

YOUR GOD IS STILL TOO SMALL

Chapter 6

Right, Wrong, and the Moral God

*If you sense the rhythm of right and wrong,
But do not sense the rhythm of God,
Then your God is still too small!*

Most know the story, even if they don't the details. On September 15, 1935, Germany passed the Nuremberg Laws that stripped Jews of citizenship and gave them status as "subjects." Jews were not allowed to marry non-Jews, and over the course of the next few years, being Jewish itself was basically made illegal. They couldn't serve in public office, or work as journalists, broadcasters, farmers, teachers, or actors. They were not allowed to work in the financial sector or as lawyers or doctors. In many towns, they were not even allowed entrance. In others, they were not allowed to buy groceries, drugs, or medicines.¹ Of course, these laws were just Hitler's warm-up. The ultimate atrocities occurred later both in the villages and concentration camps where Jews were used for human experimentation, forced to live in the most inhumane conditions, and frequently worked to death or outright mass-murdered. Hitler and Nazi Germany went about a methodical genocide that was internally termed the "final solution" to what Hitler termed, "the Jewish problem."

After the war, the trials of Nazi war criminals were held in Nuremberg, the same city that birthed the anti-Jewish laws. Reading the transcripts of the trials readily shows the callous attitudes of many leading Nazis who detailed their crimes in a cavalier tone. 38-year-old head of the Central Security Office, Otto Ohlendorf, detailed how matter-of-factly the Nazis often went about it:

The *Einsatz* [a "Special Action Group" in charge of exterminating Jews] unit would enter a village or town and order the prominent Jewish citizens to call together all Jews for the purpose of "resettlement." They were requested to hand over their valuables and shortly before execution to surrender their outer clothing. They were transported to the place of executions, usually an antitank ditch, in trucks—always only as many as could be executed immediately. In this way it was attempted to keep the

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span of time from the moment in which the victims knew what was about to happen to them until the time of their actual execution as short as possible.

Then they were shot, kneeling or standing, by firing squads in a military manner and the corpses thrown into the ditch.²

More graphic details were given by German engineer Hermann Graebe who testified to *Einstatz* executions at Dubno in the Ukraine:

The people who had got off the trucks—men, women and children of all ages—had to undress upon the order of an S.S. man, who carried a riding or dog whip. They had to put down their clothes in fixed places, sorted according to shoes, top clothing and underclothing. I saw a heap of shoes of about 800 to 1,000 pairs...

Without screaming or weeping these people undressed, stood around in family groups, kissed each other, said farewells and waited for a sign from another S.S. man, who stood near the pit...

An old woman with snow-white hair was holding a one-year-old child in her arms and singing to it and tickling it. The child was cooing with delight. The parents were looking on with tears in their eyes. The father was holding the hand of a boy about 10 years old and speaking to him softly; the boy was fighting his tears. The father pointed to the sky, stroked his head and seemed to explain something to him.

At that moment, the S.S. man at the pit shouted something to his comrade. The latter counted off about twenty persons and instructed them to go behind the earth mound... I remember a girl, slim and with black hair, who, as she passed close to me, pointed to herself and said: "twenty-three years old."

I walked around the mound and found myself confronted by a tremendous grave. People were closely wedged together and lying on top of each other so that only their heads were visible... Some of the people were still moving... I looked for the man who did the shooting. He was an S.S. man, who sat at the edge of the narrow end of the pit, his feet dangling into the pit. He had a tommy gun on his knees and was smoking a cigarette.³

While we would love to write off these actions as a singular tragedy of human history, the truth is, similar horrific actions have occurred much too often. Noted historical statistician Matthew White computed the mass brutality of Southwest Africa in the early 20th century killing between 35 and 40 percent of the

population. In Cambodia's ethnic cleansing of the late 1970's, about 21 percent of the population was killed. While accumulating the best data he can, the well-published White asks, "Who was the bloodiest tyrant of the 20th century?" His educated response? "We don't know!" One of the saddest facts of the twentieth century is we cannot decide between Adolf Hitler, Mao Zedong or Iosif Stalin who was responsible for the most deaths. More people died under Mao (40 million), but it is difficult to determine how many were deliberate deaths and how many were passive deaths from the economic restructuring and famines. For more "deliberate killings," Hitler rises to the top with 34 million, but his numbers include military deaths in battle. If only cold-blooded murder of unarmed non-combatants is counted, Stalin leads with 20 million.

The United States State Department analyzed the Serbian forces' ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Albanians in Kosovo between March and late June, 1999. Ninety percent of the Kosovar Albanian people were forcibly expelled from their homes, and about 10,000 were summarily executed in mass killings in less than four months. The accounts of forcible rape and other atrocities are well known, even though they were clearly underreported.⁴

In examining this recent history, we want to probe several questions about morality. As space dictates limitations on our discussion, we will ask these questions with Hitler and Germany as our focus:

1. Can we uncover any reason why Hitler and others would do such a thing?
2. Can we affirmatively say that what Hitler did was morally wrong? If so, how do we know it was wrong?

