

Kierkegaard

Throughout *Fear and Trembling*'s sustained reflection on Abraham Kierkegaard appears always to have two adversaries in mind: philosophical speculation (especially Hegel's metaphysics) and ethics.

Hegel maintained that Christianity was merely a pictorial representation in concrete, colourful images of a truth that the philosopher could apprehend by means of rising to the standpoint of the Absolute through pure thought. To say this, Kierkegaard knew, is to say that the philosopher can apprehend a supposed higher unity in which God and humankind have been brought together, "God" now being no more than the essence of humankind.

Hegel's understanding of religion, of course, includes his understanding of faith. And since philosophy "goes further" than religion, philosophy necessarily goes further than faith -- only, says Kierkegaard, to turn wine into water.¹ Similarly, a society popularly imbued with Hegel's dilution is unable to comprehend the significance of Genesis 22 even as it disdains the biblical narrative as no more than "bourgeois philistinism."²

Philosophy, meanwhile, is not aware that it denatures faith, for philosophy insists that it comprehends faith even as it supersedes faith. In all of this theology is seemingly unaware that its mandate is *theos*, God. Instead theology "sits all rouged and powdered in the window and courts its favours, offers its charms to philosophy."³ Theology has prostituted itself to philosophy while preening itself on an intellectual sophistication superior to the crudeness of Abraham and Isaac. After all, "it is supposed to be difficult to understand Hegel, but to understand Abraham is a small matter."⁴ With mordant irony Kierkegaard turns the vocabulary of "further" back upon his opponent: overwhelmed at Abraham, Kierkegaard glories in the fact that in 130 years the patriarch "got no

¹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 37.

² Kierkegaard, 38.

³ Kierkegaard, 32.

⁴ Kierkegaard, 32.

further than faith.”⁵ While “got no further” waggishly suggests that Abraham was stalled, Kierkegaard knows that Abraham, not the philosophical speculators, had alone moved on to *existence*. Existence cannot be gained or entered upon by means of the “thought experiments” of the metaphysicians, but only as the detachment of “worldly understanding” is left behind in favour of radical commitment.⁶

The radical commitment is to God; not the “God” of philosophical constructs but the One who summons every would-be believer to Abrahamic trial. Such trial has nothing to do with the glib summaries of those who “recite the whole story in cliches: ‘The great thing was that he [Abraham] was willing to offer him the best.’”⁷ Neither is such trial the facile escape into religious ethereality of those who speak offhandedly of a *post mortem* resolution to Abraham’s conundrum. The trial, rather, is enduring the contradiction between promise and command. This contradiction is nothing less than “absurd.” As faith paradoxically embraces the absurd (in all of this the “*this-worldliness*” of Isaac and promised blessing must be kept in mind), faith is vindicated and confirmed not in an ethereal eternal but in the temporal: Isaac, having been given up, is given back in *this* world. Isaac lives, and the promised blessing is operative in the temporal. For this reason Kierkegaard underscores, for the benefit of philosophers and romantics alike, “Abraham had faith for this life...specifically for this life.”⁸ By way of reminder of the link between the absurd and the temporal Kierkegaard adds, “Only he who draws the knife gets Isaac.”⁹

The second major adversary for Kierkegaard is the realm of ethics. Everywhere in this part of *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard relentlessly contrasts the “single individual” (or the “knight of faith”) with the universality of the ethical.

⁵ Kierkegaard, 23.

⁶ When Kierkegaard speaks of faith's leaving worldly understanding behind he is not advocating irrationality as such. See C. Stephen Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason: A Kierkegaardian Account*, chapters 6 and 7.

⁷ Kierkegaard, 28.

⁸ Kierkegaard, 20.

⁹ Kierkegaard, 27.

