EUTHYPHRO, SOCRATES, AND PROFESSOR PANGLOSS

Brian Vroman

In his article 'A New Euthyphro' (*Think*, Summer 2010), pp. 65–83, Glenn Peoples constructs a new version of the famous Euthyphro dialogue, in which Euthyphro, rather than Socrates, prevails.

It is my contention that Peoples's dialogue is based on some rather odd errors in reasoning, and that these errors can best be clarified in the form of another dialogue. Further, Peoples is in danger of falling into the 'Best of All Possible Worlds' trap: thus a cameo appearance by Professor Pangloss of *Candide* fame, is necessary.

The Dialogue

Socrates: Oh, hello Euthyphro. Nice to see you again.

Euthyphro: Same here. By the way, Socrates, in our last discussion, was I able to convince you of the veracity of my position?

Socrates: Well, it really was an interesting conversation, but I must say I am not yet convinced.

Euthyphro: What! I don't know how I could be more clear, Socrates.

Socrates: On the contrary, Euthyphro. I understood quite well what you were saying, I just don't find your reasoning cogent.

Euthyphro: What! Do you mean to insult me, Socrates?

Socrates: Believe me, Euthyphro, I have no such intention. I am merely searching for the truth. I hope you will once again agree to be my interlocutor.

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Euthyphro: OK, fine. But it has been awhile, and as you know, I am a busy man. So refresh my memory: where did we leave off last time?

Socrates: Well, contrary to my normal practice, I actually wrote down some of your statements. Near the end of our discussion, you said:

> '... 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.'[1]

Euthyphro: Yes, I remember now. What's wrong with that?

Socrates: Well, let's analyze what you are saying here. You are saying both that an action is right if God commands it, and yet that this does not mean that God can say just anything is right. This seems contradictory.

Euthyphro: I will admit that it seems contradictory. But do you remember why I said it?

Socrates: Well, to avoid the charges of putting words in your mouth, why don't you restate your position in your own words?

Euthyphro: OK, my memory is better than I realized. I said:

> '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 desire permit him to.'[2]

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Socrates: Yes, I remember now. I must say I find it a bit strange to say that God *cannot* command something that is in his power. It seems to me that if he really cannot do something, it is not in his power . . . or at least that is something in need of further consideration. But let's not quibble, and drive on to the main point . . .

Euthyphro: But Socrates, I am not sure it is quibbling. It is important to understand that God cannot do something against his own nature.

Socrates: That may be true. But look, Euthyphro. The issue is this: is God's nature the measure or standard of the Good, or is there some standard of Good to which God is subject? If we say that God is Good when he stays true to his nature, we affirm the former; if we say that God's nature can be judged with reference to something else, we obviously say the latter.

Euthyphro: OK, Socrates, I see you do not really get it yet – either that or you are just a very stubborn man. But I will humor you. Can you state your position in a different way?

Socrates: I would be glad to. But as you know, my propensity is to ask questions rather than to make assertions. So, as you did so many centuries ago, would you perhaps agree to let me ask a few questions?

Euthyphro: Oh, here we go. Why not?

Socrates: Excellent. Here is my first question then. Can you please define for me the word *is*?[3]

Euthyphro: What! Have you lost your mind? I thought we were having a serious discussion here . . . or, dare I ask, are you finally getting a bit senile? Or maybe you have been watching tapes of Bill Clinton's impeachment hearings?

Socrates: Well, Euthyphro, I am quite serious, actually and I think this goes to the very heart of the matter.

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I believe you have already said that God is benevolent. Is this the same as saying that God is Good?

Euthyphro: Of course.

Socrates: Well, what exactly do you mean when you say that?

Euthyphro: Well . . . Isn't it obvious?

Socrates: Not at all. You see, Euthyphro, I can think of at least two possible meanings of the statement 'God is Good,' and it all depends on that little word 'is.' We might be using 'is' in a descriptive sense, in other words, saying something *about* God, or we might be using it in the sense of meaning 'equivalent.'

Euthyphro: I'm not sure what you mean, Socrates.

Socrates: Well, let me see if I can explain. As you know, there have been a good many inventions over the centuries since we met in Athens. I have sort of been impressed with automobiles, or 'cars' as they are often called, even though they are probably a bad idea because they pollute the environment. Anyway, if I say 'that car is red,' I am saying something *about* the car. Do you understand what I mean, Euthyphro?

Euthyphro: Clearly, Socrates.