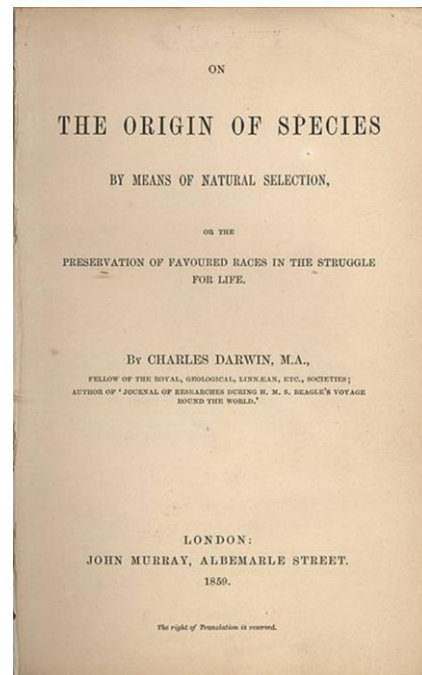
These questions can be asked about any number of "wrongs," but we have purposely chosen actions so heinous that most people readily concede it was immoral, so much so that it does not even bear examination. Most would readily say, "Of course Hitler was wrong! Every normal person knows that, and it is pointless to waste time and energy explaining why!" Notwithstanding such a protest, we will examine these questions anyway, in hopes of pointing out that for many, the examination of morality evidences a belief in a God that is STILL too small.

WHY DID HITLER ATTEMPT JEWISH GENOCIDE?

Let us begin this section setting out certain limitations. We have no interview of Hitler after the fact. We have no notes of his weekly visits to a psychologist where he explained his actions with candor and forthrightness. We also write this comment neither as an analyst with particular skill nor as a historian with a depth

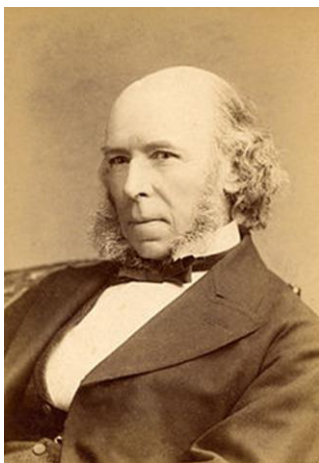
of study in this area. Noting those limitations, we can still read the results of many experts, and look at Hitler's writings as well as the testimony of eyewitnesses and see a picture that indicates, as bizarre as it is, that Hitler and many of his henchmen could have acted as they did, thinking they were acting appropriately.

To better understand some of this, we need to put ourselves into a more historical frame of mind, leaving behind our own experiences and values and trying to submerge ourselves in that of others. In 1859, Charles Darwin (1809-1882) rocked the world with his publication *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin introduced the world to the theory that "natural selection" produced an evolution of life and species. Natural selection was premised on the idea that while species reproduce, food supplies stay relatively constant. The limited availability of food instills a struggle for survival among the potentially growing numbers of offspring, such that the population cannot grow beyond the limits of foodstuffs and other necessities that are finite. Therefore individuals more suited to the environment would survive and thrive, leaving offspring, while those less suited to the environment would not.



We can see this idea of Darwin in the full title of his work:

On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life.

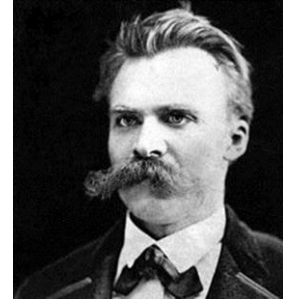


Herbert Spencer

The British philosopher and biologist Hebert Spencer (1820-1903) was a prolific writer on evolution, both before and after Darwin. Spencer is credited with first coining the phrase "survival of the fittest" in his *Principles of Biology* published in 1864. From a biological perspective, this phrase referenced being fit for a particular environment; however, it was extended readily beyond the realm of biology. It became a moniker for the idea that the better races would thrive, while those less fit would not. This was applied beyond biology to economics and other social areas. The idea took fuller form as many began to advocate

that *progress* for humanity was rooted in this principle. Let the better people reproduce and continue to evolve, while those less fit died out.

Into the German intellectual world at this time came a marvelously clever writer and fairly original thinker named Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900), son of a Lutheran pastor. Nietzsche began his studies in theology as well as philology (the study of language), and by the age of twenty had abandoned any faith in God, believing that historical research had trashed any truth behind Jesus and the gospel stories. Nietzsche was well aware of Darwin's works as well as others he read in areas of philosophy and science.



