The Suspension of The Ethical in *Fear and Trembling*

By John H. Whittaker

»If faith does not make it a holy act to be willing to murder one's son, then let the same condemnation be pronounced upon Abraham as upon any man.«[1] Kierkegaard says this in *Fear and Trembling*, speaking of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac in obedience to a divine command. He seems to imply that a believer's moral duties are superceded by a higher obligation, so that his ethical sense is overridden by an absolute duty to God – – and God »may cause one to do what ethics would forbid.«[2] To change the form of expression, faith in God entails a »teleological suspension of the ethical«. Ethical duties are suspended because they no longer apply in the face of divine commands, and this suspension is *teleological* because the individual performs it for the sake of a higher purpose – – i.e., he peforms it for the sake of his own »eternal blessedness«, the one goal which cannot be abandoned.[3]

Fear and Trembling is a popular book, one of the most popular of all of Kierkegaard's works; and as a result, the notion that one's faith in God might lead to immoral behavior is widespread. But surely this cannot be right, and surely those who say that it is are drunk with enthusiasm for Kierkegaard. For if Kierkegaard means that a person, out of obedience to God, should be willing to do immoral things, like killing one's son, then one must turn away in horror. If he means that faithfulness to God potentially abrogates our moral sense, then one has to object, and strenously. If this is what the teleological suspension of the ethical implies, then, I think, one simply has to deny that faith involves such a suspension. The trouble is that in *Fear and Trembling* there is too much textual evidence in support of this idea to say that Kierkegaard never held such a view. So if one wants to retain enthusiasm for Kierkegaard while rejecting this concept of an ethically injurious faith, one will have to dig more deeply into his literature, and into the man himself, in search of another interpretation.

Read more carefully, compared with other of his writings, and juxtaposed with events in Kierkegaard's life, *Fear and Trembling* yields a more lenient interpretation. At least there is a way to read this book that does not lead to the terrible idea that faith in God might require

immoral acts. The key to this other interpretation is this: the teleological suspension of the ethical does not refer to the *violation* of moral obligations but to the *transcendence* of ethical reasoning in justifying a sinful consciousness. The very fact that Kierkegaard attributes the book to a pseudonym, Johannes de Silentio, seems to indicate that his account of the Abraham and Isaac story must be taken with a grain of salt. But I am getting ahead of myself. Perhaps we should proceed systematically in developing a better way to read the text. That way is worth the effort, as it forces one not only more deeply into Kierkegaard's literature, but also more deeply into Christian doctrine -- which, whatever else it may be, is certainly worth understanding.

(i)

Clues to the proper interpretation af *Fear and Trembling* appear in the Biblical story itself, and in its refraction in St. Paul. Isaac is a »child of promise«, given to Abraham and to Sarah in their old age as a sign of God's faithfulness in making Abraham the father of many nations. The whole narrative in Genesis is set within the context of this promise, wherein Abraham and Sarah are repeatedly tried and repeatedly found worthy of the great blessing of having many descendants. The first trial comes in the form of Ishmael, a son born to Abraham and Hagar, Sarah's handmaiden. Being childless and beyond her child-bearing years, Sarah offers her handmaiden to Abraham so that he might have an heir through her -- and he does. But then God promises Abraham another son by Sarah, who is now ninety (Gen. 17:16); and he says that his original promise to Abraham is to be fulfilled in this other son (Gen. 17:21). Thus, Abraham must withdraw his hopes from Ishmael and place them in a son yet unborn. This, of course, is hard to do, since he has an heir *already* in Ishmael but no heir in the mere promise of God (Gen. 17:18).

Even so, Abraham withdraws his hopes from Ishmael; and what is more, he trusts that Sarah, despite her years, will bear a child. He has no reason for this trust, none other than the unseen promise of God; and yet he believes. Without any tangible evidence, he trusts that God will give him descendants as numberless as the stars, and that they will be his heirs through a son who is somehow to come from Sarah. Then miraculously Sarah bears Isaac.

