

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN FAITH AND REASON COLLIDE: A CRITICAL LOOK AT
KIERKEGAARD'S TELEOLOGICAL SUSPENSION OF THE ETHICAL

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“¹⁵ God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. ¹⁶ I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

¹⁷ Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" ¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!"

¹⁹ Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. ^[d] I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. ²⁰ And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation. ²¹ But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year." ²² When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him.

-Genesis 17:15-22

“¹ Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"
"Here I am," he replied.

² Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

-Genesis 22:1-2

I would get much more sleep if it were not for passages like the ones we find in Genesis. As a Christian scholar, passages like these send my mind reeling. Why would God deliver such conflicting messages? First, God promises Abraham that his barren wife Sarah will give birth to a son at the ripe-old-age of 90. This event will set Abraham up as the father of a great nation, whose descendants will be as numerous as the stars. Then, just five chapters later, God commands Abraham to kill Isaac, the son of promise. What good can come from such a command? What possible reason is there for killing Isaac? The tension we find here in Genesis sets the stage for this paper. What should one do when faith and reason collide? How should this tension be resolved? More specifically, this paper will address the ways in which *Christian morality* is affected by the sometimes litigious relationship between faith and reason? ¹

There are no simple answers to these difficult questions. For this reason, I turn to Soren Kierkegaard's famous work *Fear and Trembling* for help. This wonderfully insightful book represents a philosophical and theological exploration into the story of Abraham's call to

¹ It should be noted that I am not trained as a Biblical scholar. Thus, I will not be doing heavy exegesis. Instead, I will be approaching the Abraham narrative as a Christian ethicist. What can the Abraham narrative tell us about Christian morality? For instance, can an adequate moral framework be developed in light of a God who commands infanticide?

sacrifice Isaac. Clearly, this call goes against all forms of rational morality. Here, I use the term “rational morality” to represent moral frameworks that can be justified using standards set by reason² as opposed to those governed primarily by faith. Infanticide is appalling under normal circumstances, but given Abraham’s unique situation, it seems much worse. Remember, Isaac’s birth was a miracle. This miraculous event was the fulfillment of God’s promise to transform Abraham’s family into a great nation. Because of this, it seems particularly heinous for God to demand such a sacrifice. What should Abraham do? Should he listen to the rational voice telling him that killing an innocent child is morally reprehensible or should he sacrifice Isaac as an act of faithful obedience? Furthermore, would a loving God ever command such a thing? Does God’s nature conform to rational moral categories or is God beyond the constraints of rational morality? Can God command anything, even the death of Isaac, or is God limited by the restraints of love and justice? How can one be expected to imitate the divine, if God can do things that are forbidden to humans? Again, what should one do when faith comes into conflict with reason?

Some may question the very conflict assumed by this paper’s thesis. That is, when faith and reason are used properly, they tend to support one another. While I agree that the two often complement each other nicely, their relationship can become strained. For instance, how can one accept the truth of the Incarnation, the Virgin birth, or the Resurrection using reason? It would seem that reason is unable to bring one to such theological conclusions. In fact, such conclusions look completely irrational. How can human reason accept a divine human, a birth without sex, a life after death? At these theological crossroads, a choice must be made. One will either implement reason and renounce such theological claims or one will accept them on faith.

Abraham faces a similar tension. If Abraham uses a form of rational morality, he will undoubtedly refuse to sacrifice Isaac. Thus, the only way Abraham can agree to the sacrifice is by faith. For this reason, Kierkegaard argues that genuine faith often requires one to think and act contrary to reason. How else can we justify Abraham’s response to God’s call? It makes no sense when applying human categories. All forms of rational morality would label Abraham a crazed murderer. In spite of this, Kierkegaard argues that Abraham’s genuine leap of faith has the power to transform him from a murderer into a saint. The murder of Isaac becomes a divine sacrifice. For Kierkegaard, there is no higher demonstration of humanity’s love for God than perfect obedience. In Abraham’s case, obedience can only come through faith. Thus, faith demands that Abraham turn his back on reason.

