

Early Christian Ethics

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G.E.M. Anscombe famously claimed that ‘the Hebrew–Christian ethic’ differs from consequentialist normative theories in its ability to ground the claim that killing the innocent is intrinsically wrong.¹ The legal character of this ethic, rooted in the divine decrees of the Torah, confers a particular moral sense of ‘ought’ by which this and other act-types can be ‘wrong’ regardless of their consequences, she maintained.²

There is, of course, a potentially devastating counter-example to Anscombe’s characterization. Within the Torah, Abraham is apparently commanded by God to slaughter and set fire to his innocent son, Isaac.³ For attempting to do so, he is praised in the Biblical passage and by later Jewish and Christian commentators.⁴ The case cannot be dismissed immediately as uncharacteristic of the ‘Hebrew–Christian ethic’; Abraham and

¹ Anscombe 1958: 10, 19. E.g., ‘For it has been characteristic of that ethic [=Hebrew–Christian] to teach that there are certain things forbidden whatever *consequences* threaten, such as: choosing to kill the innocent for any purpose, however good . . . the prohibition of certain things simply in virtue of their description of such-and-such identifiable kinds of action, regardless of any further consequences, is certainly not the whole of the Hebrew–Christian ethic, but it is a noteworthy feature of it’ (10).

² Anscombe 1958: 5–6, 10. E.g., ‘. . . Christianity, with its *law* conception of ethics. For Christianity derived its ethical notions from the Torah’ (5). Anscombe initially says that a law conception of ethics can in principle arise without belief in divine positive law (1958: 5, citing the Stoics), but later that it requires belief in God as a *law-giver*, comparing it to positive criminal law (1958: 6; strangely, she includes the Stoics again).

³ Genesis 22:2. Regarding my qualifier ‘apparently’, see the second half of the section ‘Conceptual Parameters’ below.

⁴ Genesis 22:16–17; Hebrews 11:17–19; James 2:21–3; sections ‘Conceptual Parameters’ (second half) and ‘Early Christian Analyses’ below.

Isaac are central figures in the Torah, which contains additional instances of God or Moses commanding the killing of civilians, including children.⁵

It would appear, then, that Anscombe is mistaken factually, about what the historical 'Hebrew-Christian ethic' taught, and in her conceptual claim that the role of law in this ethic is to ground stable content. Seemingly, killing the innocent was considered justified when it was done in order to propitiate God. And while it is true that defining 'right' action as 'lawful' action will ensure that the consequences of an act cannot alter its moral rightness, this will not by itself guarantee that certain act-types are always unlawful. Indeed, the content of decrees in the Torah appears inconstant. Although the Torah does, as Anscombe says, portray God as proscribing the killing of innocent human beings,⁶ it also recounts God's contradictory command to kill Isaac and subsequent countermand not to kill Isaac after all.⁷

Christian authors from the third to the fifth centuries, some of whom were in contact with rabbinic glosses, addressed this Biblical story. A survey of their analyses will showcase the development of normative theory during this period, and allow us to assess more fully Anscombe's characterization of the 'Hebrew-Christian ethic'.

CONCEPTUAL PARAMETERS

The various early Christian commentaries invite comparisons with Plato's *Euthyphro* – where the conceptual question of the gods' relation to morality was famously raised – and with rabbinic interpretations of the episode. Although the Christian authors rarely cite the *Euthyphro* by name,⁸ we frequently find them employing concepts discussed there. These parallels, rather than questions of direct textual transmission, are the objects of my focus. Similarly for the rabbinic background: I will concentrate on relevant shared content, only alluding to *Quellenforschung* in passing.

⁵ Deuteronomy 7:1–2, 20:16–18; Numbers 31:7–18. Cf. Dawkins 2006: 31.

⁶ Exodus 23:7 ('Do not kill the innocent'; cf. Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17); 'innocent' indicates non-murderers or non-attackers (e.g. Genesis 9:5–6; Exodus 22:2; Jeremiah 2:34).

⁷ Genesis 22:12.

⁸ Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 13.4 (quoting *Euthyphro* 6a–c). The lack of frequent references is not surprising given the relaxed approach to citation in antiquity; it may also indicate reluctance to quote the text directly, given its polytheistic context.

