

Abraham, Isaac, and the Toxin

a Kavkan reading of the binding of Isaac

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Abstract: I argue that the story of God's commanding Abraham to sacrifice Isaac can be read as a variant of Kavka's (1983) Toxin Puzzle. On this reading, Abraham has no reason to kill Isaac, only reason to intend to kill Isaac. On one version of the Kavkan reading, it's impossible for Abraham, thus situated, to form the intention to kill Isaac. This would make the binding an impossible story: I explore the ethical and theological consequences of reading the story in this way. Finally, I suggest that analytic philosophers may have more to contribute to interpretive projects in philosophical theology than generally practiced.

I cannot think myself into Abraham ...for what is offered me is a paradox.

—Kierkegaard, 1983: 33

Introduction

There's a philosophical tradition of offering interpretations of that terrible tale wherein God commands Abraham to kill his child Isaac. Kierkegaard famously began *Fear and Trembling* with four different interpretations of the temptation¹ at Mount Moriah. There's a much older Jewish tradition of adding different narrative elements to the story in ways that enhance and change the bare story in Genesis 22 (see Green (1982); Lebens (2017)). The story beleaguers debates about divine

command theory and the nature of faith (prominently, Adams (1999)). Recently, Stump (2010), Hazony (2012, 2015), Lebens (2014, 2017), and Worsley (2018) have each offered philosophically rich reflections on the story. Even when not the focus of a paper, it's the sort of story that is readily wheeled in to illustrate other philosophical topics (e.g., Broome (2001) on incommensurable value).

Here, I will try my hand at this longstanding philosophical practice. Well, really, I will try Gregory Kavka's hand. I will argue that binding of Isaac can be read as a variant of Kavka's (1983) Toxin Puzzle. Just as, in Kavka's toxin case, one has good reason to intend to drink the toxin without sufficiently good reason to drink it, so Abraham has good reason to intend to kill Isaac but no sufficiently good reason to kill Isaac. In both cases, there's a puzzle as to whether the agent can form the climactic intention.

On the face of things, it's a bit outlandish (or, perhaps worse, *boring*) to suggest that a story in Genesis can be read as a version of a 20th-century, philosophical thought experiment. Nevertheless, the story is inescapably philosophical. What ought one to do (the story asks) if God were to command one to do something horrible? Can God break God's promises? And what does faithfulness in the face of God's apparent faithlessness look like?

As a broader aim, I think that in addition to all the good work analytic philosophers of religion have produced on arguments about the existence or the nature of God, or on the epistemic significance of religious experience, and so on, we have some of the tools to think about interpreting religiously significant stories. Philosophy is often wheeled in after interpretive work is done as practitioners try to

systematically construct a theology on the basis of sacred stories. But sometimes, religious stories contain logical puzzles or thought-experimental elements. And at least in those cases, analytic philosophers may have something to contribute (cooperatively, in conjunction with other disciplines) to the interpretive task of understanding the stories themselves. This paper aims to make the case, by way of example, that analytic philosophers of religion should take up this hermeneutical task more often.

I've said that I'm going to offer an interpretation of the Mount Moriah story. But which one? There are no tradition-neutral ways to approach the text. The story of Isaac's binding (or Ishmael's in Islamic traditions)² has been told and retold in importantly different ways both within and among the Abrahamic religions. In using the NRSVUE translation of Genesis 22, I'm using a Christian translation of the text, and (inevitably) I bring my own Christian upbringing and set of familiar religious texts to the story. Nevertheless, to the extent that it is practicable, my interest here is in what philosophical sense can be made of the Genesis story taken on its own. At the end of the paper, I'll reflect on ways that various retellings of the story have tried to escape the Kavkan tension at the heart of Genesis.

Here, then, is the Genesis version of the story in brief.

God promised Abraham that he would have many descendants even though he and his wife Sarah were very old. But miraculously, God gives Abraham and Sarah a son, Isaac. Isaac is the child of the covenant: God has promised that he will give Abraham many descendants through Isaac in particular.