This is the background against which the story of the sacrifice of Isaac is set. In this setting, God's commandment to sacrifice Isaac appears to be another *trial*, not a trial to see if Abraham is willing to commit murder but a trial to see if Abraham is willing *to forego the signs that God's promise is being fulfilled.* Can Abraham still believe in God's promise even in the absence of Isaac? Here it is almost as if the fact that Isaac is a person is incidental: the important thing is that he represents the *evidence* of God's faithfulness. Can Abraham do what he did before? Can he believe as he did when he relied solely on God's word,

abandoning his hopes for Ishmael, and as he did when he believed that an elderly woman would bear a son? Dare he destroy the one thing on earth that represents this hopes, his son Isaac, the one concrete and visible thing that assures him the God's promises are not in vain? He had no reason whatever to do any of these things, or none that is intelligible to a non-believer.

We all know that Abraham did dare to sacrifice Isaac; at least, he was willing to sacrifice him just as God had commanded. And we know that St. Paul in looking back to Abraham points to his remarkable faith as an example to everyone to emulate (Rom. 4). But the thing which Paul accentuates in his reference to Abraham is not that Abraham was willing to commit murder, but that he believed *even without the support of evidence.*

> »In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told, So shall your descendants be . . . No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.« (Rom. 4: 18-21)

Abraham »hoped against hope«. He maintained his confidence in God's promise despite the fact that no worldly system of calculation could justify that hope. Just as he had to hope against hope that Sarah would bear a child, he had to hope against hope that God would fulfill his promise even if Isaac were sacrificed. »No distrust made him waver.« He did not doubt that God, who miraculously gave him Isaac in the first place, would miraculously keep his promise even if Isaac were no more. Perhaps he believed that Isaac would be restored somehow, or that he would be reborn in Sarah. In any case, he *believed*, trusting in the reliability of God's promise much more than in his own reckoning of how that promise might come to pass.

All this, though, is the Biblical view, and it needs to be argued that Kierkegaard's view is sufficiently close to it to enable us to say of him what can be said of Paul – – that he did not mean to celebrate Abraham's faith by saying that Abraham was willing to commit murder for God. Fortunately, there is some evidence for this. Corresponding to Paul's point that Abraham's faith involved »hope against hope«, Kierkegaard describes Abraham's faith as being maintained by virtue of the »absurd«. And what was absurd was not that God could fulfill his promises, but that he could fulfill them by *giving Isaac back!*

This is important. Kierkegaard makes it clear that Abraham's faith does not consist in the willingness to sacrifice Isaac, but in the belief that he will *somehow* get Isaac back. Had Abraham simply lost heart and with a broken spirit yielded up his son, he would not have been the father of the faith. Had he simply said, »Now all is lost. God requires Isaac, I sacrifice him, and with him my joy,« he would have made only the »first

movement of faith«. But Abraham made a second movement as well; he believed that Isaac would be restored to him.

> »He did not believe that some day he would be blessed in the beyond, but that he would be happy in this world. God could give him a new Isaac, could recall to life him who had been sacrificed. He believed by virtue of the absurd, for all human reckoning had ceased to function.«[4]

Could Abraham really believe that he would get a »new Isaac«? Could Isaac be reborn in Sarah's womb? All the objections which one might make to this idea would be immediately granted by Kierkegaard, for Abraham believed »by virtue of the absurd«. Here all human reckoning ceases to function, for there is no way to make such a possibility seem remotely plausible. Abraham, however, believed -- he believed that he would not *really* be doing away with Isaac. He may have thought that God would rescue Isaac at the last minute, or that his son would be resurrected, or that he would inexplicably reappear. But in any case, he thought that Isaac would not be lost.[5] And it is this second movement of faith which reduces Johannes de Silentio to speechless admiration.

Now to murder someone is to do away with them forcibly. But can Abraham be said to have been willing to commit murder in this sense? -- forcibly to do away with Isaac? No, I do not think so; for Kierkegaard emphasizes, and repeatedly, that Abraham trusted that Isaac would not be lost even if he were to kill him. That confidence, crazy to our ears, is what made Abraham into a knight of faith. But, hard it is to imagine oneself having the faith of Abraham in a similar situation, I find it harder still to imagine the knight of infinite resignation in this situation. The knight of infinite resignation would simply kill Isaac, without trusting in his restoration. And Kierkegaard writes as if it would be easier to sacrifice Isaac and resign oneself to this unhappy fate than it would be to do as Abraham did. Yet if anything is crazy, this surely is; for to do this is to resign oneself to *murder*. And this I cannot fathom. Such a person would never have believed himself to have conceived a command from God in the first place. Abraham's faith is at least more intelligible than this; the belief in the original divine command and the belief that he would get Isaac back after the sacrifice are at least consistent. All that one has to do is to admit that such faith cannot defend itself.