To act ethically is to embody a universal principle. Put more sharply, to act ethically is for the agent to “annul his singularity in order to become the universal.”¹⁰ From an ethical standpoint a father ought always (i.e., universally) to love his son more than he loves himself. For this reason a legitimate ethical protest would be Isaac’s crying out, “Do not do this: you are destroying everything.”¹¹

In light of the legitimacy of the ethical protest, why does Abraham set off with fire and knife, one thing only in mind? He does so for God’s sake and for his own sake; i.e., he does it because God has commanded it, and he does it inasmuch as faith exists only as faith is exercised, it being impossible for faith to be “thought” philosophically.

As different as faith and the ethical evidently are, they remain frequently confused. Such confusion is manifest whenever it is argued that since the ethical is universal, the ethical is also divine. The argument here traces duty back to God, since ethical duty (e.g., with respect to neighbour) is “essentially duty to God.”¹² Perceptively Kierkegaard draws our attention to the crucial consideration here: “in the duty itself I do not stand *in relation* to God.”¹³

Commensurate with the aforementioned contrast Kierkegaard distinguishes the ethical hero from the knight of faith. In giving up himself for the universal the ethical hero enjoys the security of knowing that others understand him and admire him; and if his heroism is tragic too, others will weep over him as well.¹⁴ No one, on the other hand, understands or admires the knight of faith. It would be preposterous to suggest that anyone would weep over Abraham. Instead Abraham can be approached only with a *horror religiosus*, akin to that with which Israel approached Sinai.¹⁵ At the same time there is a singular privilege vouchsafed to the knight of faith: she alone says “you” to God, whereas the ethical hero, related ultimately to a principle (the ethical universal), merely speaks of

¹⁰ Kierkegaard, 54.

¹¹ Kierkegaard, 59.

¹² Kierkegaard, 68.

¹³ Kierkegaard, 68. (Emphasis added.)

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, 74, 61.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, 61.

God in the third person.¹⁶ This lattermost point is pivotal: in the realm of ethics we do not meet, engage, or contend with the living God himself; we can do no more than speak about him at the level of hearsay.

None of this must be taken to suggest that the ethical is unimportant. Kierkegaard's point, however, is that since faith alone is "an absolute relation to the absolute", the single individual determines his relation to the universal by his relation to the absolute, never *vice versa*.¹⁷ The single individual may be summoned to what ethics forbids (e.g., the slaying of Isaac), but the single individual is never summoned to stop loving. Abraham loved Isaac -- or else Isaac's death was no sacrifice but simply murder -- for Abraham was no Cain.¹⁸ Needless to say, however, the loneliness of Abraham (and therefore of any believer) is his inability to make any of this understandable to even one other human being. Since no one can foster the understanding requisite for faith, no believer can help someone else *into* faith: "either the single individual himself becomes the knight of faith by accepting the paradox or he never becomes one."¹⁹

All that Kierkegaard has said to this point about the ethical, the universal, faith, and absolute relation to the absolute yields his notorious assertion concerning the "teleological suspension of the ethical." With the regularity of a tolling bell Kierkegaard avers throughout the latter half of *Fear and Trembling* that either there genuinely is such a suspension, either Abraham does exist in an absolute relation (higher than the category of the ethical) to the absolute (God), "or else Abraham is lost."²⁰ In light of philosophy's incomprehension of all that Kierkegaard has said about the suspension, together with the human horror that surrounds the particular absurdity pertaining to Isaac, he does not hesitate to say that not only is Abraham's life the most paradoxical that can be thought; it is so paradoxical

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, 77.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, 70.

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, 74.

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, 71.

