

# Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter



*A Publication of the Howard and Edna Hong Kierkegaard Library*

St. Olaf College

Northfield, Minnesota

EDITOR: C. STEPHEN EVANS

Managing Editor: Dee Bolton

NUMBER 25

MARCH, 1992

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## A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

This issue contains an exchange between John Donnelly and Ed Mooney concerning the teleological suspension of the ethical in Fear and Trembling. Both Donnelly and Mooney have views about this that are provocative, original, and controversial. The relation between religion and morality, and between divine commands and rationally understood moral duties continues to be one that is keenly debated, and Kierkegaard is often discussed in this context. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, the Kierkegaard's that are brought to bear on

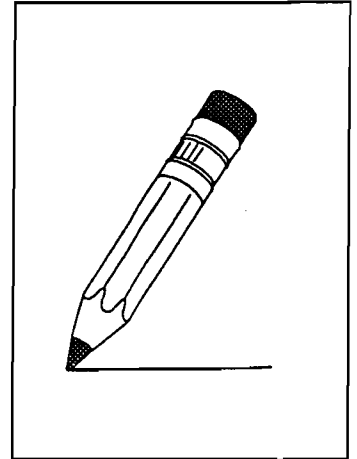
the discussion differ radically from each other. Oh well, at least this is one area where Kierkegaard is noticed in contemporary philosophy and theology, one place his voice or voices can be heard. Perhaps some light will be shed on this by the forthcoming IKC volume on Fear and Trembling.

Feedback on what has been published is also helpful. For example, I hope many of you found the piece on Kierkegaard in Hungary in the last issue helpful. Recently, I received a query from a Russian scholar who wishes to send me something. Perhaps a future issue!

# NEWS YOU SHOULD NOTE

## KIERKEGAARD SOCIETY NEWS

(The following is gleaned from a letter sent to the membership by Mark Lloyd Taylor, Secretary-Treasurer.) The Society held sessions in conjunction with the national AAR meeting in Kansas City in November and the APA Eastern Division meeting in New York in December. The business meeting was held in Kansas City at the AAR. At that meeting the following officers were elected for 1992: President, M. Jamie Ferreira, University of Virginia; President-Elect, Andrew Burgess, University of New Mexico; Secretary-Treasurer, Mark Lloyd Taylor, Seattle Pacific University; AAR Member-at-Large, Stephen Crites, Wesleyan University; APA Member-at-large, Merold Westphal, Fordham University.



The members present in Kansas City discussed at some length issues related to continuity of leadership in the Society, as well as to providing opportunities for a variety of persons to hold leadership posts. Several recommendations may come before the membership during the course of the year. The business meeting in 1992 will be held at the APA Eastern Division meeting (see below for further information). In the meantime, note the change of name from "Vice-President" to "President-Elect," which better reflects the duties of this office as already set forth in the Constitution. Also, to begin building continuity into the leadership of the Society, it was agreed by the members in Kansas City to stagger the elections (and terms) of the officers. During 1992, two officers will need to be elected to serve in 1993: President-Elect and AAR Member-at-Large. The Constitution calls for nominations from the membership. So please send nominations for these two posts to the President, Prof. M. Jamie Ferreira, Dept. of Religious Studies, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22903.

## UPCOMING MEETINGS AND CALLS FOR PAPERS

### APA Central Division Meeting In Louisville

The American Philosophical Association will hold its Central Division Meeting for 1992 in Louisville, Kentucky, at the Galt House Hotel April 24-26. The Kierkegaard Society will meet in conjunction with the APA at 8:30 a.m. on Friday, April 24, in the Brown Room. The program is as follows: Merold Westphal, Chair; Ronald Hall, "Spirit and Presence: A Kierkegaardian Critique; Arnold B. Come, "Trendelenburg: Kierkegaard's Special Philosopher."

### AAR Meeting in San Francisco in November

The Kierkegaard Society has requested two sessions to meet in conjunction with the American Academy of Religion in San Francisco in November, 1992. The call for papers requested attention be given to Kierkegaard's Early Polemical Writings, Upbuilding Discourses and For Self-Examination. The call had a deadline of Feb. 28, so I assume that it is now too late to respond. For further information write to Dr. M. Jamie Ferreira, Dept. of Religious Studies, Cocke Hall, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22901.

### APA Meetings Call for Papers

Papers are invited for the 1992 Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association (December 27-30 in Washington, D.C.) and the 1993 Central (in late April) and Western Division Meetings (in late March). Papers for all of these meetings should be sent in duplicate to Prof. Merold Westphal, Dept. of Philosophy, Fordham University, Bronx, NY 10458. Please indicate on the paper whether the paper is to be considered for the Central or Pacific Division or both.

Papers to be considered for the Eastern Division Meeting (December, 1992) should be received by April 15, 1992. Papers for the other two divisional meetings should be received by August 1, 1992. In light of the upcoming volumes of the International Kierkegaard Commentary series, papers on philosophical aspects of the following texts are welcome: Concept of Irony; Early Polemical Writings; For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourselves; and Eighteen Edifying Discourses. Members of the APA are expected to keep their membership up-to-date. All presenters, whether APA members or not, will be expected to register for the meeting at which they present a paper.

### Aalborg Workshop on Kierkegaard

During August 24-29, 1992, there will be a conference on "European Integration and the European Mind," to be held at Aalborg University in Aalborg, Denmark. This will be the "Third Biennial Conference - International Society for the Study of European Ideas." This conference will include a workshop on "Kierkegaard - A European Thinker," organized by Dr. Julia Watkin. The program will include the following papers: Prof. Alastair Hannay: "Two Ways of Coming Back to Reality: Kierkegaard and Lukàcs"; Priv.-Doz. Dr. Hartmut Rosenau: "Self-reflection and Autobiography - Kierkegaard's Writings about Himself"; Prof. Robert L. Perkins: "What a Hegelian Fool I was: Kierkegaard's Response to Hegel in Om Begrebet Ironi"; Prof. Sylvia Walsh: "Living Poetically: Kierkegaard and German Romanticism"; Prof. Rune Engebretsen: "Kierkegaard and Norway, with Special Reference to Ibsen"; Yiyun Zhou M.A.: "The Unity of Heaven and Man versus Absolute Unlikeness - Kierkegaard, European Thinker, Contra Chinese Philosophy"; Hermann Schmid M.A.: "Kierkegaard and Greece - Kierkegaard's Picture of Antigone"; Marilyn Piety M.A.: "Kierkegaard - A Danish-European Thinker"; Prof. Bruce Kirmmse: "Kierkegaard eller kaos"; Dr. Julia Watkin: "The Relevance of Kierkegaard to the Question of God in Stephen Hawking's Physics"; additional papers will be given by Prof. dr. Nelly Viallaneix and Prof. dr. Paul Cruysberghs.

### PUBLICATION NEWS

#### Kierkegaard's Writings

Practice in Christianity has now appeared. Concluding Unscientific Postscript is scheduled to be released in May. This work will appear in two volumes, with all the text in the first volume, and notes, supplement, and other scholarly aids in the second volume.

#### International Kierkegaard Commentary News

The following is from IKC Editor Robert Perkins:

The next volumes for which I am seeking contributions are International Kierkegaard Commentary: Either/Or, Part One and Part Two. There are number of "must articles" for which I need authors: music aesthetics, ancient and modern tragedy, Hegel, Heiberg and the rotation method, Don Juan, the Seducer, and Schlegel's Lucinde, just to name a few relating to volume one. The same kind of needs exist for the second volume. I have written the persons I think most likely to contribute to these volumes, but it is time for an unexpected contributor to surprise me.