But then God appears to go back on this covenant. God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering on Mount Moriah. Abraham takes Isaac to Mount Moriah. When Isaac asks why they aren't bringing an animal to sacrifice, Abraham tells Isaac that God will provide the lamb. At the top of the mountain, Abraham lays Isaac on the altar, and then comes the pivotal moment:

Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am'. He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me'. (Genesis 22:9–12)

God does provide a ram. Abraham sacrifices the ram, and God praises Abraham for his obedience, reaffirming his covenant to give Abraham many descendants.

This is a fascinating and, it must be admitted, a horrifying story. I'm going to offer one philosophically interesting way to interpret the story. But first, what desiderata can be hoped for in making sense of it? Or at least, what desiderata do *I* want?

First, it should be a story that fits with the text, in the sense that it is a plausible interpretation of it. I don't purport to be giving the only reasonable (or philosophically interesting) reading of the text – it's not that kind of story! One reason for the story's longevity is that it resists simple interpretation and invites the reader to elaborate and play around with alternative readings. But I will try to show that the Kavkan interpretation is among the plausible ways to read Genesis.

Fitting the text is one goal; here's another. The interpretation should say something about how Abraham exemplified faithfulness through this temptation. Was it by intending to sacrifice Isaac? Was it by believing that God would provide the lamb? Why is this a story for which we remember Abraham?

That said, those hoping for an apologetic defense of Abraham's actions will be disappointed by my reading. That's because the third desideratum of my interpretation is that it not say anything good about Abraham's intention to murder his son (or, for that matter, about God's command to do so).

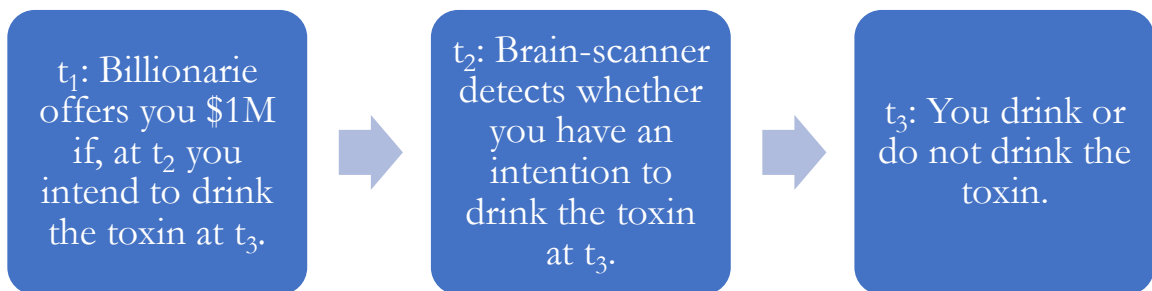
Partly, this is because I think we're supposed to read the story this way. We're supposed to feel shocked that God has commanded Abraham to kill Isaac and relieved when God reverses course and stops Abraham from going through with it: we're not supposed to be rooting for Isaac's murder, even mutedly, once we find out that God has commanded it. But even if I didn't think this was a natural reading, I would still want a reading of the story according to which Abraham does nothing right by intending to kill Isaac. This text has been presented and taught as a model of faithfulness to God. As a project in philosophical theology, it's vital that, insofar as we choose to use this text for theological or ethical education, we have a reading of it that does not make (even attempted) child abuse a proper means of faithfulness.³ If that makes me a partial reader of the text, I am happy to accept the charge.⁴

These, then, are the three desiderata that I propose: (1) that it be a plausible interpretation of the Genesis text, (2) that the interpretation give a satisfactory account of the sense in which Abraham responds faithfully, and (3) that the interpretation say nothing positive about any intentions or commands to kill Isaac.

Kavka's toxin puzzle

I've now introduced the principal story and my desiderata for an interpretation of it. I've said that my interpretation will be Kavkan. So, what is Kavka's toxin puzzle?

Kavka (1983) tells a story about a peculiar toxin. The toxin is a poison that will make you dreadfully miserable for a day, but it is not lethal nor does it have any long-term side effects. An eccentric billionaire offers you the following deal: If tomorrow at 10 am you have the intention *to drink the toxin tomorrow at noon*, then the billionaire will move one million dollars into your bank account. A brain scanner will determine whether you have the intention at 10 am.⁵ Importantly, the money will be moved into your bank account solely on the basis of whether you have the *intention* to drink the toxin, not on whether you actually drink the toxin.