It should have occurred to any classically educated early Christian writer who knew the *Euthyphro* to evaluate the Abraham–Isaac episode in light of the notions of piety, justice, and normativity discussed by Plato. Both texts deal with the killing of an innocent or possible innocent, and both contrapose piety toward God or the gods with the attempted killing of a family member.⁹

There are two senses of ‘piety’ in the *Euthyphro*, which we might call particular and general piety. Both are employed in analyses of the Abraham–Isaac episode during late antiquity.

We find particular piety, that is, the proper ritual worship of the gods, discussed at the end of the dialogue. Euthyphro and Socrates agree that these pious acts are just, though not every just act is pious (11e–14e). Similarly, it is a commonplace amongst authors in late antiquity – Christian and pagan – that the particular virtue of piety is a species of the virtue of justice.¹⁰ ‘Justice’ is often defined in this later period as giving what is due: hence piety is giving due worship to God or to the gods. There is a similar understanding, without an explicit analysis into genus and species, in rabbinic commentaries redacted in late antiquity,¹¹ as we shall see later in this section.

General piety is the main focus of the *Euthyphro*, and will receive most of our attention. Socrates and Euthyphro agree that the morally good is what the gods love (7d–e; cf. 5d). And being pious is defined as doing what the gods love (6e–7a). It follows that being pious is doing what is morally good. ‘Piety’ in this sense is not a special virtue amongst others, or a species of some one virtue. Rather, whoever is a thoroughly good person is pious and *vice versa*.

This general sense of ‘piety’ is in play when Socrates raises the problem of metaphysical ground. Are actions good independently of the gods’ loving them, in recognition of which the gods love them, or are they good because they happen to be beloved of the gods (10a)?

⁹ Euthyphro charges his father with intentional homicide, a capital offense, for killing-by-neglect a servant who killed a slave while drunk. The father’s guilt is disputed as is (Plato seems to imply) the servant’s, given his drunkenness (*Euthyphro* 4b–e, 9a; MacDowell 1963: 45–6, 59–60, 110–21; Phillips 2007: 89–90, 99; Phillips 2013: 89–90; Plato, *Laws* 865a–874d). Isaac appears to be innocent of any crime when his father attempts to kill him.

¹⁰ Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 1.116, 2.153; Cicero, *On Goals* 5.23.65; Apuleius, *On Plato and his Philosophy* 2.7; Basil of Caesarea, *Rule Q*. 170; Ambrose, *On Duties* 1.27.127. Cf. Jones 2006; Mikalson 2010: 196.

¹¹ *Genesis Rabbah* (*GRab.*), believed to have been redacted c. 400–450 CE.

Since Socrates and Euthyphro agree that the gods' loves are belief-based (*hêgountai*, 7e), and also that the gods are not mistaken,¹² the philosophical question raised here is: why are the gods' beliefs not mistaken? Either (1) because the gods perceive accurately what is good in itself, owing to their mental acuity, or (2) because the mere opinion of the gods is determinative of what is good. Socrates' question therefore bears comparison with the debate about whether 'knowledge' – including ethical knowledge¹³ – 'is simply perception', in *Theaetetus* 151e–183c. 'Knowledge is simply perception', we are told, asserts that opinion (*doxa*) is knowledge: each individual's experience and belief is the criterion or 'measure' of truth (152a, 152c, 161d–e, 178b). Socrates' option (2) in *Euthyphro* 10a would say this of the gods' perceptions, whereas (1) would deny it. Socrates is of course presented as favoring (1). As a shorthand way of referring to (1) and (2), it will be useful to employ Kretzmann's nomenclature: Theological Objectivism (TO)¹⁴ and Theological Subjectivism (TS), respectively.¹⁵

In the *Euthyphro*, the violation of the principle of non-contradiction entailed by TS when multiple divine perceivers simultaneously hold contradictory opinions about the same thing¹⁶ is avoided by stipulating that the gods are in perfect agreement (9d). This effectively reduces the number of divine perceivers to one. But it remains an implication of TS that there is no such thing as an intrinsically evil act.¹⁷ For it also follows from the perception theory (and TS) that when the opinion of a single perceiver (here, the set of gods) changes, an act-type must shift from being good to not-good or the reverse.¹⁸ This is the outstanding issue in the *Euthyphro*, given that the gods' opinions are not said to be immutable.

