

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 39 | Issue 2

Article 5

4-1-2022

The Father of Faith Rationally Reconstructed

Levi Durham

Baylor University, levi_durham1@baylor.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Durham, Levi (2022) "The Father of Faith Rationally Reconstructed," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 39: Iss. 2, Article 5.

DOI: 10.37977/faithphil.2022.39.2.5

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol39/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

THE FATHER OF FAITH RATIONALLY RECONSTRUCTED

Levi Durham

There is a tension for those who want to simultaneously hold that Abraham's disposition to sacrifice Isaac is epistemically justified and yet hold that a contemporary father would not be justified in believing that God is commanding him to sacrifice his son. This paper attempts to resolve that tension. While some commentators have correctly pointed out that one must take Abraham's long relationship with God into account when considering Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son, they do not entertain the possibility that his hearing this commandment is evidence against the hypothesis that Abraham is speaking to God. I grant this possibility. But I argue that when God commands Abraham to do the unthinkable, Abraham's previously acquired evidence could still be sufficient to justify his belief that he is speaking with God. And in making this argument, I attempt to show what differentiates Abraham from the contemporary father who thinks that God is commanding him to sacrifice his son.

Now faith, in the sense in which I am here using the word, is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods.

— C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Introduction

If a father were to notify me that God had commanded him to sacrifice his son on an altar, I would respond that he either heard incorrectly or did not hear *God's* voice—after which I would notify the proper authorities. Yet St. Paul lauds Abraham, a man fully prepared to sacrifice his son upon divine fiat, for his great faith and says that Abraham's disposition is “credited to him as righteousness” (*New American Bible*, Galatians 3:6). If one wants to condemn the contemporary father should he heed the command, but preserve Abraham as a righteous, rational father, how should they justify Abraham's obedience? Søren Kierkegaard, writing as Johannes de Silentio, attempts to resolve this tension by arguing that Abraham is



responding to God in faith, meaning that Abraham is above the ethical sphere entirely. By bringing Abraham out of worldly reasoning, Silentio thus preserves Abraham as the father of faith and shows why a disturbed man ought not heed the voice in his head telling him to kill his son. Not all, however, view Abraham as such a moral exemplar. Kant argues that since we can never be certain that God is speaking to us and yet can be certain that it is always impermissible for a father to kill his innocent son, Abraham is acting both immorally and irrationally. And Stewart Shapiro claims that the Binding of Isaac exemplifies the triumph of faith over reason. Abraham becomes the exemplar of faith *because* he acts irrationally. If Shapiro's interpretation is correct, it is unclear why we should praise Abraham for his father yet condemn a contemporary father who attempts to sacrifice his own son.

The goal of this essay is to sketch out a way in which Abraham's belief in God in the Binding of Isaac is epistemically justified. Drawing on the work of Matthew Benton, Eleonore Stump and Leon Kass, I will argue that Abraham could be a good evidentialist and believe, in proportion to his evidence, that God is commanding him to sacrifice Isaac. Arguments like Kant's do not take the totality of Abraham's long relationship with God into account. They fail to consider the strength of Abraham's evidence leading him to believe that God is commanding him to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham's conversations with God prior to the binding of Isaac have resulted in impossible pregnancies, the obliteration of wicked cities, and offerings accepted in miraculous conflagration; Abraham has a strong rapport with God. Thus, even if the command to sacrifice Isaac is strong evidence that Abraham is not communicating with God, it could very well be insufficient to sway Abraham's faith in God. Abraham is justified in both believing that God is commanding him to sacrifice Isaac and in expecting that God will deliver Isaac back to him.

To give a reconstruction of Abraham's rationale, I will use a subjective Bayesian framework. I will imagine Abraham as an ideal Bayesian agent and consider Abraham's evidence for what I am assuming are mutually exclusive, jointly exhaustive hypotheses: Abraham knows the voice of God (K), and Abraham does not know the voice of God (\sim K). I will not attempt to articulate what it exactly means to "know the voice of God" beyond an ability to discern both *that* God is communicating information and *what* information God is communicating. I will also assume that the majority of the logical space of \sim K is composed of Abraham's being deceived by a malevolent being. Even if we read the Abrahamic story as myth, we must still read it as a *consistent* myth. It would be a mistake to consider only the moral dimensions of the story while ignoring the supernatural. I will thus include in Abraham's background knowledge belief that God exists, that Abraham has had many interactions with God up until the Binding of Isaac, and that God has a unique role for Abraham to play in human history. I am not claiming that Abraham is a proto-Bayesian in the sense that he was making abstract calculations. But, as I will argue, Abraham's

history with God gives him both reason to trust God and great confidence that he can discern the voice of God, and these can be nicely modeled using Bayesian confirmation theory.¹

My focus in this paper is on the epistemic component of the Binding of Isaac. For that reason, besides brief discussions in sections I and IV, I will set ethical problems in the story—on which much has already been written—mostly aside. Evidence, in the sense that I am using it, is probability raising: to say that E is evidence for H is to say that $P(H | E) > P(H)$. Conversely, to say that E is evidence against H is to say that $P(H) > P(H | E)$. The updated probability becomes our new prior probability as we gain new evidence, and we repeat this process for each E_i . The structure of this paper is as follows. Section I introduces the epistemic problem in the Binding of Isaac that I intend to address. Section II introduces the relevant aspects of Benton's account of interpersonal knowledge and explains the similarities and dissimilarities between my account of the Binding of Isaac and Stump and Kass's. Section III is a direct application of my account to Abraham's case. Lastly, sections IV and V address some possible objections to my account.

