

Was a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical
Involved in the Decision of Abraham?

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Larry W. Weidner
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St. Meinrad College
St. Meinrad, Indiana



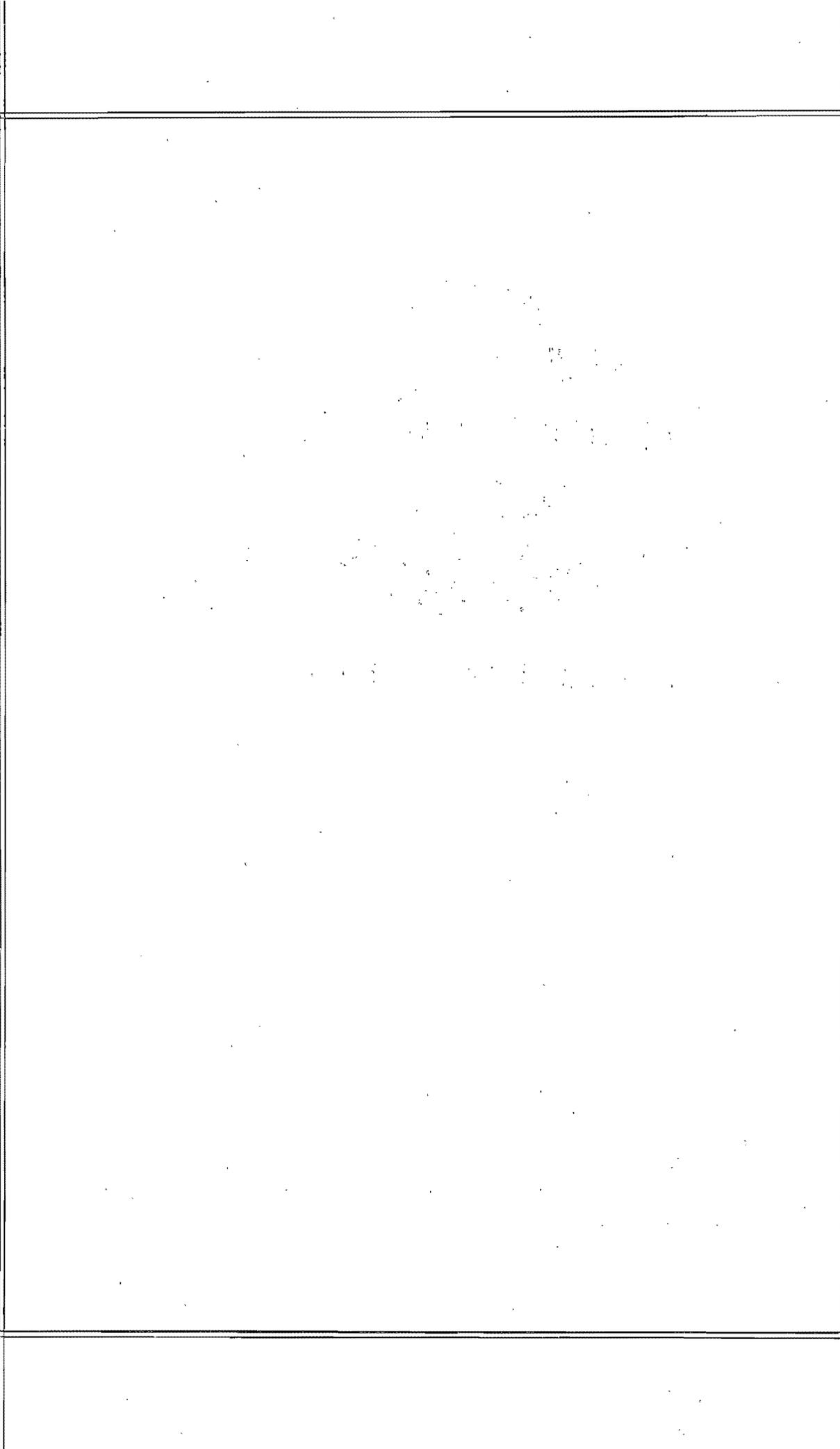


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INTRODUCTION

Søren Kierkegaard, in Fear and Trembling, describes the inadequacy of ethics through the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac.¹ Kierkegaard proposes three stages in man's life: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. He sees man as having the ability to freely choose, and the ultimate need for a 'faith leap' decision from the ethical to the religious stage. Kierkegaard sees in man a cause for him at certain times to go beyond the ethical law of the universal for the good of a higher.