This brings us back to the Torah's successively contradictory divine commands. Although the commands might seem to suggest a voluntaristic God without comparison to Socrates' and Euthyphro's intellectualist gods, in the Hebrew Bible divine commands about child sacrifice are said to be based on God's thoughts,¹⁹ and in the Socratic dialogues, the gods are presented as commanding.²⁰ More importantly, philosophically TS requires divine

¹² Cf. Evans 2012: 28. ¹³ *Theaetetus* 157d, 167c, 172b.

¹⁴ For the variant 'internalist TO', see the Conclusions.

¹⁵ Kretzmann 1983: 35, though his TS is not intellectualist.

¹⁶ *Euthyphro* 7b–8b; *Theaetetus* 152b, 171b. ¹⁷ Cf. *Theaetetus* 157d.

¹⁸ *Euthyphro* 6a–c on the changeable Homeric gods; *Theaetetus* 152d–e, 172b.

¹⁹ Jeremiah 19:5, *dienoêthên* (the extant Greek text is believed to be older than the Masoretic text).

²⁰ *Apology* 28e, 29d.

commands, and TO allows for them. Because perception and opinion are by definition perspectival and personal,²¹ in TS the only way for non-gods to know what the moral status of an action is, is for the gods to tell them. And since the gods' opinions are merely asserted to be right, not justified by any publicly accessible intelligible features of the world, this 'telling' cannot be an *explanation of how or why* an act is good or bad,²² but must be simply a statement of what is to be done, a command. In a TO universe, anyone with sufficient mental acuity could in principle know acts' moral statuses and the reasons why they are good or bad; but commands could nevertheless be useful as instruction for those who *happen* to be ignorant, or to remind and encourage those who already know. Of these two roles for law, the TO model seems implied by the general disapproval of murder in Genesis 9:5–6 insofar as this text offers an explanation of why murder is wrong, namely that humans are in the image of God.

Turning to rabbinic interpretations of the divine command to kill Isaac, we find that they do not advocate TS. First of all, they conceive of the would-be action of killing Isaac as the pious offering of 'first-fruits'²³ – Isaac being the first produce of the marriage of Abraham and Sarah – and thus as an instance of the general moral duty to pay back what is owed.²⁴ We can now see the similarity to Christian and pagan accounts that define piety as a kind of justice, giving to God what is due. The rabbis do not think the killing of Isaac is justified on consequentialist grounds, to return to Anscombe's concern. Nor is its justice or injustice dependent on changing divine opinions and commands. Instead, it is just in itself because Isaac is God's. When in Genesis 22:12 God ultimately excuses Abraham from repaying this debt, it is mercy. We may not understand why God calls in his debts in some cases and not others, but there is no real conflict with morality – so this reasoning goes.

Of course, this rationale fails to address the divergence between the Torah's murder prohibitions, and the initial divine command that Abraham kill Isaac. Justice is at issue here, for the Biblical passages which stipulate that innocents may not be killed but non-innocents may be²⁵ imply that killing the innocent is wrong because it is unfair.

²¹ *Theaetetus* 160c. ²² *Theaetetus* 161d–e.

²³ *GRab.* 22.5 (re Genesis 4:3–4); Genesis 22:2; Exodus 22:29–30; Deuteronomy 18:4; Leviticus 20:1–8.

²⁴ E.g. Psalm 37:21. The rationale for first-fruits is that God, the maker of the earth, is the rightful 'owner' of all produce; first-fruits signify gratitude and recognition of this dominion.

²⁵ See note 6.

More interestingly, some of the rabbinic commentary – which is not homogenous – alleges that God never commanded Abraham to kill Isaac. This exegetical tradition argues that Abraham misunderstood the verb *alah* in the command he received, taking it to mean ‘offer [*send up in smoke*] him there as an offering’ when he should have understood God to say ‘make him [*Isaac*] ascend there for an offering.’ In other words, Abraham was actually being told to take Isaac up the mountain so that the two could sacrifice there some other thing.²⁶ Since the former reading accords with the conventions of Hebrew syntax and semantics (the sense of the verb is indicated by the presence of the cognate ‘as an offering’ (*olah*)),²⁷ these rabbis are choosing to disregard grammatical convention to arrive at a theologically acceptable interpretation.

