

The Teleological Suspension of the Ethical: Abraham, Isaac, and the Challenge of Faith

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God demands that Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac.

One reads this and winces. Has not the human race advanced beyond such notions long ago? Have we anything more here than a datum for primitive anthropology? Would such an idea even occur to anyone anymore had it not been passed down to us by zealots anxious to preserve even the arcane barbarisms of their past? Can wisdom be gleaned from this relic of ancient superstition?

Soren Kierkegaard suggests that in the story of Abraham and Isaac we have a supreme example of the meaning of faith. Such faith, says Kierkegaard, is not only more than a relic of ancient superstition but constitutes the epitome of what a human being can aspire to. The following is my attempt to examine this claim.

Before delving into our primary questions we must consider a preliminary one. How, it is sometimes asked, does Abraham know it is God who commands him? After all, asylums are full of people who claim to have heard the voice of God. Every few years a murderous rampage is said to have such a claim as its basis. Is the Bible suggesting that homicidal psychopaths are justified in their violence on the grounds of the blessedness of faith?

If we are asking what the Bible is suggesting we must look to the Bible for our clues. Throughout the Bible God communicates his will to human beings. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and many others are the recipients of this communication. Never is there any suggestion that the source of this communication is in doubt. When the Bible says that God speaks to a man,

it is reasonable to assume that it means that God speaks to a man. The Bible does not report that Abraham has had an intimation that, maybe, God has spoken to him. The Bible tells us that God speaks to Abraham. Clearly, this is what it means to say.

But, it may be countered: this still does not explain how Abraham *knows* it is God. The story, after all, is said to be about faith. Is this not, precisely, what is meant by faith – that Abraham believes unquestioningly that the communication is from God – and would not such an idea give license to every paranoiac with a sharp axe and a demented imagination? To believe unquestioningly in what one is told simply because one is told it – is this not a prescription for disaster? Indeed it is, and that the concept of faith has been too frequently distorted to mean just this is beyond dispute. However, there is little reason to suppose that the biblical story is suggesting such a thing. Abraham does not go running about with his head in his hand worrying that he has gone crazy. He does not, after a struggle, decide to obey his strange voices in the name of 'faith.' Abraham never once doubts that the communication is from God. The Bible never once suggests that there is any reason to doubt. This is not because the Bible preaches belief in whatever one is told. To believe in false gods, according to the Bible, is the gravest of errors. No, but the story of Isaac and Abraham is not about faith in disembodied voices, or faith in paranoid delusions, or faith in psychopathic hallucinations. It is about faith in God. God demands that Abraham kill his son Isaac. That is not the end of the story, it is the beginning. Abraham *knows* it is God. That is not the proof of Abraham's faith. It is the test.

In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard tells us that Abraham's response to God's demand entails a “teleological suspension of the ethical.” That it involves a “suspension of the ethical” is clear in Abraham's willingness to kill. That this is “teleological” implies that it has, for its

motive, some overriding purpose. We are not kept in suspense as to what this purpose is. Its purpose is to affirm Abraham's faith. To understand what this means we must penetrate more deeply into the meaning of the ethical, faith, God, and their relation to human life.

The following essay makes no attempt to report the thinking of Kierkegaard, although there may well be parallels. In the following, however, I will attempt to address the issues themselves.

The Ethical

Imagine a universe devoid of anyone who cares. What meaning would the ethical have in such a universe? One event, one act, one state of affairs would have quite the same value as another; namely, no value at all. It would matter to no one whether such a universe continued to exist or ceased to exist, erupted in violence or remained eternally frozen, progressed toward some consummation or cycled endlessly in a causal loop. Such a universe would be a 'dead' universe. Even if we posited living beings, living non-caring beings, it would make no difference. Such beings might be destroyed or preserved – who would care? What could it mean to say that such beings were harmed? What could it mean to say that such beings were benefited? Insofar as they don't care themselves, insofar as *no one* cares, it is impossible to say whether we are doing them good or ill. Such a universe, in which no one cares, would not merely be devoid of value, it would be devoid of the very *meaning* of value.

Now insert in this universe a single caring being. Suddenly everything changes. Suddenly the universe aligns itself, from the point of view of this caring, in terms of good and bad, better

and worse, more desirable and less. Suddenly things matter. The universe now has *meaning*. It can fulfill or fail to fulfill the caring of this caring being. Only now, indeed, can the universe even be said to be pointless. For when we say that something is pointless we invariably mean that it is pointless in relation to the possibility of its having a point. Only now can the universe have a point – that of fulfilling the caring of this caring being – and only now can it fail to achieve it. With the entrance of caring in the universe comes the entrance of the meaning of value. Something is valuable or not to the extent that it tends toward the fulfillment of the caring of a caring being. Caring is the ground of value. From this it also becomes clear that caring is the ground of ethics. To understand the meaning of the ethical we must explore more deeply the nature of caring.

Caring is always self-referential; that is to say, it is always, in some sense, a matter of concern to itself. It is true that one often cares *about* another. But in caring about the other I make the other a concern of *mine*. What happens to the other will now affect how *I* feel. If the other were to cease to affect me in any way, I would have ceased to care about the other. This is not to imply that selfless caring is impossible. One can put another's interest above one's own. But one cannot care for another without it affecting oneself. That would be a contradiction. Caring is not always a caring *about* oneself, but caring is always a concern *to itself*, as caring.

Caring is the experience of *value*. Caring beings are such because they have the capacity for value-laden experience, i.e., experience that is deemed positive or negative, desirable or undesirable. In human caring value-laden experiences such as pleasure, pain, fear, sadness, joy, etc. are not isolated phenomena. They combine to form a complex, integrated dynamic of personal involvement with the world. When I speak of 'caring' in the following I do not mean some mere hodgepodge of emotions. I mean that aspect of the personal center (the part of us that

says 'I'), from which value-laden experiences spring and to which they ultimately refer, which can, therefore, be said to *care*.

In experiencing value, caring creates a *correlation of value* between its experience and things in the world. Things in the world are deemed to have the value they evoke in the value-laden experience of a caring being. For example, one is pained when what one cares about comes to harm. Pain is an inherently value-laden experience. The negative value caring sees in the painful event is a reflection of the inherently negative value of the pain caused by the event. Through a correlation of value caring maps its value-laden experiences to things and events in the empirical world. (Of course, caring does not establish a simple equation between the two. The mapping can be quite complex. Often things that cause immediate pain are understood as having eventual value, and vice versa. In human culture, furthermore, the correlation of value is influenced considerably by what one is taught. One's propensity to *abide by* what one is taught, however, is itself based upon the correlation of value existing between oneself and the teacher. Nevertheless, the values that caring sees in things are, ultimately if not immediately, reflections of the fundamental values caring experiences in itself.) In this sense, *only* caring has fundamental value. Caring is the womb of value. Things in the world acquire value only in relation to caring and only relative to caring's inherent valuation of itself. Yet caring is not valuable *for* anything. In attempting to express the value of caring we run into a difficulty. Insofar as value has meaning only relative to caring, the value of caring itself is, in a sense, indeterminate, for there is nothing to refer it to. With respect to itself, however, the value of caring is absolute. Caring values things in the world relative to itself. Caring values itself absolutely. Caring is the *subject* of value. Things in the world are *objects* of value to the extent that they have value *for* caring. This is what is meant by saying that caring is the *ground* of value.

