

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 10 | Issue 2

Article 5

4-1-1993

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Recommended Citation

McLane, Earl (1993) "Rereading Fear and Trembling," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil199310235

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol10/iss2/5>

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REREADING *FEAR AND TREMBLING*

Earl McLane

This paper offers a rereading of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* in the light of the *Edifying Discourses* that accompanied it. Such a rereading serves to mitigate the picture of God that one may initially receive from the work—the picture of God as a ‘capricious despot.’ While *Fear and Trembling* does contain a “divine command” ethic, it is an ethic based on the thesis that God is love—an ethic expressed in the Biblical injunction: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. [And] you shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (Matt. 22:37-39). Such a religious ethic may still require a ‘teleological suspension of the ethical.’ Abraham provides an illustration of such a suspension because he *believed* that he was called upon to sacrifice his son. However, in the light of Kierkegaard's “subjectivity is truth” thesis, God need not be seen as in fact issuing such a command. Such a non-literal rereading, it is argued, is more consistent with the emphasis on the *unchangeableness* of God—a constant theme of the religious discourses.

It is perhaps unfortunate that many begin—and end—their reading of Kierkegaard with *Fear and Trembling*. The story of Abraham—of his willingness to raise the knife over his son in obedience to the divine command—has made him the father of faith to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. To others, however, Abraham remains an object of horror. Likewise, while many have found inspiration in Kierkegaard's retelling of the story, others have found the fact that he would seriously concern himself with such a tale to be itself horrifying. Milič Čapek writes: “It is...discouraging to see Kierkegaard...admiring this story in its crude and primitive form and thus sacrificing the moral qualities of God to his alleged omnipotence.”¹ He finds in Kierkegaard “...the idea of a despotic God whose capricious and arbitrary will makes and un-makes the moral law and who insists on absolute slavish obedience on the part of man.”² According to Čapek, such a view of God is due to the influence of Luther—and further back to that of Scotus and Ockham. Even sympathetic interpreters of Kierkegaard agree that such a picture of God can be found in *Fear and Trembling*. D. Z. Phillips, for example, writes: “There [*i.e.*, in *Fear and Trembling*], Kierkegaard speaks as if one can understand God's commands simply by saying that God commanded them. One could say ‘God commands X’ where ‘X’ could be any given value whatever.”³

Whether such a picture of God, with its corollary of faith as blind obedience, is to be taken as Kierkegaard's own is crucial to determining the char-



acter of his religious thought.⁴ There are, of course, ways of dissociating Kierkegaard from such a picture. The work is, after all, by a pseudonym—and we have Kierkegaard's own word that the views of the pseudonyms are not to be identified with his own.⁵ Further, the use of a pseudonym named Johannes de Silentio (John of Silence) and, therefore, a recurring emphasis on silence, along with the motto from Hamann all suggest that the message conveyed by the book will be a *hidden* one.⁶ Again, Abraham is an Old Testament figure who, from the standpoint of Christianity, would represent a limited conception of God and faith.⁷ There is also the obvious polemical character of the book.⁸

Something can be said in behalf of each of these points. One cannot, therefore, *identify* what Johannes has to say about faith with Kierkegaard's own position. On the other hand, to view the book as fundamentally ironic, as some have done⁹, may lead one to overlook the element of *seriousness* and the fact that the book does tell us *something* about Kierkegaard's own views. It is clear that Kierkegaard saw *some* analogy between his own case and that of Abraham. While he was writing *Fear and Trembling*, it seems that he was pondering the possibility that as Abraham—after giving up Isaac—had received him back through faith so might he, in a similar fashion, get Regine back. Indeed he writes in his *Journal* at this time: "If I had had faith, I would have stayed with Regine" (*JP*, 5, #5664.)¹⁰ He would also agree with Johannes that there are "teleological suspensions of the ethical." He writes in his *Journal*:

I am a poet. But long before I became a poet I was intended for the life of religious individuality. And the event whereby I became a poet was an ethical break or a teleological suspension of the ethical. And both of these things made me want to become something more than the poet. (*JP*, 6, #6718.)

The difficulty arises in saying just what is involved in such a *suspension*.

Some have seen such a claim as directed primarily against a moral position such as Kant's—*i.e.* as insisting that there are *exceptions* to a morality based on universal or general rules.¹¹ Others have contended that the focus of the book is on an Hegelian conception of the ethical.¹² That such would seem to be the case is indicated by the fact that the ethical is characterized in terms of "social morality" (*Saedelighed*)—as well as the fact that most of the quotations are drawn from Hegel (See, e.g., *FT*, 54-5, 68-9, 82.) The "ethical" is characterized as "the universal" and the ethical task of the individual is to—"...continually express himself in this, to annul his singularity in order to become the universal" (*FT*, 54). Also, after introducing each of the three problems with a characterization of the "ethical" and its requirements, we find it repeated that *if* such a characterization is correct, then Hegel is right—and Abraham is a murderer and unjustified in keeping silent (*FT*, 54, 68, 82.) There is also the interesting irony that the sacrifice of a child on the altar of

the State is considered, contrary to Kant, *ethically* justifiable.¹³ Hence, the “ethical” that is to be “suspended” seems primarily to be that of Hegel—*die Sittlichkeit*. It would also seem, however, that he—and Kierkegaard—also have Kant in mind. Despite the many affinities of what Kierkegaard has to say about the “ethical” with the views of Kant as well as his admiration for him, he is clearly at odds with Kant on the issue of autonomy.¹⁴ This difference is clearly reflected in Kant’s well-known reaction to the Abraham story. In his *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, Kant says:

Abraham should have replied to this primitive divine voice: ‘That I may not kill my good son is absolutely certain. But that you who appear to me are God is not certain, even though the voice were to sound from the very heavens...For that a voice which one seems to hear *cannot* be divine one can be certain of...in case what is commanded is contrary to the moral law. However majestic or supernatural it may appear to be, one must regard it as a deception.’¹⁵

Against Kant, Kierkegaard insists that there are exceptions. Against Hegel, he insists that if faith is to be a reality, there must be a place for the individual “beyond” the realm of morality as *Sittlichkeit*. Against both, he is concerned to show the inadequacy of any purely rational conception of morality that leaves no room for faith as a personal relation of the individual to God.¹⁶ Both in effect leave God “out of the picture.”

Yet to insist on keeping God in the picture, as well as on the possibility of a “teleological suspension of the ethical,” on the possibility of a *conflict* of one’s religious duty with one’s ethical duty, is this not to identify oneself with the picture of God described earlier? Must this, then, be taken as Kierkegaard’s own view? My proposal is that we should look again at *Fear and Trembling*, particularly taking into account what he has to say elsewhere but especially in the *Edifying Discourses* that accompanied the publication of the work. That is to say, we should take seriously his statement that he was a “religious writer” from the beginning of his authorship.¹⁷

A central theme of these discourses is love. In fact, we find here many of the points that are developed later in the *Works of Love*, a book often regarded as isolated from the mainstream of the authorship. Two of them are on the topic “Love Shall Cover a Multitude of Sins.” They offer, in effect, a characterization of *Christian* love. Such love is said not to be found in paganism. While such love is to some extent present in Judaism, the latter is also said to be lacking. “For the pious Jew also bore witness to love, but this love was the child of mutability and change, and he knew how to hate the enemy. He even ascribed vengeance to the Lord because he himself had it....”¹⁸ By contrast, regarding Christian love it is said:

And only this is love which never becomes something else, this which gives *everything* and *because of this*, demands nothing, this which demands noth-

ing, and therefore has nothing to lose, this which blesses, and blesses when it is cursed, this which loves its neighbor, but whose enemy is also his neighbor, this which leaves vengeance to the Lord, because it comforts him to believe that the Lord is even more merciful than he himself is. (*ED DISC*, I, 63.)

