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# Kant and Kierkegaard on Faith:

In Service to Morality and a  
Leap for the Absurd

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When reading Immanuel Kant and Soren Kierkegaard, it is easy to oversimplify the relationship of their works by presuming that a fundamental philosophic abyss separates their perspectives. On a general level, there are many clear distinctions between the two philosophers that support this conventional viewpoint: Kant is a wholly rational philosopher, while Kierkegaard appeals to the absurd; Kant staunchly argues for a universalist ethic, while Kierkegaard maintains that a higher subjectivist and individualist ethic exists. Yet, there are several striking parallels between the texts that suggest, at the very least, that Kierkegaard uses Kant's ethics as a foundation for his inquiry into the religious significance of faith. Ronald M. Greene goes so far as to say that "not only was Kierkegaard's discussion organized like Kant's, but at many points it almost seemed as though, without acknowledgement, Kierkegaard had lifted words, phrases, or ideas from Kant" (xi). Certainly, Kierkegaard's representation of the ethical in *Fear and Trembling* is transparently Kantian. Nonetheless, Kant and Kierkegaard's philosophical perspectives inexorably diverge when considering the extent of the ethical domain of reason. Whereas Kant asserts that the capacity for reason allows humans to establish maxims for proper moral activity in all possible situations, Kierkegaard, in the form of Johannes de Silentio, moves against this universal-ethical position in suggesting that there is a higher duty, which surpasses all forms of human morality. This paper will demonstrate the oft-overlooked underlying similarities in the authors' conceptions of morality (which intimates Kierkegaard's adoption of Kantian ethics), and examine the point of departure in their considerations of faith.

In the course of his treatment of the biblical story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac at God's behest Kierkegaard raises a profound and troubling question for the theistic philosopher: "Is there such a thing as an absolute duty to God?" By an absolute duty to God, Kierkegaard means a specific absolutely overriding duty to obey God's commands. This duty is so absolute that it takes precedence over every other concern, even the loftiest moral obligation. Such an absolute duty is carefully distinguished from moral duties per se, though the author acknowledges that in some sense moral duties themselves are duties toward God:

Thus it is proper to say that every duty is essentially duty to God but

if no more can be said than this then it is also said that I actually have no duty to God. [...] For example, it is a duty to love one's neighbor. It is duty by its being traced back to God, but in the duty I enter into relation not to God, but to the neighbor I love. If [...] I then say it is my duty to love God, I am actually pronouncing only a tautology, inasmuch as "God" in a totally abstract sense is here understood as the divine—that is, the universal, that is, the duty. (68)

Kierkegaard explains that from this perspective the ethical becomes the whole content and limit of man's ethical-religious life and God becomes "an invisible vanishing point" (68). As such, a religious life that equates God's commands and one's moral duties contains no distinctively "religious" elements. In a religion of this type, the term "God" does not refer to an entity that makes known its desires and commands, but is simply an abstract, personified way of talking about one's moral duties.

The conception of the ethical-religious life that Kierkegaard refers to here is worked out in detail in Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. There, Kant declares that "religion is (subjectively regarded) the recognition of all our duties as divine commands" (6:154). Kant declares that the moral life and the true religious life are indistinguishable. Belief in creeds, performance of religious activities and rituals, membership in ecclesiastical bodies are all worthless religious delusions and superstitions except insofar as they facilitate the adoption of a deontological system of ethics, a 'natural religion', which consists exclusively of faith in the human capacity for moral improvement. In this regard, Kant asserts that the following principle requires no proof: "*Apart from good life-conduct, anything which the human being supposes that he can do to become well-pleasing to God is mere religious delusion and counterfeit service of God*" (6:171). Thus, when Kant considers the same situation as Kierkegaard—whether or not a father could be commanded by God to kill his son—he concludes that the command could not be of divine origin, as it contradicts all rational conceptions of human morality:

For, as regards the theistic miracles, reason can at least have a negative criterion at its disposal, namely, if something is represented as

commanded by God in a direct manifestation of him yet is directly in conflict with morality, it cannot be a divine miracle despite every appearance of being one (e.g. if a father were ordered to kill his son who, so far as he knows, is totally innocent). (6:87)

Kierkegaard agrees that “the whole existence of the human race rounds itself off as a perfect, self-contained sphere, and then the ethical is that which limits and fills [it],” then anyone who “wish[ed] to love God in any other sense than this, [...] is in love with a phantom” (68). Further, “if this is the highest that can be said of man and his existence, then the ethical is of the same nature as a person’s eternal salvation” (54).

