

GENESIS 1'S SOLUTION TO THE EUTHYPHRO PROBLEM

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Abstract

Plato's *Euthyphro* presents a puzzle about priority: is deity prior to morality, or vice versa? A Neoplatonic solution identifies God with the Good, claiming the dilemma to be illusory. If we treat the orders of being and power as distinct, however, the God of Genesis 1 may seem to be prior in one order, while goodness is prior in the other; the picture becomes complex, with the various senses of priority apparently balancing out. Without being either Neoplatonic or following other ancient theologies, therefore, Genesis 1 challenges Plato's dichotomy, highlighting the potential for finding philosophical resources in theological texts.

A Problem of Priority

A philosopher who discovers a problem that not only survives the worldview that first made it urgent, but becomes even *more* of a challenge for the successor worldview, is surely onto something deep. One can imagine how enlightening it might be to survey all such thinkers and puzzles, searching for insights in whatever patterns emerge. The number of subjects for such a study, of course, might prove prohibitively large, or might turn out to be patternlessly small. But whatever the study's extent, the question of where to start would be simple.

In the beginning, the Euthyphro Problem read, "Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?" (Plato 2002, 10a). With the passing of ancient Greek religion and the advent of Christian theology, however, the Problem took on an "updated and simplified form," such that it

now reads (1) “is something good because God ordains it or does God ordain it because it is good?” (Cottingham 2011, 50); (2) “Is what is good good because God wills it? Or does God will it because it is good?” (Chappell 2011, 63);¹ or (3) “Does God will x because x is good, or is x good because God wills x ?” (Le Poidevin 2011, 208).

The current incarnation of the Problem has preserved the basic gist of the original while reducing the number of deities to one, exchanging the notion of piety for moral goodness in general, and replacing affection with volition. So long as variations share this basic form—e.g., (4) “Did Yhwh command something because it is moral, or was something moral because it was commanded by Yhwh?” (Gericke 2011, 90) and (5) “Are actions that are obligatory, obligatory because God commands people to do them? Or does God urge humans to do them because they are obligatory anyway?” (Rahimi 2009, 753)—they remain recognizably the same puzzle.

The various reformulations, therefore, have not multiplied the question so much as revealed its heart. The Euthyphro Problem is fundamentally a dilemma regarding priority: Is God prior to the Good, or the Good prior to God? Does deity come before morality, or morality before deity? There are multiple types of priority, however—one thing can be prior to another in time (temporal priority), being (ontological priority), power (dynamic priority), goodness or value (melioric or valoric priority), knowledge (epistemic priority), etc.—and the different types often intermix. A parent, for example, not only existed before her child, but sustains her child and is stronger than her child. Thus the parent “has priority over,” or “comes before,” her child in the orders of time, being, and power (though perhaps not in value, at least on her own self-effacing assessment).

Though it may often be phrased in terms of ontological priority, Plato’s original formulation of the Euthyphro Problem can be read in two ways. The first would have the question be equivalent to, “Does the gods’ attitude toward a pious thing derive from (depend upon) the fact that the thing is pious, or does a thing’s being pious derive from (depend upon) the gods’ attitude toward it?” When understood in this way, the question is about what is prior to what in the order of being. An alternative reading, however, would have the question be equivalent to, “Is the gods’ attitude toward a pious thing controlled

(determined) by the fact that the thing is pious, or does the gods' having this attitude toward the thing control (determine) its status as a pious thing?" When understood in this way, the question is about what is prior to what in the order of power.

A similar ambiguity can be found in Genesis 1, which, like the *Euthyphro*, centers on the issue of priority. Traditionally, this priority has been understood as temporal and ontological, with the very being of the world's material substrate depending upon God for its origin. Over the past century or so, however, many scholars have argued that the central sense of priority in Genesis 1 is dynamic. Not only is there no creation *ex nihilo* in v. 1, the argument goes, but the opening verses of the chapter are an appropriation of the ancient "creation by *Chaoskampf*" theme, in which the world arises out of a battle between the primary god and chaos. Readers influenced both by the respectability of the new paradigm and the venerability of the old, therefore, may no longer be sure exactly what lesson to take from the Bible's first creation story.

