by God. We talk this way about other things. For example, the morning star *is* the evening star, because it is the same thing.

S: That it is.

E: But once we have announced that fact, we would think a man very odd who tried to put us on the spot by saying "Ah, friend, but is it the morning star *because* it is the evening star? Or is it the evening star *because* it is the morning star?"

---

<sup>3</sup> To talk of moral rightness or obligation may or may not have been Plato's original intention. Just what he did mean to talk about has been difficult to pin down exactly. However, in the literature written in opposition to a divine command theory of ethics, the dilemma has been framed in terms of what is right, rather than what is pious.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Singer engages in just this type of switching between two understandings of a divine command theory when he says: "Some theists say that ethics cannot do without religion because the very meaning of "good" is nothing other than 'what God approves'. Plato refuted a similar view more than two thousand years ago by arguing that if the gods approve of some actions it must be because those actions are good, in which case it cannot be the gods approval that makes them good." Singer says that there is a claim that "good" just means "what God approves," and then he immediately says that this was the first option Plato refuted when he tackled the claim that divine commands are *causal* for morality. But those two positions are not the same at all. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 3.

S: Odd, am I?

E: Why Socrates, it is only nine in the morning on a winter's day, but I would swear that you are blushing.

S: Euthyphro my young friend, I had anticipated a much easier route to success than this. At every turn you tell me that I have not represented your position well at all. I fear saying another word lest I get myself into further trouble.

E: Then Socrates, you may be the philosopher and I will be the gentleman. Let us say that the subject has not changed very much. Instead of talking about what piety is, as we first began to do, let us say that I believe in a relationship of causation between God and piety, for it sounds like this is what you want to talk about.<sup>5</sup>

S: You are too kind to an old man, and a true friend of a philosopher. Let me pose my question again. I am trying to see if you think God is the moral authority, or if you think something else is. Does God will things *because* they are right?

E: I think I see what you mean.

S: Yes. You now see that you must say that God wills things because they are right. And since you must say this, you must accept that rightness is prior to God's will. So you haven't really told me what rightness is at all.

E: Well no, actually. My answer is no.

S: Your answer to what?

E: To your question, "does God will things because they are right?" My answer is no.

S: You mean you think things are right because....

E: That's right, things are right because God wills them.

S: But I was trying to get you to admit that your view committed you to saying that rightness was *prior* to God's will!

*Morality is  
not prior to  
God's will  
according to  
Euthyphro  
after all*

---

<sup>5</sup> This causal view, the view that actions are right or wrong *because* God commands or forbids them, is, with the view of Adams and Alston, also a popular contemporary divine command theory of ethics, as proposed by John Hare, *God's Call: Moral Realism, Divine Commands and Human Autonomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

E: I suppose you can't say that then, since my view is that God's will causes things to be good.

S: So your view is that God could will just anything and that would make it right? So If God willed that you should torture people then that would be right?

E: Well you've asked two different questions there. They each have a different answer.

S: Oh, and who's the philosopher now?

E: Why you are, Socrates, and that is why you are willing to make any distinction that is necessary to avoid misrepresenting me.

S: Right you are! Explain this distinction then.

E: I will. You asked firstly if God *could* command just anything. Next, you asked what would follow if God *did* command something, namely torture. Let's look at you second question first.<sup>6</sup>

S: I'd love to hear your answer.

E: My answer is that it would be right to engage in torture if God willed it.

S: This is horrible, Euthyphro!

E: Yes, it is horrible.

S: Yet you take it to be good philosophy?

E: I do indeed!

S: Let's sit down over there for a while....

E: Here is what I mean. Yes, it would be terrible to torture people, and to think of God willing us to rape babies. But that is only true in this world.

S: In this world? What on earth are you babbling about?

E: Well, I believe that God created this world.

S: I'm with you so far.

E: And I believe that if God had chosen to, he could have made the world differently. Agreed?

S: Yes, I suppose he could have.

*Would  
abhorrent  
actions be  
right if God  
willed them?*

---

<sup>6</sup> This distinction tends to not be made by the critics of divine command ethics. Instead, the second question is asked, "So would X be right if God commanded it?" The assumption being made by the critic is that the divine command theorist will accept that God could command X, whatever X is.

E: Now, what I was getting at is this. Since God made this world, a world in which he does not will that we torture people, the way he made this world reflects his will, including the way he created us. This includes our intuitive sense of moral outrage at those acts, and it also includes the natural consequences of those acts, the things that torture causes.

S: Do you mean that if God had created a different world, those features of ourselves and of the consequences of torture might be different?

E: They certainly could be.

S: No doubt, but now notice what you have appealed to, Euthyphro. You are trying to say that actions are right because God commands them, but now you seem to be saying that that something like torture is right or wrong depending on the effect that it has on us, which means that God deems it wrong because it is independently wrong, regardless of whether he commanded it or forbade it.

