

Abraham and the Binding of Isaac

Abraham and Sarah are childless but God tells Abraham that he will bless Sarah, and give Abraham a son by her, with whom he will establish a perpetual covenant “to be his God and the God of his descendants after him.” (Genesis 17: 19) In spite of the fact that both are long past the age of childbearing, Abraham believes the promise. And, indeed, they have a son and name him Isaac.

But then, after the child is born, God “tests” Abraham, saying “Take your only child Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah,” and “offer him as a burnt offering on a mountain I will point out to you.” So Abraham, accompanied by two servants and his son Isaac, travels three days until the party comes to the place God has indicated. Leaving his servants behind, Abraham loads the wood for the burnt offering on his son Isaac, takes the fire and the knife for the sacrifice, and sets off with Isaac for the mountain. On their journey, Isaac says to his father, “Look . . . here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”, and Abraham replies “My son, God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering.” When they arrive Abraham builds an altar, binds Isaac, places “him on the altar on top of the wood,” and takes up the knife to sacrifice his son. (Genesis 22: 2–10)

At that point, however, the “angel of Yahweh” calls to Abraham from heaven, saying, “Do not raise your hand against the boy . . . for now I know you fear God” since “you have not refused me your son, your only son.” Abraham then sees a ram caught in a thicket by its horns and offers it in place of Isaac. Whereupon the angel speaks to Abraham a second time: “I swear by my own self—it is Yahweh who speaks—because you have done this, because you have not refused me your son, your only son, I will shower blessings on you, I will make your descendants as many as the stars of heaven and the grains of sand on the seashore,” and “all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, as a reward for your obedience.” (Genesis 22: 11–19)

What are we to make of this? Perhaps the dominant interpretation among mainstream Old Testament scholars is that while the story may have originally “circulated as an independent legend” justifying “the commutation of child sacrifice,”¹ its primary emphasis is on Abraham’s obedience.²

The fact remains that even though Yahweh tells Abraham to stay his hand, and provides a substitutory offering, he *first* commands him to sacrifice his son, and

1 Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 4th edn. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1998, p. 158.

2 See, for example, Helmer Ringgren, *Israelite Religion*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966, pp. 174–5.

Abraham is prepared to obey him. Nor does the story suggest that there is anything improper or untoward about either God's command or Abraham's willingness to obey it.

This is troubling, and not just if we assume that the account is historical. Even if it is not, it remains true that the God in whom Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe is represented in the story as commanding something that seems clearly immoral. Even if God did not in fact command Abraham to kill an innocent child, the Bible presents us with the picture of a God who would have been within his rights to do so, and extolls sincere compliance with such a command as a model of faithful obedience. How should we understand this troubling story?

Augustine thought that the clue is provided by the fact that "the divine authority" can make "exceptions . . . to its own law that men may not be put to death." It can do this in two ways. God can grant a *general* exemption to those in positions of authority, for the purpose of protecting the citizens of the commonwealth from violent criminals and external aggressors. Or God can make an exception "by a special commission granted for a time to some individual." In either case, where an exception has been made, one person may put another "to death without incurring the guilt of murder."³

Thus Abraham "was not merely deemed guiltless of cruelty, but was even applauded for his piety, because he was ready to slay his son in obedience to God, not to his own passion." Because God had made an exception to the commandment "You shall not kill" when he ordered Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham did not violate God's commands and, *eo ipso*, did not violate God's commandment not to kill.⁴ Augustine's "solution" proved influential and was adopted by later medieval theologians such as Bernard of Clairvaux.

Aquinas's interpretation is more carefully nuanced. According to Aquinas, "The intention of every lawgiver is directed first and chiefly to the common good [that is, to the good of the commonwealth]; secondly, to the order of justice and virtue, whereby the common good is preserved and attained."⁵ Precepts incorporating and/or directly expressing these intentions, such as "Do justice," are inviolable. But other precepts admit of dispensation when violating them would serve rather than impair the order of justice or the common good. For example, it is possible that in some cases social justice would be better served by affirmative action than by tying college admissions solely to an applicant's academic merits.

What is true of legislators in general is true of the divine lawgiver. God's legislative intentions are directly expressed in the Decalogue. Each of us is a member of a commonwealth of which God is the ruler and chief magistrate, and the "common and final good" of this commonwealth—that toward which everything in

3 Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods. New York: Hafner, 1948. Book I, chapter 21.

4 Ibid.

5 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, Q. 100, A. 8.

it is directed—is God himself. “You shall have no other gods before me,” and other precepts of the first table, direct us to this common and final good. Precepts of the second table, such as “You shall not bear false witness” and “You shall not unjustly kill another,” incorporate and express “the order of justice to be observed among men, that nothing undue be done to anyone, and that each one be given his due.” Now God’s intention that everything be directed toward himself as the final good of all, and that the “order of justice” be observed, is inviolable. But particular divine precepts, such as those regulating temple worship, can be set aside when doing so best serves God’s primary and inviolable intentions.⁶

Against this background we can see that Abraham would not have violated divine law if he had killed Isaac at God’s behest. For while Isaac is innocent of any personal offense, and it is a precept of justice that the lives of those innocent of personal offenses should not be taken, God has justly inflicted “the punishment of death on *all* men . . . on account of the sin of our first parent.” It follows that “if a man be the executer of that sentence *by Divine authority*, he will be no murderer any more than God would be.” Since in killing Isaac “nothing undue” would have been done to Isaac, the precept of the Decalogue prohibiting the taking of human life would not have been violated, “*as to the essence of justice which*” it contains.⁷ If Aquinas is right, then, there is no *real* violation of the ethical because Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac preserves the order of justice and subserves the common good. Neither Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac nor the deed itself fails to give Isaac his due since, as a consequence of Adam’s sin, Isaac owes God his life, and God has commissioned Abraham to take it. Moreover, Abraham’s faithful obedience is directed towards the common and final good of all, namely God.

In spite of their differences, Augustine and Aquinas agree both that Abraham would have acted ethically if he had offered Isaac as a burnt offering at God’s behest, and that there was nothing ethically improper or infelicitous in God’s commanding Abraham to kill his son. There *appears* to be a conflict between Abraham’s religious duty to obey God and his ethical duty to his son Isaac, but the conflict is only apparent.

The most influential modern interpretation of the story, on the other hand, argues that the tension between the religious and the ethical which it evinces is real and not merely apparent.

Kierkegaard and Abraham

Søren Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* is an extended meditation on the faith of Abraham.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., my emphases.

In an early section its pseudonymous author, Johannes de Silentio, uses a story to draw a distinction between the “Knight of Resignation” and the “Knight of Faith.” A young man is deeply in love with a princess. He loves her so intensely that “the whole content of his life” and “the whole significance of reality” is concentrated in the “single wish” to win her. Yet he then discovers that it is impossible that his wish be realized.⁸ At this point he makes the “movement of infinite resignation.” He does not relinquish his *love*—it remains as young and as fresh “as it was in its first moment.” But he *does* relinquish his beloved. He “no longer takes a finite interest in what the princess is doing.” He no longer needs to hear news of her, and whether or not the princess marries can no longer “disturb him.” (55) For in performing the movement of resignation, the young man’s “love for that princess became the expression of an eternal love, assumed a religious character, was transfigured into a love for the Eternal Being.” (54)

How should this be understood? Robert Adams suggests that Kierkegaard (or Johannes) is implying that “total devotion to God” requires a perfect detachment from everything finite. Yet, unlike Buddhist detachment, Kierkegaard does not think that this involves the systematic “extinction of desire.” Rather, one must focus all one’s desire on a single point, and *only then* offer one’s love to God by relinquishing love’s object *while retaining one’s love*.⁹ There are two reasons for this. First, our desires for, and our interests in, the finite are normally too many and too various to be successfully combated *in toto*. When we succeed in detaching ourselves from one of our finite interests, another immediately presents itself. If we manage to also detach ourselves from that, we find ourselves faced with a third finite interest. And so on. “It may therefore be advantageous to religion if desire for the finite presents itself in one head that can be severed by a single stroke of resignation.” Second, Kierkegaard seems to think that the Knight of Resignation’s love of God “draw[s] some of its substance—presumably its concentration—from his love for the princess.” Given the immeasurable gulf between the infinite and the finite, “no positive content of a human life” is “inherently suited to express the divine. A negative expression” alone is possible, namely, a renunciation of the finite interest in which one has concentrated the “whole content of [one’s] life” and “the whole significance of reality.”¹⁰

8 Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954, pp. 52–3. All references in this section are to this work unless otherwise noted.

9 The latter is crucial. If one doesn’t *continue* to find the whole meaning and significance of the finite bound up in the object of one’s passion, if one’s interest in the princess becomes just one more interest among others, then relinquishing the object of one’s passion ceases to be a total renunciation of the finite.