This discourse goes on to cite Jesus' injunction that we are to 'turn the other cheek' and that we are to 'forgive seventy times seven' (*ED DISC*, I, 72). Throughout, God is depicted as *unchanging* love. The image is recalled of the father of the prodigal son who stands with open arms and awaits the erring (*ED DISC*, I, 76-77.)

The second discourse on this theme notes how the Apostle Peter, even though the end of things is said to be at hand, nevertheless, admonished the early Christians to love their neighbor even in the minor relations of life (*ED DISC*, I, 81.) The discourse speaks also to us, for everyone must die and come to judgment (*ED DISC*, I, 82.) Love, however, can prepare us for judgment (*ED DISC*, I, 82.) For such love can also uncover our own multiplicity of sins (*ED DISC*, I, 84.) The discourse closes with the story of a fallen woman who appeared uninvited at a dinner party for Jesus held at the home of a Pharisee. The woman washed Jesus' feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, kissed them, and anointed them. Her many sins stood revealed before all. Her tears of repentance turned to tears of worship. But then, as she knelt weeping at Jesus' feet,

Then *love* discovered what the world hid—the love within her; and since it had not triumphed in her, the Savior's love came to help, so that he 'to whom five hundred pennies were forgiven, must love most,' and He made the love in her even more powerful in hiding the multitude of sins, the love which was already there for 'her many sins were forgiven her, because she loved much.' (*ED DISC*, I, 90.)

Such a love—a love that is said to be beyond all understanding, even foolishness to the understanding—can come to the aid of our love, drive out the fear, and conceal a multitude of sins (*ED DISC*, I, 89.)

The subject of the third discourse, "Strengthened in the Inner Man," is faith, the topic of the two discourses that had earlier accompanied *Either/Or*. The Scripture text is taken from the third chapter of Ephesians in which Paul, writing from his prison at Rome, prays that his followers may be strengthened with might by God's Spirit, that Christ might dwell in their hearts by faith, that they might be rooted and grounded in love. He is concerned that they might be offended at his sufferings, that they might lose heart and abandon the teaching, a teaching that he believed had been communicated to him by a special revelation (*ED DISC*, I, 94-96.) Paul, however, transformed his suffering into a testimony for his teaching. Indeed, "Even if afflicted, yet he was always joyful; even though poor, he always made many rich; even though he had nothing, he still possessed everything" (*ED DISC*, I, 96.) Through

such inner strengthening, through such faith, Paul was able to give thanks *always*.

Such strengthening, such faith, cannot come through knowledge of the world. Knowledge is indifferent in its relation to the world, and its testimony is always ambiguous (*ED DISC*, I, 100-102.) Faith is not acquired by “collecting evidence.” As he says in an earlier discourse, to expect something special, something particular, is to lack faith (*ED DISC*, I, 31.)

But if he is truly concerned, then will everything through God serve for the strengthening in the inner man; for God is faithful and does not leave Himself without testimony. But God is Spirit, and therefore can give only spiritual testimony, that is in the inner man; every external testimony from God, if one could imagine such a thing, is only a deception. (*ED DISC*, I, 103.)

Through faith, which can be had only through being constantly acquired, one comes to realize that *every* gift is a good and perfect gift (*ED DISC*, I, 35ff.) Whatever happens, if it is received with humility and thankfulness, can serve for strengthening in the inner man (*ED DISC*, I, 106; 45-47.) Indeed, such a believer comes to see that his faith and his thankfulness are themselves gifts (*ED DISC*, I, 116.) The conviction that God is love gives rise to a love born of repentance. Such a believer can, as it were, let the whole world go and can then receive it back again as a gift from God, as from a loving father. Only then can he truly *have* the world, rather than the world having him (*ED DISC*, I, 21-22.)

In summary, we find in these discourses the view that God is love and that faith is a trust in this love. That such love can reveal to us our sins and hence call us to repentance. That such love demands of us not only that we love God in return, but that we love our neighbor as well. That such love calls us in effect to give up the world that we might receive it back again as a gift. That such love is revealed in Jesus, in his life and in his “covering” or forgiving of sins. It is true that the words ‘paradox’ and ‘offence’ are not used with reference to Jesus, though the love that he exemplifies is said to be “folly” to the understanding. Nevertheless the two stories of Jesus’ “covering” of sins must certainly call to mind the fact that the Pharisees were “offended” that he would forgive sins—for only God can forgive sins.

Such a “picture” of God stands in sharp contrast with the one that appears in *Fear and Trembling*. However, let us read again—keeping in mind what Kierkegaard has given us with his “right hand.”¹⁹ We are now more likely to see that Abraham’s faith is not just an occasional response to an ‘absurd’ divine command. Nor was this the first time that he had been called upon to “suspend the ethical.”²⁰ Johannes, in his eulogy of Abraham, emphasizes that it was by faith that Abraham left his father and emigrated to another land, by faith that he received the promise that in his seed all the generations of the earth would be blessed, by faith that he held to this promise far beyond the

time that Sarah could be supposed to have children (*FT*, 17.) He had fought with time and had kept the faith (*FT*, 19.) His faith is exemplified in a life of trust. According to Stephen Evans, it is this trust that provides the “interpretative framework” that leads Abraham to conclude, appearances to the contrary, that his act is the right one. Evans contends:

Abraham’s trust was faith in the truest sense of the word. Though perhaps grounded in his experience of God it was by no means a belief to be treated as an experimental hypothesis, but a conviction to be clung to through thick and thin.²¹

Through his trial, Abraham is depicted as maintaining his trust in God’s promise, his trust that somehow, though it may appear absurd—especially to a non-believer like Johannes—he will get Isaac back.

His trust is also seen as an expression of his love for God. According to Johannes, the notion of an absolute duty to God is characterized in terms of God’s demand for absolute love (*FT*, 72-73.) Yet, it is also Abraham’s duty to love Isaac.

He must love Isaac with his whole soul. Since God claims Isaac, he must, if possible, love him even more, and only then can he sacrifice him, for it is indeed this love for Isaac that makes his act a sacrifice by its paradoxical contrast to his love for God. (*FT*, 74.)