Friedrich Nietzsche

Nietzsche wrote on a number of subjects. One of his later works was entitled, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, first published in 1886. The work thrashes most conventions of his day, including derogatory statements about philosophers:

They all pose as though their real opinions had been discovered and attained through [logic]...whereas, in fact, a prejudiced proposition, idea, or “suggestion,” which is generally their heart’s desire abstracted and refined, is defended by them with arguments sought out after the event.

In other words, philosophers do not logically reach conclusions; they have the conclusion and then try to use logic to justify what they want to believe! This idea will come in usefully later in this chapter.

Nietzsche’s main concern in his argument centered on the approach of philosophers to what is good and evil. Nietzsche was appalled that most thought there was an absolute or objective right and wrong. Repeatedly, Nietzsche indicts those who hold some moral view (he termed it a “moral prejudice”) and masquerade such as “truth.” Nietzsche believed that deep in history, in what he termed the “PRE-MORAL period of mankind,” the value of an action, whether it was “good or bad,” was inferred from its consequences. Nietzsche then indicts the period of history where good or bad was judged by the *origin* of the action rather than the result (*i.e.*, what were the actor’s intentions?).

Hand-in-hand with Nietzsche’s challenge to moral absolutes came his views about the future of the human race. Nietzsche famously wrote of the arrival of an *Übermensch*, most typically translated a “Superman” or “Above-Human,” in his 1883 work, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. This work covered the teachings and travels of a fictional character named Zarathustra. In the work, Zarathustra announced,

“God hath died.” The true hope for humanity was to come from a future “Superman.” In this proclamation, Nietzsche, through his character Zarathustra, charted the evolution of man from worm through ape to man. For mankind today, the ape heritage is proclaimed a painful embarrassment. In like manner, he taught, the human of today will be an embarrassment to the future Superman. Humanity, according to Nietzsche/Zarathustra, was the middle evolutionary state between apes and the Super-Humanity. How is man to get to this higher evolved state? “Man must become better and eviler...The vilest is necessary for the Superman’s best.”⁵

With Nietzsche, Darwin, and others in mind, now enter Hitler, who was eleven years old when Nietzsche died. At the end of 1924, Hitler was released from serving a year in prison where he dictated much of his first volume eventually entitled *Mein Kampf* (meaning, “My Struggle,” an echo of the German translation of Darwin’s book’s mantra “the struggle for survival”). The book was a combination of autobiography, political manifesto, and propaganda. The book sets out his promise of a grand future for Germany and for mankind. Hitler laid the difficulties of Germany’s past at the doorstep of Jews and Marxists. Hitler moved his people toward “racial hygiene,” working to eliminate not only Jewry, but also the disabled, those with serious mental or physical handicaps, homosexuals, Poles, and other undesirable people.

In short, Hitler worked to produce the Master Race, the next evolutionary step in the journey from worm to Super-Human. Hitler’s actions were consistent with those who interpreted Social Darwinism as a notion that the races were unequal and some were more biologically fit to evolve than others. It also fit Nietzsche’s idea that man was set to evolve to something greater and that evil was not something that was absolute, but rather, something that was judged by its consequences, and that achieving the greater man through means some might term “evil” was actually the higher and better good for the course of humanity. While Nietzsche was gone by the time Hitler rose to power, Nietzsche’s sister, Elisabeth Forster-Nietzsche (1846-1935) continued to edit and publish Nietzsche’s works, being his chief promoter, even in his death. Elisabeth set up the “Nietzsche Archives,” which Hitler visited on multiple occasions, and the Nazi government supported financially and otherwise. Elisabeth corresponded with Hitler, and Hitler attended her funeral.



Elisabeth Nietzsche greeting
Hitler outside the Nietzsche
Archives in 1934

Darwin, Nietzsche, and Hitler

In fairness to Darwin and Nietzsche, we should note that neither would likely have approved of Hitler's choices. Darwin's theory depended upon species diversification, and genocide would not have fit well into his approach. Nietzsche was not anti-Semitic and most scholars agree that the anti-Semitic insertions in his writings were the work of his sister, who, along with her husband, were profoundly anti-Semitic.

Examining some of the bases that might have informed Hitler's positions, we can now move to the more important questions of the morality of these actions, and why we can affirm that they were evil.

THE IMMORALITY OF HITLER

As we stated earlier, most everyone readily affirms that Hitler's actions were evil. That is one reason we have chosen him as our basis for this chapter's discussions. We want to hone in on the question of *WHY* we can be so certain his actions were immoral. It is not enough simply to state, "I just know it was wrong." There must be some reasoning offered, or else right and wrong simply is the reflections of the feelings of the person is being asked. "I think it is wrong," one says while another says, "I don't think it is wrong." In the world of suggestions, the ideas fall into certain distinct camps:

