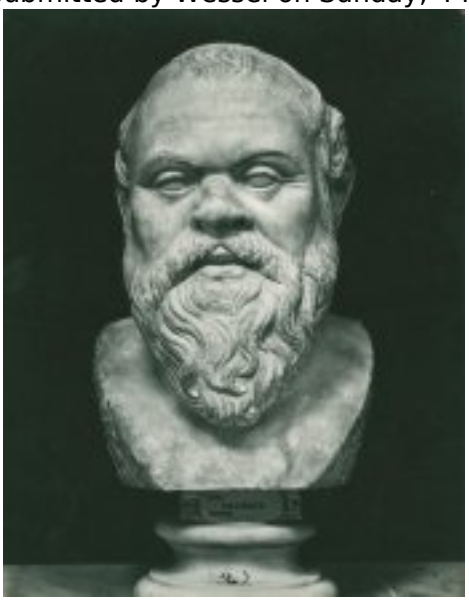
Responding to the Euthyphro Dilemma [1]

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Introduction

The Euthyphro dilemma is an argument meant to illustrate a difficulty which theism faces. This difficulty is, from where does goodness come? If something is good because God decreed it as such, we are in a precarious situation where God can command something truly horrible as being good, such as murder or genocide. On the other hand, if God knows what is good from a transcendent source and simply relays it to us, then God is not all powerful, but Himself dependant on abstract, transcendent truths.

The Euthyphro dilemma is the bane of Christian apologists. Not because it is an effective refutation of theism, but because it is a tired argument which has already been refuted many times. Yet, still, armchair anti-theists, and even philosophical scholars, believe that the Euthyphro dilemma is a death knell to theism1.

In this article I aim to undertake to refute the Euthyphro dilemma. The refutation is not anything new, but I aim to do it in a way, possibly novel, where the originator of this argument is turned upon himself.

Background to Plato and Socrates

We know that Socrates was a real person and a philosopher who lived in Athens and was executes there in 399 BC. Socrates did not write anything down, however, so we do not have any of his ideas preserved from his own pen. He did, however, have a profound influence on his greatest student, Plato. In contrast to his teacher, Plato wrote prolifically. Particularly, he wrote in the style of *dialogues*. Instead of writing abstractly in dry prose, Plato's works are in the form of two or more people having a conversation, with events happening in between (not unlike a modern stage or movie script). Socrates often appears in these dialogues, and it is not exactly clear when Plato conveys Socrates' own words, or when Socrates is used liberally in a fictional setting to convey Plato's own thoughts and ideas.

Another thing which needs to be understood about Socrates, is that he is famous for what is called the *Socratic method*. The Socratic method is a way of conducting a discussion (or even of giving

instruction) where one person drives the discussion through asking questions. In Plato's dialogues, Socrates uses this method to get people thinking about statements and ideas which they take to be obvious, and then leads them to realise that what they take for granted is not at all obvious. Examples of concepts with which Socrates and his interlocutors struggle include the natures of virtue, justice and beauty. Sometimes Socrates himself does not have an answer, and the dialogue ends in an impasse, leaving the question open for the reader to continue to ponder.

Background to Euthyphro

The *Euthyphro* is one of Plato's dialogues. It is not intended primarily as a theological discussion, but examines the nature of virtue. Outside of the courthouse, Socrates meets his friend Euthyphro, who is there to prosecute his father for murder. Socrates takes exception to Euthyphro's confidence in the cause of justice and ethics, and the two men enter into a discussion (via the Socratic method).

It is during this discussion that the Euthyphro dilemma is brought up by Socrates:

> "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?"

Note that the setting of this time period in Greece is polytheistic; while there where people who had monotheistic leanings (e.g. Xenophanes of Colophon, who lives before Socrates), most people adhered to the Greek pantheon of gods.

Socrates' Pet Peeve

We need one more thing in our arsenal of historical background before we can turn to why the Euthyphro dilemma does not work. In ancient Greece, there was an art form known as rhetoric. Rhetoric was the mastery of language and persuasion. In essence, it was the tools of language and effective delivery to an audience in order to convince other people of a particular point or idea. For example, someone might hire a rhetorician[2] to represent them at a trial to convince the jury of their innocence. Interestingly, rhetoric stood apart from the tools of logic. The truth was, often, immaterial to a rhetorician. Their primary purpose was to convince people; of what, it did not really matter. A skilled rhetorician could just as comfortable argue for two opposite sides of a matter.

For this reason, Socrates did not like the art of rhetoric much. He saw it as a way of messing with people's minds—most often with people who perhaps may not be less intelligent, but less educated and clued in. This is evident from the dialogue of Plato featuring sophists (e.g. the *Gorgias*), particularly the *Euthydemus*.

The Problem with the Euthyphro Dilemma

Finally we have enough historical background to understand why the Euthyphro dilemma fails. The key to understanding the solution is to look at one of the devices regularly employed by the rhetoricians: the false dilemma. In a false dilemma, two contrasting outcomes are proposed as the only option, while other viable options exist. This is possible because of oversimplification. For example, someone could be asked what their favourite pastry is: a Danish or a strudel. By immediately being posed with a limited set of choices, a person may feel pressured or obligated to select one of the options, even if their favourite pastry is, in fact, a baklava.

It is perhaps ironic that it was Plotinus who would propose a solution to the existence of evil that would also "solve" the Euthypho dilemma, albeit indirectly. It is ironic, because Plotinus is considered to be the founder of Neoplatonism. Neoplatonism was a revival and reinvention of Plato's theories and philosophies and it had a dramatic effect on Western philosophy and thought in late antiquity and, to a degree, all the way through to the present day.

Plotinus described goodness (what we can think of in the current discussion to be moral or piety, as used in the sense of the Euthyphro dilemma) not as an attribute which God[3] has, but what is essential to God and emanates from Him. Where this emanation does not reach, or where it is diminished, is where one finds evil, because evil is the *absence of good*. This concept has been discussed in a previous article [2].

Putting this all together, we can see that Socrates, just like the rhetoricians, posed a false dilemma to Euthyphro. It is a difficult false dilemma to discern, to be sure, and it is unlikely that Plato/Socrates realised this himself and did it intentionally. We are not constrained by only two opposites, but need to look at what is left outside of what is being asked, which should be included in the question.

Conclusion

The Euthyphro dilemma still carries force for many people. It is concerning people being ignorant, or dismissive, of responses to it. I do not believe that Euthyphro must disappear from discussion. Christians need to be equipped to think through and answer it, and people who raise the dilemma in sincerity need to be open to listen to responses.

- 1. The impetus for writing this article was when I listened to the debate "Is There Meaning to Life? [3]" between William Lane Craig, Rebecca Goldstein and Jordan Peterson. Professor Goldstein, who is a professor of philosophy, and formerly a devout Jewess, but now an atheist, presented the Euthyphro dilemma as a serious challenge to Dr. Craig, to his incredulity. I have other thoughts on the debate, such as that Dr. Craig overstretched his argument with persistent references to cosmic annihilation, thereby opening himself up to numerous attacks later in the debate, but those thoughts are for another time.
- 2. In ancient Greek culture, these rhetoricians where the Sophists.
- 3. Plotinus was not a monotheist, and so he did not use the language of God. Instead, he has the concept the One, which is an even more abstract construct. By relating the One to the soul (which is part of the divine) in a complicated manner, he arrives at this privation theory (that is, that evil is the absence of good) as the soul being "forgetful" of its divine nature, thereby becoming ensnared by the physical world. We can crudely say about Neoplatonism that what is spiritual is good and proper, while what is physical is tainted and lesser.

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