Socrates: And if I say 'God is Good' in this sense, I am saying something *about* God?

Euthyphro: Yes, that follows.

Socrates: And in this case, God and the Good are two separate things.

Euthyphro: What! You have lost me, Socrates.

Socrates: Well, remember, Euthyphro, we are using 'is' in a descriptive sense at the moment.

Euthyphro: Well, yes . . .

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Socrates: So when we say 'God is Good,' we are describing him, just as when we were saying 'the car is red.' Certainly, in using 'is' as we are, we wouldn't say that 'the car' and 'red' are the same thing?

Euthyphro: No, of course not. We are saying that red is an attribute of the car, just as Goodness is an attribute of God.

Socrates: But when we say that Goodness is an attribute of God, we are not saying that Goodness and God are the same thing.

Euthyphro: Why not Socrates?

Socrates: Because if we were, we would be using 'is' in the other sense – the sense in which it means 'equivalent.'

Euthyphro: So what's wrong with that?

Socrates: Well, if we say 'God is Good' in that sense, the terms would be interchangeable. We would be able to say 'Good is God,' which would be akin to saying 'red is the car.' This is the case because we are saying the two words signify the same thing. So again, if this is what we mean, we would be able to say not only 'God is Good,' but 'Good (or the Good) is God.'

Euthyphro: OK, what are you driving at, Socrates?

Socrates: As we said, if we use 'is' in the equivalent sense, we can say 'God is Good' or 'Good is God' interchangeably. It seems to me like this could mean one of two things: either whatever God does, thinks, or says is Good; or it can mean there is some other sort of 'Good' out there – and I must say I do not believe in some of the ideas my student Plato envisioned, but that would be one sort of example – which is God. I don't think you mean to take either one of these positions.

Euthyphro: No, I guess not.

Socrates: Then when you say 'God is Good,' you are using 'is' in the descriptive sense.

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Euthyphro: Yes, that is the case.

Socrates: Thus when you say 'God is Good,' you are describing God. And when you use the word 'Good,' you must have something in mind?

Euthyphro: OK, Socrates, I see you want to play some more word games. I'll go along – why not? Yes, when I say 'God is Good,' I am indeed saying something about God, but I still maintain that 'Good' is internal to his nature, and not prior to it.

Socrates: Fine. But then it seems you have the same old problem.

Euthyphro: Why do you say that, Socrates?

Socrates: Because if Goodness is internal to God's nature, then the Good is arbitrary. It might so happen that God favors mercy and justice and all the rest, but if he happened to like rape, murder, and mayhem, then we would have to call those things Good. Of course, this is not what you mean. You know perfectly well that such things are not Good, and when you say Goodness is internal to God's nature, you have a standard for Goodness which you believe his nature reflects.

Euthyphro: But do you remember what I said in our last conversation, Socrates? I said:

> '... the horrid things you suggest that God might command ... are only horrendous in worlds where God forbids them.'

Socrates: You speak of different possible worlds; I have a hard enough time understanding this one. But notice that you refer to 'horrid' things, even though you go on to argue that they may only be 'horrendous in worlds where God forbids them.' Now, I am going to take the conversation exactly where I suspect you do not want it to go, but where I think it must go. If what you are saying – that horrid things might only be horrendous in

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worlds where God forbids them – if this is the case, are they horrendous *because* God forbids them?

Euthyphro: Well, I guess that is another way of putting it. But remember last time, I pointed out that you were confusing causation with identity.

Socrates: I have thought more about that, and have decided that that is not a confusion, but an important issue. If the Good is a matter of identity, I think it is hard to say that God, or God's nature, or however you want to frame it, is the measure of the Good, because then once more we have to say that whatever his nature happened to be would be good. On the other hand, if God causes something to be Good, then why couldn't God make anything Good? But it seems absurd to say that child rape or something similar is Good, even if somehow positive consequences ensue. Whatever Goodness results is not inherent to the abhorrent act, and in any case, an omnipotent God could have brought those consequences about in some other way. Let me give you an example – I have taken to reading the newspapers in the last few years, and I remember some time ago reading about a father who secretly constructed a dungeon underneath his house. He then forced his teenage daughter into the dungeon, where he repeatedly raped her and forced her to bear, as it were, her own brothers and sisters. Now you seem committed to say that in some possible world, God could actually command such an atrocity, and we would be bound to say it was Good *because* he commanded it. Then child rape, murder, genocide, and so on are not inherently bad, but are bad only because God forbids them. I think this is a hard position to accept. Further, you say God has his reasons for commanding such things. But if God is all you say he is, would he not want to achieve his purpose through some benevolent end, and would not, due to his omnipotence and omniscience, such an end be available to him?