I. *The Preposterous Sacrifice*

There is, for Kant, a crucial disparity in the probability of the propositions: (a) God is telling me to sacrifice my son, and (b) I ought to not sacrifice my son. Since God is infinite, He can never communicate *that* he is God directly to any finite being.² We can, therefore, never be certain that *God* is communicating to us, which leaves us uncertain about all propositions like (a). On the other hand, we are certain of some moral propositions like (b). Even if Abraham were to hear what he thought was the voice of God telling him that he ought to sacrifice Isaac, such a command could never overcome Abraham's certainty that he ought not sacrifice Isaac. This means that Abraham believes both irrationally and immorally. Kant writes,

[Consider] the myth of the sacrifice that Abraham was going to make by butchering and burning his only son at God's command (the poor child, without knowing it, even brought the wood for the fire). Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: "that I ought not to kill my own good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God—of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven."³

¹Cognitive scientists are actively researching how well Bayesian confirmation theory aligns with our seemingly innate explanatory values. For an example, see Wojtowicz and DeDeo, "From Probability to Consilience." They argue that Bayesian models can capture both our intuitive judgements and experimental findings.

²Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing out that Anti-Climacus, one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, agrees with Kant on this point. See *Practice in Christianity*, 125.

³Kant, *Conflict of the Faculties*, 115.

Nothing could be more certain than Abraham's obligation as a father to Isaac. Regardless of how convinced Abraham is that God is telling him to sacrifice his son, his evidence is insufficient.⁴

It is not self-evident that one is *never* justified in sacrificing their child if they have reason to believe that their child will be brought back to life again. As others have noted, this appears to be what Abraham was thinking in the Binding of Isaac.⁵ God promises Abraham that through Isaac his descendants will be more numerous than the stars in the sky; this cannot happen if Isaac is permanently dead. If God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, there is excellent reason to think that Isaac will be resurrected. Abraham does not intend to end Isaac's life permanently but temporarily. This is not murder in the ordinary sense. (Although, in ordinary contexts, if one intends a temporary end of life, they intend a permanent end of life, which we ordinarily call murder.) As Davenport argues, this means that Abraham thinks that he could sacrifice Isaac without murdering him, for Abraham's faith in God is eschatological in nature: he expects that in the end God's goodness will be ethically vindicatory.⁶ Abraham's intention to temporarily end Isaac's life is not necessarily morally impermissible even if it would be impermissible for Abraham to intend to permanently end Isaac's life.

To illustrate this point, imagine a case in some distant future. Medicine has developed to the point where people can be brought back to life so long as their body remains relatively intact. A father, Adam, and his son, Ian, are taken captive by sadistic space pirates. The pirates roam the galaxy in search of innocent people whom they may force into horrendous ethical dilemmas. The pirates tell Adam that if he does not poison Ian, they will vaporize Ian. If Ian is poisoned, then it is highly probable that he can be brought back to life again. But if Ian is vaporized, he will be gone forever. In this case, is it impermissible for Adam to poison Ian? I think not. If the father has reason to believe that his son will be restored, then it is not wrong to temporarily end his son's life. It may simply be the best action available. This is not to say that it is an easy matter to be confident in a command to sacrifice one's own son—even if it is, in some (outlandish) cases, permissible.

⁴In his *The Guide of the Perplexed* (pp. 500–502), Maimonides notes something related to Kant's point but makes the opposite inference. He argues that since it would be impermissible for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac if he had any doubts, we can infer from Abraham's righteousness and his willingness to sacrifice Isaac that Abraham was certain that God was commanding him to sacrifice Isaac.

⁵Silento argues that Abraham fully expects to receive Isaac back again in his lifetime (*Fear and Trembling*) and the author of Hebrews claims that Abraham "reasoned" to the same conclusion since God promised that it is through Isaac that Abraham will father a multitude of descendants (Hebrews 11:19). Andrew Varcoe argues this same point (see Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*).

⁶Davenport, "Faith as Eschatological Trust in *Fear and Trembling*," 200.

Suppose, then, that Abraham is not certain that it is always impermissible to sacrifice one's son. He instead thinks it incredibly unlikely that such an action is permissible. If it is not completely certain that one should never sacrifice their son in order that they should receive them back, the problem becomes tractable for an evidentialist. How much evidence does one need to epistemically justify the belief that God is commanding them to perform an action if they would otherwise believe that action is morally dubious?⁷ The rest of this paper sketches out a solution to that problem.

II. Good Friends and Good Evidence

II.a. Interpersonal Knowledge

Not all knowledge is propositional. Some is objectual and, as Talbert and Benton argue, personal.⁸ We do not merely know *about* things and persons; we also *know* things and persons. We become directly acquainted with persons and objects by interacting with them. In the case with persons, we become directly acquainted with others by our interacting with them and their interacting with us. Neither the stalker nor the spy is personally acquainted with their person of interest, for they do not know the person *qua* person but *qua* object. Interpersonal knowledge requires mutual interaction. As Talbert writes, "[K]nowing another person is necessarily the product of an active engagement with the other, not a mere passive recognition of features we are hard-wired to perceive or that we could come to understand through mere observation."⁹ In order for two persons to know each other interpersonally, they must stand in mutual interaction with one another; each person, as an *I*, recognizes the other as a *you*.

Interpersonal knowledge is derived from reciprocal second-personal interactions. Benton spells out the requirements for interpersonal knowledge (know_i) in a principle he calls "Encounter" as follows:

Encounter: S knows_i R only if (i) S has had reciprocal causal contact with R, in which (ii) S treats R second-personally, and (iii) R treats S second-personally.¹⁰

Condition (i) says that two persons must interact with one another, and conditions (ii) and (iii) specify the kind of mutual interaction in which the persons must engage; each must stand in an I-you relation with each other. Notice that interpersonal knowledge is on a continuum: one can know another better and better (or worse and worse). The more encounters one has with another, the better they know_i the other. Greater knowledge can lead to either greater trust or mistrust of another. If by repeated encounter

⁷Insofar as this discussion is about how much evidence is required to overcome an overwhelming prior probability, this discussion parallels much of the debate regarding how much evidence is required to justify belief in an improbable miracle. See Anderson, "Hume and Defeated Miracle Reports," for a good general discussion of this.

