

## **Responding to the New Atheists' attacks on the God of the Old Testament-21: "Child Abuse" (Part 10: Abraham, Isaac, and Euthyphro.1)**

Connected with God's command for Abraham to murder his innocent child is the question of what is the foundation of morality. If you believe that Abraham's murder of Isaac would become moral *simply* because God commanded it, then you are a divine-command theorist. The divine-command theorist holds to a subjective view of morality where morality switches on and off according to the will of God. The will of God, not objective (autonomous) morality, determines whether something is moral or not. In the Abraham-Isaac narrative, according to the divine-command theorist, it was moral for Abraham to murder Isaac *solely because* God commanded it. Most Christians and virtually all Calvinists are divine-command theorists. While the theory may sound very pious, it actually denigrates God and destroys any notion of authentic objective moral goodness. Christians who hold to that position are precluded from really appreciating the goodness *in* God. Their focus is always on the will of God instead of on intrinsic goodness in the being of *Esse* Himself.

Many who reject the divine-command theory of morality believe that there is objective morality in the fabric of reality apart from God. This is the dominant view among atheists. This creates other problems: for if there is objective morality apart from God, then one does not need God for morality; furthermore, it means that God Himself is under obligation to these objective moral principles. The divine-command theorists destroy goodness by making it solely based on God's will. Those who believe in objective morality apart from God destroy the sovereignty of God and any need for God with regard to morality. Divine-command theorists believe it was moral for Abraham to murder his innocent son because God commanded it, the autonomous objective moral theorists believe that God was under moral universals in His dealings with Abraham and therefore would be immoral in ordering Abraham to murder his son.

This dilemma of basing morality on the will of God or outside of the will of God is captured in what is known as the Euthyphro Dilemma. I have mentioned this in Bible class in passing, and since we are in the midst of the study of Abraham and Isaac, I believe it is the best time to go over this issue. To appreciate the problem and discover the solution is to gain new insights and appreciation of the goodness of God (far better than retaining a superficial view of God where one is afraid or too lazy mentally to explore the intrinsic goodness of God—it is always easier to be superficial, which explains the current pathological mindset in contemporary Christianity). Substantial thinking about God is hard, but it is always worth it and always changes the life for the better, and it beats being obsessed with our own problems—nothing like a good dose of understanding the greatness of God to take care of being small minded in the throes of the details of life. Before I move into the comparison of God-Abraham-Isaac with Euthyphro's family, we need to understand the Euthyphro background.

Socrates (469–399 B.C) meets Euthyphro outside one of the Athenian courts of law and learns that Euthyphro is there to prosecute his own father on a charge of murder. Socrates is shocked: “most men,” he says, “would not know how they could do this and be right.” And so he supposes that the explanation for Euthyphro’s otherwise bizarre behavior must lie in the fact that the victim, too, was a member of Euthyphro’s family. Here is Euthyphro’s reply:

It is ridiculous Socrates, for you to think that it makes any difference whether the victim is a stranger or a relative. One should only watch whether the killer acted justly or not; if he acted justly, let him go, but if not, one should prosecute, even if the killer shares your hearth and table. The pollution is the same if you knowingly keep company with such a man and do not cleanse yourself and him by bringing him to justice. The victim was a dependent of mine, and when we were farming in Naxos he was a servant of ours. He murdered one of our household slaves in drunken anger, so my father bound him hand and foot and threw him in a ditch, then sent a man here to enquire from the priest what should be done. During that time he gave no thought or care to the bound man, as being a killer, and it was no matter if he died, which he did. Hunger and cold and his bonds caused his death before the messenger came back from the seer. Both my father and other relatives are angry that I am prosecuting my father for murder on behalf of a murderer, as he did not even kill him. They say that such a victim does not deserve a thought and that it is impious for a son to prosecute his father for murder. But their ideas of the divine attitude to piety and impiety are wrong, Socrates (58-E)

From this dialogue emerges what is known as the Euthyphro Dilemma. Here are a few points of summary:

1. What matters to Euthyphro is not that his father should be convicted, or even that he should be tried; what matters is that Euthyphro should, by bringing the case to the judges, publically acknowledge that an injustice had been perpetrated by his father (I think Euthyphro knew that the charge of murder would be dismissed).
2. What drives Euthyphro is the ideal of moral and “spiritual” purity, and he undertakes the legal case against his father in the service of that ideal and with a care for his father’s purification as well as his own.
3. People think Euthyphro is crazy and impious to do this, but Euthyphro is confident that *“their ideas of divine attitude to piety and impiety are wrong.”*
4. Euthyphro’s dogmatic assertion of his accurate knowledge of what is pious/moral/good is seized upon by Socrates with his “Tell me then, what is pious?” (5D). Like most of Socrates’s interlocutors in similar circumstances, Euthyphro finds it very hard to say what he thought he knew perfectly well, and makes a couple of false starts. Finally, he settles on “the pious is what all the gods love” (9E). This is neither surprising or illuminating. Socrates presses him with, “Does God approve of what is pious because it is pious, or is it pious because God approves of it.”

For our purposes in understanding morality and God, we can extract two theories regarding goodness/morality and God: theological objectivism (TO) and theological subjectivism (TS)

- (TO) God approves of right actions just because they are right and disapproves of wrong actions just because they are wrong; or
- (TS) Right actions are right just because God approves of them and wrong actions are wrong just because God disapproves of them.

“Theistic morality” is taken for granted in the stories of Abraham and his son and of Euthyphro and his father: in both stories God approves or disapproves of certain human actions, and human beings have a way of knowing which ones He approves of and which ones He disapproves of.

If Abraham was an adherent of (TS), he would have believed that the horrible deed of murdering his son was *made* morally right just because God commanded it. Furthermore, he would have believed three days later that the same deed was then *made* morally wrong just because then, at the last possible moment, God *prohibited* it. However, if Abraham was an adherent of (TO) then God really does not have anything to do with morality: it is just out there autonomously to which God must be obedient. If (TO) is right then God was not the source or originator of the Ten Commandments, He was only its Transmitter, not unlike Moses. If (TO) is correct we have objective morality that needs no God. If (TS) is right then morality is subjective and perhaps even capricious.

Every believer already has a set of metaphysical presuppositions regarding goodness, morality, and God<sup>1</sup>—whether he realizes it or not. Failure to grasp the solution to this issue precludes a believer from really appreciating goodness/morality as it relates to God and His plan for his life. It will take us a few DDRs to get through this material before we can see the beauty and goodness of goodness and how it relates to God, Abraham, Isaac, and us. We do not have to live wondering about the nature of goodness as it relates to God. We never need to wonder whether something that God brings into our lives is really intrinsically good or just some arbitrary good.

Another day closer to being face-to-face with ‘Ehyeh - אֲנִי־אֶהְיֶה

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<sup>1</sup>A clear illustration of how one must bring his presuppositions to the Bible is in our context of Genesis 22:12, where God says “now I know” after testing Abraham. Is this true? Did God just learn this? What happened to the omniscience of God? A person that says I just believe the Bible and do not bring in philosophical or theological concepts ends up with a God who does not have omniscience and is stuck in time like the rest of us. There are an increasing number of pastors and writers who say that God cannot know certain future events. They are known as Open Theists. What a mess! Yes, philosophy matters, theology matters, because understanding God really matters!