Consequently, when Kierkegaard considers whether there is an absolute duty to God, he contends that this duty must be essentially of nonmoral character. To this end, Kierkegaard develops the notion of an absolute duty to God by claiming that Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac constitutes a “teleological suspension of the ethical” (56). Abraham, who Kierkegaard characterizes as a knight of faith (a religious man who fulfills an absolute duty to God), acts outside the ethical realm—above and beyond human conceptions of good and evil. Abraham can be distinguished from a tragic hero—a man who submits himself to the universal by relinquishing what he values most for the sake a universal ethical principle—for he “transgressed the ethical altogether and had a higher telos outside it, in relation to which he suspended it” (59). Whereas one can empathize with the tragic hero, who might sacrifice his child for the sake of some higher moral duty, it is impossible to understand or identify with Abraham’s non-ethical personal quest to carry out God’s direct command to sacrifice Isaac.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that Kierkegaard’s methodology for discriminating between religious duty and ethical duties employs terms such as universality and rational intelligibility—precisely the criteria that Kant uses in *Religion* to distinguish his rational moral religion from superstition and religious delusion. For example, Kierkegaard’s characterization of the ethical as the universal is commensurate with Kant’s categorical imperative—the notion that ethical laws must be rationally conceived and universalizable. Kierkegaard questions the self-sufficiency of Kant’s ethics, however, by virtue of the longstanding existence of faith from the time of its inception

with Abraham. While Kierkegaard agrees that the ethical is the universal, faith represents a paradox in which the single individual transcends the ethical-universal and stands in “absolute relation to the absolute” (56). On a universal ethical level, speaking in terms that all humans can comprehend, Abraham is a murderer who almost kills his beloved son. The paradox then lies in explaining why it is that this murderer should be praised as the father of faith. Abraham’s faith cannot be explained or understood, it must simply be accepted as the only solution to the paradox.

While Kierkegaard uses Kantian language to describe the ethical, he envisions the realm of faith and the realm of ethical duty as two distinct spheres in the life of a human being. As such, Kant and Kierkegaard’s philosophical paths begin their acute divergence when they consider faith and its function in relation to a human ethical system. For Kant, faith is to be utilized strictly as a complementary mechanism for outwardly expressing one’s internally conceived moral principles. For Kierkegaard, faith supersedes human ethics in situations where God expects His subjects to act against their universal moral principles for a higher purpose.

Kant’s perspective on the notion of faith can be understood in light of the title of his work: *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. In his view, all religious experiences serve as heuristics to encourage human beings to be morally good. This can be achieved by embracing a deontological religio-ethical system in which one must first know that something is duty before one can acknowledge it as a divine command (6:154). According to Kant, natural religion is a “pure practical concept of reason” which combines a rational morality with the concept of God (6:157). Kant’s notion of morality implies the freedom of the human being to act morally or immorally according to his/her own maxim of action:

The human being must make or have made for himself into whatever he is or should become in a moral sense, good or evil. These two [characters] must be an effect of his free power of choice, for otherwise they could not be imputed to him and, consequently, he could be neither morally good nor evil. (6:44)

Kant's concept of God, which does not stipulate a definitive proof of God's existence, is "an idea that proceeds ineluctably from morality"<sup>1</sup> (Proudfoot). Specifically, people can hope that God will supplement their efforts to be moral insofar as they have followed their reason to the fullest extent:

Reason says that whoever does, in a disposition of true devotion to duty, as much as lies within his power to satisfy his obligation can legitimately hope that what lies outside his power will be supplemented by the supreme wisdom *in some way or another*. (6:171)

Nonetheless, humans cannot presume to know the nature of God's intervention or actions, as this is beyond the domain of reason. We can only accede that it is *possible* that a God exists, and that such a divinity *might* supplement our efforts to become moral beings if we exert ourselves fully to fulfilling our duties:

A human being's moral improvement is likewise a practical affair incumbent upon him, and heavenly influences may indeed always cooperate in this improvement, or be deemed necessary to explain its possibility. Yet he has no understanding of himself in the matter: neither how to distinguish with certainty such influences from the natural ones, nor how to bring them and so, as it were, heaven itself down to himself. And, since he knows not what to do with them, [...] he conducts himself as if every change of heart and all improvement depended solely on the application of his own workmanship." (6:88)

Thus, Kant maintains that the primary function of faith is to placate the anxieties of the dutiful: if their power of reason cannot fully satisfy the demands of moral duty, they can trust the divine will to assist them in their ethical struggle.

Yet, if Kant's characterization of faith as a mere heuristic device is accurate, it cannot account for why religious faith has had and continues to have such a strong hold

on adherents. Is it reasonable to argue that a purely hypothetical concept can attract such widespread ardent devotion? In terms of religion's lasting didactic effects, Kant asserts:

It is easy to see, once we divest of its mystical cover this vivid mode of representing things, apparently also the only one at the time *suited to the common people*, why it (its spirit and rational meaning) has been valid and binding practically, for the whole world and at all times: because it lies near enough to every human being for each to recognize his duty in it. Its meaning is that there is absolutely no salvation for human beings except in the innermost adoption of genuine moral principles in their disposition. (6:83).

Unfortunately, Kant explains, much of faith's mass appeal and staying power is attributable to the development of corrupt notions of miracles and saving grace in organized religions. Kant vehemently objects to the Christian concept of grace, which absolves all human beings of their sins when they profess their faith in Jesus as the Savior. According to Kant, "it is totally inconceivable [that] a rational human being who knows himself to deserve punishment could seriously believe that he only has to believe the news of a satisfaction having been rendered for him" (6:116). Kant does not completely discard Christianity, however, because he insists that it can be modified to form a true universal moral religion. For example, Christian belief in the historical Jesus can be understood practically as the prototypical idea of a perfect moral being and the incarnation of the good principle. As such, "it is our universal human duty to *elevate* ourselves to this ideal of moral perfection" (6:61) and to emulate Jesus' worldly activity.

Kant does not intend here to refute the divinity of Jesus, nor does he reject the existence of miracles; he simply does not think that these concepts are helpful for human moral development: "Reason does not contest the possibility or actuality of the objects of these ideas; it just cannot incorporate them into its maxims of thought and action." (6:52) Thus, Kant concludes that if moral religion (which deals not with

dogmas and observances but with the disposition to observe all human duties as divine commands) is to be established then “eventually all the miracles which history connects with its inception must themselves render faith in miracles in general dispensable” (6:84). As such, Kant avers that even if miracles do in fact exist, they are irrelevant to the paramount pursuit of human life—the achievement of moral excellence.

Clearly then, there is no place in Kant’s true religion for God’s morally incongruous revelatory command that Abraham kill his son. In fact, Kant is skeptical of the human ability to even discern divine revelation, if such a phenomenon actually exists. Furthermore, he simply cannot fathom the possibility that God would request humans to act immorally, as such a notion completely contravenes the dictates of reason. Therefore, in *Religion*, he emphasizes that in every historical faith, there is always the prospect of an error in the interpretation of a phenomenal event: “That God has ever manifested this awful will is a matter of historical documentation and never apodictically certain” (6:187). For this reason, all religions that rely on revelations for their legitimacy lack the most important Kantian criterion of truth—universality. Since such revelations are dependent upon pseudo-historical events for their transmission, they can never serve as the grounds for a separate duty to God. Kant’s skepticism is evident in his most extensive consideration of the sacrifice episode in *The Conflict of the Faculties*:

For if God should really speak to man, man could still never *know* that it was God speaking. It is quite impossible for man to apprehend the infinite by the senses, distinguish it from sensible beings, and *recognize* it as such. But in some cases man can be sure that the voice he hears is *not* God’s; for if the voice commands him to do something contrary to the moral law, then no matter how majestic the apparition may be, and no matter how it may seem to surpass the whole of nature, he must consider it an illusion.