⁸Talbert, "Knowing Other People"; Benton, "Epistemology Personalized."

⁹Talbert, "Knowing Other People," 204.

¹⁰Benton, "Epistemology Personalized," 822.

with another I come to learn that they are generally trustworthy, I will be more likely to trust them in the future; but if by repeated encounter I come to learn that another is untrustworthy, I will be more wary of trusting them in the future. But in both cases, by repeated encounters, I come to know_i them more and more. Thus, while interpersonal knowledge is distinct from propositional knowledge, our interpersonal knowledge of another greatly affects the propositions that we are willing to accept on the basis of their testimony, which is to say that our history of encounters with another greatly affects whether we are inclined to believe another when they tell us something.

There is a phenomenological aspect of interpersonal knowledge that is frequently lacking in propositional and objectual knowledge. Repeatedly standing in an I-you relation with another allows one to know 'what it is like' to know another. These phenomenological parts of interactions are often subtle and difficult to pin down in propositional terms. For instance, I might recognize a friend's voice on the phone by the peculiar inflection they place on certain syllables, or I might come to see that, on reflection, conversations with a family member illicit a particular emotional response in me—whether it be a sense of deep peace or deep annoyance. Thus, interpersonal knowledge affords us another kind of evidence for our interacting with another that would be otherwise lacking. It is by repeatedly encountering another that we acquire phenomenological knowledge of what it is like to interact with them. The same holds for interpersonal knowledge of God.¹¹ This will be important for us in later sections.

II.b. Stump and Kass on the Binding of Isaac

Eleonore Stump argues that Abraham trusts God in the Binding of Isaac both because of their history together and the way Abraham has chosen to relate to God. Abraham's friendship with God gives him ample evidence to believe that God will bring about what he has promised. God has proven himself to be both good and trustworthy. Because of this, Abraham has committed himself to God. It is this commitment that gives Abraham the willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Stump writes,

The faith that makes Abraham the father of faith has its root in Abraham's acceptance of the goodness of God, Abraham's belief that God will keep his promises, and Abraham's willingness to stake his heart's desire on that belief. In this state, Abraham is surrendering to God, letting go of his self-protective efforts to get what he wants for himself and committing himself in trust to God's goodness.¹²

¹¹See Benton, "God and Interpersonal Knowledge," for an application of interpersonal knowledge to one's knowledge of God.

¹²Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 304.

For Stump, then, Abraham's disposition is explained in part by Abraham's relationship with God and in part by his committing himself to the goodness of God.

Leon Kass makes a similar argument regarding the Binding of Isaac. He writes that at the beginning of the journey, Abraham would "have been incapable of meeting this test."¹³ The story must be understood in light of everything that Abraham has learned through his relationship with God: that God knows what is best for Abraham, that God desires what is best for Abraham, that God can bring about what he wills, and how to discern God's voice. When Abraham hears the commandment to sacrifice Isaac, he knows the voice of God well enough to discern that it is in fact God speaking to him; and since Abraham believes that God both knows and desires what is best for Abraham, Abraham believes that he ought to sacrifice Isaac.

While I agree with the general strategies that Stump and Kass employ, they do not specifically address how Abraham could take the commandment to sacrifice Isaac as evidence *against* his belief in God. Even if Abraham's history with God has taught him how to discern God's voice and has given him ample evidence of the goodness and trustworthiness of God, Abraham's hearing the commandment to sacrifice Isaac gives him evidence that he is not speaking to God after all. Why? Because, at least to Abraham, the Binding of Isaac makes no sense. It flies in the face of his expectations: God promises Abraham that through Isaac he will have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky or the sands of the sea, but now he commands an action that, without divine intervention, would foil that promise. I agree with both Stump and Kass that Abraham's history with God gives him good reason to trust God. I cannot, however, agree that the Binding of Isaac should not at all alter Abraham's disposition. The commandment to sacrifice Isaac is strong evidence against Abraham's knowing the voice of God.

II.c. My Good Friend, the Fruit Peddler

Imagine the following scene. The year is 1977. I have a brilliant, lifelong friend: Godfrey Jobs, Steve Jobs's kinder, younger brother. Many years of friendship with Godfrey have convinced me that he has my best interest at heart. Growing up, he would not shut up about how he was going to get rich someday and he always promised me that he would get me in on the ground floor of his business venture. But I was always skeptical of his far-fetched dreams.

Some Thursday evening, I get a phone call from who I am quite convinced is Godfrey. We have a wonderful chat—replete with long-forgotten inside jokes and back-patting on being wildly more successful than the jocks who used to stuff us into adjoining lockers. But at the end

¹³Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, 333.

of our conversation, he tells me that he recently co-founded Apple Computer Company, a tiny start-up that he and his brother are running out of their garage. "I swear," he says, "personal computers are the future! I know that you don't have much extra cash, but you need to invest in Apple right now!" Godfrey's idea sounds crazy to me. Prior to this impassioned speech, I shared the public consensus: personal computers are not feasible, so investing my precious, meager savings in such a boondoggle would be ridiculous. Now, however, I have a good friend, whom I have good reason to trust, telling me that I will become rich if I invest. Based on our history together, I have good reason to believe that Godfrey is not trying to selfishly squeeze money out of me. Based on my knowledge of Godfrey's expertise, I have good reason to believe that he knows his stuff, so if he thinks that this is a good investment, it is likely a good investment.