1. **Right and wrong is decided by what works to assist society.** Of course, this was the position of Nietzsche and others, which could readily be used to *support* Hitler's actions and agenda. Now one might quibble over the merits of what it means to "assist" society, but if one believed that advancing evolution was good, then it still leaves one in a position that could justify the Nazi horrors.
2. **Right and wrong is decided by what works to assist an individual.** This is closely aligned to the suggestion above, except the issue is defined by what serves an individual rather than society as a whole. Of course, this is similarly inadequate for explaining why Hitler's actions were evil. They seemed to assist Hitler as well as his agenda to further the future of evolution to a Super Human. A related idea is one where how one feels determines right and wrong. This really removes the language of right and wrong from any objective meaning, and does not allow us to say that Hitler's actions were wrong, but rather that they were wrong *to us*. They may have been *good* to Hitler even as they are not to us. A real danger here is found in the hands of those with power and insight into manipulating and conditioning others. If this view of right and wrong is correct, then one

with the power and insight can actually condition society and others to accept certain morals, and we walk right back into a Third Reich. Propaganda, films, speeches, social pressure, the lure of power, and more become the tools of the chosen few to mold right and wrong into whatever serves their purposes, and people blithely buy it, simply “sensing” his or her morality.

3. **Right and wrong is decided by whatever certain people think.** This can be a democratic approach to morality with several permutations. Right and wrong can be what 51 percent or more of people approve or think. Or maybe one might argue it needs to be a clearer preponderance of society, perhaps 75 percent. One might also argue that the people who decide right and wrong should only be a segment of society, for example, the intelligentsia or maybe the more mature (over 18? over 21?). Some might even argue that a smaller, elite group of individuals should decide right and wrong. In all its permutations, this source of values falls woefully short in proving Hitler evil. After all, the electorate in Germany duly appointed him chancellor, heading a coalition government in the German Parliament. From there, his final rise to absolute power was done within the legislative process, in a sense then being approved by the government of the people.
4. **Right and wrong is not decided; it simply exists as a truth, much like mathematics does.** Under this approach, the idea is that there is a right and wrong that is a part of the universe’s truths. Much like 2 plus 2 equals 4, certain things are just “wrong.” There is no real listing of these moral truths; they are to be uncovered just as mathematical truths are uncovered. Over time, we learn of these ethical truths through experience in society and life. There is something about this view that is alluring. It asserts an “absolute” right and wrong that is “objective,” even as it stays safely away from any argument for or against the existence of God. Among the difficulties with this view is its inability to justify any such truth against another without appealing to what one “just seems to know.” This is precisely Nietzsche’s complaint of philosophers referenced earlier in this chapter:

They all pose as though their real opinions had been discovered and attained through [logic]...whereas, in fact, a prejudiced proposition, idea, or “suggestion,” which is generally their heart’s desire abstracted and refined, is defended by them with arguments sought out after the event.

5. **Right and wrong is whatever God has commanded.** This approach might seem quite simple, especially in a book on God, but it is not

necessarily so! Most discussions of right and wrong among philosophers eventually wind their way around to a dialogue between Socrates and a fellow named Euthyphro, written by Plato some 400 years before Christ. As an old man, Socrates was headed to court to face indictment for ruining the young men of Athens. On the way, he met a young man who was headed to court trying to ruin an old man (his father). The two began discussing good and evil, and Socrates pushed Euthyphro into answering the question, “What is good?” Euthyphro’s answer eventually became “what all the gods love is holy” while “what they all hate is unholy.” Socrates then asked the pointed question whether something is holy because the gods love it or whether the gods love it because it is holy.

This is frequently called “Euthyphro’s dilemma.” Does God command acts that are morally good because they are morally good, or do the acts achieve the status of “morally good” because God commands them? If we take this idea out of the abstract and plug in something more concrete, then it might help understand the distinction. Consider the Ten Commandments. Did God command the Ten because they are good? OR, do the Ten Commandments become good because God commanded them?

If we assume the first position is true, namely that there are independent moral standards (the “good”) that God has then commanded, then we are saying God is bound by something outside of himself. God becomes “good” because God measures up to this moral standard. C. S. Lewis saw such an answer as one voiding good of any real meaning:

EUTHYPHRO AND RAP MUSIC

Euthyphro’s dilemma and the debate of right versus wrong in light of God have even made it into rap music. Rappers Jay-Z and Kanye West penned a song “No Church in the Wild,” referencing Euthyphro’s dilemma:

*Is pious pious cause God loves pious?
Socrates asked whose bias do y’all seek?
All for Plato screech!*

To say that the moral law is God’s law is no final solution. Are these things right because God commands them or does God command them because they are right? [Euthyphro’s dilemma rephrased by Lewis!] If the first, if good is to be *defined* as what God commands, then the goodness of God Himself is emptied of meaning and the commands of an omnipotent fiend would have the same claim on us as those of the ‘righteous Lord.’⁶

If we assume the second position is true, and “good” is good because God commands it, then God is no longer a lawgiver, he is simply a means of transmission. God is a law-revealer.

