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MODERN PERSPECTIVES ON FAITH: ABRAHAM'S CASE IN KANT AND KIERKEGAARD. RECONSTRUCTIONS AND CRITICAL REMARKS

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Abstract

In this paper, I will compare Kant's and Kierkegaard's reflections on faith as they are articulated in the particular analyses of Abraham's sacrifice. Kant's prosecution of Abraham, which commences from the idea of "natural religion", rests on two interrelated lines of attack, an epistemological one and ethical one, which deem Abraham's action to be morally reprehensible. For Kant, the primacy of the practical reason leaves no special room for divine duties that are not ethical at the same time. On the other hand, Kierkegaard's defence of the sacrifice is orbiting around the possibility of a teleological suspension of the ethical. If such a suspension is possible, then faith is a paradox according to which the single individual is higher than the universal. As such, an absolute duty to god is possible, but such a duty is not rationally justifiable or publicly communicable. My paper ends with some considerations about the protestant inheritance of both, Kant and Kierkegaard.

Keywords: natural religion, moral duties, divine commands, teleological suspension of the ethical, faith as paradox, absolute relation to the absolute, leap of faith.

The story of Abraham's ordeal is the story of unlimited faith. According to Genesis 22, one day, God calls Abraham and commands him to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, on the mount Moriah. Abraham consents and prepares for the sacrifice without disclosing his intentions to anyone. After a three-day journey, which the Bible does not record, the patriarch arrives at the sacrifice spot. After Isaac is bound to the

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altar, the angel of God stops Abraham just as he raises the knife to perform the sacrifice, telling the patriarch “now I know you fear God”. Abraham then sees a ram coming out from the nearby bushes, and sacrifices the ram instead.

Abraham’s ordeal is the paradigmatic narrative of faith in each of the three monotheistic religions. Across time, it has become a cultural commonplace that prompted numerous analyses and references. In this paper, I will examine two contrasting modern philosophical accounts of Abraham’s story, the Kantian one, and the Kierkegaardian one. The former is developed by the German philosopher in some reflections from *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* and from *The Conflict of the Faculties*, while Kierkegaard’s analyses is developed in *Fear and Trembling*, throughout the entire work, but especially in the first two sections. In what follows, I will use mainly these three resources, among others texts and commentaries, to investigate a few aspects of the relation between faith and reason in modern philosophy.

The background for the Kant’s analysis of Abraham’s case is his account of “natural religion”. In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant claims that “religion is the recognition of all our duties as divine commands” (6:154). What Kant wishes to argue is that the ethical conduct and the religious behaviour are overlapping. Believing in dogmas, attending divine rituals, and being part of a religious community are good only insofar as they lead to the development of a “good will”. In the absence of a sound moral conscience, all the religious manifestations are mere superstitions and “counterfeit service of God” (6:171). For the German philosopher, the proper task of religion is to instil the sense of ethical duty and to actively engage in the moral development of human beings. The end of religious behaviour lies outside religion itself, resting in the realm of the ethical. For Kant, God (as the rest of the Ideas of pure reason) is rather a heuristic fiction than an ontological necessity. The use of religious narrative is regulative, not constitutive. Therefore, the purpose of religious concepts is to elevate a rational imperfect being to the highest point of moral excellence. This is how religion (as the spiritual connection of natural and supernatural) becomes “natural religion”. For Kant, natural religion is a “pure practical concept of reason” which mixes a rational ethics with the concept of God (6:157). It is clear that the

Kantian notion of divine existence is neither an evidence of the heart, nor a proof of the mind, but an idea that derives from the existence of the moral law. More exactly, the necessity of the Idea of God is explained by people's hope that their moral improvement is eventually rewarded.

