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How Ethical is Abraham's "Suspension of the Ethical"?

Erratum
article

HOW ETHICAL IS ABRAHAM'S "SUSPENSION OF THE ETHICAL"?

Joseph A. Magno

Early in his discussion of *Fear and Trembling's* Problema I—"Is there a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?"—Kierkegaard puts to himself the question,

whether this story [of Abraham's command by God to sacrifice his son, Isaac] contains any higher expression for the ethical that can ethically explain his behavior, can ethically justify his suspending the ethical obligation to the son, but without moving beyond the teleology of the ethical.¹

How did Kierkegaard resolve this self-imposed query as to the ethicality of Abraham's act of faith? That, as those at all familiar with Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* know only too well, is precisely the exegetical case in point! For among those scholars who venture to interpret Kierkegaard herein, we may generically list no less than three widely divergent views. First, there are those who contend that Kierkegaard supplies absolutely no ethical warrant for Abraham's intended faith-act, and so view Abraham's suspension of the ethical irrationally, that is, as opposing the ethical.² At the other extreme are those who argue that while Abraham's faith-act cannot be reduced to sheer ethical justification, since on such a reduction Abraham's act would not be a *faith-act*, Kierkegaard nonetheless shows that there is no opposition between Abraham's faith and ethics, and so regard Abraham's suspension of the ethical in a sup-rationalist light, that is, as transcending, not negating, the ethical.³ Finally, there is what I shall designate a 'third force,' whose principal, shared contention is that it is beside the point to debate whether Kierkegaard does or does not ethically vindicate Abraham, that in truth Kierkegaard is primarily about something else entirely. What this something else is receives many and varying interpretations, but of these the following seem most typical. Thus, some maintain that the purpose of *Fear and Trembling* is "not to *defend* faith.... The book is a polemical slam against those [rationalists] who twaddle about 'going beyond' faith."⁴ Others hold that Kierkegaard means to justify Abraham not in virtue of reason, but rather in virtue of faith, essentially through arguing that "by faith, what appears absurd... [becomes] transformed."⁵ Lastly, some subscribe to the opinion that "Kierkegaard's main concern is with contrasting faith as mental



assent with faith as a way of life, i.e., with truth as a quality of life not as a quality of propositions.”⁶

Now of these three classes of opinion—irrationalist, suprarationalist, and ‘third force’—the latter, I submit, must be dismissed as a legitimate generic interpretation of Kierkegaard’s *primary* intent in *Fear and Trembling*. I underscore “primary” because, while I am prepared to concede that this ‘third force’ has unearthed what for Kierkegaard may be significant secondary intentions, I cannot agree that there is textual warrant for its claim that Kierkegaard considered a rational defense of Abraham’s ethicality of little or no importance. That a distinction must be drawn between Kierkegaard’s primary and likely secondary intents may be seen through closer inspection of Kierkegaard’s notion of ethics in *Fear and Trembling*.

How does Kierkegaard envision the ethical in this work? As has been justly observed, it is difficult precisely to say.⁷ Yet, whatever Kierkegaard may specifically mean by the ethical herein, it is at least patent that to him the ethical is all of a piece with what he terms “the universal.” Consider the following exemplary passages:

The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which from another angle means that it applies at all times. It rests immanent in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its Τέλος [end, purpose] but is itself the Τέλος for everything outside itself, and when the ethical has absorbed this into itself, it goes not further.⁸

If the ethical—that is, social morality—is the highest...then no categories are needed other than what Greek philosophy had or what can be deduced from them by consistent thought.⁹

The ethical as such is the universal; as the universal it is in turn the disclosed.¹⁰

From these passages I think we may safely gather that, however else Kierkegaard may view the ethical, he minimally regards it as involving (1) the normative universal—categories of right and wrong conduct applicable to all, irrespective of temporal and local circumstances, (2) the immanent—categories which neither admit of nor require higher categories of conduct, (3) the intelligible—categories inherently understandable by all, and (4) the public—categories inherently communicable to all. In a word, in *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard envisions the ethical as expressive of autonomous normative categories, intrinsically understandable by and therefore communicable to all persons.