I previously thought that the end of the summer was the likely due date, for these volumes but, because of the continued search for contributors, I now think we will not have it all together before Christmas, 1992.

The work on the commentary has been slowed by the ongoing economic difficulties in which the country finds itself. The major problem at the moment is the fact that Mercer University Press had to "rightsize," and the process left one person doing the work four persons (copy-editing, key stroking, formatting, composing) previously did. The press continues to "put out bonfires," i.e., work out ways to keep promises made in good faith by editors no longer with the press, and will, "do everything possible to deliver us the page proofs for International Kierkegaard Commentary 'Fear and Trembling' and

'Repetition' by Resurrection Day." The plan then is for an early publication date, well before the meeting of the American Academy of Religion in November.

Our editor is now Edd Rowell, the senior member of the Mercer University Press staff. We are indeed very fortunate that he will oversee our series for the Press in the future. No one is better.

Both the press and I know that the contributors to these volumes are disappointed by this delay, for I mailed the manuscript about nine months ago. Some of the contributors are already very well practiced in the virtue of patience, but times like these may enable them to excel in works of supererogation.

By the time this note appears in the Kierkegaard Newsletter, the advisory board will be writing evaluations of the great number of contributions to International Kierkegaard Commentary: Philosophical Fragments. This volume promises to be one of the very best to date.

### Westphal Book Now Available in Paperback

Merold Westphal's Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society, previously available from Mercer University Press, has been reprinted in paperback, with a few corrections, by Penn State Press. It is available for \$12.95.

### 1988 St. Olaf Kierkegaard Conference Book Now Available

A collection of articles on Kierkegaard as a social thinker and the ethical and spiritual roots of his social insights, selected thematically from the many delivered on various topics at the 1988 Kierkegaard Conference at St. Olaf is now available from Humanities Press. Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of Community: Religion, Ethics, and Politics in Kierkegaard, was edited by George Connell and C. Stephen Evans. The volume contains articles by Michael Plekon, Stephen Dunning, Mark Lloyd Taylor, George Connell, Edward Mooney, Louise Carroll Keeley, Merold Westphal, Eric Ziolkowski, Stephen Crites, Bruce Kirmmse, Michele Nicoletti, Wanda Warren Berry and Charles Bellinger.

### OTHER NEWS

Eva Nordentoft is now the Chairperson of the Ecumenical Center in Aarhus, Denmark, and recently gave a lecture on Kierkegaard and the Third World, in Managua, Nicaragua. Anyone interested may write to Dr. Nordentoft, Enebærvej 19, DK-8240 Risskov, Denmark.

Roy Martinez has been promoted to Associate Professor with tenure at Spelman College. Martinez also was appointed Visiting Assistant Professor in the Religion Department for Spring, 1992, at Princeton University.

## REVIEWS

M. Jamie Ferreira, Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 168 pp. Reviewed by Sylvia Walsh, Department of Philosophy, Stetson University.

In her new book, Transforming Vision, Jamie Ferreira tackles the difficult problem of how to understand the leap of faith in the Climacus writings in Kierkegaard's authorship, and by extension, in religious experience generally. Emphasizing the role of imagination in ethical and subjective development and in the transition to faith, Ferreira seeks to reconceptualize the leap in a way that includes both human activity and the activity of the divine in providing the condition for faith. To aid her in illuminating how these factors are combined in Kierkegaard's thought, Ferreira draws upon a wide assortment of modern and contemporary thinkers, including Roberto Unger, Thomas Kuhn, Richard Rorty, Robert Solomon, Mary Warnock, Iris Murdoch, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Kathryn Turner, William James, John Coulson, and C. S. Lewis. Her brief discussions of these persons' ideas give an added richness to the study and show how Kierkegaard's thought either anticipates or is compatible with certain aspects of theirs.

Ferreira offers a mediating, nonvolitionalist account of the leap that rejects (what she regards as) the extreme volitional position of interpreters such as Louis Pojman and Terence Penelhum yet avoids the equally extreme antivolitionalism of interpreters such as David Wisdo who see the leap as an ineffable divine gift that precludes human activity. Against the volitionists, Ferreira argues that the leap is not an act of will-power or an intentional choice or decision, that is, a deliberate, purposeful, self-conscious or reflective act by fiat on the part of the agent; against the antivolitionists, she affirms that the transition to faith nevertheless involves a free and active human agency in the moment of transition. In her view, the leap of faith is neither totally passive nor the direct result of a deliberate action on the part of the agent but rather a combination of divine gift and genuine human activity that precludes the dichotomy of faith as decision versus faith as ineffable (God's act).

To show how these apparently disparate elements may be held together in a conversion experience, Ferreira borrows from Thomas Kuhn the

scientific model of a Gestalt shift to explain how a qualitative transition may occur without being brought about by a direct decision or act of will on the part of the subject. On this model, a qualitative change to a new or different way of seeing things is thought to emerge when a critical threshold is reached by a gradual build-up of factors. Although human will is active in this developmental process, it cannot directly will to see things differently. Applying this concept to ethical subjectivity, Ferreira argues that this kind of transition is operative in the leap or qualitative transition to faith. As a result there is continuity as well as discontinuity with the development of subjectivity or Socratic inwardness that precedes the transition to faith. Since, in Ferreira's opinion, the element of discontinuity has been over-emphasized in Kierkegaard interpretation, she seeks to highlight the element of continuity by shifting the primary metaphor for the transition to faith from that of a leap to a ladder, which suggests the elements of assent and continuity rather than a radical discontinuity as suggested by leaping across a gap. A medieval metaphor for imagination associated with the original St. John Climacus, the metaphor of a ladder, Ferreira claims, can accommodate both the notion of a qualitative (and thus discontinuous) change as well as continuity. Furthermore it points to the importance of imagination or imaginative activity in the transition to faith.

It is the role of imaginative activity in coming to faith that Ferreira is most concerned to bring out in her study, as she views the transition to faith as an imaginative transition rather than an act of will-power. Understanding the function of imagination to be that of holding elements in tension, Ferreira deftly shows how imaginative activity is involved in passion (interest or engagement), will, choice, and paradox in such a way as to bring about an imaginative, transforming vision that constitutes the transition to faith. Passion, she points out, "is generated in the experience or activity of holding or being two elements (infinite and finite) in a tension-in-unity" (p. 31). A broadened concept of will as informing or predicating all our activities, including imagination, is

implied in the Climacus texts as well as in Anti-Climacus' comments on imagination in The Sickness Unto Death, and willing is better understood, Ferreira claims, in terms of the Socratic model as a free and active attending or concentration and recognition rather than as an intentional or deliberate decision. In like manner, choice, as envisioned in Judge William's account in Either/Or II, need not be understood as a deliberate decision preceding or following self-reflection but rather as an imaginative self-reflection which in itself constitutes change, or as Ferreira nicely states it, "as a reflection which is itself an action" (p. 66). This suggests to her that self-understanding is achieved by coming to see the world in a new light and that choice of the self is an imaginative leap of self-understanding rather than an intentional decision on the subject's part. This change in self-understanding is played out through a process of surrender that involves suspension or a letting go of previous perspectives by the understanding as well as active engagement in a simultaneous abandonment or break with the understanding and continued imaginative activity on the part of the understanding in perceiving paradox. Imagination is required for the perception of paradox because paradox itself involves a combination of contradictory elements, and it is precisely the function of imagination to perceive and bring elements in tension together. It takes imagination as well to embrace the paradox, since that also involves a simultaneous "letting go and a maintaining of the standards of the understanding" (p. 90). Imagination is thus integrally involved in all aspects of the movement into faith.