If it is not unfitting to summarize the matter in this way, then, Abraham believed himself to be participating in a drama directed by God, a drama whose outcome would not be tragic, despite the fact that Abraham did not know what was to come in the future acts of the play. When the play was over, he would not have really killed Isaac, for Isaac could still be. And where the victim lives, who can be accused of murder? No, even on the basis of a straightforward reading of the text, to say that Abraham was willing to commit *murder* is overdramatizing the situation.

(ii)

Even so, if it cannot be said that Abraham was willing to murder Isaac, he was willing to *kill* him; and one might wonder whether anyone should be willing to do such a thing in the name of faith. We all know what we would say if anyone claimed to have had a revelation from God which required him to kill his son, and I do not think that the fact that he expected to have his son restored to life would make much difference. Certainly we do not need scholars to tell us that such a thing would be an outrage. Obviously, the story of Abraham and Isaac, in the Bible and in Kierkegaard, must be symbolic; for we cannot be expected *literally* to emulate Abraham. But if it is symbolic, what does it symbolize?

Walter Lowrie tells us that »Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac is a symbol of S.K.'s sacrifice of the dearest thing that he had on earth« – – i.e., Regina Olsen.[6] This is borne out by Kierkegaard's *Journals*, in which he remarks that he who can explain Abraham's sacrifice can explain his [Kierkegaard's] life.[7] This entry was made shortly after he had broken his engagement to Regina, when he was trying to make himself appear to be a cad. But there are more than enough hints about his relation to Regina in *Fear and Trembling*. This book, along with *Repetition* and *Either/Or*, closely reflect his tragic love; and the fact that all were written in a little over a year shows how deeply he felt about his rupture with Regina, how consumed he was in thinking about it, and how unfinished the whole affair was in his own mind. At the time that he ended their engagement, he had been unable to explain himself to her; apparently he thought that he was too melancholy or deadly serious about life, whereas she was not afflicted with such somberness. Then too, he was painfully aware of his »waywardness«, whereas she was wholely innocent. Most importantly, he had a dim awareness of a religious calling, whereas she, he felt, was called to the hearth. In any case, he found it almost impossible to explain himself fully to her – – and so he found a kind of soul-mate in Abraham, who could not explain himself to Isaac.

The analogy between Kierkegaard and Abraham could be pressed; in fact Kierkegaard himself pressed it, using the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac to explain himself to Regina. Yet I want to stress a disanalogy in these two cases to suggest that Kierkegaard used an overly strong story to make his point. Whatever the details of their relationship may have been, and we do not need to know these for sure, Kierkegaard did what he thought was *right* for Regina. Maybe there was a mixture of self-interest in his dissolving their engagement, but he also acted with *her* interests in mind. Certainly it was for that reason that he tried so hard to appear to her as a seducer or as a hedonist, so that she might find him repellant and easier to abandon. Kierkegaard, in other words, tried to act *morally*, whether one agrees with his actions or not. At least his behavior lay in the direction of morally justifiable behavior, and if he were only able to have talked about it, he could have defended himself to her accordingly.

This, however, is not the case with Abraham. He can make no moral defense of his willingness to kill Isaac.[8] In Kierkegaard's words, Abraham stands outside of the universal, for there is no general rule or policy which he can appeal to, citing his own actions as justified under the rule. He simply cannot explain himself in such a way as to make his intended sacrifice seem remotely defensible; and to that extent, he lacks the »relief of speech«. To get such relief, he would have to say that there is something about his action which makes it universalizable, or something which makes his act and every other act having the same feature commendable. Perhaps he could say that his act was *commanded by God*, thereby commending all other acts which are commanded by God. But if God commands people at all, he commands them in private, so that there is no way of *knowing* that one's neighbor, who may claim to have received orders from God, really did receive divine instruction. Perhaps, then, Abraham could say that everyone who *believes* himself to have received a commandment from God is justified in carrying out the command. But this will not do, either. For then there are no limits on what is morally justifiable. Any normal moral judgment could be overridden willy-nilly by one who claimed to have higher instructions from God. In effect, allowing appeals to private revelation to supercede morality would spell the end of moral seriousness, throwing the door open for all sorts of religious fanaticisms to replace moral arguments.[9]