We might expect that their motivation here was to make the story consonant with the Torah’s moral law, much as Kant later claimed that if an Abraham were apparently commanded to kill an Isaac, the command would have to be illusory, given its conflict with the moral law.²⁸ But in fact they do not invoke the prohibitions on murder in support of their exegesis. Instead, they decry the ‘unnaturalness’ of a father killing his own son, note that a command to kill Isaac would contradict the divine promise of a lineage through Isaac, and observe that in Genesis Abraham assures the bystanders that Isaac will return with him from the sacrifice.²⁹

EARLY CHRISTIAN ANALYSES

Turning now to the early Christians, we find a repeated identification of the Abraham–Isaac case as an instance of ‘killing a relative’ (*parricidium*), which is also the feature emphasized as salient in the *Euthyphro* murder case. Some of these Christian authors engage the notion of particular piety, examining whether the sacrifice of Isaac would be worship owed to God. Most centrally, however, these writers care about general piety and ‘justice’ in the sense of general righteousness, asking whether Abraham acted morally correctly in carrying out God’s command to kill Isaac.³⁰ On the normative question – whether God’s conflicting commands signify that actions become pious from

²⁶ *GRab.* 56.2, *GRab.* 56.8. Cf. Kalimi 2010: 5.

²⁷ Thanks to David Vanderhooft for consultation on the Hebrew.

²⁸ *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Gregor 1979: 115.

²⁹ Respectively: *GRab.* 56.5; *GRab.* 56.8 and *GRab.* 56.10 (cf. Genesis 17:15–19); *GRab.* 56.2 (re Genesis 22:5).

³⁰ Origen is an exception; he reads the story figuratively but not morally (*Homilies on Genesis* 8.6–7; cf. *GRab.* 56.3 and 56.9). Cf. Cavadini 2002.

not-pious, and just from not-just – the texts fall into three groups: employment of what we have called TS, ambiguity or vacillation between TS and TO, and endorsement of TO. These approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive for a given author; some writers change their minds.

Ambrose apparently subscribes to a TS position in the year 393. Arguing that a command from God makes honorable what would ordinarily be a dishonorable act (*obprobrium, turpitude*), he asks rhetorically, ‘Could he³¹ believe that to be dishonorable (*turpe*) which God enjoined? . . . Abraham . . . received a very great reward, because he believed that at God’s command, even the killing of a relative might be piously (*pie*) carried out’ (*Letters* 6.27.14).³²

In the category of ambiguous accounts, we have a number of texts. Cyprian of Carthage (martyred 258) says that Abraham is among the morally righteous (*iusti*) because he was prepared to kill a relative in order to please God (*On Mortality* 12).³³ Yet later in the same text, he avers that ‘God does not ask for our blood, but for our faith. For neither Abraham, nor Isaac, nor Jacob were slain’ (18).³⁴ Does Cyprian think that God consistently does not want this kind of act because it is intrinsically wrong (TO) and that Abraham was ignorant of this, but nevertheless morally praiseworthy because he had a good intention? Or does Cyprian mean that although God happens not to want human blood, he could have wanted it, in which case it would have been just to kill Isaac (TS), and that Abraham was praiseworthy because he recognized that TS is true? Similarly, Ambrosiaster (active c. 375–400) asserts that God did not desire Isaac’s blood, but also that Abraham’s justice (*iustitia*) was increased by his attempt to kill Isaac and by his belief that God wanted Abraham to kill a relative despite God’s previous threat to punish homicide (*homicidium*).³⁵ Again, Chrysostom’s *Homily on Genesis* (c. 385–398) states that God did not intend (*oude thelôn*, 47.11–12) for Isaac to be killed, citing the conclusion of the story, while it praises Abraham’s belief (*hê gnômê*) that God did want it, and intention (*hê prohaireisis*) to cut his child’s throat (47.17; cf. 47.5–6, 47.9). In sum, these analyses praise Abraham for being committed to what we have called TS, while stating that God did not want the killing of Isaac, leaving it unclear whether God did not want it because killing the innocent is intrinsically wrong.

³¹ Isaiah (Ambrose compares his commanded indecent exposure to Abraham’s commanded killing).

³² Trans. Walford 1881 (therein numbered Letter 58), amended.

³³ Cf. *The Good of Patience* 10. ³⁴ Trans. Wallis 1868.

³⁵ *Questions on the Old and New Testament* (*Quest.*) 43.2; 117.6 (alluding to Genesis 4:15).