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

The individual has no epistemic power to access the nature of God or engage with God's intentions, because of the inherent limits of human understanding. Once again, the concept of God cannot have a constitutive use. Human beings could only presume that it is possible for God to exist and give them assistance to overcome their moral flaws:

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

For Kant, the fundamental role faith plays in the human life is the consolation of the principled man in a promiscuous world. If conscience alone cannot chase away the uneasiness of the persons who see how bad people thrive and good people suffer, than it should be God the one that comfort them in their struggle of approaching the moral ideal. For Kant, the belief in Jesus Christ is important not in virtue of the miracle of Resurrection. It is rather that Jesus can be regarded as a suggestive illustration of the "good will"; he is the incarnation of the moral law rather the incarnation of God the Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity. The terms in which Kant discusses about Christ are suggestive: "it is our universal human duty to elevate ourselves to this ideal of moral perfection" (6:61) and to imitate Jesus' human behaviour. Kant does not intend here to refute the divinity of Jesus, and neither does he

reject the possibility of miracles. He is rather refraining to give them any credit in either moral thinking or moral progress:

Reason does not contest the possibility or actuality of the objects of these ideas; it just cannot incorporate them into its maxims of thought and action. (6:52)

The Kantian analysis of miracles is essential for our account, because the trigger of Abraham's case is the miracle of God speaking directly with the patriarch. For Kant, the concept of natural religion entails that what is not rationally apprehensible is ultimately expendable:

If moral religion (to be cast not in dogmas and observances but in the heart's disposition to observe all human duties as divine commands) must be established, eventually all the miracles which history connects with its inception must themselves render faith in miracles in general dispensable (6:84).

Kant is not necessarily an enemy of the popular belief in miracles, but he renders them as useless or, as in Abraham's case, as dangerous. We could sum up the Kantian "theory" of miracles as a three-step argument. First of all, even if miracles really exist, they are superfluous to moral progress. For Kant, moral duty is a universal and necessary demand of reason, not an outcome of unreasonable belief. Secondly, since we do not have any complete test of discerning "theistic" or real miracles from false wonders, then we should be cautious about unexplainable events. Thirdly, if a so-called miraculous event pushes me to act contrary to my duties, than it is clearly not a real miracle. It was not God, the one who produced the miracle, because God wishes only the moral good².

² Maybe, it is worth noticing here that, if Kant were to answer the famous Euthyphro's dilemma: "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?" (*Euthyphro* 10a), he would definitely opt for the first answer. God "loves" the moral law because it is good in itself, which means that it stands above any possible will or power. Such an answer contradicts fragrantly "the divine command theory", for which the virtues and the laws are good only insofar as they are willed by God.

One can easily notice that Kant's prosecution of Abraham rests on two interrelated grounds: one is epistemological, the other is ethical. From the epistemological point of view, the call of Abraham is an uncertain event, because an imperfect rational being does not have the capacity to discern a divine manifestation from a demonic one or from mere delusion. The problem of "historical faith" – as Kant labels the ecclesiastical faith in opposition to "rational faith" (6:103) – is that it prescribes arbitrary, statutory laws that are not under the tutelage of reason (6:104). As such, Kant stresses out that, in every historical faith, there is always a risk to naively misinterpret a phenomenal event, which should be better analyzed by historical scholars and scholars of reason: "That God has ever manifested this [...] is a matter of historical documentation and never apodictically certain" (6:187). In *The Conflict of Faculties* (115), Kant expresses the same scepticism towards Abraham's lack of epistemic diligence even more bitterly:

For if God should really speak to man, man could still never *know* that it was God speaking. It is quite impossible for man to apprehend the infinite by the senses, distinguish it from sensible beings, and *recognize* it as such.

The second line of attack against Abraham is the ethical one. On this ground, Kant asserts that, since God wishes the moral good, it is contradictory to say that God demands an immoral action, like killing an innocent person. As I said earlier, the two grounds are connected to one another. However, the ethical objection could stand on its own. In the first line of attack, there is no sufficient reason for denying a miracle on epistemic grounds, because miracles are a matter of faith. We could say nothing more than the miracle of God speaking to man is uncertain. In the second line of attack, there is a necessary and sufficient reason for being sceptical. Even if miracles exist and one is entitled to believe in them, one has no reason to think that a morally perfect being could order an immoral action. The action is immoral, because it fails two Kantian tests, namely *the formula of the universal law*³ and *the formula of*

³ "Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (G 4: 421).

*humanity*⁴. Killing an innocent person is, firstly, a maxim that cannot be universalized, and, secondly, it means to treat the humanity of a person only as a means, and not as an end in itself.