As the ground of value, caring makes a demand. It demands that its value be respected. This demand is inherent in the very nature of caring. It is part of what it is to care. We might say that caring *is* this demand. As this demand, caring claims for itself what we may now call a 'right.' It claims the right to be respected in its value. It claims the right to be treated as something having the very value that it experiences itself as having; as something whose value can, under no circumstances, be abridged. This claim is not claimed on the basis of something other than caring, or additional to caring, or foundational to caring. It is not claimed on the basis of something beyond caring. Caring makes this claim on the basis of itself alone. Caring *asserts* this claim. It would be an affront to the very nature of caring for it to be denied its value. And that alone is its 'right' to it.

Caring's demand that it be treated as a value in itself is what I will call the *ethical imperative*. I will define the ethical imperative as the demand caring makes to the world at large that it be recognized and treated as something of inherent and irreducible value. This imperative is based upon caring's implicit valuation of itself. It is not a right caring gets from elsewhere. It is a right inherent to the nature of caring itself.

This definition of the ethical imperative may at first seem odd. We ordinarily think of ethics as having to do with our responsibility toward others, not with our insistence upon our own value. I have purposely defined it in this manner, however, in order to indicate the derivation of ethical responsibility. We can only have ethical responsibilities to the extent that there is that in the world to which we owe respect. This something, I say, is caring. Thus, the ethical imperative arises from the nature of caring itself. Caring *issues* this imperative in relation to itself. It does not come from some transcendent realm (except insofar as caring *itself* comes from a transcendent realm – more about this later). Our most direct recognition of it, further,

involves not some mystical awareness of our responsibility toward others, but an immediate concern with others' behavior toward us. We are immediately aware of our own caring's demand for respect. It is as an extrapolation from this that we become aware of our responsibility toward others. The progression goes as follows. As caring beings we value things in the world relative to our caring and value our own caring inherently. Our valuation of our own caring entails a demand that our caring be respected. The concept of 'right' emerges as a generalized abstraction of this inherent, experienced, demand. We assert that it is 'right' that our caring be respected and 'wrong' for it to be violated. The basis of this 'right' is experienced immediately in our own caring. When we then realize (or learn) that others are caring beings just as we are, we recognize that they have rights just as we do. This is the derivation of the ethical imperative.

Thus, the ethical imperative is immediately experienced by each of us in the demand that our own caring makes with respect to itself. We become aware of it as an imperative concerning others when we realize that the caring of others makes the same demand as our own. It is *possible*, of course, for us to distinguish between the claims of our own caring and the claims of others. It is possible for us to affirm the former while denying the latter, to value our own caring while disregarding that of others, and thereby create an egoistic ethic. But such an attitude cannot be honestly maintained. Our demand for respect emerges out of the nature of caring as we find it in ourselves. The moment we acknowledge that a similar nature exists in others we must also recognize that a similar demand emerges from them as well. Further, since caring is the ground of value and there is no arbiter of value besides caring, there is no basis for us to claim that our caring is more worthy of respect than theirs. We must, therefore, either abandon our own demand for respect or acknowledge that their caring deserves the same respect as ours. In other words, the rights we recognize as native to our own caring are based, not on any special merit of our

own, but on the general nature of caring as such. But once we acknowledge the rights of caring as such, we thereby acknowledge the rights of caring wherever it may be found, and hence the rights of caring in others as well. We can, of course, continue to claim the supremacy of our own caring if we like, but we can never justify such a claim. The very nature of our own caring must, if we are honest, lead us to a recognition of the value inherent in caring as such, and hence to a recognition of the rights implicit in any instance of caring. To put it succinctly: Insofar as we see the rights implicit in our own caring, and insofar as we see that these rights exist, not because our caring is our own but because our caring is caring, we thereby see the rights implicit in any instance of caring, and, thus, we see the rights implicit in the caring of others as well.

From this we may derive such ethical standards as the golden rule and Kant's categorical imperative. Once we recognize that the caring of others is of the same inherent value as our own, it becomes incumbent upon us to accord others the same respect demanded by our own. By respecting others as we would have our own caring respected, we behave in a way that acknowledges the value inherent to caring as such, and, in so doing, affirm the value of our own caring as well.

The logic of the ethical imperative is clear from the above. The *force* of the imperative is contained in what may be called the principle of retributive justice. The principle of retributive justice is, in some sense, the converse of the golden rule. Whereas the golden rule implies that we affirm our own caring when we affirm the caring of others, the principle of retributive justice declares that to violate the caring of another is to deny the right of one's own caring to respect. Who creates this principle? It is, again, derived from caring itself. In violating what one *knows* to be another's caring one demonstrates a disrespect for the rights implicit in caring as such. But if caring as such has no rights, then one has no ground upon which to claim the rights of one's own

caring. Faced, then, with a threat to violence against one's own caring, one has no ethical claim to stand on. One can plead for mercy – but this entails the acknowledgment that caring (in this case one's own) should be accorded value by others, and hence an implicit admission that one has done wrong in not valuing the caring of others – or one can remain silent and simply accept violation. If one is unwilling to accept violation – and caring, is *inherently* unwilling to accept this – one must acknowledge the rights of caring as such. The uneasy dread that arises from the recognition that one has denied the rights of one's own caring by violating the rights of another's is what we are accustomed to calling 'bad conscience.' The pang of guilt is based, not merely on the dread that one's own caring may now be violated, but on the realization that one has thrown away its very right to be respected. And yet one cannot simply throw away this right, for one's caring continues to demand it. One's caring continues to demand a right that one has, oneself, violated and lost. Through the unyielding nature of one's own caring one is brought to an awareness of the severity and unacceptability of any violation to anyone's caring. In this conflict one's own caring becomes the voice of accusation against oneself. This is the *muscle* behind the ethical imperative.