10 Robert M. Adams, “The Knight of Faith,” *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990), pp. 387–90. Adams himself finds this religious strategy defective. In the first place, “the finite objects most apt to engage our love are persons, and . . . sacrificing a person is apt to be harmful to the person sacrificed.” In the second, “the knight’s passion for his

The movement of resignation is difficult and few of us have the strength of character to make it, but it is not the object of Johannes's wonder. That is reserved for the movement of faith. To make that movement, the young man would have had to relinquish the princess while *at the same time* believing, "Nevertheless . . . I shall get her, in virtue, that is, of the absurd, in virtue of the fact that with God all things are possible." (57) That is, while continuing to resign the princess whom he loves with all his heart, and sincerely believing that it is impossible that the princess be his, he at the same time firmly believes that he will get her since, for God, nothing is impossible. And this, says Johannes, is not merely difficult but "absurd."¹¹

Abraham, too, makes the movement of infinite resignation. The "whole content" of Abraham's life is concentrated in Isaac, whom he loves with all his heart, and through whom he believes God's promise will be fulfilled. Yet God commands Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. And, while Abraham realizes that if he obeys God he will lose the most precious thing he has, and God's promise can't be fulfilled,¹² he performs the movement of resignation: without relinquishing his *love* for Isaac,¹³ he relinquishes his son.

But then Abraham performs *another* movement, the movement of faith, and wholeheartedly believes that—in virtue of the absurd—he will nevertheless *not* lose Isaac. And that, says Johannes, is why Abraham is great. "For it is great to give up one's wish, but it is greater to hold it fast after having given it up, it is great to grasp the eternal, but it is greater to hold fast to the temporal after having given it up." (33) Yet Johannes professes to be unable to understand Abraham. He *can* understand how Abraham, or even he, might make the movement of infinite resignation, giving up what he most loves in this world. For "this is a . . . movement which I dare say I am able to make if it is required, and which I can train myself to make. . . ." But I can't make the movement of faith "by my own strength, . . . for I am constantly using my strength to renounce everything." (59–60) Nor can Johannes understand how Abraham can be "joyful again with Isaac" after God stays his hand,

'princess'" continues to "define . . . the meaning of his life, and specifically its religious character as devotion to God"—yet this seems idolatrous. Freely adapting a comment of Martin Buber (in *Between Man and Man* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1955], p. 57): "God as the princess's successful rival? Is that still God?" Adams's first point is well taken but his second is unpersuasive. For when all is said and done, the meaning of the Knight of Resignation's life is *not* defined by his passion for the princess but, instead, by the sacrifice of the one thing that (apart from God) he holds dearest. How is this idolatrous?

- 11 That is, paradoxical, "incomprehensible," although not literally self-contradictory.
- 12 That is, if attention is restricted to the temporal order, there is no possibility that "something will turn up." From the point of view of the finite, the catastrophe is irreparable.
- 13 Abraham loves Isaac as few fathers have loved their sons and, indeed, if he does not "then every thought of offering Isaac would be not a trial but a base temptation." (42)

how Abraham can receive Isaac back with joy as though nothing terrible had happened. (46)

But there is yet another, and perhaps even greater, “absurdity”—the “teleological suspension of the ethical.” God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son—and Abraham has an “absolute duty” toward God. And yet if Abraham does obey God and kills Isaac, “he sins, even though *realiter* [in reality] his deed were that which it was his absolute duty to do.” (80) For while “the religious expression” “for what Abraham did . . . is that he would sacrifice Isaac,” “the ethical expression . . . is that he would murder Isaac:” and “precisely in this contradiction consists the dread which can well make a man sleepless.” (41)

How should we understand these remarks? “The ethical as such is the universal,” that is, incumbent on each of us without exception. Furthermore, each person, in her “particularity,” with her own individual outlook, hopes, fears, and desires, has her “telos [aim, end] in the universal.” Our “ethical task,” therefore, is “to abolish [our] particularity in order to become the universal.” Thus Kant, for instance, says that our actions should ultimately be expressions of our basic commitment to a moral law that is incumbent on all rational beings, not of the contingent and varied desires and inclinations we have as finite and limited beings necessarily interested in our own happiness. From the moral point of view, then, an individual sins “as soon as [he] would assert himself in his particularity over against the [ethical] universal.” And if he “feels an impulse to assert himself as the particular, he is in temptation.” (64–5)

For a Knight of Faith, on the other hand, “the particular is *higher* [my emphasis] than the universal” in virtue of its standing in “an absolute relationship to the absolute”—in virtue, that is, of standing under a special command of a God with whom one has a direct or unmediated personal relationship. (65–6) For such an individual, the *ethical universal* can be the temptation. For while “what ordinarily tempts a man is that which would keep him from doing his [ethical] duty,” in a case like Abraham’s, “the temptation is itself the ethical . . . which would keep him from doing God’s will.” For in this case, his real “duty is precisely the expression for God’s will.” (70) Someone like Abraham is therefore lost unless there is such a thing as a “teleological suspension of the ethical” (67)—unless that is, the ethical can be suspended in the name of “a higher telos” (69), unless, in other words, an ethical duty can be contravened by a higher duty.

Now, as Kierkegaard recognizes, in one sense the idea that an ethical duty can be contravened by a higher duty isn’t controversial. A calm prevents the Greek forces from sailing to Troy. The gods inform their commander, Agamemnon, that fair winds will not blow until he sacrifices his beloved daughter, Iphigenia. And, in pain and suffering, he does so. Again, Brutus, one of the first consuls of republican Rome, executes his own sons when they attempt to restore the tyranny of the Tarquins. Both Agamemnon and Brutus violate their duty toward their children for the good of the nation, their duty toward the latter taking precedence over their duty toward the former. But in their cases, their justification is clear—to allow the Greek

fleet to sail, and to preserve the Roman republic. Agamemnon and Brutus, as Johannes says, sacrifice the ethical to the ethical. By contrast, what stands against Abraham's ethical duty to his son is not a more stringent ethical universal (such as "Preserve the nation") but a divine command that, in this particular case, Abraham simply suspend the ethical and kill Isaac.

Yet isn't the general duty to obey God's commands *itself* an ethical obligation, perhaps even the highest one? It is tempting to think that it is. But *if* it is, then the ethical is *not* suspended, and Abraham's case seems to be more like Agamemnon's and Brutus's than Johannes thinks. The dread, if not eliminated entirely, is of an altogether different sort. For like Agamemnon and Brutus, Abraham can take comfort in the thought that, no matter how difficult and painful it may be, his willingness to kill Isaac is ethically justified.

This interpretation unduly sanitizes Johannes's understanding of Abraham, however. The ethical is the universal and, as such, is transparent to reason. Kant and Hegel are representative of modern ethical thought in believing that true moral claims can, in principle, be justified by reasons which other rational beings will find compelling. They are also representative of much modern ethical and religious thought in believing that a rational religion relates itself to God only *through* the ethical. Kant, for instance, says that "moral religion" consists "in the heart's disposition to fulfil all *human* duties as divine commands."¹⁴ Johannes's criticism of this view is threefold.

First, in saying that human beings can relate to God only through the ethical, *God* tends to vanish altogether. On this view, "if I say . . . that it is my duty to love God, I am really uttering only a tautology, in as much as 'God' is in this instance used in an entirely abstract sense as the divine, i.e. the universal, i.e. duty. . . . God becomes an invisible vanishing point, a powerless thought, his power being only in the ethical which," on this view, becomes, in effect, the whole "content of human existence." (78) The ethical, in other words, becomes a *substitute* for God. The object of our ultimate concern, what is 'God' for us, is, for all practical purposes, identified with the ethical. And this is idolatrous.

Second, there is no *direct* relationship to God, on this view, since any relation to God that one has is mediated *through* the ethical. Duty may be "referred to God, but in duty itself I do not come into relation to God. Thus it is a duty to love one's neighbor, but in performing this duty I do not come into relation with God but with the neighbor whom I love." (78) In *faith*, on the other hand, "the individual . . . determines his relation to the universal [the ethical] by his relation to the absolute [God], not his relation to the absolute by his relation to the universal." (80) One stands directly before the God who is "fire"¹⁵—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not of the philosophers—and submits to him in love, fear, and trembling.

14 Kant, *Religion*, p. 79. My emphasis.

15 The reference is to a paper found among Pascal's effects after his death in 1662.

Finally, while it may be true that one has an absolute duty to God, it isn't clear that this duty is an essentially moral one, or that it is fully transparent to reason.¹⁶ In the first place, although there may be a sense in which it is "reasonable" to submit unconditionally to God's direct commands, the *ground* of our obligation to do so is presumably his goodness, and God's goodness may not be a wholly *moral* goodness. (More on this later.) Moreover, unlike our purely human duties (to respect others as ends in themselves, to aid the unfortunate, and the like), we may not be able to see the reasonableness of the *content* of the obligations imposed on us by divine commands (to kill Isaac, say). That is, we may be unable to justify what we are commanded to do by appealing to ethical values endorsed by reason. For if the duty to God "is absolute, the ethical is reduced to a position of relativity," that is, can no longer be taken as absolute or indefeasible. It "does not follow that the ethical is to be abolished, but it acquires an entirely different expression . . . —that, for example, love to God may cause the Knight of Faith to give his love to his neighbor the *opposite expression to that which, ethically speaking, is required by duty.*" (80, my emphasis) It may cause Abraham, for instance, *to kill Isaac*.