We can use, as an example, the myth of the sacrifice that Abraham was going to make by butchering and burning his only son at God’s command (the poor child, without knowing it, even brought the wood for the fire). Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine

voice; “That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God—of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven.” (*Conflict* 115)

As a result, Kant warns that any religion that transcends the boundaries of reason represents “presumptuousness and immodesty” (6:89), in view of the uncertainty of such divine interventions. Thus, Kant conclusively and categorically declares that the only true religion is that religion which represents rationally conceived moral duties as divine commands.

In contrast to Kant’s adamant skepticism about divine manifestations and quick dismissal of their significance, Kierkegaard has no reservations about dealing with what he calls the “absurd”. Moreover, in the Preliminary Expectoration to *Fear and Trembling*, he is critical of those philosophers who claim to effortlessly “go beyond” faith and consider religion a trifling subject:

I for my part have applied considerable time to understanding [...] philosophy and believe that I have understood it fairly well; [...] I do this easily, naturally, without mental strain. Thinking about Abraham is another matter, however; then I am shattered. I am constantly aware of the prodigious paradox that is the content of Abraham’s life, I am constantly repelled, [and...] my thought cannot penetrate it (33)

While Kierkegaard can easily comprehend the notion that the (Kantian) universal realm of ethics is higher than that of the individual realm of the aesthetic, faith to him seems to represent an eminently perplexing abstract paradox, in which the single individual isolates himself in a sphere higher than the universal. Further, in the case of God’s command to Abraham, faith seems to be paradoxical on a material level as well: Abraham’s natural inclination, indeed his ethical duty as a father, is to protect his son. As such, Abraham’s moral obligations should incline him to disobey God’s command. Nonethe-

less, Abraham has historically been praised for his strength of character, as the father of faith, for his willingness to obey an unethical command because he believed that it came from an omniscient and omni-benevolent God. Whereas Kant simply rejects this paradox (that Abraham should be exalted for willfully attempting to sacrifice his son—a clearly unethical act) on rational grounds, Kierkegaard seems to accept the paradoxical notion of faith by virtue of its enduring resonance with religious adherents for so many generations. In fact, Kierkegaard could be in direct conversation with Kant when he definitively asserts that “if this is not faith, then Abraham is lost, then faith has never existed in the world” (55). Here, Kierkegaard effectively establishes an imperative: if one agrees that faith exists, one must agree to that it is of a paradoxical nature (cf. 70).

The paradox of Abraham’s situation, then, is that he is in an absolute relation to something that violates his deepest love for his son. Either the story of Abraham contains a “teleological suspension of the ethical” and an obligation to a higher duty or he should be forever condemned for contemplating the ignominious murder of his child. As such, the only way to legitimize Abraham’s epithet as the father of faith is to understand faith as an autonomous realm, separate and above the ethical. If no such argument can be made, Kierkegaard relates, then we should reject all notions of faith, cease all God-seeking discussions and follow the universal principles of the ethical. He does not try to evade the conclusion that the knight of faith, a person who fulfills an absolute duty to God, acts in a manner that, when judged by rational principles, is absurd. In fact, Kierkegaard even recounts three examples of fathers who sacrificed their children without moving beyond the rational domain of the ethical: Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia so that the Greeks could win the Trojan War; Jephthah sacrificed his daughter because he made a “promise that decided the fate of the nation” (58); and Brutus put his sons to death for plotting against the state. In each of these cases, the fathers kill their children for the good of their people as a whole—a higher, more universal ethical duty. These men are identified as tragic heroes because their ethical dilemmas are universally intelligible and their actions conjure empathy for their resolute moral virtue in “allow[ing] an expression of the ethical to have its telos in a higher expression of the ethical” (59).