Therefore, if Abraham could not defend himself by saying that he was commanded by God, then what could he say? There is simply no general rule, no universal, to which he can appeal in defense of himself. But *Kierkegaard*, in principle, could have defended himself in this way. He could have said that whoever feels himself to be preoccupied with morbid thoughts ought not to be engaged. He could have said that whoever cannot be fully honest with his fiancee should not go through with their marriage. He even could have said that whoever feels that his life is set aside for a religious purpose ought not to ally himself with one who has no such feelings. Any of these appeals would translate him into the universal – – i.e., would at least count as moral arguments, whether they are ultimately good arguments or not. That Kierkegaard did not say these things openly and directly to Regina but merely hinted at them in his books was not due to the *impossibility* of saying them. It was due to the psychological difficulty which he had in revealing himself.

Inasmuch as he regarded Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac as comparable to his own sacrifice of Regina, then, he may have taken comfort in the thought that he could no more speak in defense of himself than Abraham could. That is to say, he might well have wanted to accentuate the speechlessness of Abraham as a means of excusing his own speechlessness. Here, the worse the plight of Abraham, the better; for if there can be a situation in which a person cannot possibly defend himself, then might not Kierkegaard have been in just such a situation? The answer is no, but Kierkegaard might have wanted it to seem otherwise. In short, he

may have emphasized Abraham's suspension of ethical defenses as a means of justifying his own silence before Regina. He might have had a motive, in other words, for using Abraham symbolically.

(iii)

I am suggesting that Kierkegaard allowed himself considerable poetic license in dramatizing Abraham's silence to explain his own lack of an adequate explanation to Regina, but it would be a dull reader who thought that this was the only purpose which the story served. To account for the *religious* significance of *Fear and Trembling*, one has to interpret the symbolism of Abraham and Isaac in another way.

Out of *faith*, Abraham is willing to kill his son, yet nowhere else in Kierkegaard's literature is there ever a suggestion that one's faith in God might lead to such a moral crime. Only in *Fear and Trembling* is there the sense that the believer has a higher obligation to God, capable of supplanting his moral conscience. Yet even putting the matter in this way is not quite right, for the author of *Fear and Trembling* does not say that we have two sets of duties, obligations to our fellow human beings and obligations to God. Rather, for Kierkegaard, one's moral duties only become such by being related to God, so that one's dutifulness toward God is *nothing other* than respect for the binding nature of one's ethical obligations.[10] One's duty to God is simply to perform all of one's moral duties. If it were otherwise, then Abraham might justify himself by appealing to his higher obligation to God; and this appeal might have some content. But this Abraham cannot do. And the reason why he cannot do it is that his duty to God *consists in taking his ordinary duties more seriously.*

The same point can be made more simply by being expressed in terms of Kierkegaard's so-called »spheres of existence« -- the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. To say that one's duty to God is to respect all of one's moral duties as binding obligations is to say that the religious sphere does not abrogate the ethical but preserves it, so that the person who acquires faith need not in any essential way deny his moral conscience. Becoming religious is not like entering a new realm of duties, which outweigh the duties encountered in the ethical sphere; it is like acquiring a new regard for one's duties. In this respect, Kierkegaard might have written a text on the ethical validity of the religious, just as he wrote (through a pseudonym) a piece on the aesthetic validity of an ethical marriage. When one becomes ethical, he said, one's aesthetic interests are not destroyed but *dethroned.*[11] And similarly, he might have said that when one becomes religious, one's ethical concerns are not destroyed but dethroned. They are not cancelled, suspended, or changed; they are simply removed from that position in which they bear the weight of an infinite concern.

To be more exact, an interest is enthroned whenever its satisfaction becomes a condition of one's happiness. Thus, a person who leads in

aesthetic existence makes his happiness depend on the satisfaction of worldly interests and temporal desires, whereas an ethical person makes his moral duties paramount. He cannot be happy unless he is happy *with himself*, and he cannot be happy with himself unless he conforms to an ethical ideal. Ethical concerns occupy the throne of an ethical person's life; nothing matters more to him, nothing affects his happiness as deeply, as measuring up to his moral ideals.