With the above in mind we can now define such terms as 'right' and 'wrong' and 'good' and 'bad.' A thing is good to the extent that it is of positive value to a caring being. A thing is bad to the extent that it is of negative value. An act is right to the extent that it intends something good. An act is wrong to the extent that it intends something bad. Right and wrong acts are, in principle, subject to the ethical standards of the golden rule on the one hand and the principle of retributive justice on the other. In other words, to violate the golden rule is to subject oneself to the principle of retribution. The two together might be called the rule of ethical symmetry. Not to

treat others as you would be treated is to subject yourself (by right) to being treated as you treat others. This is so not by decree, but according to the logic of caring itself; a logic rooted in an onto-logic. The ethical significance of an act, therefore, is related both to its consequence and its intention. The consequence of a wrong act is harmful, insofar as it violates the inherent value of the other's caring. The intention of a wrong act is corrosive, insofar as it contravenes the inherent value of one's own.

Is it possible, though, to engage in only right acts? Is a truly ethical world achievable? Of course, if there were only one caring being in the universe there would be no conflict. One could always behave in one's best interest, or at least strive to. Given that there are many caring beings in the universe, however, and each is a ground of value, the potential for ethical conflict exists. The relativity of value owing to the multiplicity of grounds of value leads to ethical ambiguity. An act that is good for some might be bad for others, and vice versa. The study of ethics evolves out of the need to resolve ethical ambiguity. Such principles as the utilitarian maxim to seek 'the greatest good for the greatest number' are attempts to provide rules for selecting among ethically ambiguous alternatives. The utilitarian principle, however, is a *compromise* position. An act that achieves 'the greatest good for the greatest number,' if it also does harm to some, is an ethically ambiguous act, not an ideal one. Those to whom harm is done have a right to protest the act as wrong in relation to them (to the extent that the idea of 'right' is rooted in the inherent value of caring). To the extent that they have this right, they also would seem to have the right to try to reverse the act if they can. This leads to the highly paradoxical conclusion that a small group would have the right to suppress an act leading to the 'greatest good for the greatest number' in the name of their own interests. Of course in doing so their actions would themselves be ethically

ambiguous and, relative to those they are harming, wrong. An unambiguously right act would be one that tended toward the greatest good for all concerned. Unambiguously right acts, however, are only possible in a world in which the good of some caring beings is not in conflict with the good of others. The question of whether or not a truly ethical world is achievable, then, is dependant upon whether or not there is an unambiguous good available for all caring beings.

Thus far we have discussed only the implications of caring's valuation of itself. We have seen that it is from these implications that the ethical is derived. We have not discussed the positive content of what caring cares about, i.e., the good. In order to assess the possibility of achieving an ethical world we must turn from the question of caring's valuation of itself to the question of what caring cares about.

That caring values itself and hence issues an imperative is implied in the very meaning of caring. But when we now seek to learn what caring cares about how are we to proceed? This would seem to be strictly an empirical question. To answer it, it seems, we would have to poll each caring being and compile a list of responses. Nevertheless, it is possible that some progress can be made by looking at the structure of caring itself.

Caring, as we said earlier, is always ultimately a caring for itself. Caring seeks its own fulfillment; caring beings act in the world in order to achieve the fulfillment of their caring. The fact that caring *seeks* its own fulfillment implies that caring hasn't already got it. Caring, in other words, experiences itself as incomplete and in need. Caring's value-laden experiences are not random phenomena; they are ordered in relation to an end. Let us call that end 'well-being.' The individual caring being reaches out into the world to establish relationships with that which it requires to achieve well-being. But caring can never rest content with any relationship it has

established. As long as caring continues to care, it must concern itself with the preservation of that relationship. The future is inherently uncertain. This means that the security of what caring cares about is also uncertain. Caring must concern itself, then, with the future. But when does the future begin? The future, of course, begins immediately upon the present. The present is a perpetual passing away. If that which is now established in the present is not carried into the future it is lost. Actually, then, it is not so much the future that is uncertain as the present that is in flux. What we call the uncertainty of the future is really the evanescence of the present. Caring can never rest secure in what it cares about because there is no secure ground for it to stand on. Nothing in the present is secure. Nothing in the future is certain. Caring is subject to a perpetual threat. To be a caring being is to be perpetually threatened with the loss of everything.

But the situation is worse still. Caring itself, in being concerned with the establishment of what it cares about, is always fundamentally a value to itself, and is concerned for the establishment of itself. But caring is not the product of its own establishment. Caring always finds itself after the fact of its origin. The origin of caring, even the true thrust of caring, is a mystery to caring. Caring does not know how to establish itself because it does not know how it was established. And the threat to caring is still not complete. Human caring, of course, faces death. Death, the ultimate mystery, threatens to pour down upon it and sweep away everything in its wake. Death, as the threat of obliteration, is the final affront to caring. Death looms before caring with the force of inevitability – the inevitability of its loss of everything. Thus caring is more than threatened. Caring lives in the knowledge of the inevitable loss of everything it cares about. Caring has no idea how to defend itself against this. It frantically works at establishing itself and what it cares about, and perpetually fails to establish anything securely. It adopts

stratagems, behaviors, belief systems, and principles in its effort to secure itself from loss. But all to no avail. Caring hasn't the *power* to save itself.

Caring, in its effort to establish itself, seeks out relationships with things in the finite world of its experience. Caring's inability to finally satisfy itself is due to the discrepancy between the limitless nature of its need and the essential limitedness of the finite. Caring wishes to establish itself once and for all, but lives in a world in which everything passes away. So long as caring remains exclusively attached to the things of finitude it is doomed.

How does all of this affect the question of the ethical? The ethical imperative, we said, is based upon caring's valuation of itself. Caring demands of all the world that its value be acknowledged and respected. The story of human existence, however, is that the finite world in which we live does not respect this claim. There is a fundamental discord between the nature of human caring and the nature of the finite in which it finds itself. Imprisoned in its finitude, caring is doomed to defeat. In attempting to establish itself, caring sets up a correlation of value between the things of finitude and itself. Caring experiences itself as fulfilled to a greater or lesser degree depending upon the extent and security of the relationships it has established. But because caring is always subject to the threat of loss, nothing is ever sufficient. Caring requires limitless possessions and limitless power in order to satisfy its need for security. This is the basis of *greed*. The need for limitless acquisition in a limited world, of course, creates ethical conflict. But the deepest ethical conflict does not concern the competition for *things* among caring beings, it concerns the competition for each other. In its need for limitless control, each caring being must control every caring being. The need to control the other results in seeing the other as an object for one's own use rather than as a being of intrinsic worth. One disregards the inherent value of the other and treats the other merely as an instrument for oneself. The ethical symmetry

expressed in the golden rule and the principle of justice is broken. Blinded by its own need, caring blinds itself to the ethical.

Finally, given the inevitability of death, which is to say, the inevitability of its loss of everything it seeks, caring can only find satisfaction to the extent that it lives in some form of denial. Caring can either accept itself and deny death or accept death and deny itself. Caring, thus, always lives on the edge of despair and denial. In despair, caring loses all hope that its value will be finally affirmed. Despair corrodes caring's valuation of itself. When caring loses faith in its own value an opposite symmetry goes into effect from that of the golden rule and principle of justice. The *symmetry of despair* declares that if I don't matter, neither does anything else.