Abraham, on the other hand, is not at all related to the universal: his ordeal is a personal matter between himself and God:

Why then, does Abraham do it? For God's sake and—the two are wholly identical—for his own sake. He does it for God's sake because God demands this proof of his faith; he does it for his own sake so that he can prove it. [...] It is an ordeal, a temptation. A temptation—but what does that mean? As a rule, what tempts a person is something that will hold him back from doing his duty, but here the temptation is the ethical itself, which would hold him back from doing God's will. But what is duty? Duty is simply the expression for God's will. (59-60).

Thus, Abraham's act stems from a higher, purely private duty to God. This duty is personal in the sense that Abraham is the only person to understand it and he cannot communicate it to anyone else. Abraham's ethical inclination would be to try and articulate his duty to God to someone else in an attempt to seek counsel. Abraham's duty is above the universal, while speech expresses the universal, so any effort by Abraham to speak about his divine ordeal would be futile. Kierkegaard "doubt[s] very much that anyone in the whole wide world will find one single analogy" to Abraham's case, because his "life not only is the most paradoxical that can be thought of but is also so paradoxical that it simply cannot be thought" (56). Therefore, unlike the tragic hero, no one can empathize with Abraham's exceedingly demanding ordeal:

The knight of faith is assigned solely to himself; he feels the pain of being unable to make himself understandable to others, but he has no vain desire instruct others. The pain is his assurance; vain desire he does not know—for that his soul is too earnest. (80)

As a result of his uniquely personal relationship with God, Abraham's trust in God is absolute, and he thus concludes that, despite all appearances to the contrary,

sacrificing Isaac is really the right thing to do in this particular situation. Abraham's trust in God here is the rationale for his action, in the sense that he believes it his duty to obey God regardless of the command. Nonetheless, one should not interpret Abraham's trust in God as his acceptance of sacrifice within itself as a duty. Abraham views the sacrifice as his duty only insofar as he believes that God commanded him to do it. If not for his "absolute relation to the absolute" (56) and his utmost trust in God, such a command surely would have led Abraham to either reject the notion of this spirit's divinity (much like Kant instructs him to do) or renounce God as a contemptible villain. This notion of trust in God is an "absurd" religious idea, that which Kierkegaard refers to when he says Abraham acts "by virtue of the absurd" (56) by agreeing to sacrifice Isaac. This idea cannot be understood or approached rationally; instead, one must trust in God and make the proverbial "leap of faith":

The dialectic of faith is the finest and the most extraordinary of all; it has an elevation of which I can certainly form a conception, but no more than that. I can make the mighty trampoline leap whereby I cross over into infinity; [...] he who loves God in faith reflects upon God. (37)

Thus, in *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard provides an argument for the existence of an absolute duty to God, which overrides Kantian ethical concerns in certain situations. Kierkegaard insists that anyone who acknowledges that faith exists in this world, must accept the paradox that the socially isolated faithful individual rises above the ethical universal by an absurd, but authentic leap of faith. Only by adopting this supposition (which implies a division of faith and ethical into two spheres) can one exonerate the commonly recognized father of faith from his ethical liabilities.

The principal limitation of Kierkegaard's argument concerning faith and duty to God in *Fear and Trembling* is that the foundation of Kierkegaard's entire thesis relies on the acceptance of at least one incidence of divine revelation. Following the logic of Kierkegaard's argument, if God never appeared to Abraham and did not command him to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham never would have first exemplified faith or become

cognizant of his absolute duty to God. When Kierkegaard insists that acknowledging the existence of faith requires one to recognize the paradox by which he derives the teleological suspension of the ethical and an absolute duty to God, he fails to account for the fact that it is possible to have faith without accepting the doctrine of divine revelation. Indeed, Kant's notion of faith requires that one acknowledge the possibility that a God exists (who will aid in the moral improvement of those who fully exert their rational capacities) whether one believes in divine revelation or not. Thus, for Kant, even if God never appeared on Earth nor made His will apparent, one could still maintain a faith in God's existence (for reason can never refute the possibility). On the other hand, if one simply denies that God actually ever appeared to Abraham, Kierkegaard's entire argument collapses. As such, Kant's argument for commensurable religious and ethical duties is rhetorically stronger than Kierkegaard's.