For Kierkegaard, the paradox of faith is most fully revealed when the individual is called to transcend the limits of rational morality. When confronted with the ethical on one hand, and the

² The author is aware that human rationality is both contextual and culturally defined. This paper does not support the univocal nature of reason. The focus of this paper will be on Western rationality as it relates to moral theory. Several competing moral theories are supported by Western rationality, but all of them would be of one voice in condemning Abraham’s decision to sacrifice Isaac. Thus, there appears to be a conflict between Western rational morality and the Christian faith.

call of God on the other, the knight of faith transcends reason for the sake of obedience. Abraham does not have an absolute duty to the moral law. Instead, his absolute duty is directed toward the absolute, i.e. God. Thus, Abraham wills what God wills, even if that means sacrificing his only son.

Kierkegaard writes, “Faith is just this paradox, that the single individual as the particular is higher than the universal, is justified before the universal, not as subordinate but superior...”³

The logic is pretty simple. God created the moral law. Therefore, God is not a servant to the moral law. If God, in fact, transcends rational morality, so too must the ultimate telos of the faithful. As Christians, we cannot and should not stop at rational morality because God does not reside there. This is not to say that the knight of faith should disregard the moral law. The truth is quite the opposite. For most of the knight’s life should be spent in obedience to the moral law. However, if God does call one to transcend rational morality, one should be prepared to do so, remembering that one’s absolute duty is to God alone. Thus, the knight of faith must be willing to temporarily suspend the ethical as a result of God’s call. In this way, faith allows the individual to rise above the universal. Kierkegaard calls this movement the *Teleological Suspension of the Ethical*.

Kierkegaard writes,

In the time before the outcome either Abraham was a murderer every minute or we stay with the paradox which is higher than all mediation. So Abraham’s story contains a teleological suspension of the ethical. He has, as the single individual, become higher than the universal. This is the paradox which cannot be mediated.⁴

In Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac, he disregarded rational morality altogether. His ultimate telos pointed to something higher; it was aimed at faithful obedience to God. It was for this telos that Abraham suspended his commitment to rational morality. For Kierkegaard, the leap made by Abraham distinguishes him as a knight of faith as opposed to the tragic hero often portrayed in literature. Tragic heroes like the Greek king Agamemnon and the Hebrew judge Jephthah participate in what Kierkegaard calls “resignation”. That is, the tragic hero is willing to renounce everything that has value, including one’s own life, so that the hero might act virtuously in the midst of overwhelming circumstances. In this way, the tragic hero is resigned to the moral law. Here, rational morality represents the ultimate telos. For Agamemnon, this meant placing his duty to Athens above the life of his own daughter Iphigenia. For Jephthah, it meant sacrificing his daughter because of a promise made to Yahweh.

While Kierkegaard admires the difficult movement of resignation epitomized in the tragic hero, Christian faith asks that we make one additional movement: the leap. The ultimate telos for the

³ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Penguin books: London, 1985), 85.

⁴ Ibid, 95.

faithful is not the moral law, but obedience to God. Again, if God's call transcends rational morality, then the knight of faith must be willing to suspend the ethical for the sake of a higher telos. This leap of faith isolates the actor because it places them in opposition to reason. Without the ability to justify behavior rationally, silence ensues. For instance, what would Abraham say to Sarah had she discovered his true intentions for the trip to Mount Moriah? What possible reason could he give? This highlights that which separates the tragic hero from the knight of faith. While the hero is resigned to the moral law through human effort, the knight of faith transcends all forms of rational morality by faith. This allows the hero to be admired for their virtue, whereas the knight of faith can scarcely be understood.