Ferreira thus concludes that the leap of faith is best understood in terms of a model of vision or imaginative revisioning rather than through a model of will or deliberate decision. What is involved in the transition to faith is an imaginative shift to a new perspective, so that faith itself may be understood as a "qualitatively new seeing of God" (p. 84). It is this new seeing that constitutes the leap or qualitative transition. As Ferreira neatly puts it: "It is not a case of seeing before you leap, or leaping before you see--the new seeing is the leap in understanding" (p. 111). Ferreira admits that deliberate decision can play a role before, during, and after the transition but insists that "what occurs at the moment of acceptance is not a volition, but rather a shift in perspective, an engagement or surrender, which is the achievement of imagination" (p. 125). Moreover, she maintains that "[t]he moment of transition is as genuinely our activity as anything else we do, however much grace is necessary--that transition is our active, imaginative reconceptualization and

reorientation, not something that simply happens (or may happen) to us willy-nilly once we have willed to 'be open'" (p. 149). As she sees it, therefore, the leap of faith is nonvolitional but certainly not passive. Human activity in the form of imaginative engagement is present at every point in the moment of transition to faith, not merely as a prolegomenon to God's grace. In fact, a major aim of Ferreira's study is to overcome the false dichotomies between activity and passivity, cognition and emotion, God's grace and human activity that we tend to construct in the interpretation of Kierkegaard and in our understanding of these factors generally.

The foregoing summary covers, I think, most of the main points of Ferreira's study. Let me turn now to some critical assessment of her project. Without question Ferreira's book ranks as a first-rate piece of scholarship that is well-argued philosophically and imaginatively constructed so as to provide a fresh approach to and a different understanding of the leap of faith in the Climacus texts as well as a deeper recognition and appreciation of the role of imagination in Kierkegaard's thought more generally. The book undoubtedly will generate a great deal of debate among interpreters of Kierkegaard concerning the roles of will and imagination in his thought. There is much in Ferreira's account with which I agree, but there are several aspects of her study which seem to me to be questionable or not treated in an entirely satisfactory way. First, a comment about imagination, which Ferreira sees as central to Kierkegaard's thought even though negative evaluations of imagination may also be found in his writings. I am entirely in agreement with Ferreira's claims that imagination is integral to Kierkegaard's presentations of selfhood and that it plays an important role in the development of the self. A major contribution of her study is that it examines the relation between the leap, paradox, will, and imagination in a way that has not been done before. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Ferreira takes an unusually broad view of imagination which makes it easy to see it operative everywhere in Kierkegaard's thought--and perhaps in some places where it is not. The function of imagination, she says, is to hold elements (or opposites) in tension. This understanding of imagination is not argued or supported anywhere in the book on the basis of Kierkegaard's texts or anyone else's but is simply stated as an established fact. But it is far from obvious that this is how the function of imagination is or should be viewed in Kierkegaard's writings or more generally. A fundamental support needed for the foundation of her position is thus missing in the work. Furthermore, I do



not know how, on her view, we would be able to distinguish imagination from dialectic, which for Kierkegaard is the more common term used for holding opposites in tension. It is true that imagination plays a very important role in this process, but we should not for that reason confuse the two or claim too much for imagination, as I think Ferreira sometimes tends to do. Although Ferreira focuses her study primarily on the Climacus writings, it seems to me that it is Anti-Climacus' view of imagination that drives her project. In The Sickness Unto Death, for example, Anti-Climacus claims that imagination is not a faculty among others but, as David Gouwens emphasizes in his study of imagination in Kierkegaard's writings (Kierkegaard's Dialectic of the Imagination [New York: Peter Lang, 1989]), the faculty instar omnium, or that capacity upon which feeling, knowing, and willing depends. While imagination is given an important place in the Climacus writings, it does not command the priority that Anti-Climacus gives it. In Concluding Unscientific Postscript, for example, Climacus sees imagination as an equal or coordinate factor with thought and feeling in human existence. As Ferreira rightly points out, this attests to the "indispensability and importance of imaginative activity" (p. 42) in that work, but it does not give to imagination the kind of priority or importance that she attributes to it in the leap of faith.

The second point on which I have some reservations about Ferreira's account concerns the roles of the will or deliberate decision and grace in the transition to faith. While I am sympathetic to her attempt to formulate a mediating position between an extreme volitionalism, on the one hand, and an ineffable antivolitionalism on the other, her own nonvolitionalist viewpoint does not entirely do justice, it seems to me, to the element of conscious or intentional decision in the leap of faith nor to the role of the divine in the transition to faith. Climacus himself characterizes the leap as "the category of decision" (CUP, 91; cf. also 94), and in his view a decision or resolution of the will is required to put an end to reflection and engage in ethical action (CUP, 105; PF, 84). Surely, then, the leap of faith is more than a moment of realization of something that has already been decided without intentional or willful activity on the part of the believer, as Ferreira suggests in the conclusion of her book (p. 158). It is true that the will cannot of itself produce the leap, but I wonder if it is not present in a somewhat stronger sense than Ferreira credits in her account, informing the very passion and engagement which she sees as crucial to the transition to faith and assuring that one does not become a Christian "as a matter of course" but in a manner that is

fully conscious, deliberate, and intentional, even though one is impotent to bring about the leap of faith on one's own by simply willing (or imagining) it.

Ferreira's use of the model of a Gestalt shift does not help much in explaining the transition to faith since it is at most only an analogy and limited to the sorts of transitions that may occur within the framework of what is finitely possible. The notion of a Gestalt shift does not really explain how qualitative transitions or shifts of perspective occur but only that they do occur; thus the transition itself remains a mystery. Moreover, Ferreira herself recognizes the limitation of the model and supplements it with a metaphorical model or model of imaginative transition which in her view more nearly accounts for the transition. In the realm of human subjectivity, to which Ferreira wishes to extend and apply the notion of a Gestalt shift, the transition would seem to follow as a matter of course, given the appropriate development of subjective inwardness, and the qualitative transition that results would be a consequence or "culmination" (to use Ferreira's word for it) of the foregoing development even though qualitatively different from it. But Anti-Climacus in Practice in Christianity explicitly denies the validity of inferring a qualitative change from "the ever-unfolding results of something," especially pertaining to the divinity of Christ (PC, 27-29). Moreover, Johannes Climacus makes the claim in Philosophical Fragments, as does Kierkegaard in Works of Love, that Christianity did not originate in any human heart (PF, 36; WL, 41). Climacus further admits that the poem or fairy tale "imaginatively constructed" in this work to illuminate the divine-human relation is not his own creation but belongs to the deity and is not something that would ever occur to a human being to poetize or imagine. This suggests that the absolute paradox not only transcends human understanding but human imagination as well, with the result that faith is not a product of the imagination any more than it is a consequence of the will or thought but requires a revelation from God and the gift of grace to occur. But no concept of grace is required in a Gestalt shift, which results from a gradual build-up of factors, nor do we read much about the role of grace in Ferreira's account even though she holds that grace is necessary in the transition to faith.

This may be due in part to the fact that Ferreira chooses to focus on the Climacus writings and related journals of Kierkegaard rather than on his later, more specifically religious works and corresponding journals. It may also be due to the fact that Ferreira is more

interested in the role of the will than of grace in the transition to faith, as her main objective seems to be to show how human activity or willing is involved in the leap of faith without being an intentional act. For her, human activity in the form of choosing or willing is primarily a metaphorical or imaginative activity in which the individual transforms or redefines him/herself through an imaginative exercise or interaction of the actual self with the potential self to achieve a new self-understanding. This may adequately describe what happens in Judge William's view of choosing or becoming a self (although even he views choice in terms of receiving the self from God), but it does not seem adequate for the Climacus writings or for Kierkegaard's later religious works because it assumes an immanence that is breached in the qualitative change to a Christian form of subjectivity or faith. Ferreira claims that she is not guilty of reducing the transition to Christianity to one of immanence since the condition of faith must be given and we cannot generate the possibility of the self from within (p. 52). Yet a requirement of metaphor or imaginative activity, she claims, is that one is placed in two perspectives simultaneously, and it is from this putting together of different viewpoints that a reconceptualization occurs (p. 80). This would seem to suggest that an individual must already possess an image of the potential self in order for the transition or reconceptualization to occur.