So, when Kant contemplates the same problem as Kierkegaard – could or could not the real God could ask a person to sacrifice his innocent son – he claims that such a request could not be of divine origin, because it violates all rational accounts of human morality:

For, as regards the theistic miracles, reason can at least have a negative criterion at its disposal, namely, if something is represented as commanded by God in a direct manifestation of him yet is directly in conflict with morality, it cannot be a divine miracle despite every appearance of being one (*e.g.* if a father were ordered to kill his son who, so far as he knows, is totally innocent). (6:87)

The concept of a theistic miracle is allowed by Kant only insofar as reason provides a negative rule, which invalidates any alleged divine miracle that could be deleterious: the so-called miracle could not have come from God if the situation it makes possible is clearly violating the moral law (as it happened, when Abraham believed that God was telling him to sacrifice his innocent son). Although human thinking, finite as it is, does not have definitive certainties about the divine origin of certain events, the agent knows at least that God is good. Consequently, the necessary condition to regard an event as a divine one is the consistence with moral order, which God fully embraces. However, this is not a sufficient condition, because evil often comes under an appealing form, which can distract the human being from his moral path. An apparently good event is not necessarily of divine origin.

However, what Kant failed to take into consideration here is that, just as “the evil spirit often disguises himself as an angel of light” (6:87), so true evil can, as well, trick people into judging something as bad when it is actually good. Only if Abraham’s case is interpreted with this possibility in mind (*i.e.*, the possibility that God might choose to use apparent evil to teach a person a good lesson) can it be preserved as a

⁴ “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (G 4: 429).

useful guideline for moral or spiritual growth and authentic spiritual transformation. And the fact is that all three monotheistic traditions have taken Abraham's story along these lines. The hasty way, in which Kant abandoned the potential conformity of the Abraham story to his own theory of rational religion, only confirms one of his chief claims: reason becomes paralyzed whenever it attempts to identify a miracle of any kind (6:86). Given divine omnipotence, it is reasonable to believe that God would certainly be able "to conceal good behind apparent evil just as easily as a demon could pass evil off as good" (Palmquist 2016, 241).

To summarize, Kant tests the plausibility of a "theistic miracle" by a quasi-limited principle of falsification: if the alleged miracle contradicts a moral rule, then it is not of divine origin. In Abraham's story, the seemingly divine demand violates an injunction of practical reason. Therefore, one should entrust his behaviour to the moral conscience, which undoubtedly forbids killing⁵. Taken together the two lines of attack compose a single argument, which could be summarized in the following way:

1. Human understanding is not equipped to say if an apparently divine event is really of divine origin.
2. But practical reason is equipped to say if a certain maxim is in accordance with the moral law.
3. It is not certain that it was God's voice, but killing Isaac is certainly an immoral act.
4. Therefore, Abraham should have listened to the voice of his conscience and not the alleged divine utterance.

⁵ But in some cases man can be sure that the voice he hears is *not* God's; for if the voice commands him to do something contrary to the moral law, then no matter how majestic the apparition may be, and no matter how it may seem to surpass the whole of nature, he must consider it an illusion. We can use, as an example, the myth of the sacrifice that Abraham was going to make by butchering and burning his only son at God's command (the poor child, without knowing it, even brought the wood for the fire). Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice; "That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God – of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven" (*Conflict* 115).

Kant's conclusion is unambiguously on the side of human autonomy. As he stated earlier, when analyzing the putative authority of a sacred text, "[...] if it contains statements that contradict practical reason, it *must* be interpreted in the interests of practical reason" (*Conflict* 65). Kant's idea is that even if Abraham was sure that it was God's voice commanding him to sacrifice his son, he would still have to obey his moral conscience. For Kant, the primacy of the practical reason leaves no particular room for divine duties, which are not – at the same time – ethically valid. The religious has to be morally justified, while the ethical is its own justification.

In Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, the ethical is also its own justification (FT 54). However, the main question of Johannes de Silentio, Kierkegaard's pseudonym, is whether one could legitimately speak of a "teleological suspension of the ethical". The answer which Johannes eventually gives is positive. Given this, we would be inclined to say that the main interlocutor of Kierkegaard is Kant. But, in fact, the real target is Hegel, who stands as his main intellectual adversary not only in *Fear and Trembling*, but in most of his philosophical battles.