E: No, Socrates, you are assuming too much. But before I pursue that argument, I would like to finish the present argument. We'll call this new argument "the independence argument," and we will come back to it soon.

S: Very well, I will wait.

E: Thank you. You said two things previously; that my view means that God could command just anything, and that if God commanded torture, it would be right.

S: I did say that.

E: I think I have affirmed the latter already, but I have suggested that the horrid things you suggest that God might command, like torture, are only horrendous in worlds where God forbids them. Even if I have not shown this, you will certainly admit, as you have, that this is possibly true.

S: Whether it is true or not I am not sure, but yes, there can be no doubt that it is possibly true. But I doubt that it is true.

E: And why is that?

S: I doubt it because it seems to me that if something had consequences so different from torture in this world that it was not wrong, then it would be a kind of word game to call it torture at all. It wouldn't be torturous!

E: Well said. In fact, I accept that. I was only trying to show that it is at least conceivable that what is wrong and horrendous in this world might not be so in other worlds. But I too doubt that something like torture would be permissible in other worlds.

S: Oh? Then let us say that your doubts and mine are well founded. Instead of saying that we doubt that torture could be permissible, let us say – even though we accept that it *could* be permissible in certain worlds – that it is not permissible in *any* worlds.

E: Since I accept that this might be true, very well. Let us say that this is true.

S: Then you are in a rather difficult position, Euthyphro. How can you entertain the thought that such things *could* not be permissible, and yet you say that *whatever* God commands is not only permissible but right?

E: Well, you said that my view commits me to the claim that “God could command just anything.”

S: Absolutely.

E: But my position does not lead to that claim at all. I said that things are right because God commands them. That has nothing to do with what God can command.

S: But you are a monotheist, and according to you, God is all-powerful, is he not?

E: Yes, he is.

S: Then how could you be willing to say that there are some things God cannot command?

E: Because I do not worship the God of the philosophers without a face. The God who is all powerful also has a character. He has a particular nature.

S: And what does this qualification achieve?

E: Will a man commit slander when he loves the person that he is to speak of, and he has no inclination whatsoever to speak ill of him?

S: No, of course not.

E: And will a person eat a food that he utterly despises, and which makes him nauseous even to look at?

S: No, he will not.

E: In fact, if the only causal factors are the man's will and desire, could he eat it if he hates it and has no reason to eat it?

S: If those were the *only* causal factors, then no, I suppose he could not.

E: Yet the metaphysical possibility would still exist, but he could not bring himself to do it.

S: Yes, that seems right.

E: So the fact that he could not does not impugn his power of choice?

S: No, I would think not.

E: Then we have found our answer. God cannot command that which he hates, even though it is within his power. Whatever God commands *is* right, and torture could never be right because God would never command it, nor would his character, his nature and his desire permit him to. For example (and others could be given), if God is benevolent, then he does not command that which is repugnant to benevolence.<sup>7</sup>

S: Euthyphro, you have done well. I accept then, that your view does not imply that God could command anything, and it would become right. But in finding this answer, we have gone back to another problem for you.

E: And what problem is that?

S: It is the problem that I have agreed to wait for you to discuss. You called it "the independence argument." In order to get away from the view that God obeys another moral law besides himself, you said that whatever God commands is right.

E: Yes, that is what I said.

---

<sup>7</sup> For a defence of the claim that God has a nature and is subject to it see Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* The Aquinas Lecture, 1980 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980). Edward Wierenga notes that "a divine command theorist might well believe that some features of God's character, for example, that He is essentially loving, place constraints on what He commands." Edward Wierenga, "A Defensible Divine Command Theory," *Nous* 17:3 (1983), 401.

S: But look now how you have escaped the problems with that view. When I say that this would mean that God could command terrible things like torture, you say that he could not because he could not condone something as evil as torture! And you are back where I accused you of being before, because you must now say that God really *does* follow a moral law above himself, a law that forbids torture, and God dutifully obeys by never commanding torture.

E: Why Socrates, how quickly words change their meaning in your hands!

S: Never, my good friend! This is the plain path that reason draws us down.

E: Not so. I have not denied that God has his reasons for commanding as he does. But this does not mean that we must say that God is under a moral law that is outside of himself.

S: What is this strange and marvellous philosophy? Explain, Euthyphro.

E: Let me make sure that I understand your objection, Socrates, so that when I have explained myself you will not complain that I have responded to an argument that you did not make.

S: Please do.

E: I have said that God has reasons for commanding and forbidding as he does. I have also said that the reason that actions are right is that God commands them, and the reason actions are wrong is that God forbids them.<sup>8</sup>

S: This much is clear to us both.

E: Very good. And you think that this means that the reason that an action is right is actually the reason that God has for commanding it, and the reason an action is wrong is actually the reason that God has for forbidding it, so that God's commands do not change what is right and wrong, as those reasons exist whether God commands or not, and whether he forbids or not.