Moreover, if the preceding represents at least Kierkegaard’s minimal appreciation of ethics in *Fear and Trembling*, we may further infer that in this work he construes the ethical as decidedly the province of reason. For *qua* universal, the ethical is perforce a function of reason, since the universal as such is reason’s

object. More to the point, the ethical is a function of reason's *normative* judgment to the effect that, "X is good (or bad) because X does (or does not) conform to universal prescription Y."

But given the necessary connection of ethics to reason in *Fear and Trembling*, it becomes clear why this 'third force' must be disallowed as a permissible interpretation of Kierkegaard's primary intent in this opus: if Kierkegaard regards ethics as the normative expression of reason—as the ethico-rational, if you will—any determination of Abraham's ethicality can only be *primarily* resolved insofar as his conduct accords with the dictates of reason. Nor, for that matter, does it ultimately matter whether Kierkegaard consciously made the latter intent his primary intent. What does ultimately matter is that, in view of the necessary and subordinate relation of ethics to reason herein, Kierkegaard *ipso facto* commits himself to determining how Abraham's faith stands *vis-à-vis* the rational, or better yet, the ethico-rational. In short, either Kierkegaard does ethico-rationally vindicate Abraham within the textual perimeters of *Fear and Trembling*, or he does not. There is no third alternative.

Finally, and in a similar vein, neither does it particularly matter that Kierkegaard penned this book under a pseudonym—Johannes de Silentio—thereby making it reasonable to assume, as has often been noted, that the book does not entirely reflect his true position on the faith/ethics relationship.¹¹ Even granting this assumption, it has no real bearing on our present inquiry. For what we are presently about is ascertaining, not Kierkegaard's definitive estimate of the faith/ethico-rational relationship,¹² but rather and simply what he has to say about this relationship in *Fear and Trembling*. Thus, the purpose of this inquiry is quite modest: it is solely to assess the compatibility of faith and ethico-reason within the pages of *Fear and Trembling*.

On this reckoning, then, there remain but two interpretive possibilities, irrationalism or suprarationalism. Which interpretation does *Fear and Trembling* warrant? My answer is irrationalism. However, before proceeding to argue this answer—and indeed, so that we might proceed to argue this answer—it will be necessary, first, to clarify our earlier mention of irrationalism as a point of view "opposed to" the ethical. Exactly what is meant by "opposed" in this context? One cannot exactly say. Typically, irrationalism is taken to denote that which is "contrary to reason."¹³ But such a characterization is notoriously imprecise.¹⁴ Be this as it may, the fact is that when critics see fit to adjudge *Fear and Trembling* "contrary to reason," they invariably mean to suggest either (1) that the work contradicts reason, or (2) that the work is simply meaningless. Such being these critics' primary senses of irrationalism, we need only inquire as to *Fear and Trembling*'s susceptibility to either or both of these senses. Should *Fear and Trembling* prove immune to both species of irrationalism, we may rest assured that, whatever other senses "contrary to reason" may permit, this work

is neither contradictory nor meaningless in its presentation of the faith/ethico-rational relationship—and that, to my mind, is more than sufficient to establish this work as *not* contrary to reason.

But specifically what is meant by these two senses of irrationalism? How do they differ from one another? In fact, *do* they differ from one another? Toward answering these questions, consider, first, the contradictory assertion, “A is not A.” This is evidently contrary to reason and therefore irrational. But it is not thereby meaningless. Far from it. For the assertion presupposes recognition that a term with defining property “A,” which is only to say, a term which *means* “A,” is being affirmed and denied at the same time and in the same respect. In other words, a term’s meaningfulness is a necessary condition of contradiction itself. The assertion, “A is meaningless,” on the other hand, is another matter altogether. This assertion entails nothing less than the utter inaccessibility of “A” to any and all evidential verification; and, since knowledge is perforce a function of such verification, the absolute unknowability of “A.” Now what is per se unknowable can be neither affirmed nor denied, in that there is, cognitively speaking, literally nothing to affirm or deny. But what can be neither affirmed nor denied cannot, of course, be contradicted. Hence, the meaning, distinction, and fundamental irreducibility of these two senses of irrationalism to one another.