This leads to my final comment, which is to question the adequacy of Ferreira's concept of self-understanding, the leap of faith, and faith itself as a new seeing. Certainly a new self-understanding emerges in the leap of faith, both positively and negatively, for now, according to Climacus, the individual understands him/herself as a sinner, whereas before he or she did not, and at the same time, a rebirth or new being is brought about in the moment of happy encounter with the absolute paradox or God-man in time. But does this new being amount to nothing more than a new seeing? Is the qualitative transition merely a qualitative shift in self-understanding or consciousness, not a qualitative or ontological change in being? These are the difficult and nagging questions which Ferreira's account leaves me wondering about. In Philosophical Fragments Climacus claims that when the learner receives the condition of faith that individual "becomes a different person" or a "person of a different quality" or a "new person," and furthermore, that this change involves a conversion or a turning around (Omvendelse) that sets him or her on the opposite course from that previously followed (PF, 18). Climacus does say that "this conversion cannot take place without its being assimilated into his consciousness

or without his becoming aware that it was through his own fault, and with this consciousness he takes leave of his former state" (PF, 18-19), but for him there does appear to be an ontological change involved in this leave-taking, not merely a change in one's self-understanding or consciousness. It may be that Ferreira envisions such a change as part of the transformation that accompanies the shift in perspective which, in her view, constitutes the leap of faith, but that is not made clear or spelled out in the book itself.

One other minor complaint must be registered here. Ferreira uses the old Lowrie translations of Either/Or, The Sickness Unto Death, and Training in Christianity rather than the new Princeton editions of these works by the Hongs. The new Practice in Christianity (as the Hongs prefer to translate the title) was not out when her book went to press, but the other two editions were available and should have been used or at least consulted.



## ARTICLES

### MOONEY'S MAHARBA: THE TELEOLOGICAL SUSPENSION OF THE RELIGIOUS?

By John Donnelly

Reflective readers of FT have long grappled with the following dilemma:

(1) Abraham qua knight of faith ought to sacrifice Isaac (out of obedience to the divine command), and yet

(2) Abraham qua knight of faith ought not to sacrifice Isaac (out of obedience to objective, moral consideration).

I have proposed elsewhere that (1) and (2) are moral contraries that can both be false. The presumed either/or is really a neither/neither. Hence, Abraham could abstain, where this reads:

(3) It is not the case that Abraham qua knight of faith ought to sacrifice Isaac and it is not the case that Abraham qua knight of faith ought not to sacrifice Isaac.

My solution to the Abraham problematic (problema I can be given a negative answer, but not problema II) may be too strained in its loyalty to what David Pailin calls "the canons of reason." Clearly Edward Mooney and a whole host of Kierkegaard scholars think so. Paul Holmer writes:

"The fear belongs to Abraham because the question, 'What ought I to do?', gets no answer. There can be no answer. There is no way to decide that faith is right or that ethics is better. Here no scale is available to be consulted. Abraham answers with his life--and even then the question is not answered: it simply falls away. Everything 'finite,' as Kierkegaard says, is suddenly restored. but think how momentous the decision was!"<sup>1</sup>

I continue to think that the answer to the Abraham problematic lies in (3). Abraham underwent a severe trial by God, in which he was put to the test to see whether he understood the ramifications of his supreme ethico-religious principle "One ought to obey the commands of God" and how, in particular, it contextually implies "one ought not to intentionally punish or kill another innocent person." The divine command is not to be acted upon with the result that Isaac is sacrificed. It is idle. The terrifying element in Abraham's plight, as Kierkegaard noted, is "that it is not a collision between God's command and man's command but between God's command and God's command" (JP, 908).

Somewhat analogous to the idleness of God's command as a test or trial of Abraham's character, consider the case of an intelligent, highly promising high-school student, who has sadly developed a nasty cocaine habit. Normal channels of parental communication and psychological counseling sessions have seemingly proved ineffective. His father might then say to the son "Snort yourself to death," a command that is not intended to be acted upon, except inversely, for the father dearly loves his son, and in his paternal concern over the son's plight, hopes to awaken in him the decision to renounce his cocaine habit, and begin the necessary reformation and rehabilitation. The command here is idle, and much in line with the typical Kierkegaardian motif spelled out in The Point of View, to seduce the hearer into the truth, and to deceive the self-deceiver. So too, the putative demands of (1) and (2) are to be acted upon to the extent that they force Abraham to understand the principles defining his role qua knight of faith, and reach a decision about what line of conduct to adopt. Such a decision is found in (3). Accordingly, if by "infinite resignation" is meant the renunciation of the temporal for the eternal, then the knight of faith in opting for (3) is no knight of infinite resignation simpliciter. In Ortega y Gasset's words, we might describe a knight of faith as a "kind of ontological

centaur, half immersed in nature, half transcending it." However, the knight of faith's form of life is not that of what Kierkegaard termed "life's neuter gender." He is not a "pure hermaphrodite."

While I believe that God's testing of Abraham is also appropriately described as a trial, and not as a temptation, since the command is idle and not to be acted upon, I don't want to minimize the enormous fear and trembling present in Abraham. I am with Kierkegaard in not trying to devise a "cheap edition" of Abraham where admirers "mount a winged horse, and in the same instant we are on Mount Moriah, in the same instant we see the ram" (FT, p. 52). Several Kierkegaard scholars have questioned the biblical accuracy of K's account of Abraham. Clearly, there are some "cheap edition" accounts of Abraham to be found in Genesis, as when Abraham proved very dialectical, sly, and diffident in his dealings with Hagar and Sarah over the care of Ishmael; or in his evasive, cunning behavior with the Egyptian Pharaoh and then later with Abimelech over his relationship with Sarah; or in his bartering and negotiating with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Such a cut-rate version of the Abraham story forgets that "Abraham only rode an ass, which trudges along the road, that he had a journey of three days, that he needed some time to chop the firewood, to find Isaac, and to sharpen the knife" (FT, p. 52). Like Kierkegaard I have wrestled with how such a divine command could jell with a knight of faith's practical reasoning.

My claim that Abraham's principal decision is to abstain goes against a remark of Kierkegaard's on p. 22 of FT.

"If Abraham had doubted as he stood there on Mount Moriah, if irresolute he had looked around, if he had happened to spot the ram before drawing the knife, if God had allowed him to sacrifice it instead of Isaac--then he would have gone home, everything would have been the same, he would have had Sarah, he would have kept Isaac, and yet how changed! For his return would have been a flight, his deliverance an accident, his reward disgrace, his future perhaps perdition."

Yet, interestingly, on p. 114 of FT Kierkegaard suggests that it would be permissible for Abraham to abstain, had Sarah, Eliezer or Isaac asked him to. Of course, since Abraham had kept silent about his intentions to them, this wasn't a realistic possibility except in the case of Isaac. Nonetheless, while Kierkegaard seemingly despises an abstainer who he (mistakenly) identifies as a "vacillator" (FT, p. 119), I don't think my

solution of the Abraham problematic as found in (3) involves any "parody of the knight of faith." On my reading, Abraham has resolutely abstained!