What I have just called "ambiguities" in *Euthyphro* and Genesis, however, would not have appeared as ambiguities to the Christian Neoplatonic tradition, which offers what is now the standard Christian response to the Euthyphro Problem. That tradition's notion of hierarchy identifies being "higher" with being "better," being "more fundamental," and having "greater power" (Augustine 1993, I.7, I.10–11, and II.5–6; Boethius 2001, III.10 and IV.2–3). It does not, therefore, see melioric or valoric priority, ontological priority, and dynamic priority as independent things that might potentially be confused. Rather, it sees them as aspects of the same hierarchical reality which must necessarily co-vary.

We tend to think of reality more democratically than hierarchically today, and find it difficult to accept that a thing with ontological and dynamic priority would also thereby *necessarily* be meliorically or valorically prior. Nevertheless, language of "higher" and "lower" can still be useful as a way to refer to the coincidence of both ontological and dynamic priority, wherever that might occur, and I intend to use it as such in contrasting Genesis 1's implicit response to the Euthyphro Problem with that offered by the Christian Neoplatonic tradition.

Three Solutions to the Dilemma

Though the Euthyphro Problem poses a question all religious thinkers must eventually answer, it was not a “dilemma” in the modern sense for Plato. To him the answer was clear: The Good is above the gods; the Good provides the standard up to which the gods must live in order even to qualify as gods (Plato 1992, 379c–383c and 504d–517c; Chappell 2011, 65; Wainwright 2005, 73). For Christian philosophers and theologians, however, the Euthyphro Problem is a genuine conundrum (Cottingham 2011, 50; Kraal 2011, 100; Le Poidevin 2011, 208; Rahimi 2009, 753). If God is prior to the Good, then God is beyond good and evil, so we have no guarantee that God will abide by what we understand to be good. God would seem to have the ability not only to decide what is and is not good but also to change that decision at will. However, if the Good is prior to (“above”) God, then God is not that than which no greater can be thought, and thus God is not God (Chappell 2011, 63).

There have traditionally been two responses available to the Christian when it came to addressing the Euthyphro Problem. The first, offered by what is now called Divine Command Theory, bites the Euthyphronic bullet, holding that goodness must be determined solely by appeal to God’s moral decrees (cf. Gericke 2011), which means that God is ontologically prior even to goodness (at least in the human realm). This answer accords well with the traditional reading of Genesis 1, in which God is seen as ontologically prior to all things, although the two are not necessarily connected.

The second, and more popular response to the Euthyphro Problem (at least amongst the Church’s philosophers) is that offered by the Christian Neoplatonic tradition, and most especially by Augustine and Boethius. It accuses the Euthyphro Problem of posing a false dichotomy (Kraal 2011, 101–02; Chappell 2011, 64). Given the choice between saying that God is above the Good and saying that the Good is above God, it asserts that God and the Good are identical.² That is, God is on the same ontological level as the Good—because God is the Good and the Good is God—and therefore God is neither higher nor lower than the Good. God is not prior to the Good, nor is the Good prior to God, since nothing can be prior to itself.

This Neoplatonic solution is similar to the one we might derive from 1 John. There, we are told that “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). This is usually taken to mean not simply that God is loving, but that God is Love Itself. However, when we turn to Genesis 1, we do not find the same type of solution.³ Instead, we find seven assertions that “God saw that x was good” (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, and 31). From these seven assertions, in the context of the Genesis 1 creation story as a whole, one could make a case both for the priority of the Good over God, and the priority of God over the Good.

Debating to a Draw

Pro Bono

The seven assertions that God “saw” something to be good are akin to the Platonic notion that the Good is what it is, and the gods do not have any say in the matter; they either recognize the Good for what it is, or they fail to be godly (Plato 1992, 379c–383c). These claims seem to present goodness as being independent of God, as being an objective property of the things God has made, which God, though perhaps not others, has the ability to see for the good it is (Cottingham 2011, 55). Furthermore, if goodness is an objective attribute of things, not something dependent upon God’s will, then to be truthful, God must recognize those things that are good as being good. That is, the objectivity of goodness might lead us to say that a thing’s or an action’s being good determines God’s attitude toward it, and likewise determines both what God should and will do (see, e.g., Cottingham 2011, 53).

