



Self-Evident Truths?

A symposium on Omri Boehm's 'Radical Universalism'

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Held questions Boehm's reading of the Binding of Isaac and how it structures his reading of Abraham. How do you read the Binding of Isaac? Do you, like Boehm, see the contrast of Abraham at the Binding and at Sodom as untenable?
2. Griffiths condemns John Brown's violence and "normative certitude" by comparing him to Cambodian dictator Pol Pot and calling him an "apostle of lethal violence at industrial scale." But the slavery that spurred Brown to take action was lethal violence at a global scale. Is all political violence equivalent? Is there any situation in which political violence is acceptable?
3. Both Moyn and Griffiths describe Boehm as foregrounding philosophy prior to politics. Do your ethical and political convictions emerge from philosophy or politics first? Do we reason backward from the positions we want to hold to make sense of them morally, or do we come to our positions through moral reasoning?
4. If you believe in universal human dignity, where do you think that dignity comes from? Is its centrality to Catholic doctrine enough for you, or do you find yourself having the same doubts that prompted Boehm to write his book?
5. Thinking about the question at the end of Held's article, is a set of Biblical ethical principles the solution to contemporary political problems? Is the Bible a particularly advantageous ethical text? If so, which stories from the Bible have significant bearing on your own ethical life?
6. As Moyn notes, even committed universalists may find critical divides in their beliefs—for example, Kant differs from Hegel or Marx. Which qualities, if any, are universal to human nature? Which strain of universalism seems most compelling?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Christian Göbel, "A Dark Chapter," November 26, 2024: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/dark-chapter>

Michael West, "'Shakespeare and Abraham,'" February 12, 2026: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/shakespeare-and-abraham>

Julian Assele, "Forgiving My Mother's Killer," February 2026: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/forgiving-my-mothers-killer>