What, then, could it mean to dethrone the ethical? It cannot mean giving up one's concern for happiness altogether, for this is the one goal, the one *telos*, which cannot be abandoned. No matter what happens, or how one lives, one will always carry the concern for one's »eternal blessedness«, as Kierkegaard puts it.[12] So instead of giving up the interest in being absolutely happy, the dethronment of the ethical must be something which makes one's happiness, or self-acceptance, depend on something *other* than the fulfillment of an ethical ideal. The dethronement of the ethical by the religious must be a matter of making one's self-acceptance depend on God.

Here we come to a familiar story, derived from St. Paul. For one makes his self-acceptance depend on God when he believes that God forgives his sins, that he is loved and accepted by God despite his moral imperfections, and that he has a right to reside approvingly within himself under the umbrella of God's favor. Forgiveness enables him to discount his moral failures when it comes to the matter of his own approval. Forgiveness enables one to find himself acceptable, not because he is morally acceptable but because God finds him acceptable. Indeed, to believe in divine forgiveness and to refuse to be oneself, to hold one's sinful nature against oneself, does not make any sense. It is a misunderstanding of what forgiveness *means*. None of this implies, though, that one who believes himself to be forgiven by God will turn his back on any of his moral obligations. Nor does it mean that his faith entails new duties which might override his ordinary duties. If the believer has a religious duty to God at all it is simply this: that he should dare to believe that God's love extends to him and to *count* himself forgiven. This will, however, change his *relationship* to an ethical project. Instead of making his relation to himself, and hence his happiness, absolutely dependent on his success in attaining an ethical ideal of perfection, the believer makes his relationship to the ethical express the *prior* fact of his God-given acceptability. He no longer has to prove himself ethically, but he continues to struggle to do what is right to express his thanksgiving to God, to grow worthy of what he has already received, and to remind himself of his continual need for grace.

So, if this »duty« to believe in forgiveness comprises one's duty to God, then there is no reason to suppose that this »absolute duty would cause one to do what ethics would forbid.« I cannot deny, of course, that Kierkegaard wrote these words; but I can say that his general position did not require them, and that it seems overly accommodating to accept him,

or Johannes de Silentio, at his word. Abraham's suspension of the ethical must mean the suspension of ethical reasoning in justifying one who dares to believe that he is forgiven by God.

Still, I might admit that my interpretation of *Fear and Trembling* was somewhat forced and uncertain were it not for one detail surprisingly overlooked by commentators. That detail is a hint from Lowrie, who tells us that the themes in *Fear and Trembling* were taken up and reworked in later years, and that they can be found, somewhat transposed, in *The Sickness Unto Death.*[13] If this is so, it plainly suggests that the mature work, *The Sickness Unto Death*, might be used as a guide in interpreting *Fear and Trembling.* Indeed, by trying to square the Abraham and Isaac story with its thematic »repetition« in *The Sickness Unto Death*, the figurative character of Kierkegaard's treatment of the sacrifice of Isaac can finally be made clear.

When *The Sickness Unto Death* is used as a template and the story of Abraham and Isaac is pressed into it, many elements of that story pass through unchanged: Abraham's trust in God, his endurance of a trial, and his eventual reward. Yet the nature of this reward does not. For the reward does not consist in the fact that he had many descendants; to square the reward with that mentioned in *The Sickness Unto Death* one has to say that it consisted in the inward healing of a divided psyche. As St. Paul says, Abraham's faith was »counted as righteousness« (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3). For Kierkegaard as for Paul, this means that his sins were forgiven and that he was found acceptable in God's acceptability. Abraham, having all signs of assurance taken from him, is forced to rely solely on God's promise, hoping against hope that it is true. But the promise that he relies on is the promise of God's love and forgiveness, and the wonder of Abraham is not only that he believes in this without being able to argue that he deserves it but also that he believes in it without being offended by it. Abraham, in short, stands for every person of faith, who in believing in forgiveness accepts something which by *moral standards of just desert is absurd.* And Abraham believes in this, which is symbolized by his trust in Isaac's restoration, despite the fact that it is almost too high, too wonderful, to be thought.

None of this requires a person of faith to violate his or her moral sense. In the later work, the implication that one might have to do what ethics would forbid out of obedience to God simply disappears.

Abraham, it is true, does not appear in *The Sickness Unto Death*, but many passages are clearly reminiscent of him.

