

The Link Between God and Morality

Tim Kocher
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Morality is a huge question that both religious and non-religious people deal with on a daily basis. In my analysis of morality, I will deal primarily with religious morality since I consider God as the key factor in morality rather than an individual. I will analyze morality relative to the story of Abraham and Isaac in the Book of Genesis and examine whether or not Abraham would have been morally justified killing his son because God commanded him to do so.

According to the divine command theory, anything that God commands is morally right. Based on this theory, is Abraham morally right in killing his son? The Euthyphro Dilemma poses a problem to the divine command theory. Is the rightness or wrongness of actions independent of God or do God's approval or disapproval of

actions define morality? I will show in my analysis that the correct nature of a sacrifice and the problems associated with the Euthyphro Dilemma should cause us to invalidate the divine command theory; we cannot use it as a basis of morality. In Norman Kretzman's paper, he evaluates the Euthyphro Dilemma and comes to a solution based on God's simplicity. Based on these ideas, I will conclude that Abraham was not morally justified in killing Isaac.

First, we need to become familiar with the story of Abraham and Isaac as it appears in the Book of Genesis. Already having a direct relationship with Abraham, God commands Abraham to offer his son as a sacrifice:

Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah,

and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you. (Gen 22:2)

God presumably commands Isaac to kill his son as a test of Abraham's commitment and trust in God. While on the mountain, Abraham has every intention to kill. He pulls a knife and is ready to do the deed when an angel appears, emulates Abraham's faithfulness, and tells him not to kill Isaac but instead offer a nearby ram as an offering to God. Abraham does this and spares the life of his son.

I see three interpretations of this story. Some may believe that Abraham would never have killed his son since he knew that an altruistic God would not allow such an awful thing to happen (Kretzman, 419). Abraham already had a relationship with God, so did Abraham have so much trust in God that he knew God wouldn't allow him to go through with it? I think not. There is no evidence in the story for us to believe Abraham knew God was not sincere, so we must assume that Abraham was going to kill his son. Abraham had every intention to do it; he had his knife pulled and was ready for the sacrifice.

Another plausible interpretation is in the nature of the sacrifice. In ancient times a sacrifice was meant as a religious offering to God

by his holy people, a way for followers to show their dedication to their God. Some may see the sacrifice of Isaac as nothing more than a religious ceremony in which Isaac will join God in heaven—a joyous occasion, not a murder as we think of it. This poses a problem in today's society. Based on this argument a person could justify a murder based on religious principles. "The murder of Mike is nothing more than a holy offering to God. You should be thanking me because Mike is in a better place." This is obviously nonsensical. A sacrifice is a murder even if the recipient of the offering is God. Sacrificing my neighbor to my friend, Joe, is no different than a sacrifice to God. It is murder in both situations. If brought to trial, no American jury would believe me if I rationalized the murder as a religious sacrifice. Therefore I must conclude that Abraham's intent was not a sacrifice but murder.

The third way to interpret the story of Abraham and Isaac is by using the Divine Command Theory. According to the Divine Command Theory of ethics, actions are justified based on a direct command by God. Rightness and wrongness depend entirely on what God commands or prohibits. Proponents of the divine command theory believe that actions are morally neutral

unless God directly commands or prohibits it. For example, murder is morally wrong because God prohibits it in the Ten Commandments. In the story of Abraham and Isaac, the proponent of the divine command theory can argue that

Abraham was morally justified in his intended action of killing Isaac because God directly commanded him to do so. Based on this theory of God's commands dictating morality, killing Isaac would be the morally right thing to do. Or is it?

The Divine Command Theory contains many problems as Kretzman outlines in the Euthyphro Dilemma (Kretzman, 419). The dilemma is basically a question of the source of morality. Are actions morally right or wrong because God approves or disapproves of them (Theological Subjectivity), or does God approve or disapprove of actions because they are morally right or wrong (Theological Objectivity)? Theological subjectivity means that God is the subject of morality and defines it. An action is made right because God approves of it and an action is made wrong because God disapproves of it. Theological objectivity means that actions are either right or wrong independent of God. Right and wrong actions are objective and are predefined. God then approves of the right

actions and disapproves of the wrong actions. So are we to believe that God dictates what is right and what is wrong (TS) or are we to believe that God has nothing to do with defining morality (TO)?