Worse than ambiguous is Ambrose's self-contradictory gloss in his eulogy for his brother (dated 379). Here he claims that Abraham 'knew' (*sciebat*) – not just believed – both that 'his son would be *more acceptable to God when sacrificed than when whole (sanum)*' and that '*God is appeased not by blood but by dutiful obedience . . . and so Abraham was not stained with his son's blood*' (*On the Passing of Brother Satyrus* 2.97–8, my emphasis).³⁶

None of these authors cites the Torah's prohibition on killing the innocent as relevant to Isaac. In the case of Cyprian, this seems to be because he generally reserves the descriptor 'innocent' for Christ and the martyrs, on the grounds that they are the paradigmatic and 'truly' innocent ones. But while Ambrose and Ambrosiaster sometimes repeat this prophetic interpretation of Exodus 23:7, they do employ the wider sense of 'innocent' as 'non-aggressor' elsewhere in their writings. They just do not apply it to Isaac. Apparently they believe that if God commanded the slaying of Isaac, it could not be wrong to do it, and any investigation of *how* it could be right would be merely academic.

More sophisticated is Augustine, though he too is ambiguous from 397 to at least 413.³⁷ Here we see him attempting to remain faithful to earlier exegesis while using a form of what we have called TO. Like Ambrose, Augustine asserts in Sermon 8 that killing a relative, which would have been cruelty if undertaken without a command, became (*facta est*) piety when God commanded it (8.14). However, Augustine strikes out on his own when he gestures toward a *rationale* for how the command was just. He cites the Israelites' taking booty from the Egyptians at the command of Moses during the exodus,³⁸ mentioning that 'perhaps' (*forte*) this was not stealing but the recouping of a wage owed to the Israelites for their slave labor (8.16). The parallel with Isaac is not spelled out, but presumably it is that Isaac was not actually innocent, just as the Egyptians did not rightfully own what the Israelites took.

Additional detail is available in the *Against Faustus*. Here Augustine classifies the killing of Isaac as a deed 'placed in a middle position' (*medio quodam loco*) between good and bad by the 'eternal law' (22.73). That is, the act-type *killing* is in itself indifferent morally, and becomes right or wrong owing to one's intention, or the circumstances (22.71–8).³⁹ (Note how this anticipates

³⁶ Trans. Romestin 1896.

³⁷ Sermon 8, c. 400–411; *Against Faustus*, c. 397–405; *Confessions*, c. 397–401; *City of God* (*City*, begun 413), 1.21, 1.26.

³⁸ Exodus 12:35. ³⁹ Cf. *Confessions* 3.7.13–3.8.16.

Aquinas' division of acts into object, end, and circumstances, and his stipulation that a defect in any of these renders an action wrong.)⁴⁰ If, Augustine says, Abraham had undertaken to kill Isaac of his own initiative rather than in obedience to a divine command, the motive would have been cruelty and hence the act would have been wrong (22.73).⁴¹ This motive could have rendered the act morally wrong even if the act-type was correct in itself (*res recta*) (22.74). Regarding the circumstances, Augustine implies that Isaac was not *innocent*, comparing Abraham's killing of him to killing the enemy in a justified war. God has superior knowledge of who is guilty, and the best moment for their punishment (22.71–5). Apparently, then, Augustine thinks that Isaac had done something deserving of death, which is unknown to us. Similarly, the Egyptians deserved to have things taken from them as the recouping of a wage (22.71), though the Israelites did not realize this until Moses commanded them to do it.

Clearly Augustine is attempting a version of what we are calling TO; yet there is, simultaneously, an insistence on the necessity of the command for the act's liceity, which savors of TS. In keeping with TO, he argues that God's global view of the situation allows him to see how justice is to be applied in each case. It follows that if humans had such epistemic prowess, they could decide correctly in each situation, rendering commands from God unnecessary. But Augustine also insists that humans are incapable of knowing the relevant circumstances (22.72, *solus Deus novit*), which strains credibility. That the Israelites' labor deserved recompense from the Egyptians is easily inferred from a basic notion of fairness; and if Isaac had done something that merited capital punishment, surely his father could have known about it.⁴² Apparently Augustine asserts universal invincible ignorance merely to make the command somehow necessary, out of loyalty to earlier exegetes' friendliness toward TS.