What seems like easy money turns out to be hard to get. What is easy to do is to intend to *intend* to drink the toxin. After all, you have a great reason – one million of them – to intend to drink the toxin. But given that you have already formed the intention at 10 am, there isn't any reason for you to actually drink the toxin at noon tomorrow leftover. After all, the money will already be irretrievably in your bank

account (or unattainably out of it) when noon rolls around. Summarizing the conundrum, Mele explains that ‘it looks as though you have a reason to intend to do something that you have no reason to do’ (Mele (1992), 172). The reason it’s so hard to intend to drink the toxin once you’ve fully reflected on your situation is that there’s an obviously better course of action: intend to drink the toxin at 10 am and then *don’t* drink the toxin at noon! And if *that’s* your plan, you aren’t *really* intending to drink the toxin at all.

There are various creative workarounds whereby one might try to escape the puzzle. You might try to *forget* that the money will be in (or out) of your bank account regardless of whether you actually drink the toxin. Or you might try to give yourself an external reason to drink the toxin, for instance, by signing away the million to a rival if you don’t actually go through with drinking it. Kavka stipulates that those aren’t available in his case (Kavka (1983), 34–35). The puzzling feature of the case is that you should need such gimmicks in the first place, given that you already have incredibly good reasons to intend to drink the toxin.

Kavka summarizes the intended lesson this way:

One cannot intend whatever one wants to intend any more than one can believe whatever one wants to believe. As our beliefs are constrained by our evidence, so our intentions are constrained by our reasons for action (Kavka (1983), 36).

That doesn’t mean that our intentions are straightforwardly determined by our reasons or that we cannot act irrationally. It just means that, at least in ordinary

situations, we can't do things we obviously have no reason to do, especially if we also have significant reason not to.

Kavka's analogy to epistemology is illuminating. The beliefs we have are, in some sense, constrained by the evidence we have. This doesn't mean we can't develop irrational beliefs that violate our evidence. Nor does it mean that we never have voluntary control over our beliefs. But it's also very hard for us, bordering on impossible, to simply choose to believe things that flagrantly or obviously violate the evidence we (take ourselves to) have. For instance, I can't just choose to believe by an act of will that there are an odd number of stars. Why not? That belief is too obviously not supported by my evidence for me to believe it. Similarly, it borders on impossible for someone to intend *to drink the toxin* at noon when they know that, once they have formed the *intention* and got the money in their account, there is no longer any reason for them to ingest the painful toxin.

Following Kavka, I'm going to be a bit loose about whether it's strictly (psychologically) *impossible* for someone to intend to drink the toxin (without a sufficiently creative workaround) or merely (psychologically) very difficult to pull off.⁶ What's important for our purposes is that 'there is a puzzle lurking here' (Kavka (1983), 35). And a puzzle that shows up in the Abraham story.

Here are the conditions that give rise to toxin-like puzzles.

1. S has (at least apparent) good (enough) reason to intend to φ .
2. Given that S intends to φ , S has no (at least apparent) good (enough) reason to φ .
3. S cannot intend to φ without (at least apparent) good (enough) reason to φ .

The puzzling result: S cannot intend to φ despite having arbitrarily good reason to intend to φ . Put another way: reasons to intend can't help you unless they bring with them reasons to do the thing intended.

The third condition articulates the Kavkan premise that our intentions are constrained by our reasons. There is, of course, a debate to be had here. Bratman (1998) theorizes that, as creatures with limited cognitive resources, we may sometimes be rational in resolutely sticking to our plans even when we no longer have reason to perform particular parts of that plan. Too easily abandoning earlier intentions can lead to regret when preferences fluctuate. But even Bratman notes that in toxin puzzle cases we would regret *not* abandoning our plan to drink the toxin once the money is already in our bank account (Bratman (1998), 71–72).

Others have been more optimistic that there are ways to get the million dollars. But cases in which agents purportedly get the million dollars differ from Abraham's circumstances. Harman (1998) hypothesizes that one could get the money by forming an intrinsic desire to drink