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Fit to Kill:

Ancient patriarchs and the Question of Morality

It would seem an obvious moral axiom that to kill one's child is ethically abhorrent. Yet, is there a set of circumstances or situations in which one would be absolved of the criminal nature of the act? The Biblical and Greek literary traditions both hold examples of patriarchs who ponder the question: Can I kill my child in a fashion that is morally acceptable?

The stories of Iphigenia and Isaac hold many similarities. Both were to be sacrificed by their fathers and were saved by the substitution of an animal at the last moment. The stories run more or less congruent in action and plot but the somewhat small details that differ lead to even greater divergence. The ethical situation of Agamemnon and Abraham was the same, with the same moral result, but the means that each patriarch used to purge themselves of guilt were remarkably different.

While both children were to be sacrificed and were saved by a substitution the situation of the would-be sacrifice is extremely different. Aulis was the site of a battle camp. The sacrifice of Iphigenia was a public event that was structured to motivate the Greeks and placate the gods in the war on Troy. Iphigenia's sacrifice was founded upon political, military, and religious grounds. Mount Moriah was a mountain in another land. Abraham was

not even shown which mountain he was supposed to perform the deed upon until he reached it. The sacrifice of Isaac was to be a private occurrence.

Abraham traveled to the mountain with servants but went up with Isaac alone.

The sacrifice of Isaac concerned only God and those He commanded. Both patriarchs were heavily weighed upon by the actions they were to undertake and both deceived their children as to the nature of their summons.

Agamemnon sent for his daughter luring her to Aulis with the bait of marriage to Achilles, hero of Greece. Agamemnon regretted his ruse but felt constrained in the conflict between his duties as the head of a household and a military campaign. He declares, "I'm out of my mind. I'm on the verge of collapse."

(Euripides 223) He pleads with his retainer to send another letter to cancel the ruse of marriage contained in his first missive. Menelaus, who convinced him to perpetrate the deception in the first place, stops the retainer and confronts Agamemnon for his inconstancy. Agamemnon, seeing no way out of his

dilemma, resigns himself to the actions he must take. Abraham also had time to mull over the horrid moral nature of the act to be performed as he rode to

Mount Moriah. As Iphigenia traveled to Aulis and as Abraham traveled with Isaac to Mount Moriah, each patriarch thought over the nature of their actions.

As Abraham and Isaac went up the mountain Isaac innocently wondered,

"Behold the fire and the wood: but where *is* the lamb for a burnt offering?"

Abraham responded simply, "God will provide himself a lamb for the burnt offering." (KJV 14) Abraham was well aware of exactly who was to be

sacrificed but what man can blame him for concealing it from Isaac? Even so, Abraham deceived Isaac just as Agamemnon deceived Iphigenia.

It was expedient for Agamemnon to kill his daughter because something was gained from it. Abraham had no such recompensation. The death of Isaac would be the cessation of God's promise and nothing would be gained from it. "What made God's command so incongruous is that Isaac was the promised seed, the product of a miraculous conception. All of Abraham's future children were to come from this son. It didn't make sense by any stretch of the imagination for God to ask Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, to take his life, to literally cut the lifeline that would be the channel through whom God had said He would carry out His promise." (Getz pg. 171-2) Agamemnon was in a moral quandary between personal and public ambitions. Abraham had familial and ontological duty at odds. Abraham had a terrible paradox to deal with being that the promises and commands of God were not compatible. Agamemnon had a dilemma of a different sort that was not nearly as paradoxical. In order for him to sail on Troy he would sacrifice his daughter. Otherwise, the vicious army would slaughter her for blocking their path. Agamemnon was placed in a lose-lose situation and not a situation that logically fell in on itself.