Before one can answer the question: Was a teleological suspension of the ethical involved in Abraham's decision?, several considerations must first be made. First, Kierkegaard's writings were based on his own intimate personal life. Consequently, we must briefly consider his personal life. Secondly, before one can specifically judge Abraham's case, we must know what a teleological suspension of the ethical is. To do this one must be familiar with Kierkegaard's 'three stages of life'; and his meaning of truth, choice, faith and 'faith-leap.' And thirdly, consideration also must be given to the question whether Abraham's or for that matter anyone's action is 'ethically' justifiable.

The first two chapters of this thesis deal with the above considerations. Having thereby been given the necessary background, Chapter Three deals with the title question: Was a teleological suspension of the ethical involved in Abraham's decision?

CHAPTER ONE

A. A short biography of Søren Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard was born in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1813; the son of a prosperous woolen merchant. He idolized his father and spent his early years close at his side. From his father he received and took to heart the idea that life should be not only intellectually satisfying, but dramatic and encompassed in devotion. Kierkegaard did his preparatory studies at the Latin school and when he graduated at the age of seventeen, he was described by his teachers as "...late in coming to maturity, possessed of an almost inordinate desire for freedom and independence, having excellent natural gifts, but lacking in seriousness of purpose."² He entered the University of Copenhagen and studied philosophy and theology. However after a short period of time he found himself rejecting both the prevailing Hegelian system of philosophy and contemporary Danish Lutheranism. He left the university and became a socialite indulging himself in a life of pleasure, playing the role of the rich man's son.³

On May 19, 1838 at 10 a.m., Kierkegaard received a "revelation" which drastically changed the course of his life. This change was also strengthened by the death of his father in the same year. It is not clear just what the "revelation" involved, but out of it came an intense religious-philosophical quest which took him back to the university and his studies. In 1840 he became a candidate in theology and the fiancé of Regina Olson. During this period of time Kierkegaard became convinced that he had a

unique vocation. Although he wasn't sure what this vocation entailed, two things had become certain. First, he would be unable to totally give or share his life with any one person; and secondly, he could not live out the role of a conventional Lutheran pastor. In November of 1841, he broke his engagement with Regina. It is at this time that he launched his writing career. He described his situation thus:

I need to understand my place in life, what God really wants me to do; I must find the truth which is the truth for me; I want to find the Idea for which I can live and die.⁵

In light of this personal search, Kierkegaard's life is found interwoven throughout his writings. He disregarded the construction of any systems and saw philosophical inquiry as the expression of individual existence.⁶ His early rejection of Christianity was due to the lack of continuity between faith and reason, but through his "expression of individuality," he was able to reconcile them. He had sought for an "Idea" and he found it, he discovered that he was free.⁷

In the end, Kierkegaard was much more than a Lutheran preacher; he was a thinker and a great one. Contrary to his Latin School evaluation, that very desire for freedom and independence was the fuel to his fire. In October of 1855, he fell ill in Copenhagen, and less than a month later died at the age of forty-two.

Kierkegaard's only purpose in preaching and writing was to clarify and stress the importance on what it meant to be a Christian.⁸ He saw in the nineteenth century a civilization once Christian that was no more. Once it was centered in Christ but now it was, in Nietzsche's image, "...like a planet detaching itself from its sun," and the real tragedy was that this civilization wasn't even aware of it.⁹ Kierkegaard's goal was

to see individuals become Christians. His theology was that of a revivalist: "repentance and conversion, turning to Christ for salvation, the gift of faith, new birth and the life of grace."¹⁰

B. What is a teleological suspension of the ethical?

Before one can decide if the case of Abraham involved a "teleological suspension," one must first understand the question: What is a teleological suspension of the ethical? The word 'telos' has the general significance in Greek of 'end' in the sense of purpose, or a fulfillment that is being sought.¹¹ It is also assumed that this teleological purpose is not something arbitrary or whimsical.