Nonetheless, Kierkegaard's work sheds light on one major limitation in Kant's religious work as well—the refusal of Kantian ethics to consider particularities of unique individual circumstances. Kant's ethical system requires that all of one's moral decisions conform to the categorical imperative: “With respect to the action that I want to undertake, however, I must not only judge, and be of the opinion that it is right; I must also be certain that it is” (6:186). Yet, the assumption of the categorical imperative that humans can codify moral systems of universal laws that accounts for every situation in which they act is unfeasible. There are many situations that one encounters in life that are not so simple as to allow for one's maxim for action to be immediately recognized as universalizable. Sometimes people must make moral decisions without knowing whether they are of the “opinion that [the action] is right” or whether they are “also certain that it is” right. In addition, the capacity for and method of reason is not constant among all individuals. Two different individuals might make different but equally justifiable moral decisions when facing an identical dilemma, because of disparities in their methods of reasoning. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard provides an example of an individual, Abraham, who faces an unprecedented moral dilemma that is unique in its circumstances and cannot be rationalized on a universal level. This paradigm sheds light on the major flaw of Kant's universal rationalism; Kant refuses to consider legitimate individual moral questions because he imprudently maintains that

every moral decision can be answered in a universal context.

While both Kant and Kierkegaard's arguments have their drawbacks, Kant's rationalist faith allows for a more sophisticated intellectual understanding of the ethico-religious relationship. Kierkegaard's notion of faith relies so heavily on the principle of divine revelation that there is rarely any interplay between faith and ethics at all. If one does not believe that God ever revealed himself in the human world, then human beings are permanently relegated to the universal sphere of the ethical. In Kierkegaard's conception, the notion of religious faith cannot exist without the acknowledgement of at least a single incidence of divine revelation that commands an absolute duty to God that is contrary to and supersedes the dictates of ethical reason. In Kant's system, however, people can have faith everyday that God will covertly help guide them in making their rationally conceived moral decisions. Studying Kierkegaard's conception of faith is useful in that it demonstrates the periodic isolation of the individual from the ethical-universal, which Kant failed to address. Nonetheless, the complete disjunction of faith and ethics in Kierkegaard's perspective and his reliance on divine revelation renders his philosophy unreasonable to those who have not experienced the divine for themselves nor believe in tales of previous revelations.

Nonetheless, both authors' ethical and religious perspectives are ultimately inadequate, as they both neglect to effectively address the issue of human interpersonal relations and its importance in the formation of moral and religious values. Kant's Universalist ethical system is overly abstract and detached from the external realm of human relationships in its emphasis on the capacity of humans to internally rationalize universal moral principles. While Kierkegaard's individual of faith enjoys a private relationship with God, the individual is removed from the human sphere altogether by virtue of the absurd. Yet, in the view of this student, the most important factor in developing moral judgment is the experience of interacting with other moral beings, for our own ethical projects require the consent and cooperation of other persons whose freedom always intermingles with our own.

*Endnotes*

<sup>1</sup> See Kant's footnote on p153: "so far as theoretical cognition and profession of faith are concerned, no assertoric knowledge is required in religion (even of the existence of God), since with our lack of insight into supersensible objects any such profession can well be hypocritically feigned; speculatively, what is required is rather only a *problematic* assumption (hypothesis) concerning the supreme cause of things, [...] and this faith needs only *the idea of God* which must occur to every morally earnest (and therefore religious) pursuit of the good, without pretending to be able to secure objective reality for it through theoretical cognition."

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