Agamemnon and Abraham are great patriarchs of their respective traditions. Agamemnon is a son of the House of Atreus and Abraham is the first of the Biblical patriarchs. The lineage of both men play an important role in the

consequences of their sacrificial movements. The House of Atreus has always been a cursed bloodline and the blood of one of the family calls for the blood of another. The House of Atreus eats itself up from the inside with bloody vengeance and grim justice. Abraham, however, is promised to bring blessings to all nations. (KJV 11) The very fruit of this promise is his son Isaac who was given to him in his old age. Now the God of Abraham commands him to sacrifice his son, God's promise. "Might it be that Abraham was asked to choose either the promises of God as they would be fulfilled in Isaac, or the God who made the promises in the first place?" ("Do You Promise?") The sacrifice of Iphigenia is just another stone in the tomb of the house of Atreus while the sacrifice of Isaac is test of faith. Agamemnon has not the words or vision of Artemis commanding him but the message relayed from the goddess through the seer Calchis. Abraham has his faith and Agamemnon is burdened with the company of man. Abraham is only answerable in his actions to God while Agamemnon is subject to the divinities as well as his army, his brother, his wife, his people, the seer and fate. Abraham relates to God and Agamemnon relates to other men and this underlines the differences that makes the story of Iphigenia a tragedy and the story of Isaac a celebration of faith and the faithfulness of God.

"Agamemnon gives up his claim to Iphigenia, thereby finds his point of rest in the universal, and now proceeds to give her in sacrifice. If Agamemnon had not made the movement, if in the decisive moment,

instead of a passionate concentration, his soul had been lost in common chatter about his having several daughters, and *vielleicht das Ausserordentliche* [perhaps something extraordinary] could happen - then naturally he would not be a hero but a case for charity. Abraham has the hero's concentration too, even though in him it is much more difficult since he has no resort at all in the universal, but he makes one movement more through which he concentrates his soul back upon the marvel. If Abraham hadn't done that he would only have been an Agamemnon, provided it can be explained how his willingness to sacrifice Isaac can be justified other than by its benefiting the universal." (Kierkegaard 106)

Abraham and Agamemnon take different approaches in dealing with the immoral nature of their actions. Agamemnon sets apart the different goods and compares them declaring one good more good than the others. By creating a hierarchy of goods Agamemnon can choose his battles, always siding with the most powerful good. Or perhaps he merely pragmatically weighed the advantages and disadvantages. Either way, he was in the situation of choosing not the greater good but the lesser evil. In the end, Agamemnon makes a sacrifice more of Iphigenia than of Agamemnon. There can be no situational ethics with an absolute morality. Murder regardless of the benefits it may bring, or seem to bring, doesn't constitute morality. In reality, there is no question of morality in the case of Agamemnon or Abraham. It is wrong,

morally abhorrent, to kill one's child regardless of any circumstance. How is it then that Abraham, a man of God, is intent on committing such an act? More important, is it that God commands Abraham to do the unspeakable and morally reprehensible?

It is an amazing step which Abraham takes that makes him a knight of faith and not a tragic hero. (Kierkegaard 103) Abraham follows God. The Biblical account shows no wavering on Abraham's part; he rises early and heads for Mount Moriah after he is commanded to do so. The unwavering nature of Abraham's resolve is a symptom of his situation. "For, as he does not turn back in his journey, nor revolve conflicting counsels; it hence appears, that his love to God was confirmed by such constancy, that it could not be affected by any change of circumstances." (Calvin pg. 566) Abraham by following the craftsman of the universal (the ethical) is suspended or is placed above that sphere. Because the purpose of man is to follow God man can do no wrong in doing so. It is not that the ethical is determined by following God-a godless man can be supremely moral-but that the following of God takes an ontological priority over the ethical. Kierkegaard called it the 'teleological suspension of the universal'. It is man's telos, or purpose, that suspends the ethical in this action. This means that Abraham acted above and outside of the realm of ethical action in this case. Agamemnon has no suspension. He has only the flimsy absolution provided by being caught between powers and not being potent enough to face fate and change the course of things. No man in Greece

ever had that power. Nor did the gods of Greece, for fate ruled over them too. Agamemnon is stuck in the world where justice is meted out by blood and men.