Suspension is seen here not as an abrogation or abolition, but as an act superseding one level or stage for a higher.¹² As understood by Kierkegaard, the prevailing Kantian ethics placed man's supreme perfection and end in a conformity with universal law. However, Kierkegaard saw that such things as 'virtues' were not ends in themselves and that universal moral laws must themselves refer back to the author of the law.¹³ What is essential to the ethical is its universality; it applies to everyone and at all times. The task of each individual is to learn or realize this universal even to the point of suppressing his own particularity.¹⁴ An "ethical suspension" appears when an individual finds himself no longer bound to the ethical universal; in essence he becomes superior to it.¹⁵ Ethically, the individual is his own highest end and aim. The question here, then, is whether Abraham's case is one of going beyond the universal law of man, for a higher law.

CHAPTER TWO

A. The Three Stages of Life.

One of the reasons Kierkegaard is considered an original thinker is found in his subject matter. He undertook the problem of setting and directing the course for the "life of the spirit, the subject life of the emotions and the will."¹⁶ Kierkegaard thought it necessary for a man to be aware of the alternatives in human freedom, especially when approaching the core of his own existence.¹⁷ He held that there were three successive levels of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. In the aesthetic stage the person avoids making decisions. He can not discover various ideas and options on his own. He is unable to distinguish himself from the world that he experiences. His motivating factor is desire or pleasure. He seeks the goal or object if it's pleasurable, and he avoids it if it's painful. The aesthetic stage lacks simply the basic inward reflection toward the ideal principle. He avoids any relation between himself and either the standards and laws of society or the demands of God. In the second stage, the ethical, man develops the 'self' within him as the center of his decision making. Before he can make any decisions, he must first be 'self-conscious.' Self-consciousness involves two basic aspects; "the distinction of the self from its surroundings, and the distinction of the self from itself."¹⁸ The ethical person knows himself. He accepts this responsibility and he becomes independent in making his own decisions. He uses the moral standards of his society for guidelines

in his decision making. In other words he has substituted his basic satisfaction of pleasurable desires for the good of society or the universal.¹⁹

The main objective of the ethical stage or reflection is to make man aware of eternity as the goal of freedom and the measure of his moral striving.²⁰

Thus far we have seen man move from the satisfaction of the self to the good of the universal. In the third stage, the religious, man's relationship to God takes priority over his relationship to the universal good. Man must now strive for a parallelism between an "absolute relationship to the absolute end and...a relative relationship to relative ends."²¹ It is this stage, which we shall discuss later, that one may be called upon to make a suspension of the ethical for a higher good. Each religious individual has his own 'Isaac,' an ethical good that he may be called upon to give up for the sake of his religious calling.²² In coming to this stage Kierkegaard thinks that "one invariably becomes something other than he wishes to be; and the real and the ideal seem never to coincide. In the life of every self, there are elements which one would like to disown."²³ A fundamental characteristic of the religious stage is man's belief that his sins are forgiven, and in accepting this he can freely move from the present into the future.

B. What is Truth?

The next area we must survey is Kierkegaard's conception of truth. He defines truth as "an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation process of the most inwardness."²⁴ A clarification is needed here on the meaning of 'objective uncertainty.' I contemplate nature in the hope of discovering God, and I see omnipotence and wisdom; but at the same time I am also aware of much that disturbs my mind and arouses my anxiety. The sum of all of this is known as my objective uncertainty.²⁵ The difference between a 'rational' and 'uncertain' truth is the same as the difference between objectivity and subjectivity. In this case the criterion of truth is precisely the opposite of what is found in science. Science appeals to the sense-datum which can be perceived, therefore, in our case truth becomes subjective.²⁶ One may now ask: What is subjective truth? There is no simple answer to this. This much is clear: (a) it is practical because it directly concerns ethical actions, and (b) it is unfinished because its subject, man, is always creating himself, hence it is never found once and for all in some finished system; finally (c), it is paradoxical because such a truth, infinite and eternal in itself, is contained in a finite mind.²⁷

Kierkegaard believed that subjectivity is the essence of man, and that freedom and responsibility are the essence of subjectivity.²⁸ Truth is then comprised of both the objective (existing outside and independent of the mind) and subjective (relating to, or arising within one's self or mind).²⁹ Subjective truth is more important to man because of its ethico-religious nature. It must have value for the individual. It furthermore

must be something to which he can devote himself and his life.³⁰ Subjective truth is also seen as existential truth in that it doesn't just state a need for an honest relationship between man and God, but specifically gives the individual direction. It is not so much the doctrine itself as the individual application of the doctrine to himself or his own life.³¹