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Euthyphro: Oh, please Socrates . . .

Suddenly, another man appears on the scene. He is a strange looking fellow, with a disfigured face and no nose.

Euthyphro (Shocked at the man's strange appearance) *Ahhh!* Um . . . Hello . . . who are you?

Stranger: Well, I should think my fame would precede me. I am Dr. Pangloss, Professor of metaphysico-theologo-cosmolo-nigology. I came because I heard someone discoursing on possible worlds, and I just wanted to remind you that this is the best-of-all possible worlds. When we have hurricanes, they are the best of all possible hurricanes. Our pedophiles are the best of all possible pedophiles – how could God have it any other way – and our wars are the best of all possible slaughters. Now, we must conclude that all of this is not only good, but Best, because it fully conforms with God's nature, and He is the Best of All Possible Beings . . . Thus God's intentions for this world – even when he permits the rape of babies – are the best of all possible intentions, and all must therefore be for the best.[4]

Euthyphro: But couldn't God create a world that is not the Best of All Possible Worlds?

Pangloss: Oh, heavens no! I heard you speak earlier of God's nature, which he cannot violate. Thus, there is only one possible world, which is this one, and it is certainly The Best of All Possible Worlds.

Pangloss: May I ask . . . what became of your nose?

Pangloss: I lost it due to exposure to the Best of All Possible social diseases, contracted from the Most Beautiful Paquette. The malady can be traced back to Columbus, that Greatest of All Possible Explorers, and through a Jesuit, a member of the Greatest Possible Holy Order.

Socrates: And was it worth it?

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Pangloss: All is for the Best in the Best of All Possible Worlds.

Socrates: Have you, like me, read any of the history that has transpired since you were a character in a book? And I must say I am familiar with Voltaire and quite like him.

Pangloss: Why, yes! How could a learned man like me not study the events of the Best of All Possible Worlds?

Socrates: Then you must be familiar with what has come to be known as the Holocaust. How could something so overwhelmingly awful be allowed by a Deity in the Best of All Possible Worlds?

Pangloss: Well, that's easy. Many rather impressive theologians – that is, the kind that understand the sort of world we are living in – have pointed out that if the Holocaust had not happened, the Jews would never have returned to Israel; Elie Wiesel would never have won the Nobel Prize, there would be no Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC (with its delicious matzah ball soup, and all sorts of wonderful things would never have happened, making this something less than the Best of All Possible Worlds.

Euthyphro: But wait a minute? I maintain that other possible worlds are plausible. And God may have reason for commanding things in such alternate worlds that he would never expect from us here. The *net* result might turn out to be just as good . . .

Pangloss: But what you are saying, then, is that a Perfect Being is capable of Imperfection, and this seems implausible, as it would make him imperfect. Perfect is as perfect does, you know. Thus it follows that we live in the Best of All Possible Worlds, and it follows that it is the only one that could be actualized. Otherwise, the aspects of good that are lacking in other worlds would be supplied by using this world as a model. It is

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inconceivable to think that there are any possible worlds other than this one.

Socrates: So, do you think that what God commands in this Best of All Possible World is right because God commands it, or does God command it because it is right?

Pangloss: Well, God would never command something that is not right, because that would make him something less that the Best of All Possible Beings.

Socrates: And does this not mean that there is a standard of Good or right by which we can judge God?

Pangloss: Well, I'm not sure of the question. All I know is that in my study of metaphysico-theologo-cosmolo-nigology, I have concluded beyond the shadow of a doubt that this is the Best of All Possible Worlds, and All is for the Best.

Socrates: As much as I hate to admit it, even I have my limits … Euthyphro, this man is a first-rate idiot, and there seems to be no hope for him. Shall we return once more to ancient Athens?

Euthyphro: We shall, Socrates. I really see no need for a dialogue with this strange and ridiculous creature.

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Notes

[1] G. Peoples, 'A New Euthyphro', *Think: Philosophy for Everyone*, vol. 9, no. 25 (2010) pp. 65–83.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Discussion of the meaning of the word 'is' is based loosely on the work of Kai Nielsen.

[4] Voltaire, *Candide*, (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1970), chapters I–IV.

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