To understand this conflict, it is worth having a very short look at Hegel's account of ethics and language. For him, there is an important distinction between *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit*: the first designates the individual morality, while the second designates the ethical life of a community. Authentic moral principles are to be necessarily found in *Sittlichkeit*, and only by accident in *Moralität*, because the former presuppose the reflected aspects of shared values, in opposition to the subjective nature of an individual inner will, which characterize the latter. The former is necessarily rational, while the second is rational only insofar as it subordinates itself to *Sittlichkeit*. The kind of rationality which Hegel praises is different from the Kantian one. For Kant, to be rational is to acknowledge and comply with a law that is good by itself (not in virtue of its historical content or consequences). The *formula of the universal law* looks like a logical or a mathematical test, and not a social one. This is why Hegel accused Kant of "formalism", a charge by which he claims that Kant's Categorical Imperative is too empty and abstract to determine actual duties. For Hegel, the autonomous reflection of an agent is a matter of individual decision, which pertains rather to

Moralität than *Sittlichkeit*. Thus, the content of our duties must be specified by concrete relationships to other individuals in a community, and by the historical development of institutions and customs. The ethical as *Sittlichkeit* is universal in the sense that it contains the shared rules, institutions and customs of a particular society. From this point of view, the solitary appliance of the Categorical Imperative or the private relation of Abraham with God is not universal. But, for Hegel, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son is rationally repulsive on an additional ground. Not only that sacrificing your son is socially unacceptable, but the fact that Abraham cannot express a justification for his action is irrational (for lacking a public determination). For Hegel, language represents public sphere that involves sharable notions, judgments and concepts. As in Wittgenstein's case, one hundred years later, there is no such thing as a private language. Abraham's abandonment to a purely personal relation with God cannot be put into words; therefore it is only subjective idiosyncrasy. I will later return to this issue.

On these grounds, it is clear that Hegel should condemn Abraham as an irrational immoralist. Instead, Hegel is praising Abraham as the "father of faith". This is where Kierkegaard comes into play, and criticise Hegel for inconsistency. If Abraham is wrong, then Hegel should have protested "loudly and clearly against Abraham's enjoying honour and glory as a father of faith when he ought to be sent back to a lower court and shown up as a murderer" (FT 84). Either Abraham is a criminal and not the Father of Faith, or Hegel is wrong and, consequently, the singular individual could engage in an absolute relation to the absolute. But if the second horn of the dilemma is true, then the religious cannot be reduced to the ethical, be it a matter of universalizability or social acceptability. This is the fundamental claim of Kierkegaard, who stands in fragrant opposition to both Kant and Hegel.

Before proceeding to our investigation, we can easily notice that the ethical and the religious do not find themselves in contradiction. In the majority of cases, God's commands and moral injunctions are overlapping. Lying, stealing, killing or breaking a promise is, at the same time, a sin and an immoral action. There is no structural opposition between the two realms. Nonetheless, for Kierkegaard the ethical and the religious are distinct in (at least) four relevant aspects.

1) The ethical is the universal; on the other hand, faith represents a paradox⁶ according to which the single individual as particular is higher than the universal (FT 54). 2) The ethical designates what is rationally intelligible; on the other hand, faith cannot be intellectually mediated because it entails an irreducible paradox (FT 56). 3) The ethical understanding perceives human duties as divine commands, and – comprising the sacred duties as moral duties – leaves no room for any direct or special duty to God; on the other hand, faith takes into account a special kind of obligations, which are absolute, thus transforming moral duties into relative duties (FT 68-69, 81). 4) The ethical is the realm of what is publicly communicable; on the other hand, faith is an unexplainable experience even when it appears to be expressed in language (FT 82, 112-19).