In short, Kierkegaard is saying "that truth is--not the truth, but the individual's relation to the truth--not objective, but subjective."³² Existential truth is "a progressive realization of the human measure in an individual life, so that man can be said to live the truth and be made free in it and by it."³³

C. Doctrine of Choice

Kierkegaard's doctrine of choice can be summed up in two words:

"Choose thyself." To choose ethically means to choose in an unlimited way. Man must assume complete responsibility for the task of his own self-development.³⁴ For Kierkegaard the 'chooser' could only be the 'absolute self.' The chooser (man) through an act of freedom (choice) selects an object or makes a decision. The individual however, in making a choice, must keep in mind that he has an obligation in any decision that he makes to perfect his own nature, according to moral law.³⁵

D. What is Faith?

Faith is far higher than any emotion; it is not some instinct of the heart, and it has a presupposition of resignation.³⁶ Faith is precisely "the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty."³⁷ Faith thus becomes in this case, identical with subjective truth. Kierkegaard's faith implies an "acceptance of something neither given by reason nor deducible from a previous content of consciousness."³⁸ If a person knows something by reason he can not say he believes it. Likewise, what one believes by faith he can not know by reason.³⁹ Through reason an individual realizes that he can not relate to the Absolute in the way that the Absolute requires. It is at this point that man feels a sense of desperation. Man realizes that his relationship between himself and the Absolute has been broken by sin-- he seeks to remedy this--to be saved. Man receives salvation through faith. "Faith is a miracle, and yet no man is excluded from it; for that in which all human life is unified is passion, and faith is a passion."⁴⁰ The act of faith is "a total break with the rationality of the immediate and requires the passage into a sphere which is absolutely incommensurable with that of the natural man even though he be the most gifted genius."⁴¹ For the unbeliever this may all seem absurd, but for the believer, the man with faith, it is not. For by virtue of faith his criterion is God, "for whom all things are possible."⁴²

For Kierkegaard man is free either to reject or accept, "to believe as well as to know, to know the good and yet choose the evil."⁴³ Thus he

proposes a 'leap' beyond reason. "Faith is not a pure act of the will, but it involves the will in so far as it concerns an impetus to transcend reason by means of the 'leap.'⁴⁴ Rather than simply a reasonable transition from one stage to another, there is a series of leaps, where "the degree of commitment goes beyond any possible reason for making the leap."⁴⁵ "It is only when the thinker 'lets go of a proof' that he can make the leap of faith."⁴⁶ "The act of faith is a 'leap' which faith alone can make, thanks to the 'choice' provided by freedom."⁴⁷

E. Can an action be ethically justified?

Ethics usually refers to the moral life and customs of individual men, tribes, people, etc. For Kierkegaard the ethical is concerned solely with individuals, and every one of them by himself.⁴⁸ Although ethics can be objectively universal, in his case it is subjective and must be realized by the individual himself.⁴⁹ The ethical individual for Kierkegaard is internally concerned with his spirit and not the external universals surrounding him. For man, the highest he can achieve through ethics is to become subjective.⁵⁰ "The task of every individual is to become an entire man..."⁵¹ To be an entire man means to respond to the Infinite; to seek an active relationship beyond himself. God seeks the individual and not the crowd. He will only deal with man as an individual.⁵² Kierkegaard protested against social standards as the norm for ethics because "the majority's standards only reflect herdlike passivity."⁵³ Likewise he protested against statistical frequency as a norm because the results would equate morality with majority. In this, Kierkegaard argues the need for exceptions in certain situations, e.g. the case of Abraham. One must leave open the possibility of a confrontation or collision between the ethical obligation and the obedience to a direct or higher good.⁵⁴

CHAPTER THREE

Was a teleological suspension of the ethical involved in the decision of Abraham?

Let us now look at the case in point, the Biblical story of Abraham. God commanded Abraham to offer up his only son Isaac. Abraham couldn't understand how Isaac could die and yet have the prophecy of procreation fulfilled, yet he accepted both. He was willing to go beyond the moral law, or in other words to suspend the ethical, that, of a father loving his son, in order to be obedient to his God.⁵⁵ We see here a conflict between the universal demands of the moral law and the subjective demands of God. According to Kierkegaard, the ethical system of law should not be 'final' because it is focused solely on the human good and not necessarily on God's good for man.⁵⁶ Abraham ethically should love his son, but this ethical relation becomes relative, as opposed to Abraham's absolute relation to God. God is calling on Abraham to "remove himself from the domain of natural law...and to step into the dark void that exists outside the universal norm of conduct."⁵⁷ It is at this point that Abraham makes a 'faith leap.' In his decision, Abraham leaves all reason and is supported solely by faith in his God and in His promises. With this faith he is led forward as a single individual "beyond all the customary limits of human conduct and sympathy."⁵⁸ Abraham acts by 'virtue of the absurd,' for it is absurd to think that "he as the particular is higher than the universal."⁵⁹ Absurdity here means running counter to human experience or

