

# SOREN KIERKEGAARD

## NEWSLETTER NO. 13

EDITOR: Louis Pojman

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Philosophy and Religions  
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### NEWS

This year's meeting of the Kierkegaard Society will meet in conjunction with the American Philosophical Association on December 28, 1985 in Washington D. C., in the Washington Hilton Hotel in the Georgetown East Room. Dean John Elrod of Washington and Lee University will preside. The schedule is as follows:

8:30 A.M. Ron Hall, Francis Marion College: The Irony of Modern Thought: An Analysis via Kierkegaard's Concept of Irony.

9:30 A.M. Poul Lubcke, University of Copenhagen: Kierkegaard and Indirect Communication

10:30 A.M. Louis Pojman, University of Mississippi: Kierkegaard's Epistemology  
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Many of us have enjoyed receiving the INTERNATIONAL KIERKEGAARD NEWSLETTER, edited by Dr. Julia Watkin (an English scholar who has devoted her life to Kierkegaard studies and who resides in Copenhagen). It contains international information about Kierkegaard Libraries, Societies, conferences, films, books and articles. Subscription is gratis. Write to Dr. Julia Watkin (editor), Stenagervej 15, 2900 Hellerup, Denmark, to be put on the mailing list. She would also like to hear from you if you have written a book, article or dissertation on Kierkegaard.

Name.....

Address.....

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Please put me on the mailing list for the International Kierkegaard Newsletter.

Papers are now being accepted for a conference on Kierkegaard as Moral Philosopher to be held at Sunderland Polytechnic in Sunderland, England on July 7 & 8, 1986. Papers should be sent to Dr. A. M. Spector, Department of Language & Cultures, Forster Building, Sunderland Polytechnic, Sunderland SR1 3SD, England.

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This year's Kierkegaard Seminar (affiliated with the American Academy of Religion) will meet in conjunction with the AAR on November 22-25 in Anaheim, California. The theme is Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling. Dr. Abraham Khan, Trinity College, University of Toronto will be presiding.

The program reads as follows:

9:00 John Donnelly, University of San Diego: Patterns of Interpretation of Fear and Trembling: The Last Thirty Years.

Respondent: Vincent McCarthy, Central Connecticut State College

9:30 Alastair McKinnon, McGill University: Fear and Trembling: Form, Matter, and Motion.

Respondent: Andrew Burgess, University of New Mexico

10:00 Steven Dunning, University of Pennsylvania: What is Fear and Trembling Really About?

Respondent: Paul Sponheim, Luther Theological Seminary

10:30 Edward Mooney, Sonoma State University: Abraham's Dilemma: The Teleological Suspension Revisited.

Respondent: Sylvia Walsh, Clark College

11:00 George Stengren, Central Michigan University: An Epistemological Issue in the 'Teleological Suspension of the Ethical' in the Light of Two Medieval Ethical Theories.

Respondent: Robert Perkins, Stetson University

The seminar is a discussion of papers circulated in advance. To obtain copies please send \$6 to Abraham Khan, Trinity College, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 1H8, Canada. The seminar is open to interested auditors.

Dr. Khan has provided the following abstract of the five papers to be delivered:

"All five papers deal solely with Fear and Trembling, a text about which SK had this to say: "Oh, once I am dead—Fear and Trembling will be enough to immortalize my name. It will be read and translated into foreign languages." Donnelly's paper is a selective survey of recent works on Fear and Trembling over the last three decades, and a discussion of Problems I, II and III in the text. It focuses primarily on the first two, showing that the question concerning whether there is such a thing as a teleological suspension of the ethical (Problem I) can be answered in the negative, and that the question as to whether there is such a thing as an absolute duty to God (Problem II) can be answered in the affirmative. As to the third, whether Abraham was ethically defensible in keeping silent about his purpose (Problem III), Donnelly claims that it too can be answered in the affirmative.

McKinnon's paper employs statistical and computer routines to create a self-defined space within which it traces the course or motion of the book's argument. It works from the Danish text, first identifying the key or aberrant frequency words which it takes as the real matter of that text. Then it does a correspondence analysis of the data matrix showing the frequency of each of

these words in each of the eight main parts of the book. These two steps yield both a two-dimensional graph showing the strength of all ties between the key words and parts of the book, and a cluster plot showing the true relations of all these items within a seven-dimension space. The paper proceeds to show 1) how to determine the principal components of the configuration, which it claims to be the real form of the book, and 2) how the relative positions of the markers for the various parts of the book trace its argument,

Dunning's paper claims that in comparison to readings offered by either Malantschuk or Mackey, his reading is far more consistent with traditional interpretations. He argues on the basis of several key passages that the book portrays the religious stage from an ethical point of view. The central focus of the book, it claims, is more on reason than on despair and on the impossibility of a rational understanding of faith. In its argument the paper examines also the difference between the infinite resignation of Silentio and the resignation described by Climacus in the Postscript.