²⁰ Kierkegaard, 55.

that it cannot be thought.²¹ Still, the foregoing must never be regarded as unique to Abraham. He is prototype, to be sure, but as such is always to be imitated by those who have never settled for the cheap edition of him that the church is forever trying to sell. He remains the “guiding star that saves the anguished.”²²

Kierkegaard repeats several times over that what passes for faith in Christendom in fact is not; *viz.*, “infinite resignation.” Infinite resignation is a movement prior to faith; in fact it is the last stage before faith, but never faith itself. Infinite resignation, it must always be understood, is a movement in *thought* not in existence. It is born of a concentration of the person in a goal or purpose which integrates that person. Infinite resignation gains the person an eternal consciousness; specifically an eternal consciousness “in blessed harmony with my love for the eternal being.”²³ Kierkegaard’s point (*contra* Hegel) is that even an eternal consciousness is still only *consciousness*; it is not yet *existence*. Faith alone embraces existence, and does so only by means of a “leap.” This leap is always a qualitative transition that nothing can precipitate or effect incrementally. Again, infinite resignation yields peace and rest, the irreducible pain of life being yet the occasion of a peculiar kind of comfort – for those possessed of infinite resignation are considered to be heroes. Knowing themselves such, “their walk is light and bold.”²⁴ *Infinite* resignation is the matter of relinquishing *everything* in one’s own strength – and thereby finding “peace and rest and comfort in the pain.”²⁵ Faith, on the other hand, never mitigates the pain of existence (i.e., of faith).²⁶

Infinite resignation is not for that reason to be slighted. Indeed, in infinite resignation we become aware of our eternal validity in light of the enormity of the relinquishment. Since *infinite* resignation

²¹ Kierkegaard, 56.

²² Kierkegaard, 53, 21.

²³ Kierkegaard, 48.

²⁴ Kierkegaard, 38.

²⁵ Kierkegaard, 45.

²⁶ Kierkegaard, 45.

is the end-term of relinquishment, the faith that is distinct from religiosity (a form of Romanticism)²⁷ can never be “esthetic emotion.”²⁸ While infinite resignation can renounce everything, it can gain nothing. Faith alone – which faith has abandoned the Romantic/religious notion that we can save ourselves as long as our love for God is greater than our concern for earthly happiness – gains what was granted to Abraham.²⁹

We resign *everything* – including our concern to achieve earthly happiness – precisely in order, as knights of faith, to *inherit the finite*.³⁰ Finite Isaac, it must be said again, once given up is given back, with untold blessing for a finite world. At the point of infinite resignation we are convinced that the impossible is just that: impossible -- and hence the resignation. Faith, on the other hand, moves “beyond” infinite resignation (here Kierkegaard turns Hegel’s vocabulary back on Hegel himself) and “passionately acknowledges” (i.e., endorses or owns) the impossible.³¹ The single individual knows that we can be saved only as faith, itself a paradox, grasps the absurd. Such faith is forever the antithesis of the detachment of philosophy and forever the antithesis of the immediacy of the heart’s spontaneous inclination.³² Such faith is always the paradox of *existence*.

In light of all that has been said concerning the absurd, paradox, leap and existence, and the fact that the single individual can be neither understood nor admired, Kierkegaard is correct when he contends that the believer is finally a witness, not a teacher.³³ A witness to what? A witness to grace, certainly, and also a witness to faith. For it is the single individual who alone can affirm, in the face of the absurd, *Jehovah-Jireh*, “God will provide.” And Abraham’s total *existence*, says Kierkegaard,

²⁷ Here Kierkegaard doesn’t speak of the difference between Religion A (the religion of immanence) and Religion G (the religion of transcendence; i.e., faith in the God from whom one’s sin has irreparably (from a human perspective) distanced oneself), he plainly has it in mind.

²⁸ Kierkegaard, 47.

²⁹ Kierkegaard, 49.

³⁰ Kierkegaard, 50. See above where Kierkegaard insists on the relation between faith and the *temporal*.

³¹ Kierkegaard, 47.

³² Kierkegaard, 47.

³³ Kierkegaard, 80.

is gathered up in that one Hebrew word. Existence, *contra* Hegel, is indeed “beyond” all philosophical thought-experiments.