Louis Mackey has claimed that had Abraham discovered the ram before he drew his knife "he would have been remembered forever not as the father of faith but as the author of consternation."<sup>2</sup> I, of course, disagree with this assessment. On my view, such a sighting of the ram would only facilitate Abraham's eventual decision, and confirm that he understood the ordeal of his knighthood of faith. I also disagree with Robert Perkins' claim that "if it is suggested that we could or should judge Abraham according to the result, by the fact that in the end, Isaac was not sacrificed, one misses the whole point."<sup>3</sup>

Also, the "terrible irony" that Mackey et al find in Genesis 22:7-8 is not so terrible given my interpretation. "Isaac said, **Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the young beast for the sacrifice? Abraham answered 'God will provide himself with a young beast for a sacrifice, my son.'**" Since I think an affirmative answer attaches to "Problema III," I would simply point out here that we do not ordinarily share with the young the pressing moral dilemmas that beset us in adult life. Nor are we expected to from a moral point of view. Leaving aside the complex issue of children's rights, it hardly follows, pace Mackey, that "faith paradoxically asserts that there is a silence and a concealment superior to ethical community and revelation."<sup>4</sup> Abraham's silence--at least with regard to Isaac is an innocent silence.

I don't wish to appear cavalier about problema III, or in any way minimize its importance. Indeed, in terms of pagination alone, Kierkegaard devotes some 38 pages to it in FT, versus a grand total of but 27 pages for the first two problems. I do think, however, that Abraham's silence was heroic, and not demonic, given the decision of (3).

Abraham was wrestling throughout his ordeal with his self-constitution as a knight of faith, dialectically balancing his forged self-awareness as a dialectical synthesis of infinitude/finitude, and possibility/necessity. The decision found in (3) enables him to balance these polar pulls in his self-formation. Had he revealed his ordeal to Isaac, he might have caused Isaac to either acquiesce or come to despise both his father and God. Instead, by Abraham's silence, neither Genesis nor Kierkegaard describe Isaac as being traumatized.

On my account, Abraham could have made himself intelligible to others, either as a tragic hero by choosing (1), a moral hero by choosing (2), or a knight of faith in opting for (3).

Also, while there seems to be no generally received definitive answer to just how old Isaac was, the usual assumption is that Isaac was a pre-teenager. (As one theologian facetiously told me: if Isaac were a teenager, less moral qualms would surface!) And by most working estimates, Isaac was probably about ten years old. And if a youngster of that age needed surgical medical treatment (with all its attendant risks), our ordinary moral expectations would not require a parent to explain the medical situation to him, or even get the patient's consent.

Based on p. 23 of FT, where in Kierkegaard's eulogy on Abraham it is written that: ... **"he will never forget that you needed 100 years to get the son of your old age against all expectancy, that you had to draw the knife before you kept Isaac; he will never forget that in 130 years you got no further than faith,"** the Hongs place Isaac's age at 30 years old. Clearly, if Isaac were 30, this would change the 3rd problema somewhat in FT. (The Hongs also note that Kierkegaard himself was 30 when he wrote FT.)

In reading the secondary literature on FT, I remain puzzled by the (to me) disturbing fact that so many distinguished Kierkegaard scholars want to insist upon the teleological suspension of the ethical (as a protest against rationalistic tendencies in philosophical theology, etc.), as much as I try to avoid an affirmative answer to Problema I. For example, Robert Perkins holds that Abraham's situation "is outside of the ethical and is possessed by some telos that is nonethical... Abraham's greatness lies in the fact that he is able to step beyond the ethical into the religious or temptation or madness."<sup>5</sup>

I am not suggesting that (Christian) religious belief and moral belief are identical, only that they are compatible to the extent that no orthodox (Christian) religious principle can lead to a clear violation of a moral principle--that is, a moral principle that is agreed upon by both secular deontologists and teleologists. As such, I don't accept the notion of "Kierkegaardian conflict" elucidated by Philip Quinn wherein moral and religious values are sometimes incommensurable with each other. For Quinn, Kierkegaard is not only demonstrating the futility of Hegelian mediation, but nicely elucidating the logic of dilemma.<sup>6</sup>

I am also puzzled by Robert Perkins' asseveration (in light of his previous remarks) that "moral sanity requires us to accept the theological explanation (in FT) or to write off the history of man's religious experiences in Judaism and Christianity as founded upon madness."<sup>7</sup> Reading Perkins' comment as the possibly amphibological utterance that it may be, I can of course enlist it in my own defense. That is, moral sanity requires us to argue against a teleological suspension of the ethical--or else a central posture in the Judaeo-Christian tradition is founded upon madness.

Edward F. Mooney has offered some provocative reflections on FT that directly contest my reading of the text. He claims that there is no right or correct choice for Abraham to make. Instead, Kierkegaard is employing the Abraham problematic to emphasize the how of faith not the what of it. He claims that what gets suspended in FT is "the power of ethics to guide or provide decisive justification. Ethics is not abolished."<sup>8</sup> It isn't that Kierkegaard is glorifying irrationalism, so much as rationally elucidating the logical force of dilemma against a dominant philosophical tradition that smugly seeks an objectively correct answer for every ethico-religious problem in life.

Mooney claims, then, that the plight of Abraham offers a corrective to complacent, smug rationalism that seeks to enlist an objective decision procedure to solve any ethico-religious problem. Accordingly, Mooney avers, the decision procedure found in an ethic of the universal (Hegelian or Kantian), or an ethics of duties and positional contexts (such as mine) won't work. FT involves the struggle of a knight of faith wrestling with his integrity, submerged in the deep subjectivity that involves the personal, non-universalizable elements of self-integrity.

**"...In the end we are meant to be struck dumb by Abraham--not provoked to construct a defense or consoling explication...dilemmas leave an irreparable crack in the circle of comprehension and justification. Before such terrible events, philosophy and reason themselves must experience an agonizing vulnerability."<sup>9</sup>**

There are parallels in Mooney's article to Michael Slote's thesis of "admirable immorality" in his Goods and Virtues<sup>10</sup> Mooney claims "strong non-moral reasons can sometimes override weak moral ones."<sup>11</sup> However, Slote eventually drops the idea of pursuing Kierkegaard as a harbinger of his thesis. He does so because while the Kantian talk of the ethical as the

universal in FT invites the idea that in teleologically suspending the ethical in favor of divine command Abraham would do an admirable wrong--nonetheless Kierkegaard speaks of an "absolute duty" to God. And talk of absolute duties to God seems to suggest that Kierkegaard believed Abraham's (possibly) intended action of sacrificing Isaac could have been right, albeit not understandable in terms of the ethical as the universal. So, overall, Slotte is unclear about which interpretation of FT is correct, concluding "there may indeed be no answer to the question asking which is closer to Kierkegaard's intended meaning."<sup>12</sup>

Mooney entertains a possible-worlds scenario, asking whether Abraham would choose the same course of action in an exactly similar situation. He seems to hold it isn't clear that Abraham would. I, of course, disagree here with Mooney. I think Abraham would again abstain, and that more importantly there would be no point to a second trial, involving the exact same problematic.

Not unlike Mooney's possible-worlds suggestion, R.Z. Friedman has claimed that "For Kierkegaard, the life of faith is the continuous re-enactment of the trial of Abraham."<sup>13</sup> I believe Friedman is mistaken. For one thing, there are different narratives in the diverse lives of knights of faith. And with regard to Abraham's unique narrative qua knight of faith, the trial of Abraham over the possible sacrifice of Isaac is a one-time deal. so, pace Friedman, Abraham is not "the Knight of Neverending Trial"--at least with regard to that specific dilemma.<sup>14</sup>

I am not suggesting that Abraham's life qua knight of faith doesn't continue to contain the double movement of faith, so that he is simultaneously resigning the goods of this life while joyously prepared to accept them back. This is the paradox of existence that confronts the knight of faith, i.e., the acceptance of both resignation and restoration "on the strength of the absurd." The result is that, even after the trial on Mt. Moriah, Abraham "purchases every moment that he lives 'redeeming the seasonable time' at the dearest price" (FT, p. 69). The knight of faith is forever living on the brink.