But not only is this "incomprehensible," as Johannes claims, it seems morally repugnant. The next section will therefore examine three recent interpretations of *Fear and Trembling* that attempt to reduce or eliminate the moral repugnancy by domesticating the book's message.

Three Recent Interpretations of Kierkegaard's Abraham

Gellman and the "Existential Trial"

Jerome Gellman and a number of other recent interpreters think that Kierkegaard's Johannes identifies the ethical with Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*—a set of institutionally defined roles (parent, citizen, physician, and so on) each with its own built-in duties, obligations, rights, and privileges. For Hegel, *Sittlichkeit* corrects Kantian personal morality or *Moralität*. By grounding morality in pure reason, the latter tends to be unduly subjective and, in practice, often serves as no more than an excuse for furthering "one's non-moral or even immoral interests in the name of lofty moral principles."¹⁷ For one who exists at what Kierkegaard calls the "ethical stage of life," the ethical is absolute. Indeed, her very identity as a person, the way she defines and understands herself, is largely determined by the socially sanc-

16 And, as noted earlier, on the standard view, *moral* demands *are* fully transparent to reason.

17 Jerome I. Gellman, *Abraham! Abraham!: Kierkegaard and the Hasidim on the Binding of Isaac*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003, p. 32. All references in this subsection are to this book unless otherwise noted.

tioned roles assigned to her. As a consequence, for such an individual, to reject the ethical is to reject her self.

Now, for Abraham, the most encompassing social entity is not the nation (as it was for Agamemnon and Brutus) but the family. His highest obligation, therefore, is to Isaac. In this context, then, God's demand that he sacrifice Isaac is a demand that he dissociate himself from his social roles, and from his identification of himself as a father and head of a family and, instead, exist as a "single one" in "an absolute relation to the absolute."

Gellman's interpretation takes its clue from Edward F. Mooney.¹⁸ According to Mooney, Abraham faces a genuine dilemma. For there are no objectively valid procedures for deciding between following a universally valid ethical principle and following "a non-moral religious demand." Abraham must therefore decide from what Mooney calls his "deep subjectivity," his "most personal truth." "The right decision . . . would [thus] have been *whatever* Abraham would have decided, as long as Abraham's choice reflected in the deepest way his personal integrity, coming from his deep subjectivity." (30)

Gellman's view is similar. God's call to Abraham is a call to exist as a single one "in unfettered individuality before God." (38) God calls Abraham, as he calls each of us, "to stand alone before the face of God." To stand alone before God's face, however, "is to be measured by total possibility, by freedom to choose oneself, independently of and outside of the imposition of any embodiment of morality." (37) As a result, one's duty to God is, ultimately, "a duty to oneself" (38), "a duty to choose oneself in total freedom." (37) Since this is the *real* content of God's demand, Abraham's *willingness* to sacrifice Isaac is sufficient to meet it; the sacrifice itself is not necessary. And, indeed, Abraham would have responded appropriately to God's command even if he had *refused* to sacrifice Isaac, *provided* that his choice was made in "total freedom."

Gellman's interpretation of Kierkegaard is intriguing but problematic. For one thing, as a number of Kierkegaard scholars have suggested, Johannes's interpretation of the ethical is at least as Kantian as it is Hegelian.¹⁹ If it is, then dissociating oneself from the ethical not only involves dissociating oneself from the roles defined by the institutionally embodied morality which happens to be current at one's time and place; it also involves dissociating oneself from duties that appear to be incumbent on *any* rational being no matter how he or she is culturally situated—duties such as treating others as ends and not as means only, for example, or not killing innocent children. And that would be deeply troubling.

18 Edward F. Mooney, "Abraham and Dilemma: Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension Revisited," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 19 (1986), pp. 23–41.

19 See, for example, Seung-Goo Lee, "The Antithesis Between the Religious View of Ethics and the Rationalist View of Ethics in *Fear and Trembling*," in Robert L. Perkins, ed., *Fear and Trembling and Repetition* (International Kierkegaard Commentary). Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993, pp. 101–26.

For another, it is not clear that Mooney (and, by extension, Gellman) grasps the depths of Abraham's dilemma. For Mooney's Abraham is forced back on himself, and compelled to choose in freedom, because there is no objectively valid procedure for deciding whether to follow a universally valid ethical requirement or a competing nonmoral demand. But notice that precisely the same *sort* of dilemma arises from conflicts between irreconcilable *moral* requirements, for in these cases, too, there are no objectively valid procedures for making a decision. Here, too, we are thrown back on our freedom, and must decide from our "deep subjectivity," our "most personal truth." Yet in *these* cases, we are choosing between conflicting *ethical* demands and so, no matter what we choose, *we remain within the ethical*. Abraham's situation is radically different. The essence of *his* dilemma²⁰ is that God demands that he *set aside the ethical altogether*.

Finally, for Johannes (and Kierkegaard), one isn't just to choose oneself in freedom; one is to choose oneself as a "single one" *before God*,²¹ that is, *choose God*. Gellman's interpretation has the paradoxical consequence that Abraham could obey God by disobeying him. Yet this surely makes nonsense of the story as Johannes understands it. For Johannes, Abraham is to accede to God's "non-moral religious demand" by choosing to *obey* God and sacrifice Isaac.

Outka and the Teleological Suspension of Conventional Morality

Gene Outka, too, thinks that Johannes's understanding of the ethical is Hegelian. Yet Outka recognizes that the decision confronting Abraham is not just a decision to accept or refuse his authentic self. It is a decision to obey or not obey God's explicit command that he sacrifice Isaac.²²

Toward the latter part of his essay, Outka raises two questions about choices of this sort: "May the agent employ his own antecedent moral criteria of judgment to evaluate whether a given command really has a divine origin? . . . And should he bring his own [moral] criteria to bear to decide whether to follow a command, even supposing he knows it to be God's?" (235)

Kant thinks that the answer to both questions is "yes." Kierkegaard, however, believes that: "1) God is 'incommensurable with the whole of reality.' 2) He retains the initiative in disclosures to men." And "3) His governance exceeds human understanding of it." (240; the internal quote is from *Fear and Trembling*. [45]) (4) Our "practical reason" suffers not only from finitude, moreover, but from sin. As a consequence, while "human beings may properly challenge each other on the basis

20 As described by Johannes.

21 It is important to remember that Kierkegaard (and presumably his pseudonym Johannes) has a theocentric conception of the self.

22 Gene Outka, "Religious and Moral Duty: Notes on *Fear and Trembling*," in Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, eds, *Religion and Morality*. Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1973, pp. 204–54. References in this subsection are to this article.

of prior criteria of moral evaluation . . . , the ‘infinite qualitative difference’ between” God’s infinity, wisdom, and holiness, on the one hand, and human finiteness, ignorance, and sinfulness, on the other, “prevents any straightforward transfer of this procedure” to God.²³ (241) How, then, should Abraham decide?

As Johannes portrays him, Abraham is rightly convinced that God has commanded him to sacrifice Isaac. (Neither Johannes nor Kierkegaard doubts that God can make his will clear to someone if he wishes to do so.²⁴) So Abraham’s trial is not that he must decide whether the demand does or doesn’t come from God. It is to decide whether or not to *obey* God, and whether, if he chooses to obey him, he can retain his joyful confidence in God’s promises.

Now Outka thinks that Kierkegaard (and Abraham) believes that God is ultimately loving, and therefore cannot command anything that “involves turning men finally from himself,” from the life of loving communion with God which is their inmost highest possibility. So, given what God is and seeks (namely, loving communion with human beings), Abraham “cannot do anything to Isaac which is ‘finally’ unloving if [he] obeys God.” Indeed, “Abraham is confident that *unless* he obeys God, he cannot ‘love’ Isaac. For God will not, *eo ipso*, command what is unloving.” (245, my emphasis)

“To be a knight of faith,” therefore, “is to remain confident that the command is loving” in spite of the fact that not only can’t one see *how* it is loving, one’s antecedent moral criteria would have led one to judge that it was *unloving*. (244) Kierkegaard can thus conclude, “God you are to love in unconditional obedience, even if what he demands of you may seem to you to be to your own harm—yes, *harmful to his cause*. For the wisdom of God is not to be compared with yours, and God’s governance is not in duty bound, answerable to your prudence” (*or*, it seems, to your antecedent moral convictions). “All you have to do is to obey in love” trusting that God will not undermine his own loving purposes.²⁵

Does Outka’s interpretation do justice to Abraham’s dilemma as Johannes understands it? If Outka is correct, then what is “teleologically suspended” is *not* the ethical *as such* but (1) conventional judgments as to what ethics requires and (2) one’s own best judgment as to what would be the most ethical course—*in so far as that judgment has been formed in abstraction from a consideration of what God commands*. Moreover, while, on Outka’s view, Abraham’s highest obligation is indeed to stand in “an absolute relation to the absolute,” this relation isn’t just an

23 The danger, here, of course, is that if one brackets or suspends one’s antecedent moral understanding, one may lose one’s grip on the meaning and/or reality of God’s goodness.