Euthyphro and Socrates came to their discussion with preconceived notions that presented a dilemma on God and morality. The Greeks had notoriously limited

EUTHYPHRO AND GOD

Plato's story of this dialogue puts an ironic twist on the actions of the overly pious. Euthyphro is a "religious professional" who is taking his father to court in a manner that Greeks would have considered impious. Euthyphro tries to justify his actions by claiming it mimics the gods' actions in the traditional stories. Even the name Euthyphro mocks his actions. The name is a composite of the Greek *eu* meaning "good," *thy* the Greek abbreviation for "God," and *phro*, the Greek root for "to judge." Euthyphro is one who is judging what is good to the gods, yet he clearly does not have a clue, at least as Plato relates the story.

gods. In fact, earlier in their dialogue, Euthyphro answered what was right and wrong by simply pointing to the gods and what they hold dear and holy. Socrates then pointed out that the gods often differed, one favoring one thing, which was despised by another. This moved Euthyphro to modify his explanation by what was good and dear to all the gods, in other words, the things to which all the gods could agree. This gives us a clue to the inherent problem of Euthyphro's dilemma, which is simply explained: Euthyphro's gods were all too small!

THE MORALITY OF GOD

If Socrates asked Euthyphro the question posed in Plato's dialogue in a 21st century American courtroom, the opposing lawyer might well stand up and object, claiming, "Socrates assumes facts not in evidence." (The objection could also be to "begging the question.") The objection is based on the idea that there are only two choices and Euthyphro is stuck with choosing from the two. Either (A), God is good because he commanded good deeds or (B), deeds are good because God commanded them. Euthyphro's dilemma is based on either A or B, as if the only choices are A or B; the dilemma asks, "is it A or B?" Yet, there is at least one other possibility beyond A and B. Socrates unfairly assumes that the answer must be A or B. It could also be C! The Biblical view of God goes beyond A and B. Euthyphro's dilemma does not fit well with the Biblical God.

Before stating the third option outright, let us consider some Biblical passages that lead us to it. The passages we will consider evolve around two different words: "law" and "righteousness" (also known as "good").

“Law” in the Bible

The word “law” appears many times in both the Old and New Testaments, in hundreds of verses. The word can convey different meanings in different contexts. Sometimes, “law” refers to the many commands God delivered to Moses on Mount Sinai. These numerous examples include God calling his various ritualistic instructions “laws” (*see, e.g.*, Leviticus 6:9, 14, 25; 7:1, etc.). Sometimes in the Bible, the word “law” refers specifically to the Ten Commandments, as when God commanded Moses to come up on the mountain and wait “that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandments, which I have written for their instruction” (Ex. 24:12). Sometimes the reference is not to the Law of Moses at all, whether in the Ten Commandments or the other more lengthy instructions. Hundreds of years before Moses, God commented on Abraham keeping God’s “commandments, statutes, and laws” (Gen. 26:5). At times, “law” referenced the rules of society and the statutes that people lived under (2 Chron. 19:10; Ezra 7:24, 26).

Not only does the “law” have different meanings in the Bible, but “law” also had different functions in society. There seem to be at least three functions of the law in the Bible.

1. The law functioned as a check on the behavior of the unholy. In this sense Paul wrote of the “law” as something “not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers...” (1 Tim. 1:9-11).
2. It was also an instruction guide for the godly, teaching right and holy behavior.
3. The law also pointed to the crucified Christ as a necessary solution to the errors of mankind. Paul made this point in his letter to the church at Galatia, explaining, “Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith” (Gal. 3:23-24).

All of the different definitions of law, and all of the different roles of the law, stem from a common point. Each one finds its roots in the character and nature of God. It is in the character and nature of God to express holy and right behavior. Certainly, the failure of mankind to measure up to God’s character and nature points to a need for some intervention to deal with our inadequacies. This is necessitated by God’s goodness and righteousness, which are related terms to which we now turn.

“Righteousness”/“goodness” in the Bible

Three centuries before Socrates, the Old Testament prophet Amos was setting out ideas of righteousness and goodness and their relationship to God. Secular scholars generally accord these writings a special status as novel in the world at the time. Norman Snaith included the prophet Amos with several of his contemporary prophets when he wrote, “Their message is recognized by all as making a considerable advance on all previous ideas.”⁷ For Amos and the prophets, “goodness” and “righteousness” were wrapped up in a Hebrew word “*tzadek*.” The essence of the Hebrew *tzadek* is not some abstract idea of “good,” but an action or activity that we would call “good.” In Hebrew thought, goodness is not simply an idea; it is an expression of right behavior that establishes God’s will in the land. Goodness is the norm that depends entirely on the nature of God.

We see this expressed in the theology of both Jesus and Paul. In Matthew 19, the story is told of a rich young man coming to Jesus asking what “good” deed he should do to have eternal life. Jesus responded, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” Paul echoes this same idea in his letter to the Roman Christians when he wrote that “none is righteous...no one does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:11-12). Both of these accounts illustrate an idea of “good” that is intimately tied to the usages of “law.”