The most interesting aspect of Mooney's article is his postulating that Abraham would have been great qua knight of faith even if he refused God. Mooney would find that greatness in Abraham's adopting and living through his dilemma, i.e., in the quality of subjectivity that displays hope, courage, and self-integrity. That is, since the teleological suspension of the ethical involves the

incapacity of reason to justify Abraham's choice, and there is no correct solution to Abraham's dilemma, then it would not have been wrong for Abraham to say no to God. Abraham's situation involves the "resources" of faith in suffering perseverance amidst joy, care, and hope, as opposed to his failure to serve the "requirements" of faith, if Abraham refused God.

Kierkegaard and many Kierkegaard scholars often cartesianly say that with God all things are possible.<sup>15</sup> This is not true. God, for instance, cannot both command a person to do x at t and also command that person not to do x at t. That is, actions that are individually possible for God to do or command, are not necessarily compossible for him to do or command.

It isn't clear to me that Mooney accepts the all-encompassing omnipotence of God (although he hints at this on p. 35); but irregardless, pace Mooney, God could bring it about that Isaac will be lost and then returned. Interestingly, in JP No. 2223, Kierkegaard imagines a scenario where Abraham kills Isaac, having failed to realize that God was only testing him and that the command was "idle." Prior to thrusting a knife into Isaac, Abraham had explained his predicament to Isaac, and Isaac had willingly accepted his own plight. This scenario raises the interesting philosophical question whether, despite Isaac's voluntary acquiescence, this would be murder or an assisted suicide on Abraham's part, or heroic self-sacrifice or suicide on Isaac's part. In any case, God restored Isaac to life, making him and Abraham "in harmony for eternity."

In Mooney's ingenious Maharba scenario, it is God who is refused or sacrificed, and Isaac is saved. Mooney speaks of Maharba as a secular knight of faith, who performs a teleological suspension of the religious by his refusal. For Mooney, either the conduct of Abraham or that of Maharba is acceptable.

However, Maharba's resources of faith are more Promethean than theistic. Maharba teleologically suspends God, but, by a double movement of secular faith hopes for divine reconciliation. This isn't an infinite resignation so much as a resignation of the Infinite. How can Maharba both love and defy God at the same time? Maharba is not even a knight of infinite resignation, a necessary condition of Kierkegaardian knighthood of faith.

Mooney views my own work on FT as a harbinger of his thesis that there may not be a correct solution to the Abraham problematic. But he finds my

proposed "third option beyond obedience and refusal" i.e., abstention, quite troublesome. "The difficulty is distinguishing such an abstention practically from simple refusal."<sup>16</sup> I find this no more difficult to explain than I do Quidam's description of the two (identically aged) teenagers in Stages on Life's Way. One is described as sixteen summers old and the other as sixteen winters old, albeit not equally old. Just as their "time is not identical," so too Abraham's abstaining or refusing is not the same response. An abstaining Abraham is still a knight of faith; a refusing Abraham is not.

Pace Mooney, an abstention places an agent outside the moral demands of the situation. By contrast, a refusal involves a moral decision--in Maharba's case that he is obligated not to kill Isaac. Suppose ought implies can. Consider the case of a male lifeguard skilled in various rescue techniques, who chooses not to save the drowning child in the pool, preferring his distracting conversation with a bikini-clad woman. Here the lifeguard did an immoral act, by failing to carry out his duty to attempt to save the child. The same would not hold for a quadriplegic resting by the poolside. The former is a refusal, the latter an abstention. So, on my proposed solution, there isn't so much an "intractable moral problem," as that there is no moral problem simpliciter. Consequently, contra Mooney, I have not failed "to give an adequate account of the conflict that must then arise within the ethical."<sup>17</sup> (3) involves admirable amorality.

The University of San Diego

1. "About Being and Person: Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling," in Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling, ed. Robert L. Perkins (University of Alabama Press, 1981), p. 98.
2. "The View from Pisgah: A Reading of Fear and Trembling" in Kierkegaard, ed., Josiah Thompson (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), p. 401.
3. "For Sanity's Sake Kant, Kierkegaard, and Father Abraham," op. cit, p. 55.
4. Mackey, op. cit, p. 419.
5. Perkins, op. cit, p. 54.
6. "Moral Obligation, Religious Demand, and Practical Conflict" in Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion ed. Robert Audi, William Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 195-212.
7. Ibid., p. 55. somewhat enigmatically, Perkins seems to have some Kantian qualms about Abraham, saying that Kierkegaard held "it is inconceivable that God could so tempt Abraham and it is possible that Abraham was deceived by a demon or at least was mistaken. But that is the way it must be if the religious is to be autonomous from the ethical" (p. 60). And, a fortiori,

Perkins holds "Though Kierkegaard argues that the case of Abraham establishes the autonomy of the religious, it does not do so in such a way as possibly to endanger the ethical or public order: (p. 60)

8. "Abraham and Dilemma: Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension Revisited," International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion, 19, 1986, p. 32.

9. Ibid., p. 47.

10. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

11. Mooney, p. 31.

12. Slote, p. 94.

13. "Looking for Abraham: Kierkegaard and the Knight of Anxiety," International Philosophical Quarterly, 27, 1987, p. 254.

14. Ibid. Quite obliquely, Friedman seems to somewhat appreciate my analysis of the logic of trial or test. He writes on p. 255 "the test is not so much of Abraham's fidelity to God as an exploration of the character and source of that fidelity."

15. George Strengren relates (in an unpublished paper) how William of Ockham held that God could command a person to be obligated to hate him or not to love him. If the knight of faith were to respond affirmatively to such a command, this would be "ethically impossible." I suspect it would be logically impossible as well, given that the knight of faith is asked to exhibit loving hatred or loving unlove. But Ockham (like Mooney) seems to think that to obey would be to paradoxically love God. I think not. to refuse, 'a la a nonsecular Maharba, would be to love God. The only point in God's issuing such a bizarre idle command would be to test the knight of faith.

16. Mooney, p. 38.

17. Ibid., p. 40.



## SHOULD KANT APPROVE OF ABRAHAM?

By Ed Mooney

Reflecting in Strife of the Faculties on Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son, Kant counseled him to disobey, or at least delay obedience. This explicit warning aside, however, could there be a deeper Kantian lesson veiled in Fear and Trembling? If so, then we should find within this "dialectical lyric" what John Donnelly calls an "infrastructure rationality." We should suspend the presupposition that Fear and Trembling defends or exudes a fundamental irrationalism. To launch a Kant-approved edition, we should also agree that if Johannes de silentio is silent about some things, it does not follow that nothing can be said about Abraham's crisis or the terrible situation in which he is immersed. Finally, we might agree on an *initial* or *prima facie* characterization of this crisis: Abraham is asked to respond to two apparently incompatible demands, imperatives, each bearing down inexorably upon him. God seems clearly to demand Isaac's life; yet just as clearly Abraham knows he must love Isaac and honor Isaac's claim to life--and know that God expects him to love Isaac unreservedly. We have here a conflict within the ethico-religious.