Thus, in our attempt to find an unambiguous good available to all which would allow us to escape the dilemma of ethical ambiguity, we discover that the clash between caring and finitude results in the breakdown of the ethical altogether. The ethical will not work in a world where caring beings are confined to finitude. Caring's only hope is to transcend itself in the direction of the infinite in order to escape the demise of the finite. Caring, thus, must seek to establish a relationship with 'God.'

God

It is sometimes claimed that without God there would be no ground for ethics.

We must be very careful in evaluating such a claim, however, for, on the surface, it threatens to strip both God and ethics of their meaning. We must ask what it is about God that provides for this ground. We have spent some time establishing the meaning of the ethical quite

apart from any doctrine of God. This is necessary. Ethics either has its own meaning or not. If not, it cannot get it from elsewhere. The full weight of God's omnipotence cannot make God's command *right* if the concept of right is devoid of meaning. To arbitrarily define right as God's will, as is often done, entails an empty, and ultimately pernicious, tautology. It is pernicious *because* it is empty. Now anything at all can be claimed as God's will and hence right. One has no criteria with which to argue the point one way or the other. Right itself has lost its meaning and, for that matter, so has God. God has ceased to signify the legitimate ethical ground (indeed, having lost the meaning of right, we have lost the ability to evaluate legitimacy). God has been reduced to a Cosmic bully who lords it over everyone else not on the basis of right – which now means nothing – but on the basis of brute power. But right cannot lose its meaning. The meaning of right is grounded in caring, and caring is an ontological fact. Thus such a God would scarcely be God. Such a God would be in violation of the ethical him-her-self.

Were God merely one caring being among others, acting solely in his-her private interest, God's ethical status would be no different from anyone else's. Such a God could, of course, induce us to serve his-her caring through intimidation. But any slave-owner can do that. Does such power make the slave-owner's demands legitimate? What could serve as a proper criterion of ethical legitimacy? Caring, we said, is the ground of value. The value of caring, therefore, is itself *beyond* evaluation. One cannot say of one being's caring that it has more or less value than another's, for this would require a criterion of value beyond caring itself, by which caring could be adjudged. God, as just another individual caring being, as a being who acts only in the interest of his-her own caring, could make no rightful claim to supremacy in value. It is no more right to be enslaved to God's caring than to anyone else's. A God who created caring beings merely to subjugate and violate them would be ethically repugnant, however glorious his-her creative

powers. Indeed this image, the image of a vastly powerful being who claims absolute supremacy for his-her personal caring to the exclusion of anyone else's is, theologically speaking, the very image of Satan. God cannot make a claim to supremacy on the basis of the value of his-her own private caring. Caring is the ground of value. There is no competing ground of value upon which God's claim could be based. But this is not to say that God can make no claim to supremacy at all. On the contrary, God can still make an ultimate claim. This claim is based, not on God as a particular caring being, but on God as the *fulfillment* of caring for all caring beings. The ethical authority of God cannot be based upon a supersession of the caring of finite caring beings, but only on a claim to fulfill them. It is only to the extent that God represents the ultimate fulfillment of caring for all caring beings that God can be said to be the ground of ethics.

It is with this in mind that we can begin to assess the relationship between God as creator, God as omnipotent, and God as ethical ground. As creator, God is the foundation of the existence and structure of our caring. What our caring is and what we care about may be said to be rooted in God's creative nature. As omnipotent, God determines the potential for the fulfillment of our caring. What it is ultimately possible for us to achieve may be said to depend upon God's power, for this power makes for all that is possible. The relation of our caring to God, then, is intrinsic rather than extrinsic; it is based upon the nature of our caring itself, rather than on something external that our caring encounters. As such, it is fundamentally different from the relation of a slave to a slave-owner. The slave-owner speaks in the name of his own caring from *outside* of the slave's caring and with disregard to the slave's caring. God (in principle) speaks in the name of *our* caring from *within* our caring and *for the sake of* our caring. God's ethical authority is not arbitrary. It is based upon God as the ontological ground of our caring and the teleological possibility for the fulfillment of our caring. God, as ground of ethics, does not supersede caring

as ground of ethics. On the contrary, God's ethical authority is derived from it. Caring remains and will always remain the ground of ethics. God can be said to be the ground of ethics only because, and only to the extent that, God is understood to be the ground and fulfillment of caring.

But what does this mean? In what way could God be the 'fulfillment of caring'? In our discussion of caring and finitude we noted that caring was out to establish itself and what it cares about. Its inability to finally achieve this is not difficult to understand. Caring hasn't the *power* to establish anything at all. All caring beings can do is push things around in the finite world, move them from one place to another, rearrange their form. We do not bring them here in the first place. We cannot hold them here in the last. We do not know the *principle* of being. We wish to provide a ground on which to hold the things we care about but we are not our own ground, and therefore cannot provide a secure ground for anything else. We cannot secure the things we establish because we are not ourselves secure. We can only secure ourselves by securing our relationship with that which establishes us. The ultimate good for caring, then, can only be God – the power that establishes all that is.

It is worth pausing here to comment upon one of the more important conceptual distinctions in religious thought. Depending upon the context in which it appears this distinction has been expressed in a variety of terms: the 'necessary and the contingent,' the 'infinite and the finite,' the 'eternal and the temporal,' the 'creator and the creation.' Each of these attempt to express the distinction between that which has the power of being in itself, and that which merely partakes of it. Finite beings, insofar as they are finite, arise from something other than themselves and abide in something beyond themselves. They partake of being for a time but it does not belong to them in their essence. They get their being from *elsewhere*. One of the great and enduring questions in human thought is: what is the nature of this elsewhere? What is it that

IS by its very nature?; what is primal in being?; what underlies the flux of phenomena – and what is our relationship to it? Is finitude the last word for us? Are our lives merely fleeting forms, “walking shadows” as Shakespeare puts it? Or are we, at base, related to that which is fundamental – that which bestows being upon all that is finite? In asking this question we are asking about our ultimate status in being. It is, of course, the question of God. But it is no less the question of ourselves.