S: You have understood me well. This is just the objection I have.

---

<sup>8</sup> The argument Euthyphro moves into here is an argument that if God has reasons to command this does not mean that he must, morally speaking, command as he does. While Euthyphro's argument that follows is adequate, it may not be the only one available to him. If William Alston is right, then it is not unthinkable that God might – at least sometimes – have moral reasons for commanding as he does. He suggests a distinction between being morally good, and doing what is morally right in the sense of obligatory, a distinction between value and duty. But since my Euthyphro and Alston both agree that God is not subject to moral obligation, Euthyphro does not need to appeal to Alston's argument, even though he could, and since I am not yet sure I can defend Alston's position, I merely note the fact. Alston, "Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists," in Michael D. Beaty (ed.), *Christian Theism and the problems of Philosophy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 303-326.

E: Then I think that you are not yourself today, for in many other situations you do not reason like this at all, and nor should you ever. Tell me Socrates, are you married?

S: My good man! I am a philosopher! Wisdom makes a man miserable, and no woman could bear my company continually.

E: Well then, am I married?

S: I think it strange that you should ask me, but yes, you know you are.

E: Let us say then, that my wife is angry with me.

S: Why? Is she angry with you?

E: No, everything is fine. But let us imagine what it would be like if she were.

S: As you wish.

E: In fact, let us imagine that she is so angry with me that she phones me while I am in the pub with my friends, and asks me to come home.

S: Why would an angry wife do that, Euthyphro?

E: Her motive in doing that is that she wants to argue with me when I get home.

S: Oh dear, Euthyphro, are you sure everything is alright?

E: It is a story, Socrates, and nothing more. Now, let us say that I am in a good mood, and I am not at all upset with my wife, and because I love her and wish to please her, I agree to go home. Now tell me Socrates, what is the reason that my wife wants me to go home? Is it not so that she can argue with me?<sup>9</sup>

S: Yes, you said so.

E: I did. And what is the reason that I am going home? Is it not because my wife asked me to?

S: Certainly.

E: So my reason for going home is not that my wife wants to argue with me?

S: By no means, friend! On the contrary, that may be a reason *not* to go home!

E: So my wife's reasons for asking me to go home are not the reasons that I would go home?

---

<sup>9</sup> This illustration is essentially the same as that found in Baruch Brody, "Morality and Religion Reconsidered," Paul Helm (ed.), *Divine Commands and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 143.

S: Indeed not.

E: Then likewise, God's reasons for commanding are not my reasons for obeying?

S: By the gods! You have laid me a snare!

E: No, Socrates. You have laid yourself a snare. You have convinced yourself now that if God has reasons for commanding, those reasons are not what make it right for us to do the things that God commands, and his commands alone may serve that purpose. And so we may say that an action is right if God commands it, and an action is wrong if God forbids it, and this does not mean that God can make just anything right, and in avoiding this charge, we do not make rightness independent of God's commands.

S: This was much easier back in Athens!

And so we leave our two friends. Socrates has discovered that when he steps out of Plato's dialogue and into mine, things turn out rather differently for him. While general textbooks or collections of readings or University course texts in undergraduate classes in ethics around the world make passing references to the famous Euthyphro dilemma as though it is a perpetual embarrassment to theologically grounded ethics, they are successful only because they attempt to place the reader in the unfortunate position that Euthyphro is in: in the first place, philosophically unresourceful and not particularly reflective, and secondly, shielded from the responses to the supposed dilemma that have been published since that time. It might be answered in turn that all I have done is to provide Euthyphro with the answers that *Socrates* did not have access to, and so I did not give him the chance to offer a rebuttal. This is true. However, my point here has not been that there are no further arguments that Socrates could marshalled against the coherence or plausibility of theologically grounded ethics. My point is that the arguments that Socrates *did* use cannot be simply reprinted or repeated to a class as though they are respectable arguments, and could very easily have been answered by a better informed Euthyphro. And yet, they *are* simply reprinted and repeated to classes around the world as though they were adequate. As I type this I have sitting on my desk a course text from my own University where the dilemma is presented as a crippling argument against theologically grounded ethics. Likewise, Peter Singer's

*Practical Ethics* went into print in its second edition claiming that divine command ethics were annihilated by Plato in the *Euthyphro*. A simple internet search will quickly provide dozens of examples of lecturers in ethics – professional philosophers – at Universities worldwide who appeal to the power of this dilemma as a crushing defeater of theologically grounded ethics. Qualified philosophers just *are* ignoring what has been said about the dilemma in the literature over the centuries, and especially the last century. For this reason alone I submit this alternative outcome to the dialogue as one that far better displays the actual merits of Socrates' argument, which are simply unimpressive.