24 So is Kierkegaard’s answer to Outka’s first question “Yes”? Not clearly, since Abraham’s certainty that God is addressing him may be based on an “inward inspiration” (Aquinas) directly rooted in God’s causal activity or on Abraham’s previous experience of God, and not on Abraham’s “antecedent moral criteria of judgment.”

25 Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong. New York: Harper, 1962, p. 36, my emphasis.

obedience relation, not even an obedience relation to a God whom one loves with all one's heart; it is a *loving* communion with a loving God of which obedience is merely the expression or consequence. The result is that while Outka preserves the tension between the religious demand and our (and Abraham's) *understanding* of the ethical, Abraham does not ultimately step *outside* the ethical. Like Agamemnon and Brutus, he only sacrifices the ethical to the ethical—choosing to set aside his obligations to his innocent son in the name of a higher moral obligation, namely, his obligation to obey the commands of a loving God. And indeed, on Outka's view, it is not clear that he even does that. For not only is his killing of Isaac not unloving; it can't frustrate God's loving purposes for Isaac. How then, do the ethical claims Isaac has on him prohibit it? Yet if they don't, the ethical isn't sacrificed *at all*. The upshot is that the tension between the religious and the ethical—which lies at the heart of the story as Johannes understands it—ultimately evaporates.

Evans on the Unconditional Character of the Ethical

In "Faith as the Telos of Morality," C. Stephen Evans argues that "the message of *Fear and Trembling*" is *not* that "the person of faith may be required to act in a way that is contrary to moral duty." If it were, it would be inconsistent with the rest of Kierkegaard's writings.²⁶ For example, the pseudonymous author of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* says that the ethical is "preserved" in the religious. And the *Christian Discourses* (which are written in Kierkegaard's own person) ask, "What, then, is the eternal?" To which his response is "It is the difference between right and wrong. All else is transitory . . . all other differences are evanescent. . . . But the difference between right and wrong remains eternally."²⁷

What, then, is *Fear and Trembling's* target? Evans now thinks that while Johannes's *language* is often Kantian, his *understanding* of the ethical is essentially Hegelian: he identifies the ethical with socially instituted and sanctioned roles and values. Since these always stand under God's judgment, however, our duty can't be straightforwardly identified with the obligations they impose. Even though prebellum southern society sanctioned slavery, for instance, a Christian's duty was to oppose it.

Thus far Evans's interpretation resembles Gellman's and Outka's. But Evans thinks that Johannes's critique of Hegelian ethics goes deeper. The ethical, as Hegel and Johannes conceive it, is "in some sense absolute or final." (Evans 1993: 17) "It . . . has nothing outside itself which is its *telos* but is itself *telos* of everything outside it." (*Fear and Trembling* 64) In Hegel's and Johannes's view, one becomes an ethical self by willing the good—by identifying oneself with the good and

26 C. Stephen Evans, "Faith as the Telos of Morality: A Reading of *Fear and Trembling*," in *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, p. 11. Henceforth Evans 1993.

27 Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses: The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997, pp. 207–8.

embodying it in one's actions, thoughts, and character or, as Johannes says, by abolishing one's "particularity . . . in the universal." (Ibid.: 64f.) But, contrary to Hegel, Johannes thinks that one cannot become an ethical "self by willing the good" since "actual existence is 'incommensurable' with the demands of ethics." Because one can't in fact *meet* the demands of the universal one is in sin, and a person who by sin "has gone outside the universal . . . can return to it only by virtue of having come as an individual into an absolute relation with the absolute." (Ibid.: 108) "'Ethics' is [therefore] not the final word . . . for if ethics is the final word, then [our] lives are hopeless." Only if God supplies the condition that makes ethical obedience possible can we hope to become ethical selves. (Evans 1993: 19–20)

The religious therefore transcends the ethical, and "the main target" of *Fear and Trembling* is any "view of the religious life that interprets faith as reducible to a life of moral striving." (Ibid.: 15) The ethical is indeed "preserved" in the religious, but one can't *rely* on the ethical for validation in the eyes of eternity since one's very ability to live ethically is a gift of grace. In the last analysis, "a direct and personal relationship with God" alone makes ethical authenticity possible. (Ibid.: 23)

The upshot is that what both the Knight of Resignation and the Knight of Faith sacrifice, when they sacrifice the ethical to the eternal, is the ethical in *this* sense, and doing so is neither irrational nor "absurd." For what they relinquish is (1) the notion of "the ethical as a total self-sufficient view of life and mode of existence," and (2) the identification of the contents of ethics with the values that happen to be socially sanctioned at a particular time and place. (Evans 1993: 23) What is "teleologically suspended," then, is not ethics as such, but ethics' absolutist pretensions, and the tendency to identify the eternal distinction between right and wrong with the values endorsed by one's own society. Neither sacrifice is irrational, however, if one can't become an authentic ethical self by just willing the good, that is, by moral striving, and if society's values are contingent, historically conditioned, and hence frequently false or perverse.

While Evans's views are admirably sane, one can't help but wonder whether they can be identified with Johannes's. For Abraham must decide whether or not to obey God's demand that *he sacrifice Isaac*. And Abraham's obligation not to kill an innocent child is neither false nor perverse, nor reflective of contingent, historically conditioned values. Nor (although this is less certain) is it clear that if Johannes's Abraham *had* chosen not to sacrifice Isaac, that choice would have reflected a belief that ethical conduct is sufficient for authenticity, for validation in the eyes of eternity. One wonders, in short, whether Evans's interpretation, like Gellman's and Outka's, unduly bowdlerizes Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. One's doubts are reinforced by Evans's most recent treatment of the problem.

In chapter 13 of his recent *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations*, Evans argues that²⁸ though it is true that if God were to com-

28 Given the truth of divine command theory.

mand us to sacrifice our child, we would be obligated to do so, no Christian or Jew “in a contemporary cultural context . . . could reasonably believe that God has today issued such a command.”²⁹ Kant was thus partly right. For a contemporary Jew or Christian, that God has commanded her to sacrifice her child is always less certain than that she has an overriding obligation not to kill her innocent son or daughter. For our situation is unlike Abraham’s. The latter “lived in a culture in which child sacrifice was common and regarded as morally acceptable.”³⁰ Furthermore, “God had not yet . . . given the ten commandments, and the prohibitions of child sacrifice given by various prophets had not yet been given.” (Evans 2004: 310) Our situation is very different, however. We *know* that God would not demand that we sacrifice our children for, through general and special revelation,³¹ we know that God has commanded us not to murder or kill the innocent, and “any alleged divine command must be tested for its consistency with what a person already takes to be the commands of God.” (Ibid.: 308)

Yet if God is truly transcendent, how do we know that he might not *revoke* these commands, or override them in special cases? Evans’s answer is essentially this: the God in whom the Christian believes is a loving God who merits our obedience

29 C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 306. Henceforth Evans 2004.

30 Whether the ancient Israelites condoned child sacrifice in some circumstances is controversial. The standard view among Jewish and Christian biblical scholars appears to be that the only *clear* biblical references to human sacrifice by Israelites “all refer to a specific cultic practice borrowed from the Canaanites” which first appears in the reign of Ahab, and that the passages in which these references occur unanimously view it as “an alien element.” (Ringgren, *Israelite Religion*, pp. 175) It should be remembered, however, that the biblical material as we have it reflects the views of the later prophets who explicitly condemned the practice. For a well-reasoned contrary view, see chapter 1 of Jon D. Levenson’s *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). And as Robert Adams points out, the fact that, in the earlier biblical period, children were regarded as their parents’ property would have made it easier to conceive of child sacrifice “as a maximally precious gift from the *parents* to the deity,” and to ignore the independent claims of the child. (*Infinite and Infinite Goods*, p. 288) Adams thinks it significant that the emergence of explicit prophetic critiques of child sacrifice (for example, Jeremiah 19: 1–9, 32: 35; Ezekiel 20: 25–6) more or less coincide with the appearance of the idea that children are only responsible for their *own* good and bad deeds, and not for those of their parents. (Cf. Jeremiah 31: 29–30; Ezekiel 18: 2–4.) A new sense of the “moral distance” between parents and child made the wrongness of child sacrifice much more apparent. Evans’s point doesn’t stand or fall on the outcome of this controversy, however, for child sacrifice *was* practiced and condoned in the Canaanite culture in which Abraham was operating.

31 General revelation refers to what can be gleaned about God and our duties toward him from the “light of nature” (reason, conscience, our natural sentiments, and the like). Special revelation refers to God’s extraordinary revelation through the prophets, the apostles, and so on.

and trust. “A God who revoked commands that were given as universal and absolute,” however, would be “so inconsistent and unpredictable in character that it is questionable whether or not such a God would merit our obedience;” and “a God who gave *contradictory* commands”³² would be so erratic that he could not “be counted on to fulfil his promises.” (Evans 2004: 309, my emphasis) Since the God whom the Christian is obligated to obey is a loving God who commands us not to take innocent lives, and who merits our obedience and trust, we know that a command to kill an innocent child cannot come from God.