Let us have a look on how these four tensions unfold through the first two *Problemata* from *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard's objective in *Problema I* is to show how, in Christianity, the single individual rises above the universal. In a Kantian manner, Kierkegaard states that the ethical is the universal as it applies to each and every individual, at each and every moment in time (FT 54). It operates impersonally, and the individual's task is to sacrifice his idiosyncratic individuality in order to be part of the universal. Nonetheless – and this is the specifically Protestant mark of Kierkegaard account – the individual is intimately connected with God through faith. And since God is the Absolute, which stands above the universal, so is the individual too, when he links to the absolute, rises above the universal. The inversion between the individual and the universal represents the paradoxical structure of faith:

Faith is precisely the paradox that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal, is justified before it, not as inferior to it but superior – yet in such a way, please note, that it is the single individual who, after being subordinate as the single individual to the universal, now by means of the universal becomes the single individual who as the single individual is superior,

⁶ According to C. Stephan Evans, the “paradox” for Kierkegaard is not a logical contradiction. Kierkegaard’s concept of paradox rather entails that “the opposition between faith and reason is not a necessary and intrinsic opposition but a tension rooted in the prideful pretensions of reason to autonomy and completeness” (Evans 2006, 226).

that the single individual as the single individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute. This position cannot be mediated, for all mediation takes place only by virtue of the universal; it is and remains for all eternity a paradox, impervious to thought. And yet faith is this paradox... (FT 56)

So the paradox of Abraham's faith is that, in virtue of his personal relation to the absolute, he transcends the impersonal demands of the ethical. The personal overcomes the impersonal. Could it be possible that, for Kierkegaard, what is personal is always superior to what is impersonal? The answer is no. For example, a remarkable individual – much like Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov, who conscientiously decides to take another person's life – is not at all superior to an ordinary person who is acting morally in an automatic and unreflective manner. On the contrary, his (wrong) personal choice makes him even guiltier than the ordinary and unreflectively decent person.

It is worth to mention that what specifically makes Abraham great is not the personal choice to transgress the moral order, but the personal choice to make the leap of faith, and to abandon himself to God. From the ethical point of view, Abraham's right conduct involves, on one hand, the fatherly love for his son and, on the other, the universal interdiction of killing an innocent. Anything that might stray Abraham from the right conduct must be regarded as a temptation. (If, for instance, another man would offer Abraham a great sum of money to take Isaac's life, such a bargain had to be interpreted as an outrageous temptation). This is intuitive for every reasonable person. What is not at all intuitive is that, in Kierkegaard's analysis of Abraham's story, the moral injunctions have to be interpreted as a temptation. If the absolute demands a seemingly immoral action, then the temptation is the ethical itself.

At first appearance, one could say that every moral dilemma entails an ethical temptation. If I have to lie in order to save a human life, then the moral commandment to tell the truth becomes an ethical temptation. I am tempted to say the truth, but given the consequences of my sincerity, I decide to tell a noble lie. But such a conflict is resolved within the same ethical realm. The moral duty to tell the truth is overridden by the moral duty to save a human life. The temptation is part of the ethical just like the right solution is part of the ethical. In

Abraham's case, however, it is not *a part of* the ethical that entice Abraham, but the ethical *altogether*. The main point of Kierkegaard is that the true solution of the conflict should be sought outside the ethical. To this effect, Johannes compares Abraham with what he calls "the tragic hero":

The difference between the tragic hero and Abraham is very obvious. The tragic hero is still within the ethical. He allows an expression of the ethical to have its *telos* in a higher expression of the ethical; he scales down the ethical relation between father and son or daughter and father to a feeling that has its dialectic in its relation to the idea of moral conduct. Here there can be no teleological suspension of the ethical itself. (FT 59)

To portray the tragic hero, Johannes gives three examples of fathers who, only apparently, made the same gesture as Abraham: Agamemnon who sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia to win the Trojan War, Jephthah who brought his daughter to sacrifice, because he made a "promise that decided the fate of the nation", and Brutus who executed his sons for plotting against the state. In each of the three cases, the choice was tragic, because it was made in favour of an allegedly higher ethical duty. Abraham's situation is radically different:

By his act he transgressed the ethical altogether and had a higher *telos* outside it, in relation to which he suspended it.... It is not to save a nation, not to uphold the idea of a state that Abraham does it; it is not to appease the angry gods.... Therefore, while the tragic hero is great because of his moral virtue, Abraham is great because of a purely personal virtue. (FT 59)