This brings us to the Biblical idea of goodness that distinguishes Euthyphro’s dilemma. Revealed Scripture teaches that God is a moral being. By that, we mean God is not some robot programmed to do good and meeting that requirement consistently. God actually has what we would term “morality” inherent in his essence. God has a moral nature. If we were to examine God’s actions and behaviors, then we could give them the label “good.” That is not because God’s behaviors meet our standard of goodness. It is because we derive our concept of good from his nature.

Let us consider an example to help illustrate our point. Consider a rare child that is born with a “kind nature.” This is the child that from the earliest age reacts to events with kindness and gentleness, as opposed to those who seem bent to harshness or selfishness. Now, if we were to take the kind-natured child and ask Euthyphro’s questions, we might say, “Are these behaviors ‘kind’ because they are coming from a kind child? Or is this child “kind” because the child is doing kind behaviors?” The truth is: neither and both! The real answer is that the child is doing kind behaviors because it is in the nature of the child to be kind. We can apply the label “kind” because that is the label we use for such actions, but the

actions are proceeding from the child's nature, before the child even knows what kindness is.

This inadequate example may help illuminate our point about God. God has a nature that is moral, by that we mean inherent in God's nature are values and ethics. We have assigned a human word to these values that, in English, is "good" or "right" as distinct from "evil" or "bad." Those values and morals that reflect the nature of God are "good." We can observe these: (1) as taught to us in revelation, (2) as lived in the life of the incarnated God, and (3) as sensed by us being made in the image of God.

1. Taught in revelation.

Here, we return to the idea of "law" in the Bible. In the laws, we have God revealing his nature to us in the times and circumstances of history and human culture/development. Sometimes these laws are poor reflections of God's innate character, recognizing that man is not up to the task of living like God. As Paul says, no one really is good and no one really does a good deed if we consider "good" in God's purest state. This is similarly borne out by the teachings of Jesus. When the Pharisees came to probe Jesus' teachings on divorce they asked whether it was lawful to divorce, "for any cause." Jesus responded with the true character of God, with what we should call "good," saying, "What God has joined together, let not man separate." The Pharisees then asked why God would have given a law through Moses that commanded giving a certificate of divorce. The response of Jesus is that the law was not a perfect expression of God's character; rather, it was God's character trying to salvage the best from the lives of imperfect humans. As Jesus said, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (Matt. 19:3-9).

It is the doctrine of God's moral nature that Scripture sets forth as the purpose of the atonement. In the Old Testament, a major time of atonement was an annual day called the "Day of Atonement," which was set aside as a time of repentance and sacrifice. The sacrifice was for the sins of the people, in recognition that God is a moral God. God set out a teaching process where the sins of the people were symbolically placed on a goat, and the goat was driven out from the midst of God and his people (Leviticus 16). The concept woven throughout Scripture starting with the expulsion of the sinful Adam and Eve from the Garden is that God is a pure and moral being in his very essence. As such, he cannot dwell in fellowship with something less than pure. Paul follows the same theme through his writings. In the letter to the church at Rome, Paul distinguishes

our unrighteousness from God's righteousness. Man needs justification for eternal fellowship with God. It is the sacrifice of Christ that offers real atonement, in contrast to the symbolic atonement set out in the Old Testament. In teaching the atonement, Paul is emphatic that the atonement was necessary for sins of those who died before Christ, just as much as it is for those who die afterwards (Rom. 3:23-26). The key to understanding the atonement is to first understand that God is by nature a moral being. As such, his relationships of unity (as opposed to one of enmity) must conform to his same morality. The atonement is about God satisfying this need in an appropriately just way to enable permanent fellowship in unity between him and his people. None of that is necessary if God is not in his core a moral being.

2. Lived in the incarnated God.

One of the most amazing things about the incarnation of Jesus is the implication on the morality issue. As Jesus is God clothed in humanity, we can see in the actions of Jesus, the actions of God. We see "good" and "righteousness" perfectly exemplified in human life. We can safely assume that whatever Jesus did, shows the morality of God. As Jesus told his apostles, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:10). Before Jesus was arrested and crucified, he prayed to God about his coming ordeal. In his prayer, Jesus asked,

And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed. I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world...O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you... I have made known to them your name (John 17:5-6, 25-26).

In Jesus, then, we see God's nature and the actions of Jesus are the actions of God. In this sense, we can again see the limitations in Euthyphro's dilemma. We will not term Jesus as good because he did good things. Neither shall we say that Jesus did the things he did because he was determined to do good deeds. We see in Jesus the deeds that are done being done out of the very nature of God. We can then define those deeds as "good" or "righteous" because they are manifestations of God's character and morality on earth.