But *is* this so clear? I may know “that God could not command any act that is truly evil in the sense of being fundamentally bad.” But, as Evans himself admits, “given that our understanding of good and evil is fallible, this is compatible with the possibility that God might command an action that *appeared* to be evil, at least initially.” (Evans 2004: 315, my emphasis) But if so, then how can I be sure that what appears to be a divine command that I sacrifice my innocent son or daughter isn’t *in fact* a divine command to do so? Would a *single* and, for all I know, *unique* command of this sort be sufficient to show that the source of the command wasn’t the God in whom I had rightly trusted, or that what it commands is inconsistent with God’s transcendent nature?

Evans’s response appears to be that while it may be *abstractly* possible that God would issue a command of this sort, I will never find myself in a situation that warrants my believing that such a command was from God. For the injunctions against child sacrifice, or taking innocent lives for no apparent purpose, are so deeply and centrally entrenched in our prior moral understanding—an understanding be it noted which has itself been shaped by God’s general and special revelation, and our responses to it—that it can never be reasonable for me to believe that God has commanded me to kill my own child. For my reasons for thinking that he hasn’t swamp whatever reasons (an inner voice, a sudden conviction, or anything else of the sort) for thinking that he has.

And yet surely “an omnipotent God *could* reveal to a human being that the human being was commanded to carry out an act of child sacrifice in such a way that the *human being would be rational to believe it*.” Evans’s response to this objection is that while God could do this, we can be assured that he *won’t*. For if God takes “control of the person’s beliefs in such a way that the person cannot help but believe he has been commanded to perform the act, . . . it is questionable whether the person would really be morally responsible for the belief and any acts stemming from it,” and God wants our *free* obedience. (Evans 2004: 309–10, my emphases)

But this won’t do. In the first place, it isn’t clear that the only way God can bring it about that it is rational for someone to believe that God has commanded him to commit the act is by bringing it about that “no other belief is possible for that

32 Such as “Kill your innocent son or daughter” and “You shall not kill.”

person.” (Ibid.: 310) Evans’s idea, I take it, is that if I can’t help believing *p*, it is rational for me to believe *p*. And this is true on a deontological account of epistemic justification, according to which my beliefs are rationally held if I can’t be faulted or blamed for holding them.³³ But even on a deontological account, it isn’t clear that (one’s prior moral understanding to the contrary) God can’t provide external or internal evidence (miracles, internal markers, and the like) which, together with one’s past experience of God, would make it more reasonable than not to believe that the command to sacrifice one’s child comes from God, *without* that evidence being sufficiently strong to *compel* belief.³⁴

The more important point, however, is this. Evans’s argument rests on a false assumption since, in many normal cases, the moral and factual beliefs on which my *free* actions are based aren’t within my control. (Many of my perceptual and inferential beliefs provide examples.) That my *beliefs* aren’t freely held doesn’t entail that my *actions* aren’t free. So, my prior moral and religious understanding to the contrary, God could make it impossible for me not to believe that he has commanded me to kill my child without destroying my freedom.

The upshot of the points made in the last two paragraphs is that Evans hasn’t shown that the possibility that God would issue a command that flaunts our moral understanding isn’t a real one.

Conclusion

The three accounts of Johannes’s Abraham that we have discussed in this section agree that apparent conflicts between the demands of religion and those of ethics are *only* apparent. I have argued, though, that each of these accounts unduly sanitizes Johannes’s message. The next section examines a defense of the claim that conflicts of this kind can sometimes be real.

Quinn on Abraham’s Dilemma

In “Moral Obligation, Religious Demand, and Practical Conflict,” Philip Quinn invites us to consider the following four propositions:

- k (i) God’s commanding that Abraham perform a particular act of killing Isaac indefeasibly requires that Abraham perform that act of killing Isaac.

33 Although on other accounts of epistemic justification some beliefs I can’t help having aren’t held rationally. (Suppose, for example, that because of some neurophysiological disorder I can’t help but believe that all strangers are out to kill me.)

34 And if the evidence at one’s disposal makes believing *p* more rational than not, then (other things being equal) one’s believing *p* is faultless, and therefore justified in the deontological sense (as well as in other senses).

- (ii) Isaac's being an innocent child requires that Abraham refrain from performing that act of killing Isaac.
- (iii) The requirement that Abraham refrain from performing that act of killing Isaac . . . is overridden by no state of affairs.
- (iv) Abraham and that act of killing Isaac are such that it is physically impossible that he both perform and refrain from performing it.³⁵

k(i–iv) is a “situation of Kierkegaardian conflict.” Quinn argues that it is possible that k(i–iv), and also possible that Abraham *knows* that k(i–iv); that is, knows that he is in a situation of Kierkegaardian conflict.

k(ii–iv) are clearly compossible. The question, then, is whether k(i) is compossible with k(ii–iv). It would appear that it isn't. For, surely, if Abraham is indefeasibly required to kill Isaac, the requirement that he refrain from killing Isaac is overridden. If it is, then, if k(i) is true, k(iii) is false. The appearance of incompatibility is deceptive, however.

Although God's overwhelming goodness explains why his commands are indefeasible, it is possible that his goodness isn't an “exclusively moral goodness.” It may, for example, be partly “metaphysical.” Thus Leibniz thought that in choosing to create the best of all possible worlds God chose to create “the world that ranks highest on a scale combining considerations of simplicity of natural laws and variety of creaturely denizens,” and “it is not at all obvious that a world that is best in this sense is also best in the sense of maximally realizing the values of the moral realm.” Or “perhaps divine goodness has a dimension that is more akin to aesthetic goodness than to any other realm of goodness with which we humans are familiar.” Then, too, God's goodness may have dimensions that are and always will be “inscrutable to us.” If these are real possibilities, then it is also “possible that some of the values God cares about having his human creatures pursue—enough that by command he imposes on them indefeasible requirements for certain actions—should be non-moral values.” (204–6)

But suppose they are. If the values underwriting an indefeasible religious requirement can't be wholly identified with moral values, then that requirement may not be a “moral requirement at all.” If the requirement that Abraham kill Isaac isn't a *moral* requirement, however, it isn't an especially *stringent* moral requirement, and hence can't override “the supremely urgent [moral] requirement that Abraham refrain from killing Isaac imposed by the fact that Isaac is an innocent child.” Thus, contrary to appearances, k(i) does not entail k(iii)'s falsity. (204–5)

Yet suppose we grant that the moral requirement not to kill an innocent child isn't overridden by any other *moral* requirement. Still, why doesn't the indefeasible *religious* requirement that Abraham kill Isaac override the moral requirement?

35 Philip L. Quinn, “Moral Obligation, Religious Demand, and Practical Conflict,” in Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright, eds, *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986, pp. 202–3. All references in this section are to this essay unless otherwise noted.

Quinn's answer is this: *neither* requirement is overridden. Denying the indefeasibility of the religious requirement "seems . . . to involve . . . a failure to acknowledge the ultimacy of certain religious values and our commitments to them." Similarly, "to suppose that the moral requirement is overridden in this case seems . . . to involve a failure to acknowledge the ultimacy of certain *moral* values and our commitments to *them*." (207, my emphases) Neither requirement is overridden by the other. So Abraham is required to kill Isaac and also required to refrain from killing him, although he cannot do both. His dilemma, therefore, is inescapable.³⁶

To suppose that one requirement overrides the other is to suppose that the requirements are commensurable, and it is not clear that they are. In situations of Kierkegaardian conflict there may *be* no "common scale of value" or "more inclusive and more ultimate realm of value," in reference to which, or within which, the pursuit of religious values must be judged better than the pursuit of moral values, or vice versa. If there isn't, then there are no grounds for claiming that "one or the other of the two conflicting requirements is overridden." (208)

It is possible, then, that k(i–iv) is true. It is also possible that someone knows that it is. Abraham, for example, could surely know k(ii), k(iii), and k(iv). He could know that the requirement not to kill Isaac is imposed by the state of affairs consisting in Isaac's being an innocent child. He could also know "that no state of affairs bearing on the promotion of the values internal to the moral realm overrides the requirement" not to kill Isaac and that, because of the incommensurability of the religious and moral realms, "no state of affairs internal to the religious realm, including the state of affairs" consisting in God's command that he kill Isaac, overrides the moral requirement that he not kill Isaac. (210) And Abraham, of course, knows that it is physically impossible that he both kill and not kill Isaac.

But could he know k(i)? As we have seen, k(i) could be true. Furthermore, Abraham could know that "God, if he exists, is essentially perfectly good," and "this would justify for him the belief that" if God commanded him to kill Isaac, he would be indefeasibly required to kill Isaac. Abraham could also know that God has commanded him to kill Isaac. For it is possible both that God has done so and that Abraham has a properly basic belief that he has.³⁷ Moreover, "the past history

36 This presupposes the falsity of "'p is required' entails 'It is not the case that not-p is required.'" The principle may seem obvious but, as Quinn points out, (1) Joel Feinberg and some other "contemporary philosophers" have rejected it, (2) "there are perfectly respectable systems of deontic logic which do not include" it, and (3) there are apparent counter-examples. "Antigone's conflict of obligations" in Sophocles' play of the same name is an example. (Quinn 1979: 320)

37 A properly basic belief is a justified belief which isn't inferred from other beliefs. Possible examples are our beliefs in simple necessary truths and many of our ordinary perceptual and memory beliefs. Alvin Plantinga and others have argued that some religious beliefs about God are properly basic. For a further defense of the claim that Abraham could know that God has commanded him to kill Isaac, see my discussion of Evans in the preceding section.

of his interactions with God” might “serve as independent inductive backing for his belief” that God has commanded him to kill Isaac. (209–10)

Finally, on the basis of the argument given earlier for the compossibility of k(i), k(ii), k(iii), and k(iv), Abraham could come to justifiably believe that k(i) through k(iv) are compossible.