It is because the question of God is also the question of ourselves that God is said to be 'good' in essence. God's goodness is not a personality trait. God is good because God is the power of establishment, the power of being, that underlies all that caring is and all that caring seeks. But it is not enough for God merely to have this power. God must be such that we are able to participate in it. What is this 'power of being'? What is its nature? Does *it* care? Is caring an epiphenomenon in the universe, a by-product of rock and dust and patterns of electromagnetism? Or is the ground of being itself something akin to caring, and hence, something that our caring can relate to and be finally established in? The question of God's goodness is a two-tiered question. The first asks what is the 'stuff' of goodness. What does goodness have to be in order to be accounted good? And the second asks whether that stuff is available to us. The final determination of whether or not there is a good God hinges on this second question. Is our caring answered in the fundamental nature of what-is? Is there something there to meet our outstretched arms? Or are we some odd side-show in the universe – a freak of nothingness – a random fluctuation in a swirl of dead matter that has produced, for one strange moment, something that *cares*? We began this paper by saying that without caring there would be no meaning in the universe. We can now see that without God there can be no ultimate fulfillment of meaning. Finite caring is incomplete in itself. The question of God is the question of whether there is that

which completes it. Finite caring is a bride waiting at a cosmic altar. Is it to be left there waiting? Is it to grow old, dejected, and die? Or is there, ultimately, someone to meet it? Faith in God is not, in essence, belief in the existence of some entity. Faith in God is faith in the ultimate satisfaction of caring.

But there is a problem. The problem is that the possibility of such satisfaction is by no means readily apparent. The 'correlation of value' that exists between caring and the finite world argues strongly against it. The world in which caring finds itself seems set up to inevitably frustrate and violate the values of caring. This problem is known, in theology, as the 'problem of evil.'

The problem of evil may be briefly expressed thus: If there is a God who is all-good and all-powerful, if the ground of reality is a goodness open to us, how is it that there is so much evil in the world? Destruction and havoc, violence and death, disease and suffering, seem able to plague us unchecked. Is this not inconsistent with a universe grounded in a caring, loving, God? The existence of evil seems to indicate that either God's power is deficient, or God's goodness is lacking. In either case, there would be no God in the fullest sense. Thus, the existence of evil seems to contradict the existence of God. We may call this the *theistic* problem of evil. Of course, we can overcome the logical dilemma entailed in this problem by simply denying the existence of God. But we do not thereby avoid the problem. We merely transform it into what may be called the *atheistic* problem of evil. The atheistic problem of evil is not a logical dilemma, but it is a dilemma nonetheless. We have already examined it. It can be simply stated thus: If it is the nature of life to ultimately strip me of everything I care about, how am I to avoid despair? The reason that atheism is not a satisfying answer to the theistic problem of evil is

because theism may be the only answer to the atheistic problem of evil. Indeed, the two problems are really one. It is the problem of how to affirm caring in the face of a world that seems ultimately to deny it. It is, in other words, the problem of *faith*.

Faith

What is faith? The concept of faith has been used and misused so often over the centuries that before we try to define its meaning we might do well to briefly discuss some popular distortions it has undergone.

First of all, faith is not a blind belief in the objective truth of empirical claims about which one has no knowledge. The claims of faith are principally claims of value not of empirical fact. It is only since the emergence of empirical science, however (relatively recently from religion's point of view), that the drive to know the empirical world 'for its own sake' has led to the radical separation of fact and value in human thought. Empiricism, by its very nature, deals with objects of experience stripped of subjective associations; i.e. associations of value. Religion, on the other hand, is concerned with *subjects* of experience in their relation to value. It is impossible, therefore, for empirical science to tell us anything about the essence of religious claims; it simply has no way to look at them. The problem, however, is that religion has always been accustomed to expressing itself through concrete images and metaphors. Suddenly, with the onset of empirical science, it found the import of its own writings reinterpreted for it. Science challenged religion to provide justification for its empirical claims. Religion defended itself by insisting upon the only justification for belief it knew anything about, namely, faith. But faith cannot justify empirical claims. Therein begins a confusion as to the meaning of faith that has persisted to this day. It is a confusion that has had disastrous consequences, principally, if not

initially, for religion itself. Because of this confusion the merit of faith has come more and more to be associated with a willingness to blindly accept certain unverified empirical facts; as if God's primary desire for human beings is that they be maximally gullible. But, even leaving aside the manifest absurdity of such an idea, the notion that there is some spiritual merit in gullibility or, even worse, willful self-deceit, is denied in virtually all religions by their emphasis on the importance of discerning between a worthy faith and a false one. If faith were merely a matter of unexamined belief how could one tell the difference? One of the principal tasks facing religion these days is to sort itself out with respect to its claims of empirical fact, spiritual fact, and subjective value. It still has some distance to go.

Secondly, faith is not blind obedience to the authority of some Church, or even the authority of God. In Western religious mythology the bad choices that human beings make often get them into trouble. But it is their ability to choose that make them the 'image of God,' the crowning achievement of God's creation. Blind obedience to any authority would be an attempt to escape one's ability and responsibility to choose and, as such, a contravention of one's own nature and a flight from one's ethical responsibility. As such it is a very bad choice. It is certainly not faith.

Both of these attitudes are often confused with faith because religious faith, by its nature, entails a certain degree of yielding. But what one yields, what (or whom) one yields to, and what one yields for, make all the difference. In faith one yields the immediate focus of one's private caring to the ultimate focus of caring as such in order to be able to affirm the *whole* of caring. One renounces one's effort to establish 'private infinitude' in favor of participation in the infinity of God. The risk of faith is that one will sacrifice the immediate for the sake of an ultimate that is actually unattainable. But this only seems a risk from the point of view of one who is not yet in

faith. From the standpoint of faith itself, it is the yielding of the immediate to the ultimate that allows one to truly enjoy the immediate.

What, then, is faith? To properly understand the meaning of faith we must understand its roots in the fundamental structure of caring. At its most basic, faith can be seen in the infant's confidence that when it reaches out for its mother's breast, the breast will be there. In other words, faith is caring's trust that it will find satisfaction. Caring does not arrive at this trust after careful analysis of the empirical world. The infant does not do a scientific study and conclude that it is reasonable to believe in its mother's breast. This trust is inherent to the very nature of caring. It is this trust that induces caring to reach out in the first place. Faith, thus, mediates between caring's want and its fulfillment. Faith would be the simplest and most natural of all attitudes if it were not for the fact that the structure of finite existence is such as to inevitably and severely disappoint, even betray, our faith in it.

It is out of the disappointment of faith that the question of God arises. Originally, God is not a question but a presence. The presence of God is the simple wholeness of being. Caring reaches out for what it wants and achieves it. In this movement we have a seeking and a finding, a craving and a fulfillment, a simple dialectic of wholeness. The goodness of being is obvious. God only becomes a question once this wholeness is shattered. Caring reaches out for what it needs and it is not there. The simple dialectic of wholeness is broken. Faith is broken. Caring must now look around. Caring has the experience of *absence*. Suddenly that which it seeks is *not*. The *notness* of that which it seeks is a threat to it, an affront, a violation.