But there is an additional complication: I am not certain that I am talking to Godfrey. Yes, every other time I have talked to someone on this phone number, I am nearly certain that it has been Godfrey. Yes, it sounded like Godfrey's voice on the phone. Yes, the person I talked to made all sorts of cringeworthy puns like Godfrey always does. In fact, the person I talked to sounded and acted exactly like the same Godfrey that I have always known in every respect except that he told me to do something that I would otherwise think crazy. But being told to invest in Apple is the kind of thing that I would expect from a person who is trying to grift me, not what I would expect from an expert friend who has my best interest at heart. Hearing this advice is more expected if I were talking to a Godfrey imposter than if I were talking to Godfrey himself. Thus, being told to invest in Apple is counterevidence to the hypothesis that I am talking to Godfrey. We can represent this in Bayesian terms by saying that $P(\text{My talking to Godfrey}) > P(\text{My talking to Godfrey} \mid \text{Being told to invest in Apple})$. Being told to invest in Apple is better evidence for the hypothesis that I am not talking to Godfrey but a Godfrey imposter who is trying to grift my money.

Whether I ought to believe that I am talking to Godfrey or not after conditionalizing on being told to invest in Apple will depend on the prior probability that I assign to my talking to Godfrey. If I were thoroughly convinced that I was talking to Godfrey before receiving the counterevidence, the counterevidence would not be enough to sway my belief that I am talking to Godfrey. Given just how convinced I was that I was talking to Godfrey, I ought to believe that I am talking to Godfrey himself and not a Godfrey imposter. Given my deference to Godfrey's opinions on technology and investment strategies, I ought to believe that putting money in Apple would be a good investment.

The salient features of this story are, I hope, obvious: some relationships are such that even if we hear something that causes us to lower our credence that we are talking to our friend, that counterevidence could be insufficient to overcome a wildly high prior probability that we are talking to that friend. Now, let us apply this line of reasoning to Abraham's case.

If it would be rational to show great deference to Godfrey's opinions on technology and investment strategies, then *a fortiori* it would be rational for Abraham to show great deference to God's commanding him to perform some action. The question is, therefore, what is Abraham's evidence for and against the hypothesis that God is commanding him to sacrifice Isaac?

III. Abraham's Good, Reliable God

III.a. 25 Years of Friendship

A critique like Kant's misunderstands the nature of relationships. If we are to determine whether Abraham acts rationally given his subjective evidence, we must consider the totality of Abraham's evidence. It would be an egregious mistake to evaluate the Binding of Isaac in isolation. Abraham knows this "divine voice" intimately well. Time and time again, Abraham has responded to God and has never been led astray. God has earned Abraham's trust. The question is whether God has sufficiently earned Abraham's trust to believe in the preposterous.

"The Lord said to Abram: Go forth from your land, your relatives, and from your father's house to a land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). With this commandment, God establishes his relationship with Abraham and first indicates that Abraham will inhabit a unique role in world history. Following this encounter, a 70-year-old Abraham gathers together his family and leaves for Canaan. He builds an altar and commits himself to God. For the sake of argument, let us stipulate that this is where Abraham's initial credence that he knows the voice of God (K) comes from; Abraham is moderately confident that he knows the voice of God.

Abraham sojourns through Egypt. There the officials seize his beautiful wife, Sarah, with the intent of making her Pharaoh's wife. But terrible plagues strike the Egyptians immediately afterwards—an event that is unanimously attributed to Abraham's God. Call this event E_1 .

When the four kings capture Abraham's nephew, Lot, Abraham prevails against a force far mightier than his own. He attributes this victory to the favor of God and participates in Melchizedek's sacrifice. Call this event E_2 .

After this, Abraham has a vision. God promises Abraham that he will have a son despite his old age. As confirmation of this promise, when Abraham sets his offering before God, a torch miraculously emerges from the darkness. Abraham's sacrifice is accepted in conflagration. In later confirmation of this promise, a messenger visits Abraham; he promises Abraham that he and his wife, who are 99- and 90-years-old, respectively, will conceive a child the following year. Let us pair these events together and call the conjunction E_3 .

Soon after, God confides with Abraham about His plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham convinces God to promise that He will not destroy the cities if he finds but ten righteous people there. Instead of finding two cities, the next day Abraham finds heaps of smoldering ash.

Given his interaction the day before, the sheer magnitude of the destruction, and seeing cities who were entrenched in abominations justly obliterated, Abraham would surely take this event to be strong evidence that he is interacting with God. Call it E₄.

Abraham sojourns through another hostile land, Gerar, where the leaders take Sarah to be the king's wife. The king, Abimelech, has a dream in which God tells him that he is to be killed for taking Sarah as his wife. Abimelech's entire kingdom falls ill; women are incapable of conceiving. It is only after Abimelech chides Abraham into praying to God for mercy that Gerar's inhabitants' health is restored. Call this event E₅.

Sarah, being 91 years old, had long undergone menopause. Abraham, being 100 years old, was far from virile. Yet Sarah bears Isaac just as God promised. For Abraham, this is the immensely powerful confirmation that he is in a relationship with God. After twenty-five long, barren years, he miraculously has a son. Call this event E₆.

Lastly, sometime after Isaac is born, Sarah sees Ishmael interacting with Isaac in a way that she finds disturbing. She demands that Abraham cast Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert.¹⁴ This greatly distresses Abraham, for Ishmael is still Abraham's son whom he loves. But God promises Abraham that because Ishmael is his son, Ishmael will be the progenitor of a great nation. This encounter confirms the goodness of God in Abraham's eyes; he sees that God takes care of even Ishmael. Call this E₇.