Kierkegaard writes,

Abraham's whole action stands in no relation to the universal, it is a purely private undertaking. While, then, the tragic hero is great through his deed's being an expression of the ethical life, Abraham is great through an act of purely personal virtue.⁵

The stage has now been set. The tension that exists between rational morality and faith is clear. Unfortunately, the initial question still remains. What should we do when faith and reason collide? If we criticize Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, suggesting that he listen to reason instead, then we are forced to question the historical accuracy of the narrative. The Biblical text makes it clear that Abraham is to be praised for his faithfulness. However, without accepting something like Kierkegaard's teleological suspension of the ethical, one must conclude that Abraham's character is seriously flawed due to his willingness to kill his own son. Furthermore, interpreting the narrative using a rational lens confines God's nature within certain rational categories. For instance, killing innocents is blatantly unjust. God is never unjust. Therefore, God would never command or cause the death of innocents. The logic is very simple, but the conclusion places certain limitations on God. Does God really fit inside these rational moral categories or does God transcend them?

On the other hand, if we accept Kierkegaard's analysis of Abraham, then we must postulate a God that commands, and at times perpetuates, the death of innocents. This God would transcend all rational categories, making it very difficult for humanity to know or relate to such a God. Furthermore, such a view would reinforce moral relativism. That is, the call placed on Abraham is specific to him. No one else can fulfill this call and no one should attempt to imitate Abraham's actions. This leads to the inevitable conclusion that Abraham did the moral thing when he agreed to sacrifice Isaac, but this same moral standard would not hold for anyone else. Remember, Kierkegaard refers to Abraham's call as a "purely private undertaking". Unfortunately, the kind of isolation and individualism promoted by Kierkegaard's notion of radical faith allows people like suicide bombers, Andrea Yates, and the like, to use a similar justification. Each of these figures believes so strongly that God is calling them to kill that they are often willing to give up their own lives as an act of obedience. Do we consider such actions to be morally justified? Can we build a reliable moral framework around a moving target like

⁵ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 87-88.

the teleological suspension of the ethical? As we begin to analyze our options, neither looks all that appealing.

I want to begin my own evaluation of the Abraham narrative specifically, and the conflict between faith and reason more generally, by highlighting the areas of agreement between Kierkegaard and myself. First, I think that Kierkegaard is right to argue that the ultimate telos of all Christians is obedience to God. Jesus said this best in the garden of Gethsemane “Father, if you are willing to take this cup from me; yet not my will, but Yours be done.”⁶ Single-minded obedience to the Father defines Jesus’ moral character and sets up the standard for all Christian disciples. The ultimate sign of Christ-like character comes when we can truly say that we will what God wills; that we desire what God desires. Our whole lives should be spent pursuing this end. This is the unshakable theological truth that we find in the story of Abraham. At its core, the sacrifice of Isaac is about worship and idolatry. Will Abraham give Isaac back to God as an act of worship or will he turn his son into an idol? Will Abraham recognize his life and all that it entails as a gift from God or will he turn to self-sufficiency and control. Abraham’s willingness to obey God regardless of the cost reveals his genuine faith. For this, Abraham deserves our praise.

My fundamental disagreement with Kierkegaard revolves around what obedience to God entails.⁷ Before one can obey God, one must first have a clear understanding of God’s call. This clarity is made difficult by the shifting nature of the teleological suspension of the ethical. Under this framework, God’s call is unique to each individual. Thus, there are no universal moral standards to aim at. Without a fixed target, the actor becomes isolated, in this case Abraham, making it increasingly difficult to gain clarity regarding the will of God. Moreover, Kierkegaard suggests that God’s call is often contrary to reason. This places the individual on an island with no way of discussing the matter with others or even deliberating rationally. Kierkegaard makes this clear when he describes faith as a paradox that is “inaccessible to thought.” Kierkegaard goes on to say that,

Faith itself cannot be mediated into the universal, for in that case it would be cancelled. Faith is this paradox, and the single individual is quite unable to make himself intelligible to anyone... The one knight of faith simply cannot help the other. Either the individual becomes the knight of faith himself by putting on the paradox, or he never becomes one. Partnership in these regions is quite unthinkable.⁸

⁶ Luke 22:42

⁷ Providing a critique of Kierkegaard’s work can prove to be difficult. He wrote under several pseudonyms and from several different perspectives. It is not always easy to sort out the real Kierkegaard from the satirical/exaggerated Kierkegaard. Because of this, I am limiting my comments to the arguments presented in *Fear and Trembling*. I am not trying to provide a critique of Kierkegaard’s work as a whole.