As he says elsewhere, such an absolute duty may require one to embody a *paradoxical* expression of the ethical, “...such as, for example, that love to God may bring the knight of faith to give his love to the neighbor—an expression opposite to that which, ethically speaking, is duty” (*FT*, 70.) Thus, though it may not appear so to the understanding, Abraham’s action can be seen as falling under the Royal Law: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (Matthew 22:37-39.) Is this not the “ethic” that we have found in the *Discourses*? Yet, the love called for there was Christian love. Does such a possibility appear in *Fear and Trembling*? Johannes does speak of a more fearful “teleological suspension of the ethical” than that faced by Abraham. His comments occur in the context of the story of Agnes and the Mer-man. He tells us:

In sin, the single individual is already higher...than the universal, because it is a contradiction on the part of the universal to want to demand itself from the person who lacks the *conditio sine qua non*...An ethics that ignores sin is a completely futile discipline, but if it affirms sin, then it has *eo ipso* exceeded itself. (*FT*, 98-99.)

He adds in a footnote: “As soon as sin emerges, ethics founders precisely on repentance; for repentance is the highest ethical expression, but precisely as

such it is the deepest ethical self-contradiction" (*FT*, 98n.) Is it not likely that a Lutheran reading this passage would call to mind the image of the Law and the Gospel? Are we not indirectly referred here to an "ethical" that does not ignore sin—an ethic that also provides a means of "covering" sin?²² Ronald Green has urged that it is in this passage regarding sin and repentance that we find the "key" to deciphering *Fear and Trembling*. It contains not only the "secret message" regarding faith but also reveals, at least partially, Kierkegaard's own secret. He does not deny that the book was also directed to Regine, to convey to her why he could not marry her, why she had to be 'sacrificed.' But this "message" is too obvious and too much concerned with Kierkegaard's own situation to be the *real* "message."²³ In contrast to Abraham, who is seen as righteous, Kierkegaard saw himself as guilty: indeed he was laboring under a tremendous burden of guilt and melancholy, both personal and familial. According to Green:

It was partly because of the burden of this sin...that he believed himself unable to go through with the marriage: fearful, perhaps, that his melancholy disposition, which was itself one consequence of this tradition of familial sin, would ruin young Regine's life and make a happy union impossible. But the issue of sin in Kierkegaard's thought and life transcended this one preoccupation in his writing. It is this issue, I believe, that constitutes the 'hidden message' of this book.²⁴

Green sees Kierkegaard as drawing here the consequences of Kant's analysis of evil in his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, consequences that Kant did not draw because of his 'enlightenment' presuppositions, consequences that were the same as those drawn by Paul, Augustine, and Luther regarding the human condition.²⁵ He goes on to say:

Ethics must not be the highest possibility of human existence, as Kant in his most optimistic moods wanted to believe. It must instead be transcended by a more ultimate possibility in which forgiveness and the suspension of merited punishment become realities. In short, it must be possible for there to be a 'teleological suspension of the ethical.'²⁶

For Green, it is *this* teleological suspension of the ethical, rather than that in which a divine command suspends the ethical as the universal, which is the key to the book. For without *this* suspension, we are all 'lost,' even Abraham. Thus, for him, it is the issue of sin and grace, rather than the issue of divine command morality that is the central focus of the book.²⁷

I tend to agree *almost* entirely with Green. On the obstacles to marriage, Kierkegaard tells us: "A penitent such as I was, my *vita ante acta*, my melancholy, that was enough."²⁸ The problem of sin and the "teleological suspension" that Green emphasizes, the "suspension" of being unable to realize the demands of the ethical, *is* central. Indeed, the verdict on ethics had already been pronounced in the "ultimatum" attached to *Either/Or*. On the other hand,

the issue of divine command morality is *also* central to the book. The only question is the *character* of such a morality. There is implicit, we have said, in *Fear and Trembling* an ethic of “agapism,” an ethic based on the Royal Law, an ethic that points forward to the *Works of Love* where Christianity is called the “true ethic.”²⁹ It is our duty to love our neighbor *and* God (*FT*, 68.) The basis of such a ‘thou shalt’ is that God himself *is* love. Those who raise the possibility that such a “commander” could be a capricious despot forget this “is.” Kierkegaard is convinced, as is Johannes, that God *is* love (*FT*, 34.) As Jeremy Walker has said: “For SK, as for all orthodox Christians, God’s will *is* his love—his love *is* his will.”³⁰ In this sense, Kierkegaard’s view does not seem to be subject to the usual objections to the divine command theory. God’s commands flow from his nature. Further, we are to love God because He first loved us. As Phillips has put it: “To understand what it means to believe in [such a] God is to understand why God must be obeyed.”³¹

Thus, in a sense, Abraham’s “suspension of the ethical” could be seen as a suspension of a lower “ethical” by a higher “ethical.” For this reason, some interpreters of Kierkegaard see his position as involving an *extension* of the ethical rather than an abrogation of it.³² One may do this as long as one realizes that his position and the Kantian-Hegelian conception represent also *conflicting* conceptions of the ethical. Whereas for Kant one gets one’s “orders” from Reason, from oneself, and for Hegel from one’s position in society, Abraham takes his “orders” as an individual from God. Yet, that there is a *connection* between these two kinds of duties, one’s “ethical” duty and the “will of God,” is indicated by another passage in the *Journals*: “The terrifying thing in the collision is that; that it is not a collision between God’s command and man’s command but between God’s command and God’s command” (*JP*, 1, #908.) The conflict between the ethical and the religious is thus, in some sense, a *religious* conflict. Thus, perhaps it would be better to speak of Abraham’s situation as involving a “teleological suspension of the religious” by the religious.³³ On this view, Abraham’s action would involve a belief that a more general divine command had been “suspended” or overridden by a special divine command directed to him as an individual.³⁴ Interestingly enough, this is just the interpretation that Scotus places upon the situation. For St. Thomas, though God might command an act “contrary to the wonted mode of virtue,” as in the case of Abraham, such a command did not involve any suspension or dispensation of the natural law or of the fifth commandment. The command is only an *exceptional* expression of God’s supreme dominion over all life.³⁵ On the other hand, in his response, the Subtle Doctor distinguishes between the natural law understood in a strict sense and in a broad sense.³⁶ It is only as understood in the strict sense that he agrees with St. Thomas that God cannot dispense with a commandment of the natural law. Only the commandments of the first table, those dealing with duties to

God, meet this strict criterion. God, being Love, cannot command others to hate Him. He cannot issue a self-contradictory command. Scotus argues, however, that the precepts of the second table, those dealing with duties to others, belong to the natural law only in a broad sense. They cannot be deduced from the requirement that we must love God, *nor* from the commandment that we must love our neighbor. God, therefore, can issue a dispensation, or suspend these commandments, as He did in the case of Abraham. Scotus thus admits an element of contingency with regard to these commandments that is not admitted by St. Thomas. It is this element of contingency, of course, that led to the “despotic” interpretation cited earlier. Interpreters of Scotus have rightly challenged such an interpretation. God’s commands follow from his nature, which is love. It is true that the basis of such contingency is God’s liberty, that He is determined by nothing other than Himself. As Efreem Bettoni says: “To say that for Duns Scotus the basis of morality is the will of God is by no means incorrect. But care should be taken not to confuse this will with caprice or arbitrariness. It should rather be understood as that kind of will whereby God *est rationabilissime et ordinatissime volens*.”³⁷ Thus, God wills in a “most reasonable and orderly manner.” Hence while Ċapek may be correct in linking Kierkegaard with Scotus, it would seem that he is wrong in speaking of the “Scotist-Kierkegaardian claim that God is *beyond good and evil*.”³⁸