So since Abraham could come to justifiably believe “each of k(i) through k(iv),” and that k(i) through k(iv) are compossible, he could come to justifiably believe that the conjunction of k(i) through k(iv) is true. But if it is possible that the conjunction is true and possible that Abraham justifiably believes the conjunction, it is possible that Abraham *knows* that the conjunction of k(i) through k(iv) is true.³⁸ It is thus not only possible that k(i–iv) *is* true; it is also possible that someone knows that it is. *Pace* Gellman, Outka, Evans, and others, situations of Kierkegaardian conflict are possible, and it is possible for someone to know that she is in one.³⁹

How plausible is this? One *might* argue that “the ultimacy of moral values and our commitments to them” imply that moral requirements trump *all* nonmoral requirements. Or to put it slightly differently, that part of the *meaning* of “s is *morally* required,” where s is a state of affairs consisting in an agent doing something at a particular time, is that the requirement overrides any conflicting *nonmoral* requirements. If this is true, then any nonmoral requirement that conflicts with a moral requirement—such as the requirement imposed by God’s commanding Abraham to kill Isaac—is not only defeasible but *defeated*. Quinn thinks that moves of this sort “trivialize” the issue by simply defining “moral requirement” in such a way that situations of Kierkegaardian conflict cannot arise. (204 fn) And this

38 Unless, of course, the *truth* of the conjunction is incompatible with Abraham’s *justifiably believing* the conjunction. But that possibility appears to be a nonstarter.

39 Quinn notes, though, that this view of Abraham’s situation “brings with it a theological difficulty.” For “consider the following argument: (1) Suppose God commands Abraham to kill Isaac; (2) If God commands Abraham to kill Isaac, then God commands Abraham to do something wrong; (3) If God commands Abraham to do something wrong, then God himself does wrong; (4) If God himself does wrong, then God is not morally perfect; and so (5) God is not morally perfect.” Quinn’s response to the difficulty is to “reverse the argument. Since God *is* morally perfect, . . . God does not command Abraham to kill Isaac. The story of Abraham illustrates a *possibility* for tragic conflict, but fortunately it is *only* a possibility . . .” The cost of this “way out of the difficulty,” of course, “is denying the scriptural literalist’s claim that the narrative of Genesis 22 is in all details sober historical truth.” (Philip L. Quinn, “Agamemnon and Abraham: The Tragic Dilemma of Kierkegaard’s Knight of Faith,” *Journal of Literature and Theology* 4 [1990], pp. 191–2, my emphases) There is another solution to the difficulty, however. For one might argue that, in God’s case, moral perfection is “sublated” (*aufheben*) in an even greater perfection that includes much if not most of what we ordinarily mean by moral perfection—including *love*, but cannot be identified with it. This way out accepts the conclusion but questions its force. One could argue, for example, that even though God’s command conflicts with a moral requirement, it is not unloving since he intends a great good for both Abraham and Isaac.

seems right. The fact remains that a number of important moral philosophers⁴⁰ have thought that this *is* part of our concept of moral obligation, and their claim reflects common intuitions about the supreme importance of moral values. Whether these intuitions are trustworthy is another matter. Bernard Williams and others have called attention to cases in which it is *prima facie* plausible that nonmoral values aren't overridden by moral ones.⁴¹ And Quinn, of course, argues that, on the face of it, cases like Abraham's are cases of this kind.

Another potential difficulty is this. Couldn't we have a *moral* obligation to obey God's commands? If we can, then the conflict between Abraham's obligation to obey God by killing Isaac and his moral obligation not to kill Isaac is (in part at least) *internal* to the moral realm. If it is, the obligations aren't wholly incommensurable.

What are the implications of this suggestion? Abraham's *moral* obligation to obey God—as distinct from any religious obligation he might have to do so—is either absolute or it isn't. If it is, one would think that Abraham's moral obligation to obey God is not only indefeasible but overrides any conflicting obligations. But in that case there is no real dilemma (since when two moral obligations conflict, and one overrides the other, one should discharge the overriding obligation), and there is no “teleological suspension of the ethical” (since, in killing Isaac, Abraham would be discharging a *moral* obligation).

Whether a purely moral obligation to obey God can be absolute in this sense seems doubtful, however. A moral obligation to obey God would presumably be grounded in God's *moral* character (including his loving purposes for human kind), in our promise to obey him (see, for example, Exodus 19: 8), in human gratitude for God's loving kindness, and the like. Such an obligation would be one of the most important moral obligations we have. Even so, it would be no more than one moral obligation among others, many of which seem equally compelling. If the moral obligation to obey God is only one moral obligation among others, however, then it seems at least possible that in certain circumstances (such as God's commanding us to kill an innocent child) the moral obligation to obey God would be overridden by another moral obligation (such as our obligation not to kill an innocent child). But, in that case, the moral obligation to obey God is not absolute since it not only can but would be overridden.

The upshot of these considerations is that if requirements imposed by God's commands *are* indefeasible, as most theists believe, then the requirements imposed by God's commands cannot just be moral requirements but must (as Quinn suggests) be at least partly grounded in nonmoral dimensions of God's goodness. But does this imply that Quinn is also right in thinking that the requirements imposed by God's commands are at least partly *incommensurable* with moral requirements?

40 Kant and R. M. Hare, for example.

41 See, for example, Williams's “Moral Luck,” in his collection of the same name (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

It is not clear to me that he is. Quinn ties commensurability to the existence of a common scale of value, or “a more inclusive and more ultimate realm of value,” in relation to which, or within which, conflicting values can be compared and weighed. Is this justified?

It is, of course, trivially true that if we claim that (some) religious requirements override (some) moral requirements, we are *comparing* religious requirements and moral requirements, and judging one more important than the other. Does this, though, entail a more inclusive and ultimate realm of value, or a common scale of value, within which, or in relation to which, the two sets of values (religious and moral) are compared and weighed? This seems doubtful. Consider the realm of moral values and the realm of aesthetic values, and suppose that there are no religious values.⁴² Most of us would think that moral values (usually? always?) trump aesthetic values in cases of conflict. It isn’t obvious that there is a common scale of value on which moral and aesthetic values can be compared and weighed, however, or a more inclusive and ultimate realm of value which contains both. But if moral and *aesthetic* values can be compared and weighed in the absence of a common scale, why think that *religious* and moral values can’t be compared and weighed in the absence of a common scale? Yet if they *can* be, we can’t rule out the possibility that a requirement indefeasibly imposed by a divine command overrides any conflicting moral requirement, in which case k(i) and k(iii) *would* be inconsistent after all.

But, of course, while this *may* be true, it also may not be. That is, it might be the case that, while the requirement imposed by God’s command to sacrifice Isaac *can’t* be overridden (and is hence indefeasible), the requirement not to kill Isaac imposed by Isaac’s being an innocent child is not *in fact* overridden. The upshot is that it is both epistemically possible that,⁴³ because the conflicting requirements *are* commensurable, k(i) is inconsistent with k(iii), in which case k(i–iv) aren’t compossible, *and* epistemically possible that they are compossible. This is a weaker conclusion than Quinn wants,⁴⁴ but it is far from trivial. Before concluding, however, we must examine an argument which, if successful, would show that one couldn’t know that the conjunction of k(i) through k(iv) is true.

42 That is, that religious values are specious. This would be true, for example, if all religious world-views were false.

43 For the reasons given above.

44 I think that Quinn believes that he has *established* the compossibility of k(i) through k(iv), in which case not only is the compossibility of k(i–iv) epistemically possible; the denial of their compossibility is not.

Adams on Abraham's Dilemma

Adams's Abraham (who is not precisely "the biblical Abraham" nor "Kierkegaard's Abraham either") finds himself overwhelmingly inclined to believe each of the following three, mutually inconsistent, propositions:

- "1 If God commands me to do something, it is not morally wrong for me to do it.
- 2 God commands me to kill my son.
- 3 It is morally wrong for me to kill my son." (Adams 1999: 280)

How should he respond?

Adams admits that if his divine command theory is true, then, if God *were* to command something evil or cruel, what God commands would not have the property of moral wrongness, and would not be "(unqualifiedly) bad."⁴⁵ The important point, however, is this. "A deity that was what we intuitively call *cruel* would not be a good candidate for the role of supreme Good, and the cruel commands of such a being would not be a good candidate for the standard of moral right and wrong. . . . That being so, [we] should probably identify moral wrongness, not simply with the property of being contrary to the commands of God, but rather with the property of being contrary to the commands . . . of a *loving* God." (Adams 1999: 281) And note (although Adams himself does not) that if we were to replace (1) with

- 1' If a loving God commands me to do something, it is not morally wrong for me to do it,

then, while (1') entails

- 4 If a loving God commands me to do something cruel, it is not morally wrong for me to do it,

(4) has an impossible antecedent and is therefore trivially true.⁴⁶ (Note, too, that (1) has similar consequences if [as Adams thinks but doesn't pretend to have proved] loving kindness is entailed by God's nature.)