⁸ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 99.

I find the individualism which permeates Kierkegaard's notion of faith in *Fear and Trembling* to be problematic. First, it provides little in the way of accountability. Because the teleological suspension of the ethical excludes rational deliberation within a given community, it opens the door to those who would twist God's call for personal reasons or simply misinterpret it out of ignorance or confusion. The only way someone in Abraham's situation could receive a call like the one to sacrifice Isaac is through some form of personal religious experience. For instance, God coming to a person in a dream, speaking through a burning bush, enlightenment through prayer, and the like. However, this is problematic because it isolates the actor. Personal religious experience does not provide the means necessary for a reliable moral framework. Again, do we really trust individuals, like Andrea Yates and Brian David Mitchell, who claim that their actions were the direct result of obeying the commands of God? Shouldn't these personal religious experiences be held accountable by cross referencing them with Scripture, the Christian tradition, reason, and the like? That is, if my personal experience contradicts large portions of Scripture, the teachings of the church, and all forms of rational morality, isn't the best course of action to forgo this experience? If so, then we must also conclude that it would have been wise for Abraham to rethink the call to sacrifice Isaac.

Furthermore, the shifting nature of the teleological suspension of the ethical makes it impossible to mimic. Kierkegaard argues that the call of God is specific to each individual. However, if faith demands obedience to a unique call, then it does not allow for imitation. This is problematic because imitation is necessary for character formation. Children cannot develop moral character without imitating their parents. Similarly, adults cannot continue their moral development without imitating the Saints, both living and dead, within their moral communities. Jesus establishes this model when he called his disciples. Jesus did not ask his disciples to "believe" in him. He did not ask them to pray the sinner's prayer. Instead, Jesus asked his disciples to quote "follow me". That is, think as I think, speak as I speak, do as I do. This kind of discipleship building is centered on imitation. Without it, Christian disciples have no way of developing Christ-like character. Unfortunately, the teleological suspension of the ethical does not allow for such valuable mimicry.

Because of these problems, I suggest that the teleological suspension of the ethical be replaced by a more stable moral framework that fosters rational deliberation, communal discourse, and imitation. For Christians, this can be found by appealing to the values revealed in the coming kingdom of God. The values exhibited in this Kingdom provide the ultimate moral telos for all Christians. In this way, Christian ethics cannot be separated from eschatology. We may exist here on earth, but we ought to live as faithful citizens of God's coming Kingdom. As representatives of this Kingdom, it is the church's privilege to partner with God to help make this a reality on earth. As Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon write in their book *Resident Aliens*,

There is no way to remove the eschatology of Christian ethics. We have learned that Jesus' teaching was not first focused on his own status but on the proclamation of the inbreaking kingdom of God... Therefore, Christians begin our ethics, not with anxious, self-serving questions of what we ought to do as individuals to make history come out

right, because, in Christ, God has already made history come out right. The Sermon on the Mount is the inauguration manifesto of how the world looks now that God in Christ has taken matters in hand. And essential to the way that God has taken matters in hand is an invitation to all people to become citizens of a new Kingdom, a messianic community where the world God is creating takes visible, practical form.⁹

Like Hauerwas and Willimon, I argue that the clearest picture of God's kingdom is seen in the life, death, and teachings of Jesus. Through the incarnation, Jesus initiates the reign of God here on earth. That is, Jesus creates an overlap between the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God. As Christians, we are to live in this overlap as faithful witnesses to God's Kingdom.