It is not only the ethical nature of Abraham's and Agamemnon's sacrifices that are incongruent but actually the very nature of their actions. Agamemnon was motivated by a host of circumstances and situations in resigning his heart to the movement of murder. Abraham had only his own will or God's to follow. Agamemnon offered a prize precious to Artemis, a young virgin. Iphigenia was sacred to Artemis but only in a temporal sense. Her sanctity, as far as Artemis was concerned, was hinged upon her temporary state. Agamemnon thus offered his daughter whilst she was still precious to Artemis in order to placate the goddess as well as the gathered men of Greece.

" The term sacrifice derives from the Latin *sacrificium*, which is a combination of the words *sacer*, meaning something set apart from the secular or profane for the use of supernatural powers, and *facere*, meaning "to make." Although, the fundamental meaning of sacrificial rites is that of effecting a necessary and efficacious relationship with the sacred power and of establishing man and his world in the sacred order, the rites have assumed a multitude of forms and intentions." (Encyclopedia Britannica)

This definition perfectly describes the act of Agamemnon. The definition fails miserably in describing the actions of Abraham. Isaac was the promised gift of

God. He was not something secular or profane, nor is he Abraham's to give. Neither does Abraham have to perform some rite to make Isaac sacred. Unlike Iphigenia, whose sanctity is temporal, Isaac's preciousness to God is a necessary part of Isaac's being. In this sense of the word, Isaac is not a sacrifice at all. Abraham is instead acknowledging God as the provider of what is good and it is also God that provides the lamb to substitute for Isaac.

Isaac and Iphigenia continue to be distinctly different as their lives progress. Iphigenia is whisked away to Taurus where she serves as a priestess who kills Greeks for barbarian worshippers of Artemis. Her noble acceptance of sacrifice gained her little. The respect of Artemis here seems more like punishment, especially to poor Iphigenia. She laments her situation describing her new home as "here where a savage king reigns over savages." (Euripides 281) Isaac goes on to become the second of the Biblical patriarchs whom of which few stories are told. After his childhood brush with sacrifice he gains a wife and had two sons. His life is less eventful and catastrophic as the daughter of Agamemnon's is.

The neoclassical playwright Jean Racine brings an interesting view of Agamemnon forward, but it does not redeem him. In his version it is not Iphigenia which is sacrificed but Eriphile who is revealed to be the daughter of Helen and Theseus and thus suitable sacrifice for Diana. Racine's play paints Agamemnon as even more tragic and pitiful than Euripides' drama. "Racine's beleaguered leader in Iphigenie cannot come to a decision. He thus takes part,

along with Eriphile, in an ongoing theme of this work -- the confusion, alienation, isolation, and subjective disintegration that result from the quintessentially tragic predicament of the direct conflict between public obligation and private desire." (Subjective Dispersion...) Racine's supply of a 'happy ending' for Iphigenia by substituting Eriphile can be seen as an act of mercy on the unfortunate Agamemnon. Agamemnon's resignation is emphasized by Racine whereas Euripides' Agamemnon gains a certain determination once he has decided to follow the course of action he has been cornered into. Racine's Agamemnon never gains that resolve and with a heavy heart he performs his act of sacrifice but would not even gain the absolution in the ethical that Euripides' Agamemnon gains because of his indecisive nature. Racine has him state, "I know my efforts are in vain. I yield. Let heaven oppress the innocent. Soon will the victim follow where you lead." (Racine 69) Agamemnon may concede in Racine's version but only by accepting his fate not just following it can he pursue the absolution that Euripides' Agamemnon chases.

Great leaders of men, as Abraham and Agamemnon were called to be, are often put in difficult situations. When the duties of nation and family conflict or when the commands and promises from God seem incompatible the men put in those situations either fail or become great. Agamemnon sought to make one good better than another and sought absolution in the ethical. Abraham, however, acted above the ethical in following his ontological and

teleological priority of serving God. As man explores the nature and borders of morality, circumstance and situation conceal the ethical and make it appear as if no option but evil is left. Too often, men like Agamemnon create hierarchies of goods in order to determine the paths in life to take. It is the rarer man who listens to the word and will of God over even the reason of obvious morality. Agamemnon was a tragic hero of great proportions and does fill his role sublimely. Abraham, often referred to as the father of faith, is a man loved by God and a servant doted upon by his master.

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