There are, however, some points on which his position differs from that of Scotus. The latter followed most other theologians in contending that Abraham was justified in acting as he did because he was *certain* that the command came from God. Some have seen Kierkegaard as advocating such a view.³⁹ It is true that Johannes does say of Abraham: “But he did not doubt, he did not look in anguish to the left and to the right, he did not challenge heaven with his prayers. He knew that it was God the almighty who was testing him...” (*FT*, 22.) This passage occurs in Johannes’ eulogy of Abraham. Johannes presents a highly idealized and poetized picture of Abraham. As the father of faith, it would not be appropriate to depict him as irresolute and doubting. (The Bible does not.) On the other hand, it is difficult to reconcile the view of Abraham as certain with what he says elsewhere about the anguish of Abraham (*FT*, 52.) Whatever the view of Johannes, it is clear from what Kierkegaard says elsewhere that faith always involves an element of “objective uncertainty.” God being who He is, it seems that the possibility of an *immediate* relation is ruled out. For that reason, most interpreters contend that Abraham, while he may be resolute, cannot be certain that the command comes from God.⁴⁰

The other point of difference arises over what might be called Kierkegaard’s “individualism.” One of the recurrent themes of *Fear and Trembling* is that the individual must discover for himself what it is that God requires of him.

As Johannes de Silentio puts it, “Only the single individual can ever give himself a more explicit explanation of what is to be understood by Isaac” (*FT*, 71.) Kierkegaard came to believe that the task required of him demanded that he live outside the “universal.” Such is not required of everyone. As Johannes sees it, people are assigned different tasks and the single individual *may* find his task within the universal (*FT*, 75-76.) Indeed, it seems that this is where most of us will find what Kierkegaard calls in *Purity of Heart* our “eternal vocation.”⁴¹ On the other hand, the Royal Law, as he says later in the *Works of Love*, *may* demand the sacrifice of particular love-relationships such as that between man and wife.⁴² Again, it is a matter between the individual and God. He writes there:

Moreover, if it were not a fact that one man, honest, sincere, respectable and God-fearing, can under the same circumstances do exactly the opposite of what another man does, who is also honest, sincere, respectable and God-fearing; then the God-relationship would not essentially exist, not in its most profound significance. If one were able with absolute truth to judge every man according to a common pattern, then would the God-relationship be essentially abolished; then would everything face outward, heathenishly finding its complete expression in the state and community life...⁴³

Kierkegaard’s position is connected with the Pauline conception of love as the fulfillment of the law.⁴⁴ As problematic and anxiety-provoking as it may be, it is the task of the individual to decide for him or herself—in “fear and trembling”—what Love requires of them.

This brings us back, however, to the disturbing figure of Abraham. Although we have altered the picture of God, we still have the question, indeed it is all the more insistent now, how could God command Abraham to sacrifice his son? How could such an action be an expression of love of God and neighbor? How could “faith” sanction such a barbaric act? It must be admitted that many Christian thinkers as well as Jewish thinkers have believed that God *did* issue such a command.⁴⁵ After all, the Bible says He did. Indeed, until the nineteenth century and the advent of Biblical criticism, this was the “received” view. Abraham is depicted as believing that God had the right to issue such a command. He does not plead his cause—or the cause of his innocent son—as he did the cause of the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah (*FT*, 21.) It must also be admitted that Kierkegaard himself *may* have belonged to this group of believers. Like them, he sees God as the Lord and giver of life; what God gives He *can* take back. The movement of infinite resignation requires that one be willing to give up, to sacrifice, everything. Still, to take the knife to one’s own son?

A traditional way of mitigating the difficulty is, of course, to insist that God did not *really* command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. He may have told him to carry out the act, but He did not *intend* for him to do it. This inter-

pretation very early became a part of the Jewish tradition. As Shalom Spiegel points out:

To be sure, the Talmudic Sages never wearied of repeating once and again what occurs again and once again in the Prophets: 'Which I commanded not, nor spoke it, neither came it into My mind.' (Jer. 19:5)—*I did not command Jephthah to sacrifice his daughter, I did not speak to the king of Moab (saying) that he should sacrifice his son, neither came it into My mind to tell Abraham to slay his son...*⁴⁶

It is emphasized that, after all, Abraham did *not* sacrifice Isaac; the whole affair was *only a test*. Is this not clearly indicated by the first verse of the chapter, 'And God tested Abraham...'? Johannes is himself willing to grant this point, provided that we remember that Abraham did not *know* that it was a test. Again, he is willing to admit that the story ends happily; Abraham does get Isaac back, but only after he has walked the lonely and terrifying path up Mt. Moriah.

As a "master of irony" no doubt such a reading could have appealed to Kierkegaard. There are, however, serious difficulties with such an interpretation. Why subject Abraham to such a cruel test? Johannes himself asks,

Who is this who seizes the staff from the old man, who is this who demands that he himself shall break it! ...Is there no sympathy for this venerable old man, none for the innocent child? And yet Abraham was God's chosen one, and it was the Lord who imposed the ordeal [*Provelse*]. (FT, 19)

To say that God wanted to 'know' whether Abraham would pass the test, as seems to be indicated by the passage 'Now I know...', does not square with the belief in God's omniscience. The traditional response is that the test is imposed so that Abraham might show himself worthy of the promise and that he might serve as an example of faith. Still, such an approach seems to make God a dissembler whose "commands" may not reflect his *true* will. Also, while such an interpretation shifts the emphasis of the story to the second command, it does not eliminate the first. We still have the picture of *two* commands, one rescinding the other.

There is a more radical way of reading the Abraham story. This is to say that while Abraham *believed* that he had been commanded to sacrifice his son, he need *not* have been so commanded. Is there any basis for reading the story this way—or for reading Kierkegaard's version of the story this way? Certainly, at first glance, it does not seem that Johannes de Silentio reads the story this way. He appears to treat the story "literally"—in the sense that it involves two commands from God, the first "suspending the ethical" and the second "giving back" Isaac. As he says: "The story of Abraham contains, then, a teleological suspension of the ethical...If this is not Abraham's situation, then Abraham is not even a tragic hero but a murderer" (FT, 66.) If such is not the case, then faith does not exist. Yet Johannes is also a poet who

is given to imagining various possible scenarios, other ways in which the story might have happened. In his hands, the story at times begins to take on the character of a fairy tale. He is also exceedingly concerned lest anyone take it upon himself to emulate Abraham (*FT*, 28f.) That he himself seems uncertain whether Abraham did in fact receive such a command is indicated by his worry that Abraham might have been mistaken (*FT*, 61.) The feature that Johannes insists upon is that Abraham *believed* that God required such a sacrifice of him. As it turned out, God did *not* require such a sacrifice. Thus in this sense, Abraham's belief was "mistaken." He did, fortunately, come to believe that he was not to sacrifice Isaac.