understanding. In this, Abraham's particular case, "the absurdity is of living simultaneously in the infinite and the finite."⁶⁰ Abraham's faith here becomes a paradox. He has an absolute duty toward God, and in this relationship Abraham "as an individual stands related absolutely to the Absolute."⁶¹

The question now arises: How does an individual exist who has teleologically suspended the ethical? "He exists as the particular in opposition to the universal." Is he justified in this? If he is, "it is not by virtue of anything universal, but by virtue of being the particular individual."⁶²

For Kierkegaard, this existential transcendence which issues in ethics arises from a volition rather than cognitive relation to God, which is rooted not in reason but in will.⁶³ Although Kierkegaard sees the possibility of a teleological suspension of the ethical, as indicated in the case of Abraham, he is careful to point out, "that under no circumstances can there be a suspension of man's final end itself or the force of moral law."⁶⁴

Two of the three stages of life of Kierkegaard's have 'heroes.' In the ethical stage there is the 'tragic hero'; and in the religious stage there is the 'Knight of faith.' To avoid any confusion it is necessary here to discuss these heroes. Examples of tragic heroes would be Agamemnon who had to offer up his daughter Iphigenia to appease the gods and Brutus who as counsel in Rome had to condemn to death his own sons for conspiring against the Republic.⁶⁵ As we can see from these two examples the 'tragic hero' in each case is involved in a single ethical incident which he teleologically surpasses. He allows one expression of the ethical to be found in a higher expression.. However, in each case he is

supported by the universal.⁶⁶

Let us now consider the second type of hero--the knight of faith--in the person of Abraham. On Mount Moriah he gives up everything, with no hope of ever getting it back, yet at the same time he believes 'by virtue of the absurd', as mentioned before, as opposed to 'by virtue of reason', that he will gain it back in the end, and he lived according to that belief.⁶⁷ From Kierkegaard's perspective, the tragic hero remains within the ethical, but Abraham entirely overstepped the ethical. Therefore, the tragic hero is great because of his moral virtue (for maintaining the idea of the state, for saving a people, or for reconciling angry deities), but the greatness of Abraham, comes through his own personal virtue.⁶⁸

A final point of importance to be considered in the story of Abraham is the question: Can God dispense with a precept of the decalogue? The 'goodness' of man is found within two orders: how man relates to God; and how man relates to man. These two orders come from the tables of the decalogue. The first is the order of common good--to God; and the second is the order of justice which should be observed among men.⁶⁹ Sin arises when man fails to observe either order.⁷⁰ One may ask are there ever grounds for a dispensation of the second order? Yes, in the case concerning human law "a dispensation is possible if a particular situation arises in which the observance of the letter of the law would go against the intentions of the legislator."⁷¹ It should be noted that although any given precept may be universal the action stemming from it is singular and the circumstances are often variable.⁷² Without a doubt the most important circumstance in the story of Abraham was that God commanded Abraham to offer up his son Isaac and God is the author of life and death.⁷³

Therefore, in this case the order of justice is not found within the precept (thou shalt not kill) as such, but in the application of the principle to the particular act.⁷⁴

CONCLUSION

Abraham's faith was essentially one of passion. One finds and creates himself not through reflection, but by making a commitment.⁷⁵ So Abraham had to make a choice, and in that choice be willing to commit himself even to the point of solitude.