What's fearful about the term "teleological suspension of ethics" is the apparent implication that a good God can command acts that are unethical, and that we should nonetheless obediently perform them. If that's the proper understanding, then it's a shocking proposal, and we're correct to reject it. But I think the basic Kierkegaardian idea is something else. I don't think that in the last analysis Kierkegaard's basic idea has to do with whether God, in Abraham's case, can or does override ethics. Refusing to have ethics finally set aside or overridden is compatible with there being a teleological suspension, and is supported by Kierkegaard's (or Johannes de silentio's) text. The crux is what Johannes de silentio means by ethics and by its "teleological suspension."

Let's suppose a kind of ethics gets suspended or dethroned--while a superior sort gets instated. In this case, the phrase "teleological suspension of ethics" would sensibly mark a transitional phase in moral development. Its point would not be to indicate what acts God might or might not require--say, the sacrifice of sons. Rather, its point would be to describe a struggle to expand, deepen and test our conception of what ethics--

and religious ethics--truly is. The ordeals of ethics and faith that Kierkegaard explores through the story of Abraham will show that ethics and faith are not at last opposed, but co-habit fruitfully in the non-despairing soul.

The struggle to expand, articulate, and refine ethics and the ethico-religious life can be dramatized in various ways. But what gets dramatized is an inward struggle--not a civil or political or legal battle. The question is now how public moral codes ought or ought not to be altered to accommodate a crisis like Abraham's. By referring to an inward struggle, I am suggesting that at least some crucial dimensions of the soul remain sequestered from easy public view or assessment. In the most interesting cases, there are no sure fire outward criteria, available to all reasonable persons, for identifying complex moral-psychological states. Furthermore, even in my own case, I can be terribly uncertain how to read an inward state or stance, even a central feature of myself. Thus we resort, in part and tentatively, to metaphor and narrative. We invent, change, develop figures of speech, illuminative parables; we tell "just so" stories, and toss off passing, provisional "folk theories." That's how Kierkegaard proceeds. That's how the Bible proceeds. And that's how I'll proceed, producing below a God who parts the heavens to "explain himself"--in Kantian terms--to Abraham.

### I.

Not public, scandalous acts, like child-sacrifice but inward motivational structures are key to Kierkegaard's analysis. Abraham is not the only faithful figure cast in Fear and Trembling. Some faithful figures never undergo a public "teleological suspension." What scandalous events interrupt the quiet, domestic lives of the shopkeeping or professorial or housemaid "knights of faith"? What ethics are they challenged to overthrow? And as important, many Abrahams in Fear and Trembling dutifully obey God's command--apparently "suspending the ethical." Nevertheless, these obeyers are mocked by Kierkegaard as false, unfaithful. So a dramatic willingness to obey God--no more said--cannot be a mark of faith.

Abraham's story is a chilling allegory of inward struggle, one that serving maids and shopmen might

invisibly endure in advancing toward a more refined or deeper outlook. In the midst of such turmoil, it may seem to oneself that no holds are barred, that ethics and moral identity are at risk *en masse*, that civic virtue falls flat. And if this struggle for inward change occurs in the context of divine powers, orders, or assistance, then it may seem that God is against all morals. Johannes tempts us with this interpretation. But it's an illusion--Kierkegaard knows it, Abraham knows it, we know it. Abraham would never murder Isaac and is never asked to. When God says "Bring Isaac as a sacrifice" he doesn't mean "Go kill your son." In fact, God intends that Abraham love his son at every moment, and intends that Abraham believe that Isaac will not be lost.

Laid out baldly as a set of conflicting overt demands--say, to love and protect and sacrifice a son--we seem to be at a conceptual and practical impasse, at the verge of intelligibility. But the demand for Isaac is a demand for a revision in the inward structure of the ethics that Abraham has assimilated as part of his identity. It is not Isaac's life pure and simple that Abraham must give up. Instead, he must relinquish (or show that he has already relinquished) the presumption that Isaac is the single absolute center of his spiritual world. It is an ethical, spiritual mistake or piece of idolatry to make a worldly rule or attachment the center of a self's aspiration and devotion. Abraham must resign Isaac as such an absolute center (which looks absurd, from a familiar position of civic or parental virtue); yet all the while Abraham must believe that he will get Isaac back. He must believe that losing his son as the absolute center is not to lose his son outright.

What God wants relinquished, we could say, is not Isaac's bodily life, but Abraham's presumption to possess, to master, to control the meaning Isaac will have in his aged, diminishing life. Abraham must be weaned from Isaac. (Hence the repeated refrains in the opening "attunement" section of a mother "blackening her breast" as she weans her child.) Of course undergoing this inward revision in his ethics, altering his relationship to Isaac (and more generally, to "the worldly") will seem dangerously close to losing Isaac (and the worldly) outright. Hence fear and trembling. But the knight of faith knows in his bones--by his faith, not by an articulate principle or stack of evidence--that Isaac is not lost, even as he journeys steadfastly toward the mountain.

I will return in a moment to fill in some detail to this sketch of the teleological suspension as involving a transformation in Abraham's moral outlook. But let me

pause now to consider a challenge raised by Donnelly to the account as I have so far developed it.

II.

I have taken the conflicting demands bearing on Abraham as a sign that there is some sort of inward revision or struggle occurring. Many commentators assume that the issue is whether Abraham will choose x or y, kill or not kill, obey or not obey, pick ethics or pick faith. Unhappy with these "forced options," unwilling to endorse Abraham's making a choice between them, Donnelly suggests that the solution to this seeming moral-spiritual impasse is to have Abraham abstain. In that way, Donnelly suggests, Abraham can avoid the onus of harming Isaac and the onus of disobeying God. If we frame the issue as one of compliance/refusal--with Kierkegaard's message being that the faithful should opt for compliance, then given the horror of compliance--and the horror of refusal--Donnelly's option of abstention might begin to seem appealing.

Why accept obedience/refusal as the central issue? If the issue were whether to obey God, Johannes de silentio would not have introduced unfaithful but obeying Abrahams--or faithful knights who face no (overtly) terrifying tests. Johannes is enamored of the dozens of ways a complier could fall short of faith. And on the other side, he has some faithful knights skip home to dinner or to the library rather than bring their sons to the mountain. The notion that obedience/refusal frames the issue of Fear and Trembling is well-entrenched. To press the case against this presumption, one might try another tack--say, invent a refuser who, by his inwardness, is almost a knight of faith.

Most of Kierkegaard's points about faith could be made through a story of a refusing Abraham. Maharba (Abraham backwards) might be such a figure, one who maintains a belief and trust in God while nevertheless denying God the sacrifice of Isaac. Abraham could almost have made any choice--obeyed, refused, abstained--if only these projects were undertaken in proper spirit. ("Almost," because in the long run the knight of faith must first have been a knight of resignation. And if Abraham has already resigned the world, resigned his Isaac, then the options of refusal or abstention would become moot, pointless.)

My example of a counter-Abraham, a Maharba who refuses to comply, is not meant to show that it would be better had Abraham refused. Rather, my narrative embellishment is meant to shift emphasis away

from whether Abraham does x or y, and toward the motivational spirit in which he approaches doing x or y. The initial key to understanding faith and ethics is to focus, as Johannes has it, on the journey to the mountain--not on what occurs there. And the journey is clearly a process of dialectical reflection, musings about intention, about the state of one's soul, and its categorical demands. Maharba is willing to resign or "sacrifice" God, believing every moment he will get him back. Donnelly's abstainer, to my eye, remains only a hair's breadth from my refuser. If we grant his alternative figure, perhaps we now have three ways to tell the tale, each approximating the Kierkegaardian movements of faith. The common core to each tale would be that it mattered less whether the outcome was x, y, or z than how one reflectively, imaginatively, emotionally approached the outcome. This would reveal the relevant dimensions of one's soul.