(1) *would* be false if God were to issue contradictory commands—commanding me to kill my son, for example, yet also (via the Decalogue or in some other way)

45 Although "it does not follow . . . that . . . it would be wrong or bad to *disobey*" the command. For Adams's divine command theory, see Chapter 5. Notice, however, that the wrongness or badness of disobeying God's command *would* follow from (1a): If God commands me to do something, it is morally wrong for me not to do it. And won't (most?) divine command theorists who endorse (1) *also* wish to endorse (1a)?

46 Conditionals with impossible antecedents can't have true antecedents and false consequents, and hence (on the standard view) can't be false.

commanding me not to kill an innocent child. For, in that case, since “wrongness is the property of being contrary to God’s commands,” killing my son *is* morally wrong even though God commands me to do it. (Adams 1999: 282)

Adams thinks that this line of argument is a nonstarter, though, since “requirements cannot plausibly be taken as constituting moral obligations unless they are reasonable, and it cannot be reasonable to require something contradictory or impossible.”⁴⁷ (IBid.: 283) But (as Quinn points out) since *neither* command is contradictory or impossible when taken by itself, Adams must be presupposing that if doing A is obligatory and doing B is obligatory, then doing A and B is obligatory.

“Agglomeration” principles of this sort may be doubted, however.⁴⁸ For example, it would seem “that I have a moral reason not to do what would prevent one from doing what I have a moral reason to do.” So if I make conflicting promises, I have “a moral reason not to keep the first” since doing so would prevent me from keeping the second and I have “a moral reason not to keep the second” since doing so would prevent me from keeping the first. But I do *not* have “any moral reason to keep neither promise . . . , or to break both” since doing so “would accomplish nothing.” Again, while the consequences of doing A may provide me with a moral reason for doing A, and the consequences of doing B may provide me with a moral reason for doing B, I may not have a moral reason for doing both A and B since “the consequences of doing each of [the] two acts separately can be different from the consequences of doing both acts together.”⁴⁹

In responding to Quinn, Adams agrees that he should probably abandon the agglomeration principle but continues to insist that “it cannot be reasonable to impose on someone, at the same time, requirements that contradict each other.” (Adams 2002: 485)

Yet this seems doubtful, for it implies that it can never be reasonable to knowingly bring about a situation which confronts someone with a moral dilemma. Suppose, though, that one has good reasons for bringing about *s* and also has good

47 Furthermore, if God were to command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the command would seem “to imply a suspension of any contrary commands from the same source” since commands “carry permission to do what is commanded.” Denying this principle implies a God too inconsistent and unreasonable to be fit “for the exalted role of defining obligation.” (Adams 1999: 284) It should be noted, however, that the principle itself won’t yield a contradiction. If God commands Abraham to kill Isaac and also commands him not to do so, then, given the principle, it is permissible for Abraham to kill Isaac and it is permissible for him not to kill Isaac. But propositions of the form “It is permissible for *x* to do A” and “It is permissible for *x* not to do A” aren’t mutually inconsistent. (Although, of course, it *is* true that the conjunction in question entails that Abraham’s killing Isaac is morally indifferent, and that *is* inconsistent with either Abraham’s killing Isaac or Abraham’s not killing Isaac being morally required.)

48 Philip L. Quinn, “Obligation, Divine Commands, and Abraham’s Dilemma,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64 (2002), pp. 459–66. Henceforth Quinn 2002.

49 Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Dilemmas*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988, chapter 4, pp. 133 and 130.

reasons for bringing about s' where s (a divine command to kill Isaac, say) makes doing x (killing Isaac in this instance) morally obligatory, and s' (a created order in which Isaac's innocence is a morally compelling reason for not killing him) makes not doing x morally obligatory. Bringing s about and bringing s' about may be backed by incommensurable values (metaphysical and religious goods in the first case, perhaps, and moral values in the second). There needn't be anything irrational about embracing or pursuing incommensurable values, however. Even if aesthetic and moral values are incommensurable, for instance, it can be rational to embrace and pursue both.

Adams himself thinks that the best response to Abraham's dilemma is to reject (2) ("God commands me to kill my son"). It is true that we should not be too quick to reject propositions *like* (2). Given God's transcendence and our own fallibility, we should be constantly open to the possibility that what God actually requires of us in a situation is very different from what we *think* it is. For, as the transcendent Good, God's requirements may conflict with our present understanding of moral rightness and moral wrongness. For example, God may legitimately require someone to accept martyrdom rather than betray her principles even though doing so harms not only herself but many others. Nevertheless, in deciding whether a purported revelation really is from God, we must rely (among other things) on the conceptions of the good and the right that we bring to that situation. For, ultimately, we have nothing else to fall back on.

And so it is here. Adams thinks that, in the present case at least, we should side with Kant and reject (2) since the very content of the command is good evidence that God did *not* issue it. Our "vision of the Good, and of God as the Good" (Adams 1999: 284) rules out the possibility that God could command someone to kill his innocent child.

Quinn, however, claims to have described a case in which God causes "a sign that we could not credibly fail to interpret as a genuine command from God to offer otherwise unnecessary human sacrifices." Adams doubts that God could do this.⁵⁰ Yet suppose he could. There are two alternatives. One is to obey God, "trusting that God will see to it that obedience works out for the best." The other is to "change deities," to decide that the deity in which one has placed one's trust isn't worthy of one's worship and devotion. (Adams 1999: 290) Which is preferable?

If "we could see the author of the command as the supreme Good . . . , then *perhaps* trusting obedience might seem the right course." (Ibid.: 290, my emphasis) Nevertheless, that God would command me to kill my son is so "unimaginable" that "it is at best a waste of spiritual energy to try to decide [in advance] what one should do in that case." Nor does it "honor God to prepare oneself mentally for

50 Adams doesn't explain why. Perhaps because he thinks that the evidence against the claim that God has commanded a person to sacrifice his or her child provided by the fact that doing so is a moral horror is sufficiently strong to outweigh any possible evidence to the contrary.

receiving such a command.” For “consider an analogy: It would hardly be an expression of confidence in your spouse to ponder in any but the most abstractly theoretical way what you should do if your spouse demanded your cooperation in a serious crime.” (Ibid.: 290–91) Adams’s response, in short, is this: because it is “unimaginable” that God would issue such a command, it is either idle or spiritually pernicious to consider what one should do if God *were* to do so—“idle” if one’s consideration is “abstract” and “theoretical,” pernicious if one engages the question existentially. Adams elaborates this point in responding to Quinn.

“To decide in advance . . . that such and such evidence would justify” the conclusion that, while the commandment may come from a supernatural being, it could not come from a “*loving* God” (and should therefore be disobeyed), “seems religiously presumptuous, and perhaps a proleptic abandonment of faith in one’s deity, about whom, we are assuming, one does not actually have that disturbing evidence.” It would be equally “presumptuous, ‘tempting God,’ to decide in advance that such and such evidence would force us to draw a conclusion [that a loving God has commanded me to kill my son] that (if false) would be highly insulting to God.” The “wisest” policy, therefore, is probably “not to try to decide” in advance whether one should or shouldn’t obey if one were confronted with what appears to be a loving God’s command that one kill one’s son. (Adams 2002: 487)

This conclusion is reinforced by three further considerations. First, “if we ever actually found ourselves in [that] horrendous situation, we would surely be right to distrust any conditional decision we had made before we experienced it.” Second, “it is hardly honoring God to think of this as an issue that demands our attention.” And, third, “some biblical precedents (*Genesis* 18: 17–33; *Exodus* 37: 7–14) suggest that if we ever concluded” that God had issued such a command, our “first step” should not be to obey or disobey him, but “to argue with God, in the hope that the apparent command would not be God’s final decision in the matter; and it seems, again, presumptuous to set a limit to how persistent we should be in such remonstrance.” (Adams 2002: 487) I do not find this convincing.

Just *why* is it religiously presumptuous to decide in advance that such and such evidence would force us to conclude that a God who commanded me to kill my son would not be a *loving* God, and just *why* might such a decision be a “proleptic abandonment of faith”? Because it involves entertaining the possibility that the God in whom one (now) believes might not *be* loving? But merely *entertaining* the possibility does not imply that one (now) has *real* doubts. If it doesn’t, then it is difficult to see how merely entertaining the possibility involves a proleptic abandonment of one’s faith. The possibility that the God in whom one believes might not be loving would indeed be “abstract” and “theoretical.” A consideration of abstract and theoretical possibilities is often relevant in *philosophy*, however, if not always in the hurly-burly of real life.