God's promise to take care of Ishmael is the final encounter in the long chain through which Abraham learns to trust God emphatically. Abraham is convinced that he is interacting with a good, trustworthy God. While Abraham's evidence does not entail that he is speaking with God, these events compound to give Abraham astoundingly strong evidence. Furthermore, as Kass points out, all of these interactions with God have taught Abraham how to discern the voice of God.¹⁵ Not only does Abraham have excellent reason to believe that God is good and trustworthy, but he also has excellent reason to believe that he knows the voice of God; he has excellent reason to trust his own experience of God. Similar to Adam and Eve's discerning that it was God who called out to them in Eden, Cain's discerning that it was God who told him of Abel's blood crying out, and Noah's discerning that it was God who commanded him to build the ark, Abraham has a lifetime of these divine interactions through which he has learned what it is like to interact with God. This ability to discern the voice of God, however, makes hearing God's commandment to sacrifice Isaac all the more terrifying.

¹⁴Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, suggests that this command is not only motivated by Sarah's desire to see Isaac receive all of Abraham's inheritance but is also an act of revenge on Hagar.

¹⁵Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*.

III.b. Overcoming Overwhelming Priors

If we were to consider the Binding of Isaac in isolation, Kant would be right: no matter how majestic and convincing of an “apparition” Abraham experiences, it should not overcome his belief that it would be impermissible to sacrifice Isaac. But given Abraham’s intricate history with God, the situation requires closer analysis.

Suppose that Abraham is quite convinced—but not overwhelmingly so—that God is indeed speaking to him when he initially packs up and travels to Egypt. So, he initially decides on 10/1 odds in favor of K.¹⁶ Call this his prior probability for K: we add the numerator to the denominator and divide, rendering $P(K) \approx .91$. Events E_1, \dots, E_7 do not compose an exhaustive history, nor can we assume that Abraham had no more interactions with God than those that are written down. Nevertheless, even if we limit ourselves to those pieces of evidence, they still carry enormous weight in favor of K. Suppose that Abraham were to assign 10/1 odds in favor of K for each independent E_i . The evidence for K grows exponentially, meaning that $P(K | E_1 \& \dots \& E_7) / P(\sim K | E_1 \& \dots \& E_7) = 100,000,000/1$. Put another way, Abraham’s credence that he is speaking to God is .99999999. Abraham is nearly certain that he knows the voice of God immediately after E_7 .

When Abraham hears the same divine voice with which he is intimately familiar commanding him to do the unthinkable, he faces a dilemma. He *was* convinced that he had been communicating with God, but now God commands him to do something that seems wrong—utterly and egregiously wrong. Could Abraham have been mistaken about the being with whom he has been communicating all these years? Absolutely. The commandment to sacrifice Isaac seems to mark the end of a “kafkaesque” tragedy, not the fulfillment of a friend’s promise.¹⁷ Perhaps Abraham has been interacting with a malevolent being of unfathomable cruelty all along. Or perhaps Abraham *has* been interacting with God in the past, but *now* a malevolent being is attempting to deceive him.

Let us look at these two alternative possibilities. How likely should Abraham think it that he has been interacting with a malevolent being all along? Not very. Abraham would have to think that this demi-god—who is capable of raining down fire on a wicked Sodom and Gomorrah, causing Sarah’s barren womb to become fertile, and causing all of the inhabitants of Gerar incapacitated with sickness—has been playing a sick joke on him the whole time. This being has nothing better to do than instill hope in righteous old men solely for the purpose of absolutely crushing

¹⁶For ease of estimating the Bayes factor for K, I will rely on the ratios of each piece of evidence E using the odds form of Bayes theorem. When I say that some piece of evidence E is n/1 odds in favor of K, I mean that $P(K | E) = n/n+1$. I am assigning values roughly and conservatively in a subjective Bayesian schema. These values are meant to merely *illustrate* the accumulation of force that various independent pieces of evidence have for a hypothesis.

¹⁷Visotzky, *The Genesis of Ethics*, 103.

their spirit. It would be similar to my friend Godfrey's deceiving me for our entire friendship for the sole purpose of grifting my money later in life. While it is possible that Abraham was deceived in every God-like encounter he had, it is highly improbable.

How likely should Abraham think it that he *has been* interacting with God but now is interacting with a malevolent being? This seems quite plausible. The commandment to sacrifice Isaac is unlike anything that God has issued in the past. Sure, some of Abraham's interactions with God have been strange, but none that seemed so vicious and contrary to his purposes. And so, that a malevolent being is attempting to deceive Abraham—or even that Abraham is not in his right mind—is, *ceteris paribus*, a far better explanation for the commandment than God's testing Abraham.

Whether Abraham thinks it more likely that he has always been interacting with a malevolent being or only during the Binding of Isaac, the commandment to sacrifice Isaac seems so out of character for God that it is strong evidence against K. But how much weight should Abraham assign to this new event, E_8 , that is evidence against his knowing the voice of God and therefore evidence of his being deceived by a malevolent being? Suppose that he decides on 1,000,000/1 odds against K, meaning that $P(K | E_8) = .000001$. God's preposterous command, if taken alone, would render Abraham nearly certain that he is not communicating with God. Kant would be right.