Is Johannes, is Kierkegaard, trying to caution us here against a "literal" reading of the story? Might Abraham still serve as an exemplar of faith, even though he was "mistaken" in thinking that God required him to take the knife to his son? That Abraham possessed the "formal" qualifications of faith, *i.e.* that he believed against the understanding, need not necessarily imply that the 'what' of faith, at least with regard to the command to sacrifice Isaac, was in fact correct. Anyone familiar with the writings of Kierkegaard will surely call to mind here the "truth is subjectivity" thesis of the *Postscript*—a thesis that is especially applicable to the account of faith at the level of Religion A—of which Abraham would seem to be an exemplar.⁴⁷

My suggestion is that we read the story in the light of this thesis. There are many difficulties raised by such a suggestion, not the least of which is that without the first divine command the story of Abraham would no longer seem to contain a "teleological suspension of the ethical." There is also Kierkegaard's description of Abraham's conflict as a conflict of two *divine* commands. There is finally his acceptance of the Bible as God's Word. The second of these could be resolved by saying that this is how Kierkegaard sees Abraham as understanding the conflict. Let us consider the other two in reverse order. While Kierkegaard accepted the Bible as God's revelation, he was obviously aware of the historical-critical approach and was not himself a "literalist."⁴⁸ Also he was not above, as we have seen, criticizing the Old Testament and Jewish conception of God. In the Old Testament, God is seen as "through a glass darkly." Only with God's revelation of Himself in Christ, and even there He does not reveal Himself "immediately," do we have a full expression of God's nature as Love, a "pattern" to guide us in our efforts to become a subject in truth. It is also interesting to note the difference between the double-movement of faith in *Fear and Trembling* and the *Discourses*. In the latter, to expect something special, something particular, is said to be to *lack* faith. Abraham, on the other hand, believes that he will get Isaac back. Only in *Fear and Trembling* and in *Repetition*, where Job is the focal figure, is faith described in terms of receiving back the finite in a *particular* sense. The emphasis on the particular in these works may be due to the fact that

both focal figures were Jewish, and that they represented a life possibility that needed to be presented as a part of his comprehensive project to map out such possibilities.⁴⁹ They do represent in this sense a characteristic feature of Judaism.⁵⁰ We have noted that it seems that Kierkegaard, while he was writing *Fear and Trembling*, may very well have been struggling with this possibility, the possibility that he might also get Regine back.

Kierkegaard's "struggle" here can be seen as representative of the "building" of faith or the "strengthening" of the inner man. One hopes, one prays to God for *some* thing, for some possibility that might be granted by Him to whom all things are possible. One's hope, one's wish, however, may be denied. Yet, one may come to perceive this denial, and the whole world along with it, as a gift from the hand of God. Only through such faith can one receive back the *whole* of the temporal. This would seem to be import of the picture of the *ordinary* knight of faith in *Fear and Trembling* (FT, 38f.) It is *this* double-movement, the double-movement of the *Discourses*, rather than that illustrated by Abraham, that is fundamental. In this sense, the "faith" of the *Discourses* does seem to "go further" than that represented by Abraham.⁵¹

The crucial difficulty with the reading that we have proposed is that the story of Abraham would no longer seem to contain a "teleological suspension of the ethical." Is the "suspension" involved that of God's acceptance of Abraham's *willingness* to sacrifice his son, when such a sacrifice was not literally required of him? One may certainly wonder if we have here not only "gone further" than Abraham but also beyond Kierkegaard.⁵² Indeed, one might well wonder if we have not removed the "fear and trembling" from *Fear and Trembling*. On this reading, the story in Genesis 22 would not *actually* require a "teleological suspension of the ethical." Is not such a reading, however, more consistent with the picture of God as *unchanging* Love, the picture of God in the *Discourses*, than that of God as issuing and rescinding commands?⁵³ On this point, it is interesting to note what Kierkegaard has to say in the *Discourses* about Abraham's pleading with God to change his mind about punishing the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah. To speak of God in this way, as the Bible does, is said to 'speak humanly.'⁵⁴ Could it be that the description of God as issuing and rescinding commands, of finding out something he did not know before, is also to 'speak humanly'? In short, is it that we ought not to read the story in Genesis 22 literally? Might it be that the story can serve as an *illustration* of the "teleological suspension of the ethical" and Abraham can remain an exemplar of faith without its being taken "literally"?

While such a reading may be Kierkegaardian in spirit, I am not completely convinced that it is Kierkegaardian in fact. Kierkegaard notes at one point in the *Discourses* how what we see, especially in matters pertaining to the spirit, depends on the seer. In our "rereading" perhaps we are "reading into" the

text what we want to find there. Whether this is so, it seems that each reader must decide for him or herself. Even so, such a reading still leaves us with the *possibility* of “teleological suspensions of the ethical,” with the possibility of “conflicts” like those *illustrated* by the story of Abraham, and by Kierkegaard’s own situation. Indeed, that there *can be* such “conflicts” might very well be seen as the *moral of Fear and Trembling*. In the final analysis, the work does advocate the primacy of a *religious* ethic. Nor can we eliminate the element of “fear and trembling” from the religious life.⁵⁵ The demand of love and the “covering” of love must both be present. One must live with the possibility that the demand of Love may conflict not only with our own desires but also bring us into conflict with others and society.⁵⁶ In this sense, the “call to sacrifice,” the first command, cannot be eliminated. Nor is there any “objective” means of settling such “conflicts.” Still, while one must walk one’s own path in “fear and trembling,” one need not for Kierkegaard, thanks to God’s revelation in Christ, go one’s way without a Pattern, or without Help.

College of William and Mary

NOTES

1. Milic Čapek, “Professor Blanshard on Kierkegaard,” *The Modern Schoolman*, 47 (1970): 49.

2. Čapek, 47.

3. D. Z. Phillips, “Subjectivity and Religious Truth in Kierkegaard,” in his *Faith and Philosophical Inquiry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 211. See also C. Stephen Evans, “Is the Concept of Absolute Duty to God Unintelligible?” *Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling: Critical Appraisals*, ed. Robert Perkins (University of Alabama Press, 1981), 143, where he speaks of “...the implied picture of God as a nonmoral capricious despot who commands his followers to perform morally vicious acts, for no intelligible reason except as a test or trial of the follower’s devotion.” Neither Phillips nor Evans see this as Kierkegaard’s final position.

4. See Phillips 212: “The misgivings which I have voiced about certain parts of *Fear and Trembling*, however, are not characteristic of the general character of Kierkegaard’s remarks. In *Either/Or*, in *Purity of Heart*, in the *Postscript*, in *Works of Love*, and in other writings, the commands of God are internally related to the nature of God. There are certain things which would be nonsensical to place after ‘God commands.’ ‘God commands the slaughter of the innocent’ is nonsense. God’s nature is the grammar of God’s will and Kierkegaard never tires of saying that God’s nature is love.” See also Jackie Kleinman, “Čapek on Blanshard on Kierkegaard,” *The Modern Schoolman*, 50 (1973): 209-218, Kleinman contends: “Concerning God’s determining characteristic, Climacus [and Johannes de Silentio] is fairly explicit in his expression of the opinion—not to be considered a philosophical (rationally justifiable) conclusion—that God, in his role as creator, does not deny his nature, which is to love” (214).

5. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans., David F. Swenson

and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 551: "I am just as far from being Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling* as I am from being the Knight of Faith whom he depicts...." The standpoint of de Silentio is clarified later by Kierkegaard in an intended reply to a reviewer of *Fear and Trembling*: "The absurd is a category, the negative criterion, of the divine or of the relationship to the divine. When the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd—faith transforms it, but in every weak moment it is again more or less absurd to him. The passion of faith is the only thing which masters the absurd... To a third person the believer relates himself by virtue of the absurd; so must a third person judge, for a third person does not have the passion of faith. Johannes de Silentio has never claimed to be a believer; just the opposite, he has explained that he is not a believer—in order to illuminate faith negatively." Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 7 vols., ed. and trans. by Howard and Edna Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967-78), vol. 1, #10. All future references to this work will be made in the body of the text and will be abbreviated *JP*.

6. See Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 207: "If there is any message about faith in *Fear and Trembling*, it will be an enigmatic message." See also Ronald M. Green, "Deciphering *Fear and Trembling's* Secret Message," *Religious Studies* 22 (1986): 94-111. We will return to this article later.

7. On this point, Kierkegaard writes: "Abraham is called the father of faith because he has the formal qualifications of faith, believing against the understanding, although it has never occurred to the Christian Church that Abraham's faith had the content of the Christian faith, which relates essentially to a later historic event" (*JP*, 6, #6598.)

8. In a later *Journal* entry, Kierkegaard describes Johannes as a "real thinker who has pushed things to extremes." See Kierkegaard's *Papirer* X2 A 594. The Danish reads: "en virkelig Taenker har sat paa Spidsen." The Hongs translate this passage as "has pushed [things] to its logical conclusion" (*JP*, 3, #3130.)

9. See, e.g., Jerry Gill, "Faith is as Faith Does," *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, ed. Perkins, 204-217.

10. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), ix: "Of all of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings, *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition* are perhaps the most clearly personal." (All future references to this work will be made within the body of the text and will be abbreviated *FT*.) See also *JP*, 5, #5640 where Kierkegaard says: "He who has explained this riddle [Abraham's collision] has explained my life." In a later entry, *JP*, 6, #6491, he refers to this entry as hinting "...*Fear and Trembling* actually reproduced my own life." See also Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self Examination*, trans. by Edna and Howard Hong (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965), 91-93. It should be noted, however, that some interpreters see a closer analogy with the young man who has received privately a divine veto on his marriage (*FT*, 93) or even the demonic figure of the Merman who is set outside the universal by nature or by a historical situation than with Abraham. Kierkegaard speaks often of his "thorn in the flesh" which set him outside the universal. See e.g., his comments to Boesen during the last days of his life: "I had my thorn in the flesh, and that is why I did not marry, and could not enter ordinary relationships. So I concluded that my task was to be 'extraordinary.'" Cited in Johannes

Hohlenberg, *Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. T. H. Croxall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), 270. (Most biographers think that by his "thorn in the flesh" he meant his melancholy.) There is also the fact that Abraham and Job are treated as "righteous," whereas Kierkegaard was very much aware of his guilt. Malantschuk believes that for these reasons one must reject the view that Kierkegaard was still considering the possibility of marrying Regine. See e.g., Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Thought*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1971), 236ff. Nevertheless, it may have been that Kierkegaard, like the young man of *Repetition* was hoping for a "religious" transformation that would enable him to marry. Such a possibility is hinted at for the Merman also in *Fear and Trembling* (98ff).

11. See, e.g., James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1953), 89-97. On p. 89, Collins writes: "That there are other more decisive considerations than those of rationalistic ethics in the determination of conduct and personal attitudes is clearly evident in the case of exceptions to the universal ethical precepts. This appeal to exceptional situations is Kierkegaard's main argument against the adequacy of the ethical interpretation of existence." See also Frederick A. Olafson, *Principles and Persons* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), 27-33.

12. See especially Merold Westphal, "Abraham and Hegel," *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, ed. Perkins 62-80. See also Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 89: "Every individual ought to live in fear and trembling, and so too there is no established order which can do without fear and trembling... And fear and trembling signifies that a God exists—a fact which no man and no established order dare for an instant forget." See also p. 92: "...and it is precisely this God-relationship of the individual which must put every established order in suspense, so that God, at any instant He will, by pressure upon the individual has immediately in his God-relationship a witness, a reporter, a spy, or whatever you prefer to call it, one who in unconditional obedience, or by unconditional obedience, by persecution, suffering, and death, puts the established order in suspense."

13. See Evans, p. 144: "To sacrifice a child to save a nation or to maintain the state is ethically intelligible to Johannes. This suggests that despite the Kantian sound of the 'universal,' Johannes' conception of the ethical is essentially Hegelian. The highest ethical duties are concretely embodied in social situations." See also James Bogen, "Kierkegaard and the Teleological Suspension of the Ethical," *Inquiry* 5 (1962): 305-317. Bogen sees the ethical in *Fear and Trembling* as characterized as a system of duties. Since no place can be found for Abraham's action in such a system, there is a teleological suspension of the ethical. On the other hand, Bogen infers that since Abraham's act cannot be characterized as a duty, the answer to Johannes' second problem is negative. That is, there is no absolute duty to God.

14. For a discussion that emphasizes the points of contact between Kierkegaard and Kant, see Robert Perkins, "For Sanity's Sake: Kant, Kierkegaard, and Father Abraham," *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, ed. Perkins, 43-61. On the matter of autonomy, Kierkegaard writes in his *Journal*: "Kant was of the opinion that man is his own law (autonomy)—that is, he binds himself under the law which he himself gives himself. Actually, in a profounder sense, this is how lawlessness or experimentation are [sic] established. This is not being rigorously earnest any more than Sancho Panza's self-administered blows to his own bottom were vigorous" (*JP*, 1, #188.)

15. The citation here is taken from Emil Fackenheim's, "Abraham and the Kantians," in his *Encounters between Judaism and Modern Philosophy* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 34.

16. See Mackey, 412: "The 'ethical' in this context does not refer to any particular system of ethics, but simply to the attitude that reads all of human life in ethical terms."

17. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, trans. Walter Lowrie (London: Oxford University Press, 1950): 15-21.

18. Søren Kierkegaard, *Edifying Discourses*, 4. vols., trans. David R. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1954). Hereafter abbreviated *ED DISC*.

19. Kierkegaard, *Point of View*, 20.

20. Some Jewish commentators have seen Abraham's leaving of his father as an example of a "teleological suspension of the ethical." See Judah Halevi, "Kierkegaard and the Midrash," *Judaism*, 4 (1955) 13 - 28. "In leaving his father despite his reverence of the principle *Kibbud Ab*, Abraham did not intend to *abolish* the ethical principle that the son must respect and honor his parents. When such an ethical rule conflicts with the demand which the religious makes upon the individual, however, then *in such instances* the ethical must be suspended in favor of the higher religious *telos*, even at the risk of having the act falsely interpreted as a sign of hate or disrespect." (19) Halevi also interprets the Abraham-Isaac incident as also involving such a suspension. See also Ronald M. Green, "Abraham, Isaac, and the Jewish Tradition: An Ethical Appraisal," *Journal of Religious Ethics* (1982), 1-21. Green does not see the case of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac as illustrating such a suspension—he claims that in the Jewish view Isaac is not seen as an independent personality but as a *part* of Abraham's person so what is called for is rather a demand for *self-sacrifice*. Thus, "In this context, the divine imperative loses Kierkegaard's morally troubling dimension (no independent third party is involved) and instead becomes a call to consummate personal sacrifice" (8). For Green, "Jewish thinkers have virtually never read Genesis 22 in a way that undercuts the primacy of human conscience and reason" (2). He does admit, however, that: "They [i.e. Jewish commentators] were particularly sensitive to the charge that in leaving his aged father, Terah, Abraham violated the very special religious and ethical duty of honoring one's parents" (6). According to Green, "God grants Abraham a very special exemption from this duty" (6-7). (See also *Fear and Trembling* (72) where Luke 14:26 is cited as teaching an absolute duty to God.)