Mooney focuses on the dilemma of fear and trembling. His papers preserves the terrible aspect of the dilemma by showing that Abraham's choice, including the alternative, could not be justified. To justify his choice either by suspending reason and ethics or by broadening the definition of morality to include Abraham's obedience to God is to abolish the idea of fear and trembling. Abraham, according to Mooney, is a knight of faith because he faces the full complexity of his situation. In Mooney's view Abraham would have been a knight of faith even if he had refused God. The paper takes a lead from writers such as Bernard Williams and Martha Nussbaum to show that "particular" reasons can legitimately compete with "universal" reasons or public morality.

Stengren's paper claims that Problem I contains an epistemological issue which neither Kierkegaard nor anyone else has handled adequately. The issue is whether a person commanded by God to act against universally valid ethical imperatives for a specific purpose in a given instance can know with reasonable certainty that the divine command is authentic. The paper considers the issue in light of two medieval ethical theories: natural law ethics of Aquinas and voluntaristic ethics of Ockham. It shows that neither Aquinas nor Ockham gives any indication of how one can verify that God actually commanded a "teleological suspension of the ethical" except through revelatory faith, although the difficulty is more serious and general for Ockham's theory. The paper suggests that even though ultimately there is no answer to the question, William James may have given a rather convincing suggestion in his Varieties of Religious Experience.

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Edward Mooney has sent an abbreviated form of the paper to be given at the Kierkegaard Seminar. I include it for your reflection:

The bare bones of an argument or interpretation are never as appealing as a fleshed-out version. Nevertheless, I'd like to give a barebones interpretation of "the teleological suspension of the ethical" for the readers of this Newsletter. Fear and Trembling presents us with a deeply vexing problem. On the one hand, there is the apparent message that above all, one should obey God, even if such obedience means the sacrifice of reason and ethics. Few are willing to accept such an injunction simpliciter. Yet SK seems to force us inexorably in that direction. On the other hand, there is the desire to make sense of SK's account of Abraham in some way that will not require the sacrifice of reason and ethics. So a number of commentators have tried to show that Abraham's choice does not go against reason and ethics (Donnelly introduces the notion of 'duties-plus' to bring Abraham's obedience into the real of ethics, while Evans stresses the idea of a special relationship to God which generates a moral duty. See their

contributions to Kierkegaard's "Fear and Trembling": Critical Appraisals, ed. Robert L. Perkins, and Pojman, also, suggests that Abraham's obedience needn't be seen as 'absurd'. Cf. The Logic of Subjectivity).

This second strategy involves broadening the definition of morality to include the sort of relationship or duty Abraham has toward God. His response, then, becomes less arbitrary or irrational. But if this eliminates the sacrifice of reason and ethics, it also eliminates the fear and trembling—or so it seems. Are we really to believe that with a second or third look at the concept of morality, we can get comfortable about Abraham's choice?

Our problem, then, seems to be this: Is there a way we can preserve fear and trembling, the aspect of terrible dilemma, without posing the dilemma as a choice between God, on the one hand, and reason and ethics, on the other. If so, we would have a third interpretative strategy, one that avoids the pitfalls of a simplistic message: "Shut-up and obey!" or "Relax, it's moral!"

First, we should look at dilemmas. Seeing the respect in which they momentarily paralyze reason and the directives of morality can give us a sense for the phrase "suspension of ethics." Reason can effectively define the dilemmatic situation, without being effective in showing us a wayout. Reason—say, as principles—can produce self-cancelling directives; so it becomes temporarily impotent, suspended, although not overruled or banished.

Second, we should ask whether the clash between faith and ethics, or particular and universal (as SK has it) can be construed as a clash of self-cancelling directives. I think it can. If for convenience we start with SK's boundary for ethics, what he leaves outside that realm is not just a region of irrationality or arbitrariness. In fact, the work of Donnelly, Evans and others shows that God's command or Abraham's duty can be seen as moral; they are not simply opposed to reason. And following the lead of Bernard Williams and others, one can develop the idea of non-universal, personal, or "subjective", "particular" reasons that can legitimately compete with "universal" public morality (Cf. Moral Luck, 1981). With Abraham we have a clash between these two different sorts of consideration; and as SK shows, in this case the conflicting considerations produce a standoff where reason can't point the way, where reason seems helpless. Thus although not abolished, reason and ethics get suspended.