But that is not how the story unfolds. During his twenty-five-year-long history with God, Abraham has learned how to discern the unique voice of God and has accumulated significant evidence indicating God has his best interest at heart. And, most importantly, Abraham has deep interpersonal knowledge of God. He knows what it is like to speak with God; he is intimately familiar with the phenomenology of encountering God, which is a strong kind of interpersonal evidence. As *Silentio* points out, this evidence might not be communicable, and it also might not be understandable from an outsider's perspective, but it is *evidence* nonetheless. While E_8 is powerful evidence against Abraham's knowing the voice of God, it is not enough evidence to overcome his priors. In the same way that my receiving the advice that I ought to invest in Apple is insufficient evidence to sway my belief that I am talking to Godfrey, Abraham's hearing the commandment to sacrifice Isaac is insufficient to sway his belief that he is interacting with God. By combining all of Abraham's evidence together, we find that $P(K | E_1 \& \dots \& E_8) \approx .99$. Although Abraham might be unable to say *why* exactly God would command him to sacrifice his son, he believes, according to his evidence, that through Isaac his descendants will be more numerous than the stars in the sky. So long as Abraham is faithful and does not change the values that he assigns to E_1, \dots, E_7 in spite of his understandably "changing mood,"¹⁸ he would still be rational to believe that God is commanding him to sacrifice his son in order that he might receive Isaac back again.

¹⁸Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 140.

IV. Acting on Inconclusive Evidence

I see three obvious objections to my reconstruction of Abraham's evidence. First, being willing to sacrifice one's son when $P(K) \approx .99$ is just wrong; as Maimonides says, one should not even consider such an action until $P(K) = 1$. In this way, Abraham is not behaving rationally. Second, while it is *possible* that Abraham sees his past history with God as providing probabilistic evidence for God's commanding the Binding of Isaac, it is highly *improbable* that Abraham actually thinks in these terms; so, even if my argument is successful, it justifies only a modern facsimile of Abraham, not the man presented in Genesis. Lastly, if Abraham acts in perfect accord with his evidence, then in what sense is he acting in faith? Some argue that trust, since it is a virtue, extends beyond the evidence that we might have for another's honesty and goodwill. As Adams says, "Belief that goes beyond the evidence is as important in trusting other people as in understanding them. . . . It is important that we often trust other people in circumstances quite different from any in which we have previously known their honesty and good will to have been tested."¹⁹ If faith entails trust in another, and trust entails believing someone beyond what the evidence permits, then my account strips the Father of Faith of his faithfulness.

To respond to the first objection, the values that I assign to each piece of evidence are not meant to be definite. They are meant to merely illustrate how Abraham could think about his evidence. If Abraham assigns greater values to E_1, \dots, E_7 given K and a lower value to E_8 given K , he would be nearly certain that God is commanding him to sacrifice Isaac. Of course, one could go in the other direction instead. Perhaps you think that 10/1 odds for each piece of evidence E_1, \dots, E_7 in favor of K is too high and 1,000,000/1 against K for E_8 too low. If we were to assign 5/1 odds for each positive piece of evidence and 1/10,000,000 for the negative piece of evidence, $P(K | E_1 \& \dots \& E_8) \approx .07$. One set of value assignments results in a justified Abraham, and the other clearly does not. Which is the correct way to assign the values? This is, I admit, a limitation of the model. Subjective Bayesianism does not tell us the values that we ought to assign to a proposition, only the probabilities that we get given the values that we do assign. The values I chose are meant to reconstruct how Abraham, as an ideal Bayesian agent, could rationally believe in accordance with his evidence. That is, I attempted to reconstruct Abraham's rationale for obeying God in a way that does justice to his actions and takes his available evidence into account. And, as we saw, there is a set of value assignments that leads to Abraham's having a very high credence that God is commanding him to sacrifice his son. One might still think that performing such an action without complete certainty is still immoral, but that is a separate question.

¹⁹Adams, *The Virtue of Faith*, 14.

Moreover, there is a difference between assigning a credence to a proposition and assigning utilities to an action's obtaining. The likelihood that I win a lottery might be $1/1000$, but if the ticket cost only a dollar, and the prize money is worth a million dollars, it would still be rational for me to bet despite that the probability of my winning is $.001$. Faith, since it involves not only belief but also acting on beliefs, allows one to have a less-than-certain credence in another without believing in disproportion to one's evidence. Lara Buchak makes a helpful distinction on this point between "epistemic rationality" and "practical rationality."²⁰ One is epistemically rational if they believe P in proportion to their evidence that P . One is practically rational if they perform an action X on the supposition that P given their evidence for P and the utility that X will obtain given decision-theoretic considerations. In this framework, even if Abraham is not certain that God is commanding him to sacrifice Isaac, so long as Abraham has sufficient evidence that God is speaking to him and assigns a high utility to obeying God, Abraham would be rational in sacrificing Isaac.²¹

To respond to the second objection, Abraham clearly shows that his later interactions with God are highly influenced by his earlier interactions. When God tells him that he will destroy Sodom, Abraham tells God that it would go against his character to destroy the innocent along with the wicked. And when Isaac asks Abraham where the lamb is for the sacrifice, Abraham responds that God will provide the offering. These are not conjectures but inferences to God's future actions based on God's past actions. Abraham has deep interpersonal knowledge of God on which he bases his expectations of God's future actions. My Bayesian reconstruction of Abraham's rationale is meant only to show how Abraham's past interactions with God accumulate evidence that justify his believing God.

To respond to the third objection, trusting another includes believing them even when the consequences of their being wrong are disastrous. It includes not altering one's evidence despite having a strong desire to do so. Abraham holds his son of promise. He does not need God for anything more. When God commands Abraham to sacrifice the person he values above all else, Abraham has good reason to forget his relationship with God. Yet Abraham does not; he remains faithful and trusts that God will be faithful in return.²² It is in this sense that C.S. Lewis articulates that Abraham has faith: "Now faith, in the sense in which I am here using the

²⁰Buchak, "Can it Be Rational to Have Faith," 235.