In light of this clarification, I may now specify the precise sense in which I account *Fear and Trembling* an irrationalist statement. In the following section, I shall argue, against the prevalent irrationalist persuasion, that this work is not vulnerable to the verdict of irrationalism by reason of contradiction, that, in truth, there exists no inherent opposition between Abraham’s faith and ethico-reason. Proponents of this sense of irrationalism have, in my opinion, failed to exploit *Fear and Trembling*’s exegetical potential and, to that extent, have sold this work far too short. But invulnerability to contradiction does not in itself insure success against the charge of irrationalism, as we have indicated. Thus, in the final section, I shall explore *Fear and Trembling*’s susceptibility to the second species of irrationalism, that by reason of meaninglessness. I shall show that the demonstration of a meaningful relation between Abraham’s faith and ethico-reason hinges on this work’s capacity to furnish probabilistic evidence supportive of Abraham’s faith. But, as I shall further show, this work neither does nor can furnish such evidence. So that, in the end, *Fear and Trembling*, notwithstanding the noncontradictory status of its treatment of faith and ethico-reason, is an irrational document, susceptible to the verdict of irrationalism under the aspect of meaninglessness.

I

That many find *Fear and Trembling* conspicuously irrationalistic is readily

understandable from the fact that it is liberally sprinkled throughout with passages such as these:

The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac—but precisely in this contradiction is the anxiety that can make a person sleepless....¹⁵

[F]aith [is] a paradox that makes a murder into a holy and God-pleasing act, a paradox...which no thought can grasp, because faith begins precisely where thought stops....¹⁶

Faith is precisely the paradox that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the [ethical] universal, is justified before it, not as inferior to it but as superior.... This position cannot be mediated, for all mediation takes place only by virtue of the universal; it is and remains for all eternity a paradox, impervious to thought.¹⁷

Abraham represents faith and [is] therefore...either a murderer or a man of faith.¹⁸

Were these and like sentiments indicative of Kierkegaard's sole sentiments on the faith/ethico-rational relationship in *Fear and Trembling*, one would be hard pressed, I submit, not to dismiss this work as hopelessly irrationalistic. In actuality, though, Kierkegaard is not content to leave the matter at that. Well into the book, subsequent to yet another of those citations which appear utterly to preclude any possible link between faith and ethico-reason, Kierkegaard asserts that,

From this it does not follow that the ethical should be invalidated; rather, the ethical receives a completely different expression, a paradoxical expression, 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.¹⁹

For present purposes, two things are especially noteworthy about this passage. First, Kierkegaard's initial sentence—"From this it does not follow that the ethical should be invalidated"—can hardly be construed as anything other than a suprarationalist assertion. If, as Kierkegaard declares, in faith the ethical is not invalidated, he can only mean to imply thereby that in faith the ethical persists and is in some sense operative—a perfectly apposite description of suprarationalism. The second striking feature about this passage is that, immediately subsequent to this suprarationalist assertion, Kierkegaard appends the statement, "the ethical receives a completely different expression...an expression opposite to that which, ethically speaking, is duty," which seems to belie his original, suprarationalist assertion, and so to recapitulate *Fear and Trembl-*

ing's ostensibly irrationalist motif.

What are we to make of these seemingly incongruous assertions? Unfortunately, there appears to be no hope of ascertaining Kierkegaard's actual intent here, since nowhere, as far as I can determine, does he volunteer such information. We have, it would seem, no more to go on than the passage itself, and what we might interpretively infer therefrom.