Next we must ask, do reason and ethics get suspended in the sense of being overruled by deeper or higher considerations? Although SK seems sometimes to suggest this, I think we must resist any such move. SK can't have his fear and trembling and have the idea that faith overrides desire. That would make the triumph of faith too easy, and would make us too comfortable with Abraham's choice. Faith carries us through a dilemma, but not on the basis of some overriding principle that justifies our choice. Faith is groundless assurance, "an objective uncertainty embraced with utmost inwardness," required when grounds conflict and hence provide no support. I conclude, therefore, that Abraham is not a knight of faith because he made the right choice—in dilemmas, the idea of a 'right choice' loses its meaning, since the considerations that help us chart right from wrong, in that instance, are locked in a terrifying stalemate.

But if not for making the 'right choice', then why is Abraham a knight of faith? It must be that he earns this accolade for facing the full complexity of his situation with courage, concern, vulnerability, and hope—for making his choice with full openness to the conflicting considerations that infuse his situation with

terrible urgent meaning, and with full knowledge that he is 'beyond justification,' in some sense, 'beyond good and evil.' This means, surprisingly, that on my view Abraham could have been a knight of faith if he had refused God—granted that he refused him in the right way. This seems right to me: it puts the stress on character, "subjectivity," rather than on public rules or outcomes.

Silentio imagines that phrases like "an absolute relationship to the absolute" and "the individual is superior to the universal" announce principles or pictures that somehow legitimate faith as against ethics, that relativize ethics as against faith's overriding, authoritative supremacy. But that sort of understanding gives faith an objective dominance that cuts against everything else SK tells us about faith. We must take Silentio's understanding to be incomplete, or develop alternative readings for these phrases. For the main task must be to provide an interpretation that preserves both fear and trembling and reason and ethics; and it is that I've worked to accomplish.

Edward Mooney  
Sonoma State University

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A Review of James J. Valone's The Ethics and Existentialism of Kierkegaard: Outlines for a Philosophy of Life (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1983), xvi and 293 pp.

As often happens with academic books, the subtitle tells more than the title. Those looking for a treatment of ethics and existentialism in SK, along the lines of that provided recently by Stack, are likely to be disappointed, because that is not what is attempted in this work. Instead, the volume uses selections from SK as an introduction to religious ethics, as the author has taught in his course at Belarmine College in Louisville. Both ethics and SK are in the book, but the teaching of ethics is what is primary.

The format is very suitable for a textbook. After the introduction, the outline consists of three major sections, each with an introduction, selections from SK, a summary and application, and then questions for the student on the section covered. Finally, there is a brief "critique", plus a final one page reading designated a "postscript," so that SK gets the last word.

The selections for each of the three sections are chosen to illustrate the three "stages of existence." The aesthetic stage is represented by "In Vino Veritas" from Stages on Life's Way, together with some brief commentary from "Equilibrium" by Mr. B in Either/Or. The ethical stage also has selections from Either/Or II, plus some material from Two Ages and from the Postscript. The religious stage is shown mainly by selections from the early parts of Fear and Trembling, followed by pieces from Training in Christianity.

While a beginning reader would learn about SK from these selections, the book is much more likely to be used as an introduction to religious ethics than as an introduction to Kierkegaard. For one thing, the framework of the three stages is more problematic than the outline of the book allows. Moreover, there is little critical discussion of interest to scholars, no footnotes except explanations for the SK texts themselves, and no mention of other SK researchers. If this were not a textbook, there would have to be much more defense than there is for such disputable claims as, for example, that SK seems to overlook at the end of

his work the importance and role of reason and rationality in living, and that at that period he abandons reason for faith.

On the other hand, it is surprising how well familiar SK categories work as an introduction to religious ethics. If the students get little of the traditional material from theoretical ethics, such as intuitionism and utilitarianism, they are recompensed with other categories that a SK scholar, if teaching ethics, might find helpful. The format is well-organized. My preference is to write study questions of my own for students, if necessary, and to leave many more loose ends for students than Valone does. But I congratulate the students of Bellarmine who have such a careful instructor and such a painstaking text to guide them.

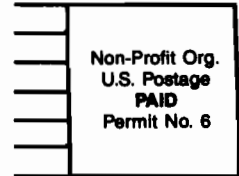
Andrew J. Burgess  
University of New Mexico

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The Kierkegaard Newsletter is published twice a year (in October and April). We welcome news, short articles, and reviews concerning Kierkegaard scholarship. We have a circulation of about 400 persons. We welcome gifts to help off-set the cost of printing and mailing. We will also consider printing or distributing advertisements of suitable of Kierkegaard material. Enclosed in this issue is a brochure of works from Wilfrid Laurier University Press.



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