As stated earlier, Kierkegaard's writings are reflections of his own personal life. One can only speculate that he thought his own life in some way paralleled with that of Abraham's. Perhaps Kierkegaard saw himself as a 'knight of faith' in his giving up of Regina and all hope of his own self-preservation through a son. He too believed he was following the 'will of God.' But one thing is certain, Abraham was willing to stand alone before God, to teleologically suspend the ethical. And today because of that decision, he is the father of Christian faith.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Genesis 22:1-18 (NAB). (NAB= New American Bible.)
- ² David F. Swenson, Something About Kierkegaard (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1956), p. 7.
- ³ Ibid., p. 8.
- ⁴ Rudolph J. Gerber, "Kierkegaard, Reason, and Faith," Thought (Spring 1969): 30.
- ⁵ Swenson, op. cit., p. 10.
- ⁶ Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 1967 ed., s.v. "Søren Kierkegaard."
- ⁷ Swenson, op. cit., p. 16.
- ⁸ William Barrett, Irrational Man (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1962), p. 151.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 150.
- ¹⁰ H.J. Blackham, Six Existentialist Thinkers (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), p. 5.
- ¹¹ Samuel Beck, "Abraham, Kierkegaard: Either, Or," Yale Review (October, 1972): 66.
- ¹² Libuse Lukas Miller, In Search of the Self (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), p. 185.
- ¹³ James Collins, The Mind of Kierkegaard (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), p. 92.
- ¹⁴ Ralph McInerny, "The Teleological Suspension of the Ethical," Thomist (July, 1975), 298.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 298.
- ¹⁶ Swenson, op. cit., p. 26.
- ¹⁷ Howard A. Johnson and Neils Thulstrup, A Kierkegaard Critique (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 143.
- ¹⁸ Mark C. Taylor, "Psychoanalytic Dimensions of Kierkegaard's View of the Selfhood," Philosophy Today. (Fall, 1975): p. 204.

- 19 Miller, op. cit., p. 184.
- 20 Johnson, op. cit., p. 145.
- 21 Miller, op. cit., p. 184.
- 22 Ibid., p. 188.
- 23 Taylor, op. cit., p. 209.
- 24 Gerber, op. cit., p. 37.
- 25 Robert Bretall, A Kierkegaard Anthology (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951) p. 214.
- 26 Ibid., p. 117.
- 27 Gerber, op. cit., p. 38.
- 28 Fernando Molina, Existentialism as Philosophy (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 10.
- 29 Gerber, op. cit., p. 37.
- 30 James L Marsh, "The Two Kierkegaards," Philosophy Today (Winter, 1972): p. 316.
- 31 Collins, op. cit., p. 143.
- 32 Swenson, op. cit., p. 11.
- 33 Collins, op. cit., p. 143.
- 34 Gerber, op. cit., p. 41.
- 35 Collins, op. cit., p. 82.
- 36 Bretall, op. cit., p. 126.
- 37 Gerber, op. cit., p. 38.
- 38 Ibid., p. 49.
- 39 Ibid., p. 48.
- 40 Martin A. Bertman, "Kierkegaard: A Sole Possibility for Individual Unity," Philosophy Today (Winter, 1972): 309.
- 41 Johnson, op. cit., pp. 162-163.
- 42 Ibid., p. 179.
- 43 Gerber, op. cit., p. 34.

- 44 Ibid., p. 49.
- 45 Marsh, op. cit., p. 318.
- 46 Gerber, op. cit., p. 49.
- 47 Johnson, op. cit., p. 163.
- 48 Bretall, op. cit., p. 226.
- 49 Ibid., p. 226.
- 50 Molina, op. cit., p. 12.
- 51 Blackham, op. cit., p. 10.
- 52 Bertman, op. cit., p. 310.
- 53 Gerber, op. cit., p. 40.
- 54 Miller, op. cit., p. 185.
- 55 Marsh, op. cit., p. 317.
- 56 Gerber, op. cit., p. 43.
- 57 S.J. Starkloff, "The Election: Choice of Faith," Review for Religion (May, 1965): 450.
- 58 Collins, op. cit., p. 91.
- 59 Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952) p. 83.
- 60 Bretall, op. cit., p. 121.
- 61 Kierkegaard, op. cit., p. 105.
- 62 Ibid., p. 92.
- 63 Gerber, op. cit., p. 40.
- 64 Collins, op. cit., p. 92.
- 65 Beck, op. cit., p. 67.
- 66 William V. Spanos, A Case Book on Existentialism (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1966), p. 249.
- 67 Bretall, op. cit., p. 117.
- 68 Kierkegaard, op. cit., p. 88.

69 McInerny, op. cit., p. 301.

70 Ibid., p. 302.

71 Ibid., p. 302.

72 Ibid., p. 304.

73 Ibid., p. 304.

74 Ibid., p. 304.

75 Marsh, op. cit., p. 314.

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