As to interpreting this passage, let me first call attention to the passage's potential exegetical significance. Far from being an irrelevant and/or gratuitous gloss on Kierkegaard's part, the passage actually serves as a concrete test case, so to speak, of the compatibility of Kierkegaard's suprarationalist assertion with all seemingly irrationalist utterances in *Fear and Trembling*. For insofar as the passage's subsequent assertion seems to court irrationalism, any reconciliation between the latter assertion and the initial suprarationalist assertion would effectively mean the reconciliation of faith and ethico-reason in *Fear and Trembling* writ large.

But a determination of such reconcilability itself presupposes the legitimacy of Kierkegaard's suprarationalist assertion. By legitimacy here I understand a demonstration establishing that this assertion is not merely arbitrary or question-begging, that there exists evidence supportive of its claim to be in keeping with ethico-reason. What would count as such evidence? Let me suggest a demonstration establishing that this assertion neither contradicts ethico-reason nor is in itself meaningless—in other words, a demonstration showing that this assertion is unsusceptible to the verdict of irrationalism in either of the aforesaid senses. To this end, I shall first consider whether Kierkegaard's suprarationalist assertion is liable to an irrationalist estimate by reason of contradiction, then consider same by reason of meaninglessness.

To demonstrate that Kierkegaard's suprarationalist assertion does not contradict ethico-reason, is effectively to demonstrate that Abraham's act of faith, though *qua* faith-act beyond reason, yet (a) does not contravene the ethico-rational proscription of murder, because (b) his faith-act is consistent with, and therefore justifiable in virtue of, a positive ethico-rational precept.

Furthermore, since the issue is murder, said demonstration requires an unexceptionable statement of what murder essentially is. Accordingly, I think we may safely suggest that, whatever the multifarious species and contexts of murder, in essence it consists of the premeditated (i.e., voluntary and deliberated) and unjust taking of human life. Now while each term of this definition—'premeditated,' 'unjust,' and 'taking of human life'—is, I maintain, indispensable to an adequate generic characterization of murder, certainly the most indispensable of these is the qualifier, 'unjust.' That is to say, murder is specifically wrong because it designates an action egregiously opposed to justice.

On this specification, we may now say that any would-be defense of Kier-

kegaard's suprarationalist assertion must establish (a) that Abraham's faith-act does not contradict the ethico-rational proscription of murder, precisely because (b) his faith-act is consistent with, and therefore justifiable in virtue of, the positive ethico-rational precept of justice. The following, I believe, shows just such consistency to obtain.

If God is author of life and death—and there is certainly nothing to prevent our assuming as much—it follows that God may give and take life sans injustice. This conclusion, be it noted, pertains unqualifiedly even to innocent human life. The so-called "state of innocence" here denotes the absence of moral fault, and hence exemption from what theologians are wont to call "moral death." This state, however, does not entail exemption from physical death, which *qua* physical, bears no necessary relation to one's moral status. Whence, as author of life and death, God may justly elect to take even innocent human life.

Moreover, should God so choose to take human life, innocent or no, God may choose to do so through human mediation sans injustice. This follows from the principle that what is rightfully one's own may be justly conferred upon or delegated to another. Hence, God could legitimately command a person, in His stead, to take even innocent human life, and the person so enjoined would be at once obligated and justified thereto: obligated, in that God has commanded him; justified, in that God has justly commanded him.

Now murder, we have noticed, is morally wrong specifically and ultimately because it contravenes the ethico-rational precept of justice. But anyone acting in accord with God's command to take human life acts justly, as we have seen; and anyone who so acts subserves the ethico-rational principle of justice; whence, anyone who so acts is not and indeed cannot be adjudged a murderer. There is, then, no inherent contradiction between Abraham's faith-act and ethico-reason;²⁰ and Kierkegaard's suprarationalist assertion is not susceptible to the charge of irrationalism by dint of contradiction.