This shattering of wholeness mustn't be thought of in strictly material terms. The absence that caring experiences is not in essence the absence of some 'thing.' It is the absence of its own wholeness. Or, to put it another way, it is the presence of a need, a want, a lack. But it is not the

mere presence of want that shatters wholeness. So long as faith is there to mediate between want and fulfillment wholeness is preserved. It is when the absence of satisfaction finally leads to the loss of faith that wholeness is shattered. Now caring turns in on itself. Caring withdraws from its spontaneous openness to the world. Caring now reaches out only tentatively, hesitantly, calculatingly. A mote is built between caring and its world. A gap, an absence, is placed between the presence of caring and the presence of its world. The width of this mote is the measure of caring's loss of faith. The great dread of caring is that it will be utterly overtaken by absence. It will be all want with nothing to fulfill it. Nothing to relate to. Nothing to commune with. Darkness. Void. Isolation. Exclusion. It is not simple nonexistence that caring dreads. It is the *presence* of absence; the being overtaken by absence; the continuing to be as sheer, unmitigated, *lonely*, want – in the midst of nothing.

Absence gives rise to a recognition of one's finitude. Caring reaches out for what it wants and it is not there. Where is it? It is elsewhere, it is beyond, it is out of reach. Suddenly caring is aware that there is an elsewhere, a beyond, an out of reach. One is not the whole of what is. One exists in relation to a world that extends beyond one, and from which one can be separated. The otherness of the world is both a threat and an enticement. It is an enticement because it contains that which would complete one, that which would make one whole. It is a threat because it can withhold itself, and one can become increasingly separated from it.

It is the awareness of finitude that gives rise to the question of God. One is aware that one exists in dependence upon an other. One's relation to this other is not a simple spatial relation or temporal relation. It is an *ontological* relation; a relation having to do with the fundamental structure of one's being. One realizes that one is not complete. One cannot stand on one's own. One requires the other in order simply to *be*. One does not have the power of being within

oneself. This leads to the question of what does have it. What is the ultimate that one stands upon? God, as the power of being giving rise to all things, represents the matrix encompassing all that is. As such, God is the possibility of wholeness.

Caring is now on a journey. It is on the journey toward wholeness. But it cannot proceed on this journey with the simple faith it began with. Its faith has been broken. Faith has become an issue, a question, a problem. The fulfillment of faith is by no means obvious. The goodness of being is by no means apparent. The world of otherness that caring must commune with in order to achieve wholeness extends far beyond it. It extends into a distant past and a distant future. It extends to the others of one's family, one's nation, one's world. The faith required to respond to this situation must extend beyond these boundaries as well.

What we are describing here is nothing extraordinary. It is not something that has gone wrong in infancy. It is not something that can be made right by psychotherapy. The issues here are ontological and spiritual, not psycho-pathological. Our world, the realm of finitude, is in its *very nature* a fractured wholeness. The original wholeness of caring's early faith was false. That is why it was able to be shattered. It was a finite wholeness and thus it did not truly encompass the whole. It cannot be returned to. Caring's journey must take it beyond, not back. The question of religious faith begins when caring recognizes that its only hope of final satisfaction is in centering itself within the infinite – that which gives rise to the whole of what-is.

Faith, in the religious sense then, is caring's commitment to that which transcends, grounds, and fulfills, the finite. It is caring's commitment to the possibility of its participation in infinite wholeness. We are, of course, speaking of faith in the abstract. The particularities of one's relation to the infinite are envisioned differently in different religions. Nevertheless, the

essence of faith is the same. It is caring's devotion to that which completes it. As such, it is caring's ultimate, but paradoxical, affirmation of itself. In faith caring affirms its ultimate destiny of participation in the infinite, but only by surrendering its egoic desire for *private* infinitude.

Faith is a commitment, not a conclusion. There is a great deal of confusion surrounding the question of the justification for faith. A good deal of this is because of a failure to distinguish between a belief held in faith and one held for epistemic reasons; i.e., reasons that would support a claim of fact. If one believes that the moon is made of rock as opposed to bleu cheese, for instance, one does so for sound epistemic reasons. Scientists have investigated the moon, astronauts have walked it, stargazers have gazed at it. Each can provide a reasoned argument appealing to commonly accepted fact criteria to support their claim.

Beliefs held in faith are of another sort altogether. Faith, in essence, does not address issues of objective fact but of subjective value. Faith is caring's affirmation of itself, of its ultimate thrust. The motivation for faith is that it is desirable for spiritual life, not that it is supported by objective evidence. In other words, what would, in an empirical investigation, be viewed as subjective bias, is, in matters of faith, the very basis upon which a belief is held. This implies, of course, that a belief held in faith is really a rather different thing from a belief held for epistemic reasons. An epistemic belief claims that something is in fact the case, or is likely to be the case. Faith can make no such claim. Faith *holds* something to be the case because it expresses the deepest concerns of caring. Whether and in what manner it is in fact the case remains – from an objective point of view anyway – unsettled. Whereas a scientific theory is a body of empirical assertions, a religious creed is an articulation of faith. The first expresses a set of factual conclusions, the second expresses a spiritual commitment. The first employs precise

language designed to allow for empirical verification. The second employs evocative language designed to elicit a spiritual response. But all of this is not to say that faith makes no legitimate claim at all. On the contrary, faith makes a most significant claim. Faith claims that it is possible for caring to be ultimately fulfilled. This claim, however, is more on the order of a traveler's belief that she will eventually arrive at her destination than it is like a scientist's belief that the moon is made of rock. The first is a commitment to a desired possibility, the second is a conclusion as to fact.

There is always, in religious faith, an element of 'in spite of.' What is immediately apparent is the finite world. What is immediately evident is the demise to which all finite things, including oneself, are subject. The world-view of faith is not adopted because it is evident, but because it is sought. It is not adopted because it is likely, but in spite of the fact that it often seems not to be. Faith is not a claim to know. It is an affirmation of one's relation to the ultimate in spite of the fact that one does not know. To the question: "Can you rationally conclude, using the best reasoning you can summon and the best evidence you can amass, that anything at all transcends the empirical world?" a perfectly legitimate answer is, "No, not at all. But I have faith."

It is the 'in spite of' character of faith that necessitates what Kierkegaard calls the 'leap' of faith. It is a leap from a spiritual orientation rooted in the world of finitude, to a spiritual orientation that affirms one's relation to the infinite. Again, the motivation for faith is spiritual, not epistemic. Caring looks out at the finite world and faces a choice. It can affirm the ultimacy of finitude, and deny its own deepest longings. Or it can affirm its longings, and deny the ultimacy of finitude.