Kierkegaard’s exclamation remains challenging, profound, and dismaying all at once: “No one is as great as Abraham. Who is able to understand him?”³⁴

V: Comment

A

Martin Buber, likely the Jewish thinker of greatest influence on the church in the 20th century, watched with sadness and horror as the best of his philosophy students at Berlin University in the mid-1930s appeared in class wearing swastika armbands. Soon these students were telling Buber that the horizon-filling goal of serving Naziism’s restoration of Germany’s glory was the *telos* that asked of them the suspension of all ethical considerations. Shortly they were highly-placed officers in the dreaded SS.³⁵

While the concept of “the teleological suspension of the ethical” may have much or little credibility in the context of Kierkegaard’s exposition of Abraham’s *existence* and therein that paradigmatic faith whose nature cannot be subsumed by either metaphysical thought or popular romanticism, in the context of Nazi ideology such a “suspension” has none. Grave danger attends any claim to such a suspension in any context. If a *telos* can suspend ethics, then the question has to be asked if any *telos* can suspend any ethical consideration. If not, then there have to be specified *both* those *tele* that do effect such a suspension *and* the reason for the suspension.

Imagine someone announcing in church that she has received a divine summons to slay her offspring. It is inconceivable that fellow-congregants would nod knowingly, all the while telling her they understood why she must proceed and assuring her of their support throughout it. Instead they

³⁴ Kierkegaard, 14.

³⁵ I learned of this development from my friend, Rabbi Dr. Lawrence Englander of Solel congregation, Mississauga.

would insist she undergo psychiatric assessment, thinking her to be psychotic. Now imagine that she submits to such assessment and is shown to be non-psychotic. It is still inconceivable that anyone would agree that, horrific as the deed appears, she must proceed as an act of faith. Most likely assertions would tumble out of many that God does not ask such hideous things of his people. If the woman in question were to reply, “Why not?”, then likely it would be said that God would not or cannot, on the grounds of the character of the God we apprehend through his self-disclosure. Willful slaying of one’s offspring is not the sort of thing that the God known in the church asks of his people, not the sort of thing that can be regarded as bringing honour to him in any way. This being the case, the question must be asked concerning Abraham: why would anyone concur that Abraham was divinely summoned to slay Isaac? If God’s character forbids such today, why would it not have forbidden it then? Conversely, if God’s “voice” rendered sacrifice non-murder then, why would it not do as much today?

A clue to coming to terms with the aforementioned question is suggested by Luther and Calvin in their insightful discussion of the *akedah*: in view of Isaac’s consensual complicity, the son is as much sacrificer as the father; and in view of the fact that Isaac’s death is tantamount to a fatal knife-thrust in the heart of Abraham, the father is as much the sacrificed as the son. Father and son are one in offering up and in being offered up; father and son are one in their obedience, their suffering and their trust.

I am convinced that a fruitful way ahead, in light of the critical comments adduced already in this section, is to consider the simultaneity of Father and Son with respect to the Atonement, presupposing as it does the *homoousion* as reflected in the apostolic confession of Jesus Christ and articulated in Athanasius’s assertion at the Council of Nicaea. In the context of the Arian heresy, Athanasius insisted, following the apostles, that the Son was of the *same* nature as the Father, not merely of a *similar* nature. If Father and Son were merely of a similar nature, then the Father’s

appointing the Son to the cross on behalf of humankind would be no more than the Father's appointing an innocent yet hapless third party to misery in the interests of appeasing a wrath the Son did not share. Yet precisely because Father and Son are of the same nature, same substance, same identity and being, the Son's free, self-willed identification with sinners is the Father's; the Son's sinbearing love is the Father's; the Son's cry of dereliction is the Father's heart-cry of self-alienation for the sake of sinners that demonstrates Father and Son to be one in their judgement of humankind, one in their determination to redeem it, one in their self-identification with it, and one in their pain suffered for its restoration.