But granting that Kierkegaard's suprarationalist assertion has been found non-contradictory to ethico-reason, how reconcilable is this assertion with his 'subsequent assertion,' which, we recall, epitomizes the seemingly contradictory association between faith and ethico-reason in *Fear and Trembling*? The answer is that these assertions are in contradiction only if we regard Abraham's doings apart from the supposition of his faith. Apart from this supposition, Abraham's actions become "completely different" than what is prescribed by ethico-reason, and Abraham is a murderer. Suppose faith, however, and Abraham's conduct becomes consonant with the ethico-rational standard of justice, and Abraham stands vindicated. And what permits this all-important supposition? Precisely the foregoing demonstration that Kierkegaard's suprarationalist assertion is not irrationalistic by virtue of contradiction. In short, if, as has been shown, there exists no contradiction in supposing Abraham's faithfulness, then neither does

there exist any reason not to grant the reconcilability of these assertions on the supposition of Abraham's faithfulness.

II

There remains to be considered the second sense of irrationalism, that by dint of meaninglessness. To see how Kierkegaard's suprarationalist assertion fares on this sense, we must reintroduce the fact that the preceding demonstration reposes on the supposition that Abraham is verily a man of faith. Now this supposition, we noticed, was permissible in that its acceptance proved noncontradictory. As such, the preceding demonstration may be taken as internal evidence supportive of said supposition, that is, evidence to the effect that there is nothing logically amiss or inconsistent in supposing Abraham's faithfulness. Positively stated, the preceding demonstration effectively shows that Abraham's conduct *could* be in line with ethico-reason. But to show that something could be the case, is not of course to show that something actually *is* the case. Yet the latter is precisely what must be demonstrated if we are to establish the meaningfulness of Kierkegaard's suprarationalist assertion. Hence, in this section, the task is to investigate whether Abraham's behavior actually does conform to the prescriptions of ethico-reason.

To demonstrate such conformity, however, is effectively to show that there exists, not just internal evidence supportive thereof, but external evidence, as well. External evidence here denotes concrete behavioral evidence to the effect that Abraham did act in faith. Merely to suppose that Abraham did so act—however noncontradictory this supposition—is implicitly to assert that no behavioral (external) evidence can support this supposition. But if absolutely nothing can count as external, behavioral evidence that Abraham is a man of faith, and if meaning is perforce a function of such evidence, then the supposition that Abraham acted in faith (and therefore that his conduct conforms to ethico-reason) is effectively meaningless. And in this event, Kierkegaard's suprarationalist assertion, notwithstanding its noncontradictory status, would be yet subject to the verdict of irrationalism by reason of meaninglessness.

For this reason, then, it is incumbent upon us to examine whether any external or behavioral evidence supports the supposition of Abraham's faith. But no sooner do we reach this conclusion than we meet a perhaps obvious objection. Succinctly put, the objection is based on the epistemic truism that faith-claims, *qua* faith-claims, are *ipso facto* irreducible to evidential verification. If so, any would-be quest after external evidence of Abraham's faithfulness is seemingly doomed from the start. So that the only apparent alternative is to own that Kierkegaard's faith-supposition is unsusceptible to external evidential support, and thus that his suprarationalist assertion is, from the start, irrationalistic by

reason of meaninglessness.

I would suggest that this frequently voiced objection against the rational evincibility of faith-claims fails to differentiate two argumentive categories of evidence. Indeed, to maintain that faith is per se irreducible to evidence is in actuality to affirm that faith is per se indemonstrable: that faith is by definition unsupportable by argumentation whose conclusion is necessary and certain. Faith is unsupportable by demonstrative argument because as such faith's object exceeds reason. So that to purport to demonstrate what is of faith is either to lapse into contradiction, or else to reduce an object of faith to an object of reason.