These two facts—the apparent independence of goodness from God, and the apparent control this gives good things over God’s attitudes and choices—therefore, could lead us to conclude that Genesis 1 is an expression of the belief that the Good is higher than God (that is, that the Good is prior *both* ontologically *and* dynamically to God). The first does not give God ontological priority over the Good, and so is compatible with the Good’s being ontologically prior to God, while the second is evidence of the Good’s being dynamically prior to God. The simplest explanation of these two facts may be that the Good is higher than God.

Pro Deo

There is no sense in Genesis 1, however, that this is so, or that God is constrained by the creatures God recognizes as good. After all, everything God recognizes as good is something God has created, and thus over which God has exercised a fundamental type of power. Even if the objectivity of goodness in Genesis 1 implied that the Good was ontologically prior to God, in other words, this implication would be mitigated by the fact that God has dynamic priority over everything good. Since a thing cannot be good (or have any other property) unless it first exists, God chooses what is good (in an important sense) by controlling what *is*.

Pro Bono

Nevertheless, is not God's control over the things that are good controlled by the goodness of things? After all, God's choices regarding what to create are limited to those things that are good. They are good only because they exist, and they exist only because God created them, but God created them only because God saw that they would be good. They were, even *in potentia*, directing God's choices.

Pro Deo

Perhaps, however, God might not have created at all, or might have created that which is "neutral." In the first case, the Good would limit God's options, but not force God's hand, while in the second, the Good would not even limit God's options. The first case, furthermore, is one for which Christian theology has traditionally argued (see, e.g., Cottingham 2011, 53), and the second (a) is implied by the thematization of God's recognition of the goodness of things (why draw attention to their goodness if it were not possible for them to be otherwise?) and (b) is supported by the claim in Genesis 2:18 that God created a situation (a human being's being alone) that was "not good."

Genesis 1, furthermore, portrays God, not goodness, as the creator of everything that exists within our universe. It is not goodness that allowed God into its creation, but God who allowed goodness into God's creation. Thus, Genesis 1 portrays God as having dynamic priority over goodness with respect to the created realm.

And finally, Genesis 1 gives us no sense that there is an opposition between actually independent beings, as if there were two primal

realities locking horns. Genesis 1 does not hypostasize the Good as a Platonist might, and thus cannot be said ultimately to threaten God by opposing to God a potentially higher *being*. God is portrayed as an agent, a being, while goodness is treated as a mere aspect or property of beings.

Decision

This does not mean, however, that Genesis 1 places God above and beyond goodness, since its emphasis on God's reliably achieving and recognizing goodness lacks any note of surprise. There is no implication that morality is arbitrary; things' being good depends on God's will *not* insofar as their being good is something granted to them arbitrarily by God (without which they would have been neither good nor bad), but only insofar as their being good depends on their being at all, and their being at all depends on God. Furthermore, Genesis 1 repeatedly insists is that God "saw" that created things were good, not that God *declared* them to be good.

It would seem, therefore, that Genesis 1 presents us with a draw. God's ability to control the Good's access to the created universe by determining which good-instantiating things are created is balanced by the passivity of God's acts of recognition. Genesis 1's recognition passages *could* have said, "And God called it good," or, "and God declared it good," but the author(s) instead used "saw." Genesis 1 likewise could have had God recognize goodness in something uncreated, but the author(s) instead say(s), "God saw everything *that he had made*, and indeed, it was very good" (1:31, NRSV; my emphasis). If we were to formulate a response to the Euthyphro Problem based on Genesis 1, therefore, we would have to say: "Things are loved or willed by God because they are good, *and* things are good because (they exist, because they were created by God, because) they are loved or willed by God."

Comparisons

Within Genesis 1

The apparent ontological independence of goodness in Genesis 1 threatens God's status by implying that the Good is superior to God, or at least that God may not have ontological priority over the Good. This is offset, however, by God's dynamic priority over those things that are good. A similar situation can be seen with regard to the dark-

ness of Genesis 1:2, 4, and 5. We are told that God creates light, while darkness seems simply to be. However, even if darkness is uncreated at first, it only has a continuing existence because God separates light from darkness. God eliminates darkness by introducing light, and then reintroduces darkness by separating light and darkness into the time periods of Day and Night (Walton 2008, 52).