There is a famous argument concerning the choice of faith known as Pascal's wager. Pascal's wager is sometimes classed among arguments for the existence of God, but it is certainly not that. Pascal's wager is, rather, an argument for the adoption of faith. Although Pascal presents his argument in specific relation to Christianity, it can be adapted to refer to the question of faith in general. In our own terms, we can express the argument thus: If caring has faith in its relation with the ultimate and turns out to be wrong, it loses no more for being wrong than if it had not had faith, and in the meantime has lived in affirmation of itself. If it turns out to be right, of course, it gains everything. On the other hand, if caring has no faith in its relation with the ultimate and turns out to be right, it gains no more for being right than if it had had faith, and in the meantime has lived in despair. If it turns out to be wrong, on the other hand, it has diverted itself from its own fulfillment.

This argument, as seen, has no bearing on the question of whether or not faith is true, but only on whether or not faith is wise. It concludes that faith is a wise choice even if the worldview of faith seems improbable. It is the wisdom of the choice of faith in spite of the improbability of the truth of faith that necessitates the leap of faith. It is not a leap from an acknowledgment of the improbable to an assertion that the improbable is really probable. That would simply be dishonest. It is a leap from a spiritual orientation conditioned by the apparent improbability of the ultimate fulfillment of caring, to a spiritual orientation that affirms it anyway.

Just as despair leads to the erosion of the ethical, so faith leads to an affirmation of the ethical. Freed from the intensive self-concern of despair, one is liberated to affirm the infinite value of caring in oneself and others. Faith shifts the 'correlation of value' set up between caring

and the finite world in such a manner that the demise of the finite no longer appears ultimately threatening. Caring is able to let go of its desperate need to possess and control the things of finitude. Caring is now able to live in the celebration of its own value and the value of others. Faith, thus, heals the damage done to the ethical in its confrontation with finitude by allowing caring to accept and affirm itself, and thereby accept and affirm the value of others as well.

To summarize then: Faith is not something innately foreign to caring. Caring starts out with it. Caring starts out with a simple, natural faith in the goodness of being. This goodness is experienced as the immediate presence or immanence of satisfaction. This simple faith is broken, however, in caring's encounter with finitude. The finality of finitude, the apparent inevitability of loss at the hands of finitude, erodes caring's valuation of itself (which is the basis of the ethical) and leads to despair. Because of this problem one is awakened to the question of God. Theism posits a reality that transcends the horizons of finitude and can, therefore, redeem the losses of finitude. Religious faith makes the ethical viable again by asserting that its defeat at the hands of finitude is not final.

But religious faith is more problematic than the simple faith it replaces. The moment we move toward religious faith we are confronted with what we have called the 'theistic problem of evil.' The very evils that caused us to lift our eyes toward the infinite now cause us to question the goodness of the infinite. The viability of faith depends upon our ability to somehow overcome this problem. It is the theistic problem of evil, precisely, that is graphically presented in the story of Abraham and Isaac.

Abraham and Isaac

God demands that Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac. One reads this and winces. Not to wince would be not to acknowledge the extremity of what God is demanding. God is demanding that Abraham sacrifice the thing most dear to him in his life. God is demanding that Isaac sacrifice life itself. How can one escape the conclusion that God is cruel? How can one escape the despair of living in a universe of such boundless cruelty?

Of course, Abraham is not the only one from whom sacrifice is demanded. To be a caring being in this finite world is to be confronted with the inevitability of having to sacrifice everything. It is the very structure of finite existence that demands this of us. Abraham is not unique. The Bible has taken the universal demand that finitude makes of all of us and put it into the mouth of God as a command to Abraham.

How is Abraham to respond? Abraham, of course, is a man of faith. But now his faith is challenged – not because he is unsure that it is God who makes the demand but because he *is* sure. Because it is God who makes the demand there is no escaping it. Because it is God who makes the demand there is no appeal. He can resist the demand of God but he cannot cancel it. His faith in the goodness of existence itself is challenged. His faith in the goodness of God is challenged. Does the ultimate itself violate the ethical? Can it be that God is not good? Abraham is face to face with what we have called the theistic problem of evil, which confronts the man who adopts faith as a response to the atheistic problem of evil. But Abraham's problem is not a logical one. He can deny the goodness of God, but only at the expense of denying the goodness of life itself. The problem of evil is a challenge to faith. The problem of evil asks us how we can avoid despair in a world full of suffering and loss.

Abraham has a choice. He can insist upon the immediacy of his caring and deny God, or he can have faith in the ultimate triumph of caring and assent. It is natural for caring to favor the immediate. It is natural for caring to want what it wants in the moment that it wants it. But in the course of life one learns to postpone gratification. One learns to lift one's eyes beyond the immediate and extend one's caring across a wider field. One learns to do this because one must; because the world does not allow for instant satisfaction. But now God is demanding something far more extreme. God is demanding that Abraham extend himself not merely beyond the moment, but beyond the entirety of his finite existence, the only existence that he knows. He is demanding that he extend his deepest caring beyond the boundaries of life itself; to a beyond he cannot even be sure is there. What is Abraham to do? Because he is free, he can refuse to accept God's demand. He can protest and rage and howl at the injustice of it. He can throw himself upon the ground and refuse ever again to move. He can connive and scheme and try to figure a way out. He can spend the rest of his life in bitterness, or sorrow, or stoic indifference. But because Abraham is finite, he can never escape. Abraham can break himself upon the rocks of finitude, or he can transcend them. This is the choice that caring faces in its confrontation with the finite. It can live in faith, or break itself in despair.

Abraham's answer is greater faith. Abraham's answer is a faith that transcends the demise of the finite. The ultimate goodness of existence is not visible to the eyes of finitude. It is not visible because of the clash between the limitlessness of what caring needs and the limitedness of what finitude provides. In the finite world caring will always lose in the end, if only because there is an end. Caring divides the finite world between its good and its evil, between what sustains and expands its finite existence and what threatens it. But God's goodness is not the simple goodness of finitude. God's is a goodness *beyond* the goods and evils of finite life. God's

world is a consuming fire as well as a creative light. God's goodness stands on the other side of destruction. It is only through the eyes of faith that God's goodness can finally be seen. It is only through the eyes of faith that the problem of evil is finally resolved. It is not resolved logically, but spiritually. In faith, it is transcended. The response of faith to the challenge of faith posed by the apparent evils of life can only be greater faith. This is the lesson of the story of Abraham and Isaac.

But to understand this lesson it is imperative that we understand what faith means. Abraham does not assent to God out of abject submission to an authoritarian tyrant. This would be worse than despair. Abraham assents in the faith that neither his nor Isaac's caring will be *finally* violated. Abraham assents in the faith – which in Abraham we must assume amounts to an *awareness* – that there is a goodness beyond the fire of destruction, in which the losses imposed by finitude are ultimately resolved. Abraham's is an example of fulfilled faith. Abraham no longer doubts the goodness of God. If he did he would not – *should* not – assent. His love of God does not *supersede* his love of Isaac. Rather, Abraham trusts – subjectively he *knows* – that he and Isaac will ultimately be well. Abraham *trusts* God. He does not abandon his ethical sense, he 'suspends' it in trust that *caring* – his and Isaac's – will finally be respected, indeed loved. Abraham has discovered a Good beyond the goods and evils of finite life, upon which his soul has come to rest.