But to disallow, as we certainly must, the reducibility of faith to reason is not necessarily to disallow the existence of evidence supportive of faith. It is only and of necessity to disallow the existence of *demonstratively* supportive evidence. There yet remains, I contend, at least the possibility of advancing evidence for faith-claims which, though nondemonstrative, may nonetheless be supportive. What might this nondemonstrative albeit supportive evidence be? Invoking a distinction well known to philosophers past and present, I would propose probable evidence, to wit, evidence which supports the likelihood or plausibility of a given proposition. Pursuing evidence of this more modest ilk in behalf of faith-claims is not in principle to reduce faith to evidence. Faith's categorical autonomy, its definitional transcendence of the evidence, is preserved, and the search for evidence of Abraham's faith becomes merely an attempt to show that the supposition of his faith is in some sense intellectually respectable, if not intellectually provable. In a word, nothing prohibits inquiry into the existence of external evidence supportive of Abraham's faithfulness—provided, that is, that we understand thereby evidence serving as foundation of probable argumentation. Let us now see if *Fear and Trembling* affords such evidence.

As a matter of recorded fact, the Kierkegaard of *Fear and Trembling* was well aware of the social and moral necessity of detecting behavioral evidence of the authentically faithful. He notes that, on the pretext of being inspired by faith, "there are those who...would abandon themselves like unmanageable animals to selfish appetites." For this reason, he continues, a person must "demonstrate²¹ that he does not belong to them."²² And how does one so prove oneself? In one primary way, answers Kierkegaard: insofar as the faithful experiences "fear and trembling" over "being unable to make himself understandable to others."²³ Such is Kierkegaard's proposed criterion of genuine faithfulness. How adequate is it as probable evidence of Abraham's faithfulness?

To begin with, it is important that we understand what Kierkegaard has in mind by the expression "fear and trembling," since he regards these sentiments as the appropriate and distinctive response of the faithful to his inability to make his actions understandable to others. In the context of *Fear and Trembling*, there can be little doubt that by "fear" Kierkegaard understands "anxiety," specifically

a state of unrest or inner turmoil as to the ethical justifiability of one's conduct;²⁴ and that by "trembling" he means the dramatic, physical manifestation of this anxiety, and thus something of secondary, derivative significance. Anxiety, accordingly, is synonymous with Kierkegaard's use of the term, fear, in *Fear and Trembling*; and since trembling is causally subsequent to fear, it follows that for all intents our inquiry into the probability of Kierkegaard's criterion of the faithful resolves to this: just how distinctive of Abraham's faith is such anxiety as a response to his unintelligibility to others?

I believe the answer must be in the negative, and for three principal reasons. In the first place, while it is highly likely that, given the gravity of his intended faith-act, Abraham's unintelligibility to others would elicit in him the sentiment of anxiety as to the justifiability of his act, any such likelihood itself *presupposes* Abraham's faithfulness, and so cannot constitute probable evidence for his faithfulness. In a word, on this objection, the question of Abraham's faithfulness is patently begged.

Then again, it is difficult to see why such anxiety is any more indicative of Abraham's faithfulness than of his non-faithfulness. I suspect we have all had occasion to feel ill at ease over the justifiability of certain of our deeds in consequence of others' incomprehension. But I wonder how often we have experienced a need to regard our unrest at these times as significant of our faithfulness? On this objection, then, Kierkegaard's criterion of the faithful, even as probable evidence, is far too vague to serve as a discriminative test of the faithful, and at worst, becomes an open invitation to moral and social anarchy.

The final and, in my view, most critical objection specifically concerns Kierkegaard's referral to the unintelligibility of Abraham's conduct to others. This reference is particularly injurious to his criterion of faith because it effectively situates Abraham's conduct beyond the pale of any and all evidential support, such that nothing can count as the requisite external evidence of the Patriarch's faithfulness. But, as has been seen (see pages 4,8), if Abraham's faithfulness is radically unsusceptible to external support, and meaning is perforce a function of such support, then Kierkegaard's assertion as to Abraham's faithfulness becomes irremediably meaningless.