Something similar might also be said of the material out of which God constructs the universe. While Genesis 1:1 has traditionally been read to say that God creates the formless and empty “earth” (or “deep”) out of which the formed and filled earth is constructed, many scholars now see Genesis 1:1 as describing the work God is about to undertake in the rest of Genesis 1. This leaves open the question of whether God is also the creator of the deep, or whether it is “coeternal” with God. The rest of Genesis 1, however, shows that even if God does not have temporal or ontological priority over the material of the universe (i.e., even if God did not exist before it, or even if its existence does not depend on God), God does have dynamic priority over it (Routledge, 2010). God is able to form and fill it, and thus to control it. God’s power is greater than that of the material out of which the universe is formed.

Between Genesis 1 and Other Religions

Listening with modern ears, it is interesting to note how unsatisfactory this portrayal of divine priority can sound; the philosophical preferences of our day and age are for God to have ontological, and perhaps even temporal, priority over everything. In America, for example, one often sees bumper stickers that read, “My Child Is an Honor Roll Student at x School,” and less frequently, ones that read, “My Child Can Beat Up Your Honor Roll Student.” The latter can only be taken as a joke in our culture. We recognize, at least in our more enlightened moments, that might has nothing to do with right, and thus that power is nothing of which to be proud, in and of itself. The thinking Christian, therefore, typically will not base her devotion to the God of Abraham on that deity’s ability to dominate other beings. Instead, she typically will base her devotion to the God of Abraham on that deity’s being the Alpha and Omega, the Source of All, the One Who Was before All Else, etc.

And yet in other times and places, this was not how people chose their gods. They did not worship a god because it was the first, or because it was the source. They worshiped a god because it was the winner and ruler. Zeus was not the first; he was ontologically derivative. But Zeus won and ruled. Zeus had dynamic priority even though he lacked temporal and ontological priority. Something similar goes for Marduk and Odin, neither of whom came first either in time or ontology. Both, nevertheless, had dynamic priority over the other divine beings. Both won and ruled, and thus were prioritized by the people who worshipped them.⁴

Genesis 1, as is often noted by scholars responding to claims that the story is just another example of *Chaoskampf*, lacks the themes of war and conquest that can be found in other creation stories (Routledge 2010, 72; Walton 2008, 55). Thus, it seems closer to the modern concern with temporal and ontological priority. And yet it is often read by non-scholars if it were concerned only with temporal and ontological priority, even though the issue of dynamic priority is still present (as we saw). One naturally wonders, therefore, whether there has been a shift from the ancient preference for founding one's basic worldview or religion on dynamic priority, to Genesis 1's more intermediate or ambiguous status, to the modern preference for founding our basic worldviews or religions on temporal and ontological priority. That is, has such a general cultural change actually occurred, and is there a coherent story to tell about it?

One might suspect, for instance, that it was with the rise of philosophy that worldviews based on dynamic priority finally gave way to worldviews based on ontological or temporal priority. Socrates's offering of argument as an alternative to physical conflict at the beginning of the *Republic* (327c) comes to mind here, as does the Platonic notion of the Good (and the Neoplatonic notion of the One) as the source of all existence. Perhaps, however, the shift from, "My god can beat up your god," to, "My god was around before your God" (or "My god is the source of all, while your god is just a derivative aspect of the created universe") was accomplished through theological and political reflection on the apparent pacifism of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, which notably devalues exercises of physical power.

Or perhaps the shift away from worldviews based on dynamic priority, and towards those based on ontological and temporal priority, was finally accomplished more recently. In the worldview of modern physics, the universe begins with an explosion of energy that coalesces first into subatomic particles, which only later aggregate into macroscopic objects. This makes parts (particles) prior to wholes both temporally and ontologically, and makes Quantum Mechanics in some sense epistemically prior to General Relativity (just as physics in general is taken to be prior to chemistry, and chemistry to biology, etc.). In our scientific age, then, cosmology still derives from cosmogony, but cosmogony has become a story of temporal and ontological unfolding, rather than of power struggles between agents.