It is not important for our account if those three sacrifices could really be justified from a Utilitarian or a Kantian point of view. What counts is that, in each case, one could find an ethical justification, no matter how objectionable it may be. The three fathers who painfully sacrificed their children made choices that are intelligible for everyone and conjure empathy for their dramatic character. Every tragic hero is inevitably caught in an ethical conundrum that requires a solution. The answer, which the hero gives, is an ethical response in the sense that it may not be universally justifiable, but certainly is universally understandable. At the opposite, Abraham's case is not of ethical nature,

and furthermore his solution is neither rigorously justifiable, nor publicly understandable. His response is essentially a non-ethical one. God approaches Abraham directly to demand a visibly immoral behaviour. Whereas the tragic hero balances two ethical options, Abraham balances the ethical option and the religious one.⁷ He opts for the latter, thus giving Kierkegaard the possibility to speak of a "teleological suspension of the ethical". This means that the ethical, understood as the universal, could be not annihilated, but suspended for a higher *telos*. But Abraham's decision brings forth the problem of a special and absolute obligation: the duty to God.

The question about an absolute duty to God is further discussed by Kierkegaard in *Problema II*. At the beginning of this section, Johannes defines once again the ethical as the universal, but in contrast to the beginning of the former section, he also defines it as the divine. From such a standpoint, every duty is ultimately a duty to God. So far, it appears that one could understand Kierkegaard's perspective as a version of Divine command theory: an action is morally good only insofar as God commands it. On this basis, the ethical and the religious are overlapping. However, such an interpretation would contradict Kierkegaard's view:

Thus it is proper to say that every duty is essentially duty to God, but if no more can be said than this, then it is also said that I have actually no duty to God. The duty becomes duty by being traced back to God, but in the duty itself I do not

⁷ The tragic hero assures himself that the ethical obligation is totally present in him by transforming it into a wish. Agamemnon, for example, can say: To me the proof that I am not violating my fatherly duty is that my duty is my one and only wish. Consequently we have wish and duty face to face with each other. Happy is the life in which they coincide, in which my wish is my duty and the reverse, and for most men the task in life is simply to adhere to their duty and to transform it by their enthusiasm into their wish. The tragic hero gives up his wish in order to fulfil this duty. For the knight of faith, wish and duty are also identical, but he is required to give up both. If he wants to relinquish by giving up his wish, he finds no rest, for it is indeed his duty. If he wants to adhere to his duty and to this wish, he does not become the knight of faith, for the absolute duty specifically demanded that he should give it up. The tragic hero found a higher expression of duty but not an absolute duty (FT 78n).

enter into relation to God. For example, it is a duty to love one's neighbour. It is a duty by its being traced back to God, but in the duty I do not enter into relation to God, but to the neighbour I love. If in this connection I then say that it is my duty to love God, I am actually pronouncing only a tautology, inasmuch as "God" in a totally abstract sense is here understood as the divine – that is, the universal, that is, duty.... God comes to be an impotent thought. (FT 68)

One of the logical consequences of interpreting Kierkegaard's view as a version of Divine command theory would be to state that Abraham's relation with the universal is mediated by God. All moral duties are divine duties. But, as in above quote, this leaves no room for an absolute duty to God. Additionally, such an interpretation would contradict Kierkegaard's claim from *Problema I*, which ended with a positive answer to the question of a possible suspension of the ethical. If obeying God is equivalent to being moral, then there is no possibility for the individual to be higher than the universal.

Under such circumstances, Kierkegaard's account of the ethical must be interpreted as being an essentially different stage than the religious, which superpose only incidentally with the ethical. Morality is not necessarily created by God; it is rather the outcome of the historical development of human conscience, much like in the Hegelian account of *Sittlichkeit*. It is an entirely human task to develop the most adequate ethical instruments for history's continuing challenges. Moral values and norms are the creation of mankind, and they generally apply to all persons. Nevertheless, the true believer must always be ready to welcome God and obey his demands, even when those are in a visible contradiction to human morality. In such a case, the "ethical is reduced to the relative" (FT 70), and the individual finds himself in an unmediated relation to the absolute. However, this is almost an unbearable situation, because a decision like Abraham's cannot be rationally defended or even expressed. His connection to the absolute is private and unmediated.