Finally, we must ask what God's *motive* is in demanding the sacrifice of Isaac? In order to address this question we must first come to an understanding of the nature of the Bible and biblical stories in general. The Bible is not, principally, an attempt to relate historical truths, but spiritual truths. The literal historicity of the Bible, for all the emphasis placed on it in certain

religious circles, is not only doubtful, it is unimportant. Those who require the Bible to be literally true in order to fortify their faith are building their spiritual house on sand. What may or may not have actually happened between Abraham and Isaac all those many years ago is not the point. The question we must ask is: What is the story trying to teach us?

In demanding that Abraham sacrifice Isaac God is demanding little more than what the structure of finite existence demands of us all. We do not, of course, all respond like Abraham. It is of the nature of the finite world that we are perpetually threatened with the loss of our most cherished relations. It is of the nature of the finite world that we inevitably face, in death, the loss of all of them. In asking why God demands the sacrifice of Isaac we are asking no less a question than why the structure of existence is the way it is. Theologically, we can debate this question endlessly. The story of Abraham and Isaac provides no answer to this question. The finite world that we live in, demanding the sacrifices that it does, is a simple, brute (and oftentimes brutal) fact. The motive of the story is not to explain why existence is the way it is. The motive of the story is to demonstrate how we should respond to it.

In demanding that Abraham sacrifice Isaac God is demanding that Abraham shift his *correlation of value* from one conditioned by finitude to one conditioned by faith. This shift requires what Kierkegaard calls a “teleological suspension of the ethical.” It is now time for us to penetrate more deeply into the meaning of this phrase.

The word 'teleological' is derived from the Greek word *telos* meaning aim, goal, or end. The *telos* of a thing is its purpose. We began this paper by noting that if the universe were devoid of anyone who *cares* it would have no *telos*, no purpose. It might, of course, still exist. It might still have a structure and a past and a future. But it would have no point. Only caring beings can truly have a *telos*, and it is only in relation to them that the universe can have a point.

The telos of a caring being is to achieve its own fulfillment. This is not some arbitrary goal that caring beings adopt. It is fundamental to the very nature of caring. It is what caring *is*. Caring cannot abandon its telos without doing violence to itself.

The spiritual attitude that accompanies this projection toward fulfillment is what we have called *faith*. Caring's demand that its project of fulfillment (and, implicitly, itself) be respected is what we have called *the ethical imperative*. Faith and ethics, thus, go hand in hand. The ethical is caring's insistence on its immediate value. Faith is caring's commitment to its ultimate value. A world in which there were no conflict between the ethical and faith, between the immediate and the ultimate, would be an easy one. In such a world everything would combine to affirm the value of caring and lead it ever onward toward its consummate fulfillment.

But such is not the world in which we live. We live in a world in which the ethical is violated regularly. Indeed, the very structure of finite existence seems set up to ensure this violation. This fact is known in theology as the problem of evil. The problem of evil, as we have seen, is a classic problem in the philosophy of religion. Cast in conceptual terms, it is the problem of how to reconcile the idea of God's perfect goodness with the presence of evil in the world. Considered in this manner it is a logical problem involving mutually irreconcilable terms. But at a spiritual level it has a far deeper significance. Spiritually, the problem of evil is really a problem for faith. It is the problem of how to retain faith in the face of a world in which the ethical is continually violated.

It is this dilemma that is addressed in the story of Abraham and Isaac. From the perspective of finite value, what God is asking of Abraham is intolerable. God, it seems, has no *right* to ask such a thing. In our discussion of God and ethics we saw that even God has no right to violate the ethical. But there it is. Abraham is presented with the blunt fact of God's demand.

God offers no explanation. There is no justification proffered in terms of some greater finite good – nor could there be, for the value of a human being, in this case the value of Isaac, is inestimable. Abraham is given nothing with which he might assuage his ethical sensibilities. Abraham is given only a choice. He can place his ultimate commitment in the immediacy of finite life, or he can have faith in the ultimate goodness of God despite the demise of the finite, and *suspend* his ethical judgment.

This is the problem of faith. Faith would be the simplest thing, the most natural thing, if it were never contravened. But as it is faith is a challenge. At the deepest level, the way we respond to this challenge determines our orientation to life. We can insist upon the immediacy of the finite and condemn life for violating it, or we can suspend ethical judgment in faith and affirm life in spite of everything. For those of us who have been wounded in life the temptation to do the former is great. But in the end it is our very commitment to the ethical that demands that we suspend our ethical judgment: To abandon faith in the name of the ethical is to give up one's belief in the possibility of fulfillment in the name of one's very right to it.

Thus, *suspension* of the ethical is not abandonment of the ethical. It is a *teleological* suspension; done for the purpose of securing the faith required to finally *affirm* the ethical in a complete and universal way. By loosening his attachment to his own finitude, Abraham is able to extend his caring to all. This, finally, is righteousness. Thus, ultimately, the suspension of the ethical in faith is *for the sake of* the ethical; it is for the sake of shifting our correlation of value from the finite world that cannot support even our own good, to the infinite reality that sustains the good of all.

And this shift, finally, is the glory of human existence. In the end, it is not caring's telos to establish itself within finitude. It is not caring's telos to rest comfortably in its limitedness. The

world does not permit it and, truth be told, caring would not accept it. Caring has a grander destiny. Caring's telos is to transcend itself in the direction of the infinite. Caring does not learn of this destiny from its study of the world, but from itself. Caring's ability to believe in itself in spite of the world is its ability to transcend the negativities of finitude in the name of its highest aspiration.

The story of Abraham and Isaac, of course, does not end with the sacrifice of Isaac. At the critical moment God intervenes and has Abraham sacrifice a ram instead. The purpose of the story is not to show that God violates the ethical, nor to suggest that we should be willing to violate it in the name of God. The purpose of the story is to affirm the necessity of faith. That God finally prevents Abraham from sacrificing Isaac is not incidental to the story; it is the story's consummation. It is the Bible's way of saying that, *in the end, God's goodness prevails*, even when things very much appear otherwise. Abraham's faith, in other words, is vindicated. Abraham is not asked to abandon his finite caring, but to rest it upon a transcendent ground. He is to see the finite goods of life, for however long they endure, not as insecure possessions to which he must cling, but as divine gifts to be celebrated and, when the time comes, released. It is just this shift that makes Abraham "the father of faith." Having transcended the finite in faith, however, Abraham is now called upon to live in it in faith. He is to live in it, and live beyond it. This is what the structure of the world demands. This is what allows for true joy in the face of finitude. This is the challenge, and the gift, of faith.