For these principal reasons, I conclude that there is no choice but to allow that the supposition of Abraham's faith cannot be even probabilistically supported, and hence that Kierkegaard's suprarationalist assertion must be accounted irrational ultimately and properly by reason of meaninglessness.

With this conclusion, Kierkegaard's question as to the ethicality of Abraham's conduct, with which we began this inquiry, is resolved. For if, as we have shown, Abraham's ethicality hinges on the reconcilability of Kierkegaard's suprarationalist assertion and his subsequent, seemingly irrationalist assertion; and if, moreover, the establishment of such reconcilability was itself shown to hinge

on a prior demonstration of the unsusceptibility of Kierkegaard's suprarationalist assertion to either species of irrationalism; then, having just demonstrated said assertion's failure to escape this final test of irrationalism, we thereby prove the irreconcilability of both assertions—and therefore, in answer to Kierkegaard's question, the radical unethicity of Abraham's conduct. This question having been resolved, our analysis of Abraham's ethicality as told in *Fear and Trembling* is brought to a close.

Loras College

NOTES

1. (With *Repetition*). Ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 57. Henceforth cited as FT.

2. These include: Regis Jolivet, *Introduction to Kierkegaard*, trans. by W. H. Barber (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1946), pp. 143, 150-51, 154, 207; H. V. Martin, *Kierkegaard: The Melancholy Dane* (London: Epworth Press, 1950), pp. 52-55; T. H. Croxall, *Kierkegaard Commentary* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), p. 152; H. J. Paton, *The Modern Predicament* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 121; William Earle, "The Paradox and the Death of God," in William Earle, James H. Edie and John Wild, *Christianity and Existentialism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1963), pp. 73-74; Edward John Carnell, *The Burden of Søren Kierkegaard* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), p. 131; Alasdair MacIntyre, "Søren Aabye Kierkegaard," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, Inc., and Free Press, 1967), Vol. I, p. 338; Brand Blanshard, "Kierkegaard on Faith," *Essays on Kierkegaard*, ed. by Jerry H. Gill (Minneapolis: Burgess Press, 1969), pp. 115-16; Luther J. Binkley, *Conflict of Ideals* (New York: Van Nostrand Press, 1969), p. 144; Maurice Friedman, *The Hidden Human Image* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Delta Books, 1974), pp. 237-38; Francis J. Lescoe, *Existentialism With or Without God* (New York: Alba House, 1974), pp. 39-40; John D. Mullen, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy* (New York: Mentor Books, 1981), pp. 131-32; and Mark C. Taylor, "Sounds of Silence," *Kierkegaard's 'Fear and Trembling': Critical Appraisals*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1981), pp. 184-88.

3. For example, see: James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Press, 1953), p. 92; Martin J. Heineken, *The Moment Before God* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1956), pp. 244-46; William Barrett, *Irrational Man* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), p. 167; Louis Dupré, *Kierkegaard as Theologian* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 77; George Price, *The Narrow Pass* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1963), p. 190; Hermann Diem, *Kierkegaard: an Introduction*, trans. by David Green (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1966), pp. 39-42; George E. Arbaugh and George B. Arbaugh, *Kierkegaard's Authorship: A Guide to the Writings of Kierkegaard* (Illinois: Augustana College Library, 1968), pp. 107, 109-10; Stephen Crites, *In the Twilight of Christendom*, AAR Studies in Religion, no. 2 (Pennsylvania: American Academy of Religion, 1972), pp. 23-24, 65-66; George J. Stack, *Kierkegaard's Existential Ethics* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1977), p. 163; Nancy Jay Crumbine, "On Faith," *Kierkegaard's 'Fear and Trembling'*, pp.

201-03; Paul Holmer, "About Being a Person: Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*," *ibid.*, pp. 94-99; Robert L. Perkins, "For Sanity's Sake: Kant, Kierkegaard, Father Abraham," *ibid.*, pp. 54-61; and Merold Westphal, "Abraham and Hegel," *ibid.*, p. 75.