Unfortunately, I don't have enough time or enough talent to lay out all of the details regarding the kingdom of God. Instead, I intend to sketch a rough portrait of this Kingdom. To begin, let's look at the Sermon on the Mount. Here we are told that the poor are blessed, that we are to love, not only our neighbors, but our enemies as well. If we are slapped on one cheek, we should turn the other. If someone asks us to go one mile, we should go with them two. This helps paint a picture of the kingdom of God. The values we find here are not the values we find in the world. In one sense, the values of the world have been turned upside-down. Jesus tells us that if we want to lead, we must serve. If we want to be first, we must be last. If we want to save our lives, we must lose them. Of course, Jesus does more than just speak of these Kingdom values; he lives them as well. Jesus rejects both wealth and power. Instead of the political Messiah that the Jewish community was hoping for, Jesus comes as a faithful servant. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus literally establishes the kingdom of God on earth, and this Kingdom provides the moral compass for all Christians. Thus, I argue that a Christian's ultimate telos is faithful obedience to these Kingdom values.

In order to connect the current line of thinking to my overall thesis, I am forced to ask the million dollar question. Are the values associated with the kingdom of God rational? Can they be justified using a form of rational morality? The short answer is no, they can't. Like Kierkegaard, I suggest that Christian morality begins with a leap of faith. When a person becomes a Christian, they are literally baptized into a new community, a new Kingdom as it were. This transformation cannot occur without faith. However, once saved, a certain "theo-logic" can help to provide a stable moral framework. In this way, I accept Kierkegaard's leap of faith, while rejecting the individualistic nature of his ethic. Instead, I argue that the core values associated with the kingdom of God are both communal and constant.

First, these values are communal. We learn them, develop them, and live them together, in community. Thus, they hold for all Christians. The values associated with the kingdom of God should be reflected in the Church acting as the body of Christ. Viewing the Kingdom through a communal lens provides new avenues of accountability because it allows the church to scrutinize its theo-logic collectively, rather than, individually. For instance, in various Wesleyan

⁹ Stanely Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 87.

traditions, the church might apply Wesley's quadrilateral to help evaluate and re-evaluate what it means to participate in the kingdom of God. What does Scripture say about it? What does our Tradition say? What does our local Church community say? What can reason and experience add to the discussion? Placing rational dialogue in a communal context helps establish a fixed target. Thus, unlike Kierkegaard's individualized notion of faith and morality, a moral framework that is communal allows for accountability, rational discourse, and imitation.

It is important to note that while Christian morality is governed by the church, there must be room for the prophet. That is, individuals within a Christian community must be allowed to call the church back to faithfulness. Communities can get it wrong just like individuals get it wrong. Because of this, Christian morality must be freed from the tyranny of the group. This is the role of the prophet. However, the prophet is not called to initiate a new covenant. The vision of the coming kingdom of God will not change. The ultimate moral telos for all Christians is fixed. The prophet might speak out against a particular community, calling them back to faithfulness, but the prophet will not do this in isolation. At the very least, they will stand as a faithful member of the universal Church in relation to the particular faith community that has lost its way. Thus, the prophet is never an individual isolated from the one Holy and Universal Catholic Church.

Second, the values associated with the kingdom of God are constant. That is, they are not subject to change. Thus, all Christians are held accountable to a single moral framework. Again, creating a fixed target provides the means necessary for accountability and imitation.

My theo-logic looks something like this.

Premise 1- God does not act contrary to God's own nature. To suggest the opposite, is to postulate a form of divine schizophrenia. Such a conclusion is both logically inconsistent and theologically irresponsible. Instead, I suggest we postulate a God whose nature, while not completely confined by rational constraints, is, at the very least, consistent over time. Thus, if God's nature is love, all of God's actions will be consistent with love as well.

Premise 2- God's nature is constant. It endures over time. Therefore, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the same God we worship today.

Premise 3- The kingdom of God is created and sustained through God's divine nature.

Conclusion 1- If the values associated with the kingdom of God emanate from God's very nature, as I suggest, and God's nature is constant, so too are the values associated with the Kingdom. This provides a fixed moral telos.