It is worth remarking how these early Christians' conflict of loyalty to TS and TO differs from the dichotomous model proposed by Kierkegaard. If we take Kierkegaard at his word, he thinks that the divine command to kill Isaac imposes an absolute religious duty to obey God, which has precedence over and thus can 'suspend' morality, 'reducing' universal moral norms 'to the relative' *while they remain ethical duties*.⁴³ So the command does not render

⁴⁰ *Summa theologiae* IaIIae Q. 18. ⁴¹ Cf. *City* I.2I, I.26.

⁴² Possibly Augustine assumes Isaac's sharing in the corporate human guilt of the original sin; but he fails to say so.

⁴³ *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Hannay 1985: 60, 98.

what would otherwise be unethical ethical, nor is the command justified by its conformity to objective criteria of justice. Rather, in such a case an *unethical* act is *pious*. That scenario cannot arise for our authors, for whom obeying divine commands always coincides with moral righteousness (via either TS or TO), and particular piety falls within the class of morally just actions.

We finally come to an analysis of the Isaac story that approximates Anscombe's 'Hebrew-Christian ethic' in Augustine's *Questions on the Heptateuch* 7.49 (dated 419–420). Bringing to the fore the apparently consequentialist rationale for sacrificing Isaac, Augustine asks whether the story of Abraham and its near-parallel, the tale of Jephthah,⁴⁴ signify that human sacrifice is acceptable for the sake of an eternal reward from God. He emphatically answers that on the contrary, God 'hates this kind of sacrifice' (*odisse talia sacrificia*), citing the general prohibitions on child-sacrifice elsewhere in the Torah,⁴⁵ and the climactic divine command *not* to kill Isaac. Although Augustine does not quote the more general Biblical prohibitions on killing innocent humans, he implies that these are the grounding principles when he says that this story about *child* sacrifice shows that God does not want *human* sacrifice (*hominis immolatio*). Why, then, did God order Abraham to offer up his son? It served to create a teaching moment. By dramatically preventing the sacrifice of a human being, God shows (*ostendit*), prior to the Mosaic Law's prohibition, that it is wrong. The lesson was needed because Abraham, the first Jew, was surrounded by religions that normally sacrificed children.⁴⁶ The episode also taught particular piety by instituting the 'buying back' ritual for human first-fruits (codified later),⁴⁷ with the ram being the substitute sacrifice.⁴⁸

Augustine's exegesis here must be indebted to Ambrose's *On Virginitas* 2.5–9 (written 377–384),⁴⁹ but he improves upon it. According to *On Virginitas*, the Isaac episode was a divine pedagogy (*exemplum*) given because people were ignorant of the status of human sacrifice. It taught (*docuit*) that God does not approve of killing one's child (*parricidium*), and that firstborn children should be dedicated to God, though not as holocausts. Ambrose

⁴⁴ Jephthah sacrificed his daughter in fulfillment of a vow (Judges 11:30–9).

⁴⁵ Quoting Deuteronomy 12:29–31, alluding to 'many others.'

⁴⁶ Deuteronomy 12:29–31, cited by Augustine, on the Canaanites west of the Jordan (=Abraham's home in Genesis 22:2–12); cf. Deuteronomy 18:10; Jeremiah 7:18, 4:31, 7:31–2; Xella *et al.* 2013; Smith *et al.* 2013. On child sacrifice to the Ammonite god Molech (east of the Jordan), see 1 Kings 11:7, 2 Kings 23:10, Leviticus 18:21.

⁴⁷ Exodus 13:13, 13:15. ⁴⁸ Genesis 22:13. ⁴⁹ Adkin 2003: 32 n. 15, 387.

here implies that God never intended for Isaac to be killed, a gloss which he probably owes to the rabbis.⁵⁰ However, Ambrose backtracks, calling into doubt whether he thinks God opposes child sacrifice because it is objectively unjust. He claims that God's cancellation of the killing of Isaac was divine 'mercy' (rather than a defense of Isaac's life), which the father and son earned by believing that God is merciful. In contrast, he surmises, God allowed Jephthah to kill his daughter as punishment for failing to believe that God would mercifully intervene. Augustine says, more consistently, that it was Jephthah's *vow to kill his daughter* that God punished, of which God disapproved because he hates human sacrifice as such.