Halevi and other Jewish thinkers who do see Abraham's act as involving a "teleological suspension of the ethical" point to a Midrash in which Abraham is warned by Satan that if he carries out such an act God will condemn him as a murderer. To which Abraham is said to reply: "Nevertheless." (See Louis Jacobs, "The Problem of the *Akedah* in Jewish Thought," *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, ed. Perkins, 1-9.) Thus, Halevi writes regarding *Fear and Trembling* "In this work, with no knowledge of the Midrash and only the prodigious powers of his dialectical mind and imagination, he recreated singlehandedly the essential features of the Rabbinic interpretation of Abraham" (26). Jacobs also says elsewhere of *Fear and Trembling*: "...but what a midrash it is! Only so gifted a writer as Kierkegaard could call attention so effectively to the heart of the ancient tale missed by both the philistine and the pious." See Louis Jacobs, "The Relationship between

Religion and Ethics in Jewish Thought," in *Religion and Morality*, ed. by Louis Jacobs and Gene Outka, 155-172.

21. Evans, 146. This is also a point much emphasized by Gill in the article cited earlier.

22. One may feel that this is to make too much of a footnote. It is, however, just this more *fearful* "teleological suspension of the ethical" that is emphasized in Johannes Climacus' review of the literature in the *Postscript* (239-240). In the light of these "hints," it is not surprising that some have seen *Fear and Trembling* as an essay in the figural reading of the Old Testament (see, e.g., Mackey, 422) and Abraham's story as "an anticipation of the case of the Christian believer" (see Evans 150.)

23. Green, "Deciphering *Fear and Trembling's* Secret Message," 98-99.

24. Green, 99.

25. Green, 107.

26. Green, 107.

27. Green, 111.

28. Cited in Robert Bretall, editor, *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 15.

29. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. by Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 64.

30. Jeremy Walker, *Kierkegaard: The Descent into God* (Kingston, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985), 215.

31. D. Z. Phillips, "God and Ought," *Faith and Philosophical Inquiry*, 136.

32. For examples of those who have taken such an approach, see Olafson, 28: "The familiar phrase Kierkegaard uses to describe Abraham's case, the 'teleological suspension of the ethical,' can be somewhat misleading if it is not understood that the ethical that is transcended or suspended is the morality of general rules, and that the real effect of Kierkegaard's views is to expand the sphere of morality to include the requirement of obedience to God's particular commands. Kierkegaard is saying that it can be our duty (to God) to do what we cannot justify to other human beings by subsumption under a general principle." Evans also cites W. D. Ross' view on the personal character of moral duties and asks whether such duties might not also be based on a Creator-creature relationship. To extend the notion of 'moral duty' in this way to a notion of 'religious duty' is not to reduce the latter to the former. The standpoint of faith is autonomous (Evans, 148-151.) The "connection" between these two kinds of duties is developed at greater length in his book *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1983). See particularly chapter VIII. See also John Donnelly, "Kierkegaard's Problem I and II: An Analytic Perspective," *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, ed. Perkins, 115-140. In response to Bogen, Donnelly extends the notion of duty and "position" where the latter is allowed "...to designate certain mental attitudes, in which a position is a way of looking at something, a way of taking a certain perspective on life. Such an extended sense of *position* allows the term to designate a point of view adopted with reference to a particular subject, such as a certain benevolent attitude toward God." In this sense, Abraham is said to occupy a position and have a duty to obey God. Donnelly thus answers problem II in

the affirmative: There can be an absolute duty to God. On the other hand, problem I is answered in the negative. There is now no teleological suspension of the ethical.

33. See Bruce Russell, "What is the Ethical in *Fear and Trembling?*" *Inquiry* 19 (1975): 337-343. Against Bogen and Donnelly, Russell contends that Kierkegaard did not depict morality as a system of duties where moral duties derive from the particular *position* one holds in society. According to him, "Kierkegaard thought that moral duties were based on universal principles that were divine commands" (337). Thus, to be an ethical duty an act must be divinely commanded *and* universal. Hence, he claims that Donnelly is mistaken in thinking that Abraham can have a particular ethical duty as a knight of faith. Abraham is said to be acting upon a *religious* duty. "In general, ethical duties have in common with absolute (religious) duties the feature that they derive from divine commands. They differ in that ethical duties apply to everyone (they are universal) while religious duties apply only to particular people in particular circumstances." On his view, Abraham has a *religious* duty to suspend the ethical. It seems to us that Russell is closer to being correct on this issue than Bogen and Donnelly. On the other hand, he too tends to understand the religious life as involving a *multiplicity* of duties. To us, it seems that for Kierkegaard such duties are ultimately subsumed under the Royal Law, "You shall love God and your neighbor as yourself."

34. On this point, see Philip L. Quinn, "Moral Obligation, Religious Demand, and Practical Conflict," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 248-267. Quinn describes a situation that he calls "Kierkegaardian conflict" in which an indefeasible religious obligation and a moral obligation are in conflict and the moral obligation is *not* overridden by the religious demand. Such an interpretation does do justice to the tremendous force or weight of the ethical; for Kierkegaard the "universal" does have divine sanction. On the other hand, such an interpretation would seem to make God "at odds with Himself." See also Edward F. Mooney, "Abraham and Dilemma: Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension Revisited," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (1986): 23-41. He sees Abraham's dilemma as a "conflict" which has no "objective" solution. This is, in fact, the case. To go on, however, and maintain that there is then no "right choice" for Abraham is to "relativize" all answers that one might venture in such a conflict. For Kierkegaard, there is a course of action that we should follow in such situations. Our difficulty is to seek, in "fear and trembling," to discern it.

35. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II 104, 4 ad 2 and I *Sent.*, e. 47, q. 1, a. 4. For discussions of St. Thomas' views here see Ralph McInerny, "The Teleological Suspension of the Ethical," *The Thomist* 20 (1957): 295-308 and Denis A. Goulet, "Kierkegaard, Aquinas, and the Dilemma of Abraham," *Thought* 32 (1957): 165-188.

36. Scotus deals with this issue in the question "Whether All the Precepts of the Ten Commandments Belong to the Natural Law?" in his *Ordinatio*, book III, Dist. XXXVII, the single question. Portions of this question are translated in Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh, *Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 601-604.

37. Efreem Bettoni, *Duns Scotus: The Basic Principles of his Philosophy*, trans. Bernardine Bonansea (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1946), 181. See also

Robert Prentice, "The Contingent Element Governing the Natural Law on the Last Seven Precepts of the Decalogue, According to Duns Scotus," *Antonianum* 43 (1968): 259-292.