²¹We could even model Abraham's willingness to risk sacrificing Isaac in order to gain something greater given his uncertainty using risk weighted-expected utility theory (REU) instead of standard expected utility theory (EU). See Buchak, *Risk and Rationality*, for more.

²²Buchak, "Faith and Steadfastness in the Face of Counter-evidence," makes an applicable point along these lines. For her, one way in which faith is a virtue is that it allows a person to remain committed to a risky venture over time. Faith is especially essential in cases where a person could not succeed without commitment. In these cases, though acting on faith might be irrational in a particular time frame, the act is rational when taken into a broader context.

word, is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods."²³

There is a natural tendency for one to alter the probability they assign to a proposition when it appears that belief in that proposition could be costly. It would have been easy, given the anguish Abraham feels, to forget all of his previously acquired evidence for K. If God were to smite Abraham for his disobedience, what is that to him? Abraham can relinquish his life knowing that Isaac will be his heir. That is all he ever asked of God. Yet Abraham believes that God is faithful and his belief is "credited to him as righteousness" (Galatians 3:6). Abraham trusts God in spite of his fatherly inclinations telling him to doubt. He obeys God's preposterous command in faith by staying true to his evidence and, in this way, is a pillar of faith.²⁴

V. Differentiating Between Abraham and Schmabraham

I want to end by considering one of the challenges I presented at the start of this paper: differentiating between Abraham and the Abraham imposter, Schmabraham. As Shapiro puts the point, "What's the difference between the near sacrifice of Isaac and contemporary religious terrorism?"²⁵ Perhaps one accepts my argument that Abraham could have had sufficient evidence to believe that God was indeed commanding him to sacrifice Isaac. But, one might say, how does this help *us* distinguish Abraham from a delusional father, Schmabraham, who is also convinced that God is commanding him to sacrifice his son, Schmisaac? Sure, Abraham would say he has sufficient evidence to believe that God is commanding him to sacrifice Isaac, but Schmabraham would say the same thing. We can even imagine this deranged Schmabraham telling us about all the experiences he has had with God where God promised to perform many miracles through him, delivered him from various illnesses, etc. What differentiates Abraham from Schmabraham? Furthermore, even if there is something that does distinguish Abraham from Schmabraham, this might not help *us* distinguish the two cases. Why should *we* believe Abraham but not Schmabraham? There is a metaphysical problem, an internal epistemic problem, and an external epistemic problem, and the three seem to come apart.

The answer to the metaphysical problem is almost trivial: Abraham knows God, and Schmabraham does not. Abraham has repeatedly had reciprocal causal contact with God in which the two stand in

²³Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 140.

²⁴I do not mean to say that this is the only sense in which Abraham has faith. I do not argue that Abraham believes solely *because* of his evidence, only that he believes *in accord with* his evidence. My argument is perfectly consistent with a view where Abraham believes *because* of the infused virtue of faith. For an overview of the literature on Abraham's faith, see Pace and McKaughan, "Judeo-Christian Faith as Trust and Loyalty."

²⁵Shapiro, "Faith and Reason, the Perpetual War," 12.

second-personal interaction, but Schmabraham has not. Abraham has had God deliver him through many trials, but Schmabraham has not. In short, Abraham's relationship with God is genuine, whereas Schmabraham's is not.

However, the internal epistemic differentiation is not at all trivial: Abraham's epistemic position seems to be nearly indistinguishable from Schmabraham's. The internal evidence available to both fathers seems to be almost identical; it just so happens that the set of evidence available to one of them is legitimate and the set available to the other illegitimate. What are we to make of this? One thing to note (which we will revisit in a little bit) is that even if the evidence available to the two is nearly identical, it does not follow that they should assign the same probabilities to each of the pieces of evidence. But in reply to the problem, some epistemic positions rationally permit one to perform actions that, from the perspective of a person with better evidence, are terrible. If, for instance, I falsely believe that I am a trained emergency-room physician and see a person who requires an emergency tracheotomy, I have very good reason to believe I am well-equipped for the job; even if I were to cause great injury, it is not clear that my actions are irrational *per se*.²⁶ It could be that the same is true for Schmabraham. Perhaps Schmabraham's willingness to sacrifice Schmisaac would be laudable were he heeding an actual commandment from God, but it is instead only tragic.

The answer to the external epistemic problem depends on the particulars of the case. Were Schmabraham to merely tell me of all of his interactions with God, I would not believe him; all I have to go off of is Schmabraham's testimony. In the Binding of Isaac, we have a narrator telling us of all Abraham's encounters with God. Perhaps there is an historical Abraham about whom we know very little, but that is not the Abraham with whom the story is concerned. If we accept his history—again, even if it is merely mythical history—we know that Abraham has in fact had myriad encounters with God. Schmabraham, on the other hand, has no one besides himself to vouch for the veracity of his encounters. We never *learn* his evidence like we learn Abraham's; we learn only the testimony of his evidence. And given just how implausible it would be for each of these events to take place, Schmabraham's testimony carries far less weight than a trusted source would.