> »Suppose it occurs as follows. Picture a man who with all the shuddering revolt of a terrified imagination has represented to himself some horror as a thing absolutely not to be endured. Now it befalls him, precisely this horror befalls him. Humanly speaking his destruction is the most certain of all things – – and the despair in his soul fights desperately to get leave to despair, to get, if you will, repose for

> despair, so that he would curse nothing and nobody more fiercely than him who attempted . . . to prevent him from despairing.«[14]

Suppose this person were Abraham. What could have been worse than God's command to sacrifice his son Isaac, in whom all his hopes were concentrated? Surely he might have wanted at least »leave to despair«. Yet Abraham does not despair. He hopes; he hopes in God *for whom all things are possible.*

> »So then, salvation is humanly speaking the most impossible thing of all; but for God all things are possible! This is the fight of *faith*, which fights madly (if one would so express it) for possibility. For possibility is the only power to save. When one swoons people shout for water, Eau-de-Cologne, Hoffmann's drops; but when one is about to despair, the cry is, Procure me possibility, procure possibility! Possibility is the only saving remedy . . . Sometimes the inventiveness of a human imagination suffices to procure possibility, but in the last resort, that is, when the point is to *believe*, the only hope is this, that for God all things are possible.«[15]

Abraham needs *possibility* to believe that Isaac will not be required for God or that he will somehow be restored to life. By every canon of reasonable judgment, this is the most *impossible* thing that he can imagine. God commanded the sacrifice, so why would God change his mind and withdraw the request? Or how could it happen that a man, once dead, might be restored of life? Such things do not make sense; they are impossible. Yet by faith Abraham procures possibility, for as God is him in whom all things are possible, anything might be believed through him.

Suppose, however, that Abraham had not believed but had become angry over his trust in God. Then he would have contracted what Kierkegaard calls a »more potentiated« form of despair -- defiance. He might have used his plight as an excuse to hate the whole world.

> ». . . this too is a form of despair: not to be willing to hope that an earthly distress, a temporal cross, might be removed. This is what the despair which wills desperately to be itself is not willing to hope. It has conceived that this thorn in the flesh gnaws so profoundly that he cannot abstract it . . . So he is offended by it, or rather from it he takes occasion to be offended at the whole of existence . . . For to hope in the possibility of help, not to speak of help by virtue of the absurd, that for God all things are possible -- no, that he will not do.«[16]

Abraham, that is, might have taken offense at the promise of God, thinking that the idea that God might choose him as His elect was too much to hope for. »Such a thing is too high for me, I cannot get it into my head; it seems to me, if I may blurt it straight out, foolishness.«[17] How

easy it is to imagine Abraham saying such a thing! Yet he was not offended; he believed, trusting in the inexhaustible possibility of God.

The important point, though, is that these quotations from *The Sickness Unto Death*, which I have applied to Abraham's situation, were applied by Kierkegaard to an inward situation. The faith that fights madly for possibility is a faith that hopes for »salvation«, which is pictured in terms of an earthly promise in the Abraham and Isaac story but which actually refers to the problem of becoming a self, eternally happy. The necessity from which one needs to be saved is the necessity of having to condemn oneself for one's moral failures. It is the necessity of holding one's sinfulness against oneself, or the inability to affirm oneself in the light of ever-imperfect attempts to fulfill one's ethical ideals. We seem *bound* to hold ourselves against ourselves until we can make something better of ourselves, and this inward opposition to ourselves is sin. Sin is simply despair, which when full-grown prevents a person from being himself. For we are never the selves that we would have ourselves to be. To put it more sharply, sin is this despair when it is brought before the promises of God, where it becomes disobedience, defiance, and the refusal to trust in a gift that seems »too high«.

Just as mankind's problem, then, is sinfulness -- the inescapable condition in which he not only acknowledges his guilt but holds it against himself -- God's promise is the perfect antidote: forgiveness. Yet when one believes that he is forgiven by God, he affirms something which, from an ethical point of view, is absurd. He believes that he has a *right* to self-acceptance, a right which is underwritten by God's acceptance. All that can be *known* about one, though -- at least from a nonbeliever's perspective -- is that one has fallen short of what duty requires. So by ethical standards, one *has to feel guilty*. Saying that one has a *right* to accept oneself despite one's guilt sounds unintelligible. Where does such a right come from? How is it earned? One can only say that it comes from God, that it was not earned at all, and that it is given sheerly out of love. None of this makes sense strictly on the basis of moral reasoning; on that basis one has no grounds to hope for his salvation at all. But then, the believer does not put her trust in her moral reasoning; she trusts in God for whom all things are possible.