38. See Čapek, 30.

39. See Gene Outka, "Religious and Moral Duty: Notes on *Fear and Trembling*," in *Morality and Religion*, ed. by Gene H. Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr. (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1973), 249. He writes: "It is plain that Kierkegaard wants the relation between the individual and God to be direct and immediate—this is one of the things the teleological suspension is designed to guarantee. The immediacy connotes an actual privileged awareness, not reducible to empirical description."

40. See, e.g., Mackey, 213: "...for Abraham has no surety that the voice he hears is the voice of God." In addition to other Jewish writers like Halevi and Jacobs who cite the midrash tradition indicating Abraham's uncertainty about what he is to do (see earlier references), see also the paper by Fackenheim. He says that Kierkegaard is correct in describing Abraham's anguish and fear and trembling—as Abraham, since he lived before the gift of Torah—had to respond only to the mysterious divine commanding presence. While he had to suspend his "understanding," he did not have to suspend the "ethical"—since it had not yet been given. For Fackenheim, however, Abraham's was the last such trial. Now that we have the Torah there can be no more *Akedahs*.

41. Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart*, trans. Douglas Steere (New York: Harper & Row, 1948), 184.

42. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 133.

43. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 217.

44. See, e.g., Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, IIIA. Jeremy Walker has particularly developed this point. He writes: "The conception of law as the expression of God's will has an important role within SK's theory. For it allows him to move from the idea of morality as a system of principles to the Christian idea that 'morality' is summed up and revealed in the life of Jesus, without abandoning the characteristic ethical concepts of principle, standard, ought-ought not, right-wrong, conscience, judgment, and so on. In moving to an ethics of love, SK thinks of himself not as abandoning the characteristic standpoint of *morality* but as developing and fulfilling the implicit meaning of the moral standpoint." Walker, 214.

45. For an excellent overview of this issue, see Roland Bainton, "The Immoralities of the Patriarchs according to the Exegesis of the Late Middle Ages and of the Reformation," *Harvard Theological Review* 23 (1930): 39-49. According to Bainton, "The most common position in the middle ages was that the patriarchs had a special command or revelation from God, granting a dispensation from the commandments..." (40).

46. Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, trans. by Judah Golding (New York: Behrman House, 1967), 79.

47. This thesis is not just characteristic of Johannes Climacus. It can be found elsewhere in both the pseudonymous and non-pseudonymous writings. Indeed, it seems to be present already in some remarks of Judge William in *Either/Or*. On this point, see Earl McLane, "Kierkegaard and Subjectivity," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 8 (1977), 226-27.

48. See, e.g., his handling of the Adam and Eve story in *The Concept of Anxiety*. The story is not treated as an historical event but in terms of its human and religious significance.

On this point, see also Bradley R. Dewey, "Kierkegaard and the Blue Testament," *Harvard Theological Review*, 66 (1967), 391-409. In commenting upon the markings in one of Kierkegaard's personal copies of the New Testament, he remarks: "Some of the Blue Testament markings reveal that Kierkegaard employed a sharply critical eye while reading the text" (397).

49. See particularly Malantschuk's book, especially parts I and II, for an excellent account of the character and comprehensiveness of this project.

50. See *JP*, 1, #206 and especially *JP*, 2, #2223 where he describes a possibility that he calls a "new" *Fear and Trembling*.

51. See *ED DISC*, I, 76, where he sees Paul's "faith" as going beyond that of Abraham.

52. While I have not been able to find explicit support in other interpreters for such a reading, I might cite the following as possibly suggesting such a view. Robert Perkins says: "The greatness of Abraham and his personal virtue and character lay in the fact that, ambiguous though the command was, he was willing to obey it because he thought it was from God." *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, ed. Perkins 55. See also Louis Jacobs, "Traditions in Judaism and Christianity," in Outka and Reeder, *Morality and Religion*, 169: He agrees that God, being God, could not command a man to murder his son. "His [Kierkegaard's] point is rather that if Abraham had been convinced that it was God's will he would have done it because as 'knight of faith' his ultimate aim, unlike that of 'ethical man,' is not subservience to the universal ethical norm but his individual relationship to God." Such a reading would be closer to that usually taken in modern Biblical scholarship. Generally, those elements in the story that seem to imply that God could demand such a sacrifice are seen as a residue of a more *primitive* period of religious belief. Archaeological investigations, e.g., have revealed that child sacrifice was practised at this time in Canaan. (See Roland DeVaux, *Ancient Israel*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1961, 441-446.) Note also that the primitive demand—"The first born of your sons you shall give to me" (Exodus 22:29) stands by itself in the text, though it is also emphasized elsewhere that—"Every first-born son of man among your sons you shall redeem" (Exodus 13:13). These factors are said to explain how Abraham could have come to *believe* that God required Isaac as a sacrifice. See Norman Gottwald, *A Light unto the Nations* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 254: "Any devout soul in that time [in Canaan] could have understood the divine will as requiring of him the sacrifice of his dearest possession." See also *The Interpreter's Bible*, 12 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1954), 1 645: "Abraham was not blessed for correctness in conception of God's will; he was blessed because when he thought he knew God's will he was willing to obey it to the limit." These "primitive" elements are said to have been "re-edited" by a later writer—who emphasizes that the whole affair is only a 'test.' See Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1966), ch. IX. According to Gottwald, "The outcome of the story gives a most emphatic rejection of child sacrifice while it respects and retains the intention of the sacrifice: the giving of everything to God. Elohim accepts the intention in place of the act" (254). (See also Spiegel 73.) Yet, while our interpretation of Kierkegaard would be *consistent* with the above views, it must be admitted that such an account removes most of the *pathos* from the story—and from Johannes' version. In contrast to Johannes account, Abraham could have communicated with others about his ordeal and received consolation—as he was carrying out a "common practice."

53. The *unchangeableness* of God was a theme of the religious discourses from first to last—from “Every Good and Perfect Gift” (*ED DISC*, I, 51-71) to “The Unchangeableness of God” (1855) reprinted in Bretall, 469-482.

54. *ED DISC*, I, 75.

55. See Outka 205: “The kind of religious belief in *Fear and Trembling* exemplifies *par excellence* the effects of bringing a being on the stage which is uniquely the object of love and fear.” One of the most beautiful expressions of this “double” element of the religious life is the discourse “The Unchangeableness of God” (1855) cited earlier. There he writes: “do you earnestly consider and sincerely strive to understand—and this is God’s eternally unchangeable will for you as for every human being, that you should sincerely strive to attain this understanding—what God’s will for you may be?... How terrifying then that He is eternally unchangeable!” (474). Yet, while “There is thus sheer fear and trembling in this thought of the unchangeableness of God...it is also true that *there is rest and happiness in this thought*” (479). This “double” emphasis was present in Kierkegaard’s thought from first to last.

56. This is why prayer is so crucial for the religious life for Kierkegaard. For him, “...the true prayer-relationship does not exist when God hears what is being prayed about but when the *pray-er* continues to pray until he is the *one who hears*, who hears what God wills” (*JP*, 3, #3403). See Perry D. LeFevre, *The Prayers of Kierkegaard* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1956)—especially ch. 4.