Consider the attraction of the comply/refuse/abstain framework for interpreting Abraham's dilemma. In many familiar problematic situations, there are just these three options: one can decide for, decide against, or refuse to go on record either way. We have theists, atheists, and agnostics. We picture our moral situations as akin to political ones. A proposition is placed before us on the ballot, and our assent or dissent, solicited. By our choice, our action, we show our colors. So with Abraham. He must vote, vote for or against God, for or against Isaac, for or against ethics--or (as Donnelly would have it) refuse to go on record either way.

But this quasi-political model is distorting because over-simplified. There are many more than the three obvious behavioral options: vote either aye, nay or abstain. One might absently forget that it's polling day. Or one might try but fail to make up one's mind whether to bother to go to the polling place. There are still others who explicitly decide whether to bother to go to the polling place. There are still others who explicitly decide that they will opt out of resolving either to travel or not to travel to the polls: the issue is deemed not worth the effort to resolve. Furthermore, there are important and sometimes less behaviorally discrete aspects to the process. For example, one might vote "nay" wholeheartedly or cast the same vote whimsically. One might abstain in relative composure, inward and outward; feign outward composure while steaming within; or picket the polling booth, vociferously protesting the narrowness of the resolution proposed.

It's my hunch that in Fear and Trembling, the simple "aye/nay/abstain" options are far less central than these latter less noticed, often behaviorially elusive, but morally and religiously crucial dimensions of sensibility and response. Biblically, and in Johannes's retelling, we know that Abraham sets out for the polling booth, and we know exactly how he'll "vote". These aspects of the tale are transparent--too transparent, in fact, for them to play any but a background role in the lyrical, dialectical explorations that give Fear and Trembling its substance. What Abraham will "vote" is not the aspect under scrutiny. Instead, Johannes tells us ways of going to the booth, ways of voting "correctly," yet failing to have faith. So faith must lie in how Abraham travels (or refuses to travel), in the way his soul, his passional-imaginative state of mind, is set or moved or misted...as he journeys to the mountain.

### III.

Can more be said of this tale's effective spiritual or moral grip? Grant that God is not a tyrant wondering if his subjects will play the game of absolute obedience--do absolutely anything for him. What, then, could be the motivation for putting Abraham through this shock?

First, if we're honest, most of us need a shock out of complacency. The professorial or serving maid knights of faith set out on no apparent "crimes." By the same token, the very placidity of their lives makes us all too comfortable, all too sure we have arrived at faith, that it's quite an easy accomplishment. How could a hard lesson or ordeal be contained in their (so unexceptional) lives? In marked contrast, the knight of faith as Maharba, the refuser, is as shocking as Abraham--or as Job. But what might then lie beyond the shock, beyond complacency?

Getting shaken up must be a prelude to something affirmative. We need to find something relevant and positive beneath the outward, shocking public act--something that is of moral or religious interest. We need to be forced toward something (say, the double movement of faith) that can be present beneath a range of acts, a range including Abraham's journey to the mountain, but also Maharba's refusal to budge, a professor's trek to the library, and a shopkeeper's jaunty homeward march.

Perhaps Abraham was tempted to believe that being moral was conforming to some lucid list of moral or religious do's and don'ts, a list of what acts are required or forbidden. Ethics would then be a matter of following

basic rules--and that alone. Suppose that for his ethical advancement Abraham has to be shocked at some point into a Kantian realization. He has to see that outward rule-following conduct is well and good, but by no means enough--and in fact, as Kant would have it, of absolutely no moral worth.

But if just being a conventional loving father is not enough to be ethical--if the essential moral dimension is not public conduct and its consequences but inwardness, or motivational structure, character, soul, or good will--then how can that truly moral dimension (as opposed to merely conventional public behavior) be forged, articulated, or tested?

Given familiar difficulties of knowing what our motives really are, it can seem nearly impossible to honestly sort out actions done in a proper spirit from roughly the same actions done improperly--say, from fear or intimidation, or the desire to please or to win approval. The conceptual distinction might be made vivid, even given the difficulties in identifying the contrast accurately in experience. The relevant kantian contrast between mere behavioral compliance with local norms, on the one hand, and pure moral motivation, on the other, could be brought out by telling a number of stories that emphasize motivational structure. Of necessity, given the rough row a human's given, these stories would show the many ways that such structure properly consists of turbulent conflict and ambiguity, restless strains of self resisting any easy clarification.

Can Abraham act without despair, neither giving up on god nor on Isaac nor on himself? The task seems impossible, sets an intractable conflict. But then, being properly religious and ethical may also be nearly impossible. Johannes de silentio tells us over a dozen ways in which false Abrahams could act in "obedience," could follow the letter of God's command, yet fall far short of faith. Let's try our own hand at invention. How could a Kantian school master make the point that conventional acts of civic virtue are only surface phenomena in the moral life? Could God speak as such a schoolmaster?

After Abraham's ordeal is over, let God appear to explain himself (Abraham is still a bit troubled). In good professorial and Kantian tones, He holds forth.

*Look, Abe, it's ok to act in accord with duty. But I want you to be more than a paltry conformer. I want you to act from duty. So I set you a "practical antinomy"--a task that would force you to drop deeper than convention.*

*By convention, whatever you did would be immoral. So it becomes a quite useless guide. You'd get blamed by pastors and public no matter what you chose. I put you through the mill. You had to be loyal to Isaac and to me. If you went toward the mountain, you'd seem a killer; if you refused, you'd seem a blasphemer. If civic virtue cancels out, what remains? Your soul, of course!*

*I wouldn't have asked this of most mortals. I don't tempt professors or serving maids or shopkeepers with these killing alternatives. But you're a special case, the father of faith, an extraordinary fellow, exemplar--after all, I'd tested you in the past. I had faith you'd hold your own. Of course there was no command to murder. You knew that. You believed every second you'd get Isaac back. You didn't give up on your loves, even as they seemed to tear your heart apart. (No doubt if anyone overheard us just now, that last remark would sound like romantic trash. But I know you'll not take it askew.)*

Now have the heavens close. Let God retreat quickly to the wings before too many questions bubble up. Let this script be sufficient for the day. At least we have one (faltering?) way to unravel what I've called God's motivations, the respect in which the command was to be taken in all moral seriousness. The task was to love God and Isaac selflessly, simultaneously, inwardly, fully aware of conflict, and fully aware, too, of likely consequences--but without regard to tallying them up.

#### IV.

Fear and Trembling is meant to convey any number of other things--none of them having to do with blind obedience or willingness to murder on divine command. At best, in the short space remaining, I can list some of these. The demand for Isaac is meant to remind us that there aren't rule- or principle- or theory-generated answers to many practical problems; that there are moral dilemmas that evade objective solution; that this should instill in us a kind of cognitive and emotional humility. The demand for Isaac is also meant to remind us that in raising sons and daughters, there is persistent danger that through parental love we will try to possess our future through possessing their lives, their progeny, to the last generation, denying thereby both our own mortality and the unmasterable, independent, inestimable, worth of the other. Proprietary claim must be replaced by selfless concern, a love that can survive the threat of loss of the beloved. We must learn the double movements of faith, of giving up and getting back, of worldly resignation and of worldly reconciliation. And

we must learn that in the confusing turmoils of moral growth, we can seem nearly crazy, to ourselves and to others; we can undergo what an Hegelian pedant might call a teleological suspension of the ethical. Thereby we are reminded that in the midst of moral/spiritual growth we cannot always know what is morally required, and that a necessary inward moral shift in perspective can have all the nightmarish terror of being commanded to do the utterly murderous.

Sonoma State University

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