In accepting God's promise of forgiveness, not only does the believer affirm something which from an ethical point of view is absurd, he also places himself »outside the universal«. He does this by presuming that God cares about him, but not because he is a member of the race, or because he is a good Christian, or because he satisfied any other general condition. He presumes that God cares about him simply as an individual, without regard to the features that he has in common with others and which make him a member of a universal class.

> ». . . Christianity's defense against all speculation . . . lies in the fact that a man, as a particular individual, should have such a reality as is

> implied by existing directly in the sight of God; and then again, and as a consequence of this, that a man's sin should concern God. This notion of the particular man . . . speculative philosophy can never get into its head, it can only universalize the particular man fantastically.«[18]

Speculative philosophy can never get divine forgiveness into its head because it deals with man *generically* and concerns itself with individuals only insofar as they can be grouped together with others in a kind. To dare to believe in God, however, is not to believe that one *deserves* because mankind has been forgiven -- and one is, after all, a member of the race. It is to believe that God cares about all prople in their particularity, forgiving them all one by one. One might say that it comes to the same thing in the end -- namely, that all are forgiven. But this is not so, since it makes a difference whether one forgives a *class* of people because of a shared feature which unites then under this »universal«, or whether one forgives a number of people individually, who are members of a class only because they have been forgiven. Ethical reasoning could perhaps comprehend the former case, in which people might deserve forgiveness owing to the common feature which they share. Yet ethics cannot explain the second case, in which no condition whatever is attached to God's grace.

This is the real meaning of the »teleological suspension of the ethical«. The ethical is suspended because forgiveness cannot be understood as a matter of just deserts, a matter of measuring up to prior conditions, or a matter of fulfilling universal conditions for Godly acceptance. No, God's forgiveness, according to Kierkegaard, shortcuts all such mediation by the universal; it has no requirements, and there are no universal ideals to which one must conform to receive it. His way of saying this was to say that forgiveness is offered directly to the *individual.* And the individual who finds his happiness in God's promise of forgiveness suspends his ethical reasoning when it comes to his faith. He counts himself happy in a new way, according to a non-ethical, religious, way of reckoning.

If I am right about this, then the story of Abraham and Isaac is a story which illustrates the happy passion of faith -- the fact that Abraham dared to believe that with God all things are possible. He believed in his »salvation«, which in Christianity is a matter of forgiveness, though the story represents this under the guise of another promise. The idea that Abraham was willing to kill Isaac, thus teleologically suspending the ethical, dramatizes the fact that his faith was not an outgrowth of moral reasoning but a wholely new way of accepting oneself. For no ethical reasoning leads to self-acceptance; to affirm oneself absolutely one has to draw the breath of God's possibility. Kierkegaard, as well as St. Paul, knew that the breath of that possibility was available to resuscitate people who suffer from the difficulties of the inward life, where we are all on trial to believe that we somehow have a right to be ourselves, despite the

conviction of our consciences. One does not have to suspend ethical behavior to believe such a thing, but the suspension here does involve a violation of ethics in a sense. One suspends ethical reasoning in daring to be oneself, without satisfying moral preconditions, through God in whom all things are possible.

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. by Walter Lowrie (Garden City; doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), p. 41. Hereafter referred to as *FT*.
2. *FT*, p. 84.
3. *FT*, p. 65.
4. *FT*, p. 46-7.
5. *FT*, p. 64.
6. *FT*, p. 10.
7. *FT*, p. 10-11.
8. Much of the following paragraph is dependent on Edmund Santurri. See his »Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* in Logical Perspective,« *Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 5, No. 2 (1977), pp. 225-47.
9. Others disagree; notably Gene Outka, who tries to specify criteria under which a divine command might be responsibly acknowledged and acted on. These criteria are expressly designed to rule out fanatical claims, such as the claim of Charles Manson, who defended himself by saying that he was acting (in killing his victims) in obedience to a divine command. Outka's three criteria are (1) that one must have *seriously* held moral and religious beliefs, (2) that one cannot *want* to do what one does for independent reasons, and (3) that one must be self-reliant and not in need of social support to convince him that he is acting rightly. Manson fails on at least one of these points, the first.

However, it is doubtful that these criteria exclude all acts for which we have an intuitive moral revulsion. Consider the case of some Islamic terrorists, for example.