4. C. Stephen Evans, "Is the Concept of an Absolute Duty Toward God Morally Unintelligible?" *Kierkegaard's 'Fear and Trembling'*, p. 143. See too Edward F. Mooney, "Understanding Abraham: Care, Faith and the Absurd," *ibid.*, p. 109.

5. David J. Wren, "Abraham's Silence and the Logic of Faith," *Kierkegaard's 'Fear and Trembling'*, p. 159. See too Harry R. Klocker, S. J., "From Rationalism to Faith: Ockham and Kierkegaard," *The Modern Schoolman*, 55 (Nov., 1977): 69.

6. Jerry H. Gill, "Faith is as Faith Does," *Essays on Kierkegaard*, pp. 204-05. See too Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), pp. 206-26.

7. See Wren, "Abraham's Silence and the Logic of Faith," p. 144.

8. FT, p. 54.

9. *Ibid.*, p 55.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

11. In the "Historical Introduction" to their recent translation of *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition* (see note 1), Howard and Edna Hong shed considerable light on the place and function of the pseudonym in Kierkegaard's writings. Their principal point is that "Kierkegaard expressly employed indirect communication in works such as *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition* in order to take himself as author out of the picture and to leave the reader alone with the ideas." For while "A historical and biographical approach to any work may afford some illumination, ...such an approach becomes eccentric if it diverts attention from the author's thought to the author's life. Throughout his authorship, Kierkegaard took special care to prevent his readers from being so diverted, from committing the genetic fallacy.... Yet few writers have been approached so consistently from the biographical angle." Pp. x-xi. See too *Ibid.*, pp. xxiv-xxx for elaboration on this point.

As such, the Hong's findings herein lend support to this paper's purpose of assessing the rational status of the faith/ethics tandem in *Fear and Trembling*, irrespective of what Kierkegaard's ultimate motives might have been for authoring this work.

12. Virtually no one doubts that in later works Kierkegaard advanced considerably beyond his statement of the faith/ethics relationship in *Fear and Trembling*.

13. See, for instance, Stanley M. Honer and Thomas C. Hunt, *Invitation to Philosophy* (California: Wadsworth Press, 1982), p. 240; Robert C. Solomon, *The Big Questions* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982), p. 252.

14. See Patrick Gardiner, "Irrationalism," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, Inc., and Free Press, 1967), Vol. IV, pp. 213-219.

15. FT, p. 30.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 55-56.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 56-57.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

20. I would note that arguments based on God's right to dispense from the precepts of the decalogue, as regards, for example, fornication, adultery, stealing, and killing the innocent, were in vogue

among prominent medieval thinkers. These included William of Auvergne, Bonaventure, Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas. They argued that such acts performed under God's inspiration did not transgress the order of justice, and so only seem to oppose the ethico-rational order. A favorite case in point was the Abraham story. See John F. Dedek, "Intrinsically Evil Acts: An Historical Study of the Mind of St. Thomas," *The Thomist*, 43, 3 (July, 1979): 385-413.

21. Kierkegaard's use of "demonstrate" here is doubtless ill-chosen, but it is certain that he does not mean thereby a strict demonstrative proof. Kierkegaard never wavered in his conviction that faith admits of no such proof, and that a person's conduct is at most a sign of his God-relationship. See *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, Vol. IV, X⁴A456 (4680), ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 1975).

22. FT, p. 75.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 75, 80. See too *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 30, 61, 71, 75-76, 78-79.

24. Abraham's concern as to the justifiability of his conduct issues, says Kierkegaard, from the inevitable clash between the ethical and religious expressions of his deed. As Kierkegaard puts it: "The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac—but precisely in this contradiction is the anxiety that can make a person sleepless, and yet without this anxiety Abraham is not who he is." FT, p. 30.