Neither would it be clearly presumptuous, or “tempting God,” to decide in advance that such and such evidence would force me to draw a conclusion that (if false) would be highly insulting to God. For if the evidence is so strong that it

would *force* me to conclude that a loving God commands me to kill my son, then the possibility that I might be mistaken, *given that evidence*, wouldn't be live for me. Yet, if it wouldn't, then the possibility that I might be insulting God by *falsely* attributing the command to him wouldn't be live for me either. Why, then, would my decision be presumptuous?

Nor are Adams's final three considerations compelling. Adams claims that if we ever were actually faced with Abraham's horrid choice, we should "distrust any conditional decision" we might have made in advance of experiencing it. But this, if true at all, is presumably true of *any* horrendous moral dilemma in which we have equally compelling moral reasons for performing and not performing a certain action. And why should we think that, in situations of this sort, our decisions will be just as good or better if we *don't* try to anticipate them? The answer isn't obvious.

Adams also thinks that it doesn't honor God "to think of this as an issue which demands our attention," and this may be true. It does not follow, however, that considering the issue *dishonors* him.

Adams's final suggestion is that if we ever were to find ourselves in the situation in question, we should "remonstrate" with God rather than decide to obey or disobey him. But notice that this suggestion, too, expresses a *present* decision to act in such a way should the "unimaginable" situation ever arise. Why should this decision be any more reliable than a present decision to obey or disobey in the envisaged circumstances? Moreover (and in spite of the biblical precedents), isn't it at least equally "presumptuous" to decide in advance to implore the God "in whom there is no shadow of turning" (James 1: 17) to change his mind?

I conclude, then, that Adams's case for the claim that we should refuse to decide what we should do if we ever were in Abraham's shoes isn't fully convincing. Even so, Quinn may be right in saying that this is the best move Adams can make within his "ethical framework." "To preclude the possibility of a credible divine command" to kill one's son "would be to attempt to domesticate the transcendent, which is at odds with its fearful and dangerous character," and Adams is reluctant to do this. Yet "to insist on a decision" to either obey or disobey such a command "would be to demand allying oneself either with the moral horror of human sacrifice or with rebellion against the Good itself . . ." In Adams's view, however, this "is not a forced choice" as long as the envisaged situation "remains a mere possibility," and his refusal to make it does not impugn his ethical framework unless an adequate ethical framework must determine "a decision for every *possible* [and not just every actual] morally significant situation of choice to which it applies." (Quinn 2002: 465, my emphasis)

Nevertheless, Quinn doubts that Adams's solution is superior "to a solution that rejects (1) [If God commands me to do something, it is not morally wrong for me to do to it] on the grounds that the divine command . . . puts Abraham in a moral dilemma," or "to a Kierkegaardian solution that rejects (3) ["It is morally wrong for me to kill my son] because the divine command to sacrifice Isaac brings with it a

teleological suspension of the ethical.” (Ibid.) (If there are genuine moral dilemmas, then it can be true that, if God were to command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, he *morally ought* to sacrifice Isaac, and yet it would be *morally wrong* for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. On the other hand, if God’s command “teleologically suspends” the ethical, then it is false that it is morally wrong for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.)

If my reasons for thinking that Adams’s case for suspending judgment is less than compelling are sound, then Quinn’s doubts that Adams’s solution to Abraham’s dilemma is superior to its competitors is even more persuasive.

Conclusion

In his response to Quinn, Adams says that he does not think his view is “contrary to belief in a transcendent, in large measure incomprehensible God who ‘screams with the hawk and laughs with the hyenas’.” (Adams 2002: 486) But when all is said and done, it seems to me that it is, and that differing judgments as to the weight one should assign to this aspect of the Godhead may largely account for the disagreement between those who, like Quinn, think that religious values may be incommensurable with moral values at significant junctures and those who, like Outka, Evans, and Adams, doubt that our duties to God can ultimately come into conflict with our moral obligations.

Rudolf Otto has effectively argued that important strands of theistic experience resist easy moralization. Arjuna’s vision of the supernal form of Krishna in the eleventh chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is an example:

If the light of a thousand suns were to spring forth simultaneously in the sky it would be like the light of that great Being. . . . I see Thee, with many arms, stomachs, mouths, and eyes, everywhere infinite in form; I see no end nor middle nor beginning of Thee, O Lord of All. . . . I behold . . . Thy face as a shining fire, burning this universe with Thy radiance . . . Seeing Thy great form, of many mouths and eyes, O mighty-armed one, of many arms, thighs and feet, of many bellies, of many terrible tusks, the worlds tremble, and so do I. Seeing Thee . . . my inmost self is shaken and I find no strength nor peace, O Vishnu!⁵¹ Seeing Thy mouths, terrible with tusks, like time’s devouring fire, I know not the directions of the sky and I find no security. Have mercy, O Lord of gods, Abode of the world. [I see kings and warriors] rushing into Thy mouths, dreadful with terrible tusks. . . . As the many water currents of rivers race headlong to the ocean, so these heroes of the world of men enter into Thy flaming mouths. . . . Swallowing all the worlds from every side, Thou lickest them up with Thy flaming mouths; Thy fierce rays fill the whole world with radiance and scorch it, O Vishnu. . . . For whatever I said in rashness from negligence or even from affection thinking Thou art my friend, and not knowing Thy greatness . . . I pray forgiveness from Thee, the boundless one . . .

51 Krishna is an *avatara* (“descent”) of Vishnu, the one Lord of heaven and earth.

Having seen what was never seen before, I am glad but my mind is distraught with fear. Show me, O Lord, that other [benign] form of Thine, O Lord of gods, be gracious, O refuge of the world.⁵²

Or consider the story in Exodus 4 where “Yahweh came to meet [Moses] and tried to kill him.” Or God’s revealing to Job from the “heart of the tempest” that he is not only the author of the beneficent aspects of nature but the God who furnishes “a prey for the lioness,” is the creator of the ostrich, who “leaves her eggs on the ground . . . forgetting that a foot may tread on them or a wild beast may crush them. Cruel to her chicks as if they were not hers . . .,” or Lord of the eagle, who “feeds her young on blood: wherever men fall dying, there she is.” (Job 38–9) Or, again, consider Paul, who asserts that God has mercy on whom he will, and hardens whom he will (Romans 9: 18), or the author of Hebrews who says “it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God,” and “Our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 10: 31; 12: 29). Compare this with Luther: “For God is a fire, that consumeth, devoureth, rageth; verily He is your undoing, as fire consumeth a house and maketh it dust and ashes.” Or again, “Yea, He is more terrible and frightful than the Devil. For he dealeth with us and bringeth us to ruin with power, smiteth and hammereth us and payeth no heed to us. . . . In His majesty He is a consuming fire. . . . For therefrom can no man refrain: if he thinketh on God aright, his heart in his body is struck with terror. . . . Yea, as soon as he heareth God named, he is filled with trepidation and fear.”⁵³

This theme resounds as well in apophatic theology, and in the writings of major Christian mystics. Thus John Chrysostom, commenting on Psalm 139: 14, which the *Septuagint* translates, “I praise thee: for that Thou madest Thyself fearfully wondrous,” says “we wonder at the greatness of the sea and its measureless expanse, but terror and ‘fear’ only seize upon us when we gaze down into its depths. So, too, here the Psalmist. When he gazes down into the immeasurable, yawning depth of the divine wisdom, dizziness comes upon him, and he recoils in terrified wonder and cries: . . . ‘The knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, above my power’.”⁵⁴ Meister Eckhart claims that the depth of the Godhead is beyond good and evil, and John of the Cross says that in mounting toward the deity, God “destroys, crushes and overwhelms the soul in such a deep darkness, that it feels as though melted and in its misery destroyed by a cruel death of the spirit. Even as though it were to feel it had been swallowed by some savage beast and buried in the darkness of his belly.”⁵⁵

52 Eliot Deutsch, *The Bhagavad Gītā, Translated with introduction and critical essays*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Wilson, 1968, chapter 11: 12, 16, 19, 23–5, 27–8, 30, 41–2, 45.

53 Quoted in Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey. New York: Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 99.

54 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 182.

55 *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 106.

This is not the whole story, of course. The message of the *Gītā* is ultimately one of love and grace. Paul thinks that God sought us out when we were yet sinners, and exclaims that “no created thing can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8: 39) Luther believes that God is not only hidden and incomprehensible but revealed as gracious and loving in Jesus Christ. And John of the Cross tells us that in the final stage of her ascent, the mystic’s soul is consumed in love.

The fact remains that important aspects of the *Gītā*’s God, or of Paul’s or Luther’s, or of the God of a number of major Christian mystics can’t be easily assimilated by moral categories. Those of us who, like Otto, think that these are essential aspects of the “transcendent, in large measure incomprehensible God” of theism will resist attempts to sanitize the story of the binding of Isaac, or to deny that Abraham’s dilemma is a real one. It may be true, as Evans says, that the Christian can be assured that whatever God may command, he is loving. It doesn’t follow that *what* love commands may not be flatly contrary to what love *seems* to require or to the dictates of rational morality—that, as Johannes says, our “love to God may [not] cause” us “to give [our] love to [our] neighbor the opposite expression to that which, ethically speaking, is required by duty.”⁵⁶

56 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 80.

Religion and Morality

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