There are problems with both of these views. The problem with theological objectivity is that God plays no important role in morality (Kretzman, 432). If God can literally be written out of the story of morality then the view is hardly a theory of religious morality (Kretzman, 432). I think this view also is inconsistent with an absolutely perfect being, specifically omnipotence. If God is omnipotent then he has the power to do anything, even play a role in determining morality. If we accept theological objectivity to be true then God's omnipotence is destroyed. Consequently, the view that actions are objectively right or wrong and God approves of the right actions and disapproves of the wrong actions is not a basis of religious morality and is inconsistent with a theistic absolutely perfect being.

The problem with theological subjectivity is that God can decide what is morally right and morally wrong. This in itself is ok, but the position means that God can command any action to be

right and any action to be wrong at his choosing. It further means that God can take an action that we intuitively know to be wrong and command it to be right and vice versa; he can willingly flip our meaning of right and wrong. Any action can be made morally right in light of God commanding it. This is what we see in the story of Abraham and Isaac as applied the divine command theory. God commanded Abraham to do something that he knows is wrong. How could God do such a thing?

This view is also inconsistent with an absolutely perfect being, specifically immutability and perfect goodness. If God can reverse what is right and wrong then God must change. But if the theistic God is immutable then there is an inconsistency with theological subjectivity. Since the theist believes that God cannot change, he cannot make wrong actions to be morally right. Kretzman adds that we cannot follow this view based on perfect goodness either (Kretzman, 421) He explains that if everything God commands is perfectly good and if God approves of perfectly good actions, then this just means that God approves of himself because God *is* perfect goodness. We can get nothing out of saying that God approves of himself. Consequently, right actions are not morally right just because

God approves of them and wrong actions are not morally wrong because God disapproves of them.

The problems with the Euthyphro Dilemma show that the divine command theory has problems. The two horns of the dilemma are not consistent with an absolutely perfect being and we cannot accept the divine command theory as a basis of morality. So how do we come to a conclusion from the dilemma? Kretzman answers that God is independent and simple (Kretzman, 424). If God is independent then he does not rely on any other being; he is entirely self-existent. He is simple meaning that we can take all the attributes of an absolutely perfect being and say that God is identical with these characteristics (Kretzman, 425). God does not merely *possess* omnipotence, omniscience, immutability, and perfect goodness; rather, God *is* omniscience, omnipotence, immutability, and perfect goodness. Therefore, God as being equal to perfect goodness approves of right actions and disapproves of wrong actions; and actions are either right or wrong because God, equaling perfect goodness, approves and disapproves of them (Kretzman, 426). One might cry the impossibility of these qualities being equal; it is like saying $2=3=4$. Kretzman responds that while

goodness does not equal power, *perfect* goodness equals *perfect* power (Kretzman, 426). The perfect term in front of the qualities implies that the reference is of God, and God *is* perfect goodness and perfect power.

Based on the facts that the divine command theory cannot hold true and the nature of a sacrifice, I propose that it would not have been morally right for Abraham to carry out what God commanded him. We cannot use the divine command theory and both components of the Euthyphro Dilemma as a basis for theistic religious morality because they are not consistent with the characteristics of an absolutely perfect being. Furthermore, a human sacrifice is still

murder even if the offering is to God. We can, however, use the fact that God is simple meaning that God, equaling perfect goodness, approves of morally right actions. Abraham may have been given a direct command by God, but it would be morally wrong for him to carry out the command.

Works Cited

Kretzman, Norman. "Abraham, Isaac, and Euthyphro: God and the Basis of Morality." *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions*. Ed. Eleonore Stump and Ed. Michael J. Murray. 6th. Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1999. 417-427. Print.