The Son's God-forsakenness (not merely his feeling he was) for the sake of humankind, together with the Father's self-same "God-forsakenness"³⁶ means that no human being is -- or can be -- God-forsaken. Looked at from a different angle, the cross means that that to which God appointed himself at Calvary *no human being will be appointed to now: namely, the sacrifice of one's offspring.*

Abraham and Isaac are together a prolepsis of God the Father and Son. The prolepsis, however, having been fulfilled in actuality in the event of Good Friday, is thereafter rendered impossible *as prolepsis*; i.e., any slaying of one's offspring could thereafter be regarded as murder only, never as sacrifice. Abraham and Isaac are not an instance, or even *the* instance, of the "teleological suspension of the ethical." They are, rather, an instance of the unity of Father and Son in the event of the cross, no subsequent "anticipation" ever being possible in the light of *this* anticipation's definitive fulfillment. What Father and Son did in the cross is nothing less than that "one oblation...once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world."³⁷ Such an act needs no supplementation *or duplication*; neither does it permit one.

B

³⁶ There is a point, of course, at which comprehension falls short and gives way to sheer adoration.

³⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer, Canada (1962)*, 82.

The force of Genesis 22:1-19 is that hope alone reconciles promise and command of God. Such hope, however, must always be distinguished from wishful thinking. Wishful thinking is but “dead” hope; “living” hope, on the other hand, is rooted in the event of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. (1 Peter 1:3) From a biblical perspective, *hope* is always a future *certainty* grounded in a present reality. Any lessening of hope as *certainty* merely denatures “hope” and moves it in the direction of wishful thinking. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is that reality which is ultimately the fulfillment of the promise of Exodus 3:14: “I shall be who I shall be.” In the resurrection of his Son, God definitively resolves any suggestion or imputation of a “double character” (Calvin) in his kingdom-establishing event. The resurrection is that act of God whereby promise and command are reconciled; hope is the human counterpart that finds promise and command reconciled in the believer. Accordingly, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is ultimately the truth and reality that gave Isaac *back*; hope, that which gave him back to *Abraham*, the resurrection beings the guarantee of all the promises of God to all believers. Because Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead; because his resurrection and all it implies is the truth of the world (albeit hidden and therefore unacknowledged), as well as the truth of the church (an “open secret” and therefore acknowledged in faith), hope can never finally disappoint God’ s people. The future certainty of what is hoped for pertains to all the promises of God, whether now only partially fulfilled or not yet fulfilled at all. They *will* be fulfilled, and will be seen to be such.

Instances without end can be recited with respect to promises that appear to remain unfulfilled, as well as of commands that seem to perpetuate the non-fulfillment. One such promise/command appears to be the promise that the powers of death will not prevail against the church (Matt. 10:18), even as the church, defined by the gospel and charged to live by the gospel, must announce Jesus Christ with no little urgency in season and out of season. (2 Tim. 4:2) Related to the command to announce the gospel is the promise that God’s word does not return to him fruitlessly (Isaiah 55:11),

as well as (among others) the promise that whoever hears the herald of the Lord hears that selfsame Lord himself. (Luke 10:16)

Yet the command appears to vitiate the promise, as the church dwindles numerically (at least in the west) week by week. The gospel has been promised to be fruitful beyond our imagining, while the command to declare it appears to ensure the church's fruitlessness. After all, the gospel appears too narrow in an age of inclusiveness, too sharply-defined amidst the blurred vaguenesses of pluralism, too confident of its effectiveness in a time of polite opinions, too real for an era that prefers romanticism, too specific for those who like generalities, too precisely parameterized to suit the taste of those who want no boundaries. It appears that insofar as the church attempts to live by the gospel it will die by the gospel. Then what is the church to do?

Like Abraham of old it can trust God to fulfil promises in ways that the church cannot see at present. It can obey the command of God even though its obedience must render all such fulfillment *hope*. Or it can second-guess God and attempt to ensure the fulfillment of the promise by "improving" on the command as it resorts to gimmicks, entertainment, sure-fire techniques, agendas that "work" with other institutions and whose "success" the sociologist can explain.

For those who have agonized with Abraham there is only thing to be done: live in hope, confident that hope will see, in God's own way and in God's own time, the reconciliation of promise and command.