It might be objected against Augustine's *Questions on the Heptateuch* interpretation that it has merely replaced a murderous God with a lying God. For according to Augustine, God told Abraham to kill his son while not actually intending that he do so. This seems particularly problematic, given that Augustine wrote two treatises insisting that lying is always wrong. But note that Augustine's definition of a 'lie' is 'telling a falsehood with the intent to deceive.'⁵¹ According to this criterion, God was not lying, since a command is not a proposition, and hence cannot be false.⁵² Apparently Augustine thinks that God's filicidal command should be understood as a case of antiphrasis.⁵³

CONCLUSIONS

We have investigated about 200 years of rabbinic and early Christian analyses of the Abraham–Isaac episode, and find that only if we make Augustine's late (c. 420) writing the standard of what is 'characteristic' of 'Hebrew Christian ethics' can we say that Anscombe's description of that ethic is true in this case. It is hasty generalization to speak of a unitary ('the') Hebrew–Christian ethic that is always characterized by its opposition to killing the innocent. Moreover, to defend Anscombe's assertion that the Torah teaches that killing the innocent is always forbidden regardless of its consequences, one would need to use the kind

⁵⁰ He does not reason from the ambiguity of the verb, however (the LXX *anapherein* is ambiguous), but from the conclusion of the story. On Ambrose and rabbinic glosses, see e.g. Rueling 2006.

⁵¹ In *On Lying* (c. 395), Augustine says the combination of these two conditions is sufficient for a lie, but leaves it open whether both are necessary conditions (4.4); however, in *Against Lying* (c. 420, contemporaneous with *Questions on the Heptateuch*), Augustine says both are necessary (10.23–4, 12.26), *pace* Griffiths 2004: 25–31.

⁵² Diogenes Laertius, *Life of Zeno* 7.65, 7.68; Byers 2013: 8–22, 29 on Augustine's reception.

⁵³ See *Against Lying* 12.26.

of hermeneutical method employed by Augustine. His approach makes the Bible's *general* prohibitions on killing non-aggressors *determinative* of the meaning of the *particular* demand to kill Isaac. This procedure requires an idiosyncratic reading of the Hebrew of Genesis 22:2, or interpreting it as antiphrasis.

Furthermore, we can accept Anscombe's conceptual claim that this (Augustinian) defense of the innocent Isaac is grounded in a 'law conception of ethics' only if we equivocate on 'law.' By the 'legal character' of the 'Hebrew-Christian ethic' Anscombe understands divinely given prohibitions.⁵⁴ In contrast, Augustine's ultimate criterion of ethics is 'eternal law', which is not divine legislation but God's set of simple ideas of justice, prudence, moderation, and fortitude. These ideas subsist in God irrespective of whether they are positively given to humans. Augustine's model, which could be called 'internalist TO', is derived from Neoplatonic and Stoic conceptions of eternal 'law' (*ho nomos, lex*);⁵⁵ herein God's ethical ideas are called 'law' because they are immutable and because living in accord with them yields a consistent and well-ordered pattern of life. God's simple ideas when articulated in words are ethical axioms and definitions (for instance, 'justice is giving what is deserved');⁵⁶ these are to be applied variously in differing circumstances.⁵⁷ The proposition 'Killing the innocent is unjust' is always true because 'innocent' specifies the relevant circumstance.⁵⁸ Augustine does think that a comprehensive divine positive law (*lex generalis*) 'Do not kill the innocent' was issued at a particular time and recorded in the Torah.⁵⁹ But he holds that the function of this and more particular decrees such as 'Do not kill children as sacrifices' was to inform people who happened to be ignorant about what objective justice entails, rather than to be the ultimate criterion of rightness and wrongness.⁶⁰

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⁵⁴ See note 2.

⁵⁵ Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.9.5 ll. 28-9, cf. 5.9.10 ll. 2-4; Chrysippus in Marcian (Long and Sedley 1987: 67R); Arius Didymus in Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 15.15; Cicero, *Republic* 3.33.

⁵⁶ *On Free Choice* 2.10.29; cf. *City* 19.4. ⁵⁷ *Confessions* 3.7.13-8.16.

⁵⁸ Cf. *Commentaries on the Psalms* 61.22. ⁵⁹ *Against Gaudentius* 1.11.12ff.

⁶⁰ Cf. Byers 2013: 167-9.

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