Conclusion 2- If the kingdom of God is established because of God's divine nature and God does not act contrary to this nature, then it follows that God would not command or perpetuate that which is opposed to God's Kingdom.

It should be noted that Christian morality requires an initial leap of faith. Reason cannot help one accept the incarnation, the resurrection, or the virgin birth. Similarly, reason cannot help one understand the command to love one's enemies or the preference God shows for the poor. In order to understand such things, one must enter the Christian community by faith. However, once a person becomes a citizen of the kingdom of God, a form of rationality must emerge that allows the Church to make conclusions that are both consistent and coherent. Thus, I argue that a communal form of theo-logic be used to help better understand and apply the values associated with God's kingdom.

To conclude, I will apply the moral framework established above to the situation of Abraham and his call to sacrifice Isaac. First, is the call to sacrifice Isaac consistent with the values established in the kingdom of God? I would argue that the answer is no. Infanticide, in all its forms, runs counter to Kingdom values. For this reason, I argue that the Church rethink Abraham's call to sacrifice Isaac. The single-minded obedience displayed by Abraham is praiseworthy. It represents the ultimate end for all Christians. However, the details of the narrative run counter to the values associated with the kingdom of God, and thus, to God's nature. In such situations it seems reasonable to glean important theological truths found within the Abraham narrative, without using the details as a moral compass the way Kierkegaard does with the teleological suspension of the ethical.

It should be noted that I am not advocating for a particular interpretation of Abraham's attempt to sacrifice of Isaac. Rather, I am trying to eliminate those interpretations that endorse a God who commands the death of children. A theology that supports such a God does irreparable harm to Christian morality. If God can command anything at any time, then the church cannot pursue a fixed moral telos. Unfortunately, this moral framework fails to provide accountability and imitation. I have argued that a better model for Christian morality comes when ethics is grounded in eschatology. The coming kingdom of God represents our ultimate moral telos. God is working to make all things new. This represents nothing less than the redemption of all creation.¹⁰ As the church, our moral imperative is to participate in God's redemptive work. This cannot include the killing of innocents. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the same God we worship today. Thus, if killing innocents fails to bring about God's kingdom in the 21st century, then it must also fail to bring about the Kingdom for Abraham.

Placing this back into my larger argument looks something like this:

Premise 1- The kingdom of God is created and sustained through God's divine nature.

Premise 2- God does not act contrary to God's own nature.

Conclusion 1- If the kingdom of God is established because of God's divine nature and God does not act contrary to this nature, then it follows that God would not command or perpetuate that which is opposed to God's Kingdom.

¹⁰ Revelation 21:1-6

Premise 3- The command to kill Isaac conflicts with the values associated with the kingdom of God.

Conclusion 2- Therefore, God would not command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

In closing, I would like to make two things clear. First, the argument outlined in this paper is not intended to diminish the importance of the Abraham narrative specifically or the authority of Scripture more generally. The story of Abraham and Isaac is profoundly true and highlights important theological themes related to idolatry, Christian worship, and the nature of gift, to name a few. Its extreme significance should not be lost in the above analysis.

With that said, I want to resist interpretations that promote a God who commands infanticide and other acts of unjustified violence. Such commands go against the morality associated with the Kingdom of God. As such, I believe they go against God's very nature. Obviously, this method of interpretation has profound implications for other passages of Scripture. What should be made of the Canaanite genocides? How should the violence seen in Exodus, Joshua, and the prophets be interpreted? My argument has been that these, and other passages, must be read in light of the coming Kingdom of God as instituted and revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, the depiction of God's character as well as the moral content unearthed in such passages should be consistent with the eschatological vision experienced in Jesus Christ. Failure to interpret in such ways may free God from the constraints of rational morality, but the result of such freedom is a moral framework lacking both accountability and imitation. A God who commands that which is fundamentally opposed to the Kingdom creates a theological house divided against itself. Such a house cannot provide an adequate foundation for Christian morality.