But if I were to somehow learn that Schmabraham has had encounters (E'_1, \dots, E'_7) with God that eerily parallel Abraham's encounters, the situation would be more complicated. For now, I have strong evidence that Schmabraham knows the voice of God—even if in this case he is being deceived or hallucinating. There is, however, a strong epochal disanalogy between the cases. As both Adams and Evans argue, in a culture where child sacrifice is not normal (though it was a common expression of devotion to

²⁶See Coltheart, Menzies, and Sutton, "Abductive Inference and Delusional Belief," and Maher, "Anomalous Experience and Delusional Thinking," for more.

a deity in Abraham's circumstances), it is not clear that we could ever be justified in believing that God is commanding child sacrifice.²⁷ The prior probability of God's commanding the sacrifice is simply too low. How low? Even if we were to *seriously* err on the side of incaution and assign 100,000,000/1 odds against K' for the commandment and the same 10/1 odds for K' for each of Schmabraham's positive pieces of evidence, the posterior probability would be approximately .09. The difference in cultural milieu creates a massive difference in priors for God's commanding Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and God's commanding Schmabraham to sacrifice Schmisaac. And so, even if Abraham and Schmabraham have nearly identical evidence, the difference in their cultural environment would render Abraham's action rationally justified and Schmabraham's irrational.

Conclusion

Silentio is right: God's commanding Abraham to sacrifice Isaac is asking Abraham to believe the preposterous. But it may be even more preposterous for Abraham to think this being with whom he has had a relationship for over twenty-five years is leading him astray. Abraham's relationship receives confirmation after confirmation that he is indeed trusting God, a God who is both good and trustworthy. My goal has been to sketch out a way in which Abraham's disposition in the Binding of Isaac could be rationally justified even in terms of human, epistemic calculation. Moreover, even if Abraham is not nearly certain that God is speaking to him, the values that Abraham could assign to the sacrifice's obtaining could be such that he is still practically rational in sacrificing Isaac. And, as we have seen, what metaphysically differentiates Abraham from a contemporary Abraham imposter is that Abraham is actually interacting with God, what internally differentiates Abraham from the imposter are the probabilities that they should assign to their pieces of evidence, and what differentiates the two cases epistemically for us is knowledge of their histories with God. Thus, we have satisfied both of Silentio's desiderata: Abraham is not lost, and the contemporary, delusional father is not justified in sacrificing his son.²⁸

Baylor University

²⁷See Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, and Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*.

²⁸Thanks to Nick Hadsell, Kelsey Maglio, and Matthew Davis for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and thanks to a colloquium audience at Baylor University for their helpful criticisms. Many of the ideas for this paper were developed through conversations with Austin McCoy, Alex Pruss, John Hawthorne, Matthew Benton, and Nathan Mueller. Most importantly, special thanks to C. Stephen Evans, Charity Anderson, and Yoaav Isaacs for their substantial contributions.

References

- Adams, Robert. 1987. *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Oxford University Press).
- Adams, Robert. 2002. *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*. (Oxford University Press). <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195153715.001.0001>.
- Anderson, Charity. 2018. "Hume and Defeated Miracle Reports." In *Knowledge, Belief, and God: New Insights*, edited by Matthew Benton, John Hawthorne, and Dani Rabinowitz (Oxford University Press), 13–28. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198798705.003.0002>.
- Benton, Matthew. 2017. "Epistemology Personalized." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 67, no. 269 (October): 813–34. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqx020>.
- Benton, Matthew. 2018. "God and Interpersonal Knowledge." *Res Philosophica* 95, no. 3: 421–47. <https://doi.org/10.11612/resphil.1666>.
- Buchak, Lara. 2012. "Can it be Rational to Have Faith?" In *Probability in the Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Jake Chandler and Victoria S. Harrison (Oxford University Press), 225–47. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199604760.003.0012>.
- Buchak, Lara. 2013. *Risk and Rationality* (Oxford University Press). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199672165.001.0001>.
- Buchak, Lara. 2017. "Faith and Steadfastness in the Face of Counter-evidence." *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 81, no. 1: 113–33. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-016-9609-7>.
- Coltheart, Max, Peter Menzies, and John Sutton. 2010. "Abductive Inference and Delusional Belief." *Cognitive Neuropsychiatry* 15, no. 1: 261–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13546800903439120>.
- Davenport, John. 2008. "Faith as Eschatological Trust in *Fear and Trembling*." In *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard*, edited by Edward F. Mooney (Indiana University Press), 196–233.
- Evans, C. Stephen. 2004. *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (Oxford University Press). <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199272174.001.0001>.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1979. *The Conflict of the Faculties*. Translated by Mary J. Gregor (Abaris Books).
- Kass, Leon R. 2003. *The Beginning of Wisdom* (Free Press).
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1991. *Practice in Christianity*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton University Press).
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 2006. *Fear and Trembling*. Edited by C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh, translated by Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge University Press).
- Lewis, C.S. 1952. *Mere Christianity*. HarperCollins.
- Maher, Brendan. 1988. "Anomalous Experience and Delusional Thinking: The Logic of Explanations." In *Delusional Beliefs*, edited by Thomas. F. Oltmann and Brendan. A. Maher (Wiley), 15–33.
- Maimonides, Moses. 1963. *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Translated by Shlomo Pines (University of Chicago Press).
- Pace, Michael, and Daniel McKaughan. 2022. "Judeo-Christian Faith as Trust and Loyalty." *Religious Studies* 58, no. 1: 30–60. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412520000153>.

- Shapiro, Stewart. 2010. "Faith and Reason, the Perpetual War: Ruminations of a Fool." In *Philosophers Without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*, edited by Louise M. Antony (Oxford University Press).
- Stump, Eleonore. 2012. *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*. (Oxford University Press). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199277421.001.0001>.
- Talbert, Bonnie M. 2014. "Knowing Other People: A Second-Person Framework." *Ratio* 28: 190–206. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rati.12059>.
- Visotzky, Burton L. 1996. *The Genesis of Ethics* (Three Rivers Press).
- Wojtowicz, Zachary and Simon DeDeo. 2020. "From Probability to Consilience: How Explanatory Values Implement Bayesian Reasoning." *Trends in Cognitive Science* 24, no. 12: 981–93. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2020.09.013>.