3. Sensed by image-bearers.

One of the more profound lessons of Scripture relevant to the issue of right and wrong is found in the references to man "made in the image of God."

This distinguishes mankind from the animal world. In the Genesis 1 creation account, God makes “living creatures,” but then makes man and woman unique. Only man and woman are made in God’s “image.” Man and woman possess a unique similarity to God. Genesis 2 goes into more detail as man tried to find a proper companion among all the creatures made by God. No other companion was suitable until God made woman, another person created in God’s image. While the passages do not explore fully what it means to be in the image of God, Genesis quickly links that fact to ethics in the next few stories. In the Noah story, God specified that the dignity of man, the particular value that makes killing an innocent man wrong, is that man is made in God’s image.

There is, in man, an ingrained morality that is a reflection of the morality of God. To be sure, some mar the image and distort it beyond recognition. Yet for most, there is a sense of “right” and “wrong” that exists, even as it is hard to explain, define, or justify. This is the imprint of God’s morality that is carried by those made in his image.

The Bible places morality, not as some objective right or wrong, which God either does or that God instructs others to do (a la Euthyphro). The choices Socrates posed to Euthyphro are not the only two choices! The Bible sets forward God as a moral being who makes what we would consider moral choices consistent with his moral values. Those values and traits inherent to God’s essence are what we properly term “good,” “right,” or “moral.” That which God is not, those values that are contrary to his nature we properly term “evil,” “wrong,” or “immoral.” As Jay Butler has said it,

God neither conforms to nor invents the moral order. Rather his very nature is the standard for value.

This reflection of God and good/evil is borne out not only in the Old Testament, but also in the New Testament. Not surprisingly, then, traditional thinkers in both Judaism as well as Christianity have dismissed Euthyphro’s dilemma as inapplicable to the Judeo-Christian insight into God. The Jewish scholars Ari Sagi and Daniel Statman criticize Euthyphro from an Old Testament perspective as misleading for leaving out option three – that God acts consistently out of his own nature. Katherine Rogers added the perspective of towering figures of Christian thought from church history,

Anselm, like Augustine before him and Aquinas later, rejects both horns of the Euthyphro dilemma. God neither conforms to nor invents the moral order. Rather his very nature is the standard for value.⁸

One might fairly ask, “So what? Does this really matter that much?” The answer is, “Absolutely!” All moral choices and values must be based on something. It might be one’s instinct, it might be whatever makes one happy, it might be whatever seems to be for the best for most people (whatever we decide “best” is), it might be what someone is taught, or maybe something else. Regardless, somewhere there is an “end of the line” that explains or justifies whatever one might think is “right” or “good.” The Christian choice should be that God is the end of the line. The choice of right or good becomes the question of what God’s character calls for. Any other end of the line except God will never hold itself as an absolute value that protects what is really good and right. Hitler’s values can be taken up again, as we have seen in multiple genocide attempts since the end of WWII.

THE IMMORALITY OF HITLER AND THE MORAL GOD

We began this chapter asking whether we can fairly call Hitler’s actions “good” or “evil.” Most everyone is quick to say murder of innocents is wrong. Yet when pressed on how they know, there are very few camps people can choose. Some will argue it just *is* wrong, as if everyone else should agree. Of course, there is resonating in the essence of those made in God’s image the wrongness of such an atrocity. But curiously, many people will not credit the rightness or wrongness of a deed to Deity.

Others will judge Hitler’s actions wrong because it did not function to the benefit of society, or it violated the values of the majority. As discussed earlier, though, these arguments are really inadequate for such claims. In deciding right and wrong, and in imposing that on others, as the Allied powers did against the Axis powers in World War II, the real question is where the “end of the line” is. Do people determine right and wrong themselves or do they have a fixed point outside of themselves that serves as the measuring standard for right and wrong.

God, Israel, and Genocide (Cont’d)

As some read this, they might ask, “But didn’t God order genocide in the Old Testament? When the Israelites were invading Canaan, God instructed them to kill all men, women and children!” This is an excellent question worthy of more space than allotted here. But even with space limitations, it should be addressed. First, we define the problem. In Deuteronomy 20, God instructed the Israelites on how they were to conduct war in their invasion. For battles encountered on the way to the Promised Land, they were to offer peace, and

fight only if peace were rejected, and the others made war. In that event, the soldiers were to be killed, but not the women or children. For the communities inside the Promised Land, there was different treatment ordered. There the people were to “save alive nothing the breathes” (Deuteronomy 20:16). The expressed purpose was so that the Canaanites would not teach the Israelites “all their abominable practices.”