Between Genesis 1 and Christian Neoplatonism

Whatever we eventually conclude about the history of appeals to the various types of priority, we can say (based on the above analysis) that the solution implied by Genesis 1 shows there to be a self-consistent third option that Plato overlooked in formulating the Euthyphro Problem. This “third option,” furthermore, is not—at least *prima facie*—the same as that offered by Neoplatonic Christianity. While Christian Neoplatonists replied, “Neither,” to the question, “Is God prior to goodness, or goodness to God?,” Genesis 1 implies, “Both.” What allows this move to make sense is Genesis 1’s presentation of the relationship between deity and morality as involving distinct senses of priority—senses which the Neoplatonic tradition insisted upon running together. Deity can be prior to morality in one way, even while morality is prior to deity in another, and Genesis 1’s focus on God’s being both a creator and an evaluator allows the differing senses of priority to make themselves seen. Genesis 1, therefore, enables its readers to call into the question the Platonic idea that we must declare either God *or* the Good, *and not both*, to be prior.

But if Genesis 1’s “third option” is not at least *prima facie* the same as the Neoplatonists’, how are the two options related? First, it would seem that they are at least compatible. If God is identical with goodness, then God’s recognizing, rather than dictating, what is good would simply amount to God’s recognizing, rather than willing, God’s own self. This would seem to imply that God has a kind of permanent

“essence,” such that God does not arbitrarily declare what it means to be God (cf. Sartre 1975, esp. 348–49).

Second, the Neoplatonic Christian solution might be seen as revealing the ontological ground of the Genesis 1 solution. We might say, for instance, that the reason God can be the creator of all good things, and yet only recognize things as good—rather than willing them to be so—is that the goodness God recognizes in them is, in some way, God’s own self. Whether we must take this option, however, depends on how tenable the alternative is; perhaps, rather than being identical with God, goodness is simply an essential attribute of God, which other beings can also have (cf. Kraal 2011).

Between Theology and Philosophy

Part of the attractiveness of the Genesis 1 solution, however, is that it does not require us to choose between these two options. It, as it were, gives us a theological fact, and leaves the philosophy open. And yet it makes a philosophical point in the process, in that it shows—once again—that the Euthyphro Problem has presented the tradition with a false dichotomy.

What this means is that religious stories, parables, myths, etc. cannot simply be dismissed by philosophers as irrelevant to their investigations. They, instead, might be better seen as thought experiments through which to examine philosophical questions. Given the question, “Is the Good above God, or vice versa?” we might respond, “Imagine a world in which a single deity creates all the physical objects that are good. Imagine furthermore that this deity has the ability to recognize which of those objects are good, but never simply declares one to be good. In such a world, the dichotomy with which we are presented can be shown to be a false one.” We may have no guarantee that we live in the possible world envisioned by the thought experiment, of course, but the fact that we can imagine such a world should lead us to reexamine the philosophical problem we are trying to solve.

The idea that religious stories might imply novel answers to important philosophical questions, or might be seen as thought experiments that can shed new light on philosophical debates, therefore, should lead us to wonder which other stories in the Bible, and in the sacred traditions of other religions, are simply waiting to be “discovered” and put to work by philosophers.

Notes

1. Anders Kraal's version (Kraal 2011, 100) is identical except for variations in punctuation and capitalization.
2. Kraal, whose thesis is that Alvin Plantinga's objections to divine simplicity (Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* [Milwaukee, Wisc.: Marquette University Press, 1980], 47) fail (Kraal 2011, 103), refers primarily to "St Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. D. Wiesen (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 462–70" (Kraal 2011, 101), saying that "in classical Christian doctrine, God and the good are held to be inseparable in a very deep sense" (Kraal 2011, 100). The idea can also be found implicitly in book II of Augustine 1993, and explicitly in Boethius 2001, III.10.
3. Gericke writes, "to my knowledge no biblical scholar has tried to establish what a given text in the [Hebrew Bible] might imply in response to [the Euthyphro Dilemma]" (Gericke 2011, 90). However, Genesis 1 is not one of the many texts Gericke examines.
4. My thanks to Ruth Kitchin Tillman for helping to clarify the issues in this paragraph for me.

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