But, given Kierkegaard's own framework, is it really possible to have a pure, unmediated relation, as Johannes passionately claims? In Hegel's philosophy, for instance, a non-mediated relationship is impossible. For him, the very opposition between mediation and immediacy requires

mediation to the extent that nothing is unequivocally mediated or unmediated (Lippit 2003, 95). According to Inwood's interpretation,

Hegel's arguments are often obscured by the different levels of mediation and immediacy that come into play: e.g. absolute, wholly unmediated, immediacy (which never occurs), relatively bare immediacy, and mediated immediacy. (Inwood 1992, 110)

It is not my intention to enter in all these details, but only to show that, for Hegel, there are "greater and lesser degrees of mediation", and not a purely unmediated relation. For example, Hegel thinks that one's perception of his own existence is relatively unmediated, while the believer's knowledge of God is relatively mediated. The mediation occurs through the Bible, the Holly Tradition, the clergy, the rituals, and ultimately through the incarnation of Christ, which is the mediation *par excellence*. In Abraham's case, there is obviously no Bible, no Holly Tradition, and no incarnation, so Kierkegaard would seem entitled to claim there is no mediation. But how does a wholly unmediated relation look like? The first answer that comes in one's mind is that entering a purely non-mediated relation is engaging with a pure abstract entity, an empty form that could not have such a strong hold on the individual. Such an entity would have no history and no previous manifestation. But this is not the case for Abraham, who perceives God as the Creator of the world, as the sender of the great flood, or as the one who made possible the miraculous birth of Isaac. From this point of view, Abraham's relation is already mediated by a tradition and by his past encounters with God. In this respect, Johannes de Silentio seems to be wrong in attributing to Abraham a pure non-mediated access to the Absolute. However, for Kierkegaard this is not the central point of his argument. My claim is that Kierkegaard is not interested so much in rigorously assessing the unmediated character of the relation, but rather to show that such mediation is so weak that it does not count as rational mediation.

With this, I come again to the non-public character of God's connection to the Absolute. Even if Abraham's relation with God is mediated by a tradition and his former encounters with Him, this is not a reason to say that his behaviour is rational. In Hegel's philosophy

mediation is by definition rational. For Kant, universality as the mediation between the agent and the moral law is also rational⁸. But in Kierkegaard's philosophy the mediation does not seem to be rational. How could a perfect being that created the universe, a just being that punished the sinners, and a loving being that send Isaac as a miraculous gift, demand such an absurd behaviour from Abraham? In this respect, Kant seems to be fair rejecting a voice that demands such unreasonable actions. How could one explain such a horrific conduct? Kierkegaard's solution is precisely that true faith is publicly incomunicable or unexplainable. There is no justification from the ethical point of view that could endorse sacrificing an innocent being. To speak or to justify oneself is to engage more or less with the universal, which is a matter of public concern. What is unspeakable and unjustifiable is a matter of absolute privacy. So when Johannes is claiming the unmediated character of Abraham's relation to God, he is rather pointing to the absolutely private character of the relation than to the absolute lack of determinations.

The private character of the individual's relationship with God is not at all Kierkegaard's personal invention. The privatization of faith is one of Luther's cardinal ideas that marked protestant theology and Western culture. In Lutheran theology, unlike Catholic or Eastern Orthodox theology, the individual's relationship with God does not have to be intermediated by the Church or by the Holly Tradition. To give only one example, one of the fundamental principles of the Bible study is "Scriptura Scripturae interpres" ("Scripture is the interpreter of Scripture"), which dismisses the authority of the clergy or of the Holly Fathers in interpreting the Bible. This principle endows the believer with the responsibility and authority to interpret the Scripture all by himself. As such, the relationship with the Holly Book, as the relationship with God is private and unmediated. If we add to this the primacy of the inwardness (as opposed to the Catholic emphasize of public conduct), another Lutheran idea, than we may easily notice how Kierkegaard's ideas were shaped by the Protestant milieu. But the same Protestant

⁸ There are important differences between Kant's use of the word "rational", and Hegel's use of the same word. Some of them I have mentioned earlier here. Others do not make the object of my paper.

environment shaped Kant's ideas as well. The priority of intention over consequences is the secularized version of the Lutheran priority of faith over good deeds. The Kantian notion of autonomy may be seen as the philosophical version of the exegetical principle, which dismissed other exegetical authorities than the believer himself. As such, it is interesting to see that the same religious empowerment of the individual gave birth to opposite philosophical perspectives on faith, such as Kant's and Kierkegaard's. But the development of such a topic deserves a standalone work, in which the above implications could be examined in detailed.

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