This is a harsh command, and apparently an order to genocide. Many skeptics point to this and ask how a God of love could make such an order. We should note several things that are worthy of consideration. First, God is God. He is in a different position on ordering life and death than any man. When and how people die is a decision that should be reserved for God. That is not man’s call. This is a harsh but true lesson. Second, God is also a patient God. The same Scriptures state earlier in Genesis that the Israelites would not invade the Promised Land until the abominable sins of the inhabitants was so great, it was beyond repair (Gen. 15:16). Third, Scripture does not teach that everyone had to die. It was certainly in the power of the inhabitants to flee before the Israelites and go to the lands outside Israel’s possession. I can assure you that knowing an invincible army was coming to slaughter my community and family would prompt me to leave and go to safety before the battle began! Fourth, the really hurt people in such a command are the Israelite soldiers who were charged with the killing. Most Christians readily accept that God would take any children not old enough to be accountable for their own sins into his eternity. The older people who were killed in this invasion approach were people that, archaeology teaches, were often involved in child sacrifice and other abominable practices that made them a threat to the Israelites, as set out in Deuteronomy. Fifth, we must remember that sometimes God’s will in this fallen world is choosing what we would term the lesser of two evils.” As Jesus pointed out to the Pharisees, God was permitting divorce, not because it was right before God, but because it was often making the best of the sinful situation brought about by man’s sinfulness (Mat. 19:3-9). Finally we suggest a sixth point, people who point to this are generally people who do hold that genocide is an objective moral evil. This concept is core to the point of this chapter. The idea of an objective moral evil requires some point of objectivity, some “end of the line” that justifies terming the action an objective evil. That does require a God, and our difficulty then comes in trying to understand him.

When faced with the actions of Hitler, the response of the believing Christian is that the actions were clearly wrong and evil. Hitler violated the character and nature of God as he wrongly killed many who were made in God’s image. God

has communicated the truth of his character in revelation (the Bible), in incarnation (Jesus), and intrinsically (in his image-bearers).

As for those who might play Socrates and ask Euthyphro whether God is good because he does good or whether good is good because God commands it, the Christian can readily respond: God's nature is itself the ultimate standard of what we term goodness. God is the end of the line. Any other ethic, any other morality, inadequately stems from either no god at all, or from a god/gods who are STILL too small!

Endnotes

¹ Shirer, William, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, (Fawcett 1981), at 233ff details this and much more history regarding Nazi Germany.

² Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression (Nuremberg Documents), V, pp. 341ff (N.D. 2620-PS).

³ Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression (Nuremberg Documents), V, pp. 696-699 (N.D. 2992-PS).

⁴ An Executive Summary of the State Department Report is available online at: http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/kosovoii/homepage.html.

⁵ The quotations are from the Charles River Editors edition of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

⁶ Lewis, C. S., *Christian Reflections*, (Eerdmans 1994), at 79.

⁷ Snaith, Norman, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, (Epworth 1983), p. 59.

⁸ Roger, Katherin, *Anselm on Freedom*, (Oxford 2008), at 8.

POINTS FOR HOME ADDENDUM

1. “*There is only one who is good*” (Matt. 19:9).

Nietzsche had a most insightful indictment of many philosophers and thinkers about right and wrong. His caustic pen mocked those who claimed an objective right and wrong, when they had no business making such claims. Having abandoned his faith, Nietzsche was left with no “end of the line” for ethics, even though many tried to assert such an end or foundation. The end always revealed itself to be an illusionary argument trying to justify a position already held.

Man will not, and cannot, establish good and right without God. Any such good or right ultimately stands on reasoning that cannot be explained in any final manner. The ethics, try as they might, have the stability of a house built on sand. Hitler may not reign in the world, but it will be only because of the imposed will of others who were stronger. The frightful implication for those who have ethics built on anything other than a foundation of God might not manifest itself immediately. The residual echo of God's morality that man as image bearer carries, may be adequate for some to live responsibly vis-à-vis right and wrong, but at some point, it will change. Maybe in a second generation, maybe when a crisis hits, or maybe when the heart hardens. At some point, without God, ethics will prove inadequate.

2. *"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father"* (John 14:10).

As we try to examine good and evil, and as we decide how to live, it is critical to spend time in the gospels. In Christ, we see the purest example of how God's nature would walk on earth. We have most clearly, one who reflects the Father in human garb enduring the life of humanity. This is an example to us who seek to do right. It should stir us to spend more and more time in Scripture watching and learning from our Lord and Savior.

3. *"In the image of God he created him; male and female"* (Gen. 1:27).

The basis of human value is found in man created in the image of God. This establishes a worth for humanity that far exceeds that of the animal kingdom. It sets humanity apart. Importantly, however, we should note that God did not insert varying degrees of image into people. Some are not "more" image bearers than others! All humans – male and female, red, yellow, black, brown, white, tall, short, big, little, hairy, bald, smart or not – all humans have equal inherent value and are to be regarded as magnificent and valuable. This is why all Christians are responsible for fighting for social justice and fairness for all people. This is why all human life is to be valued. This is not a matter for lip service. It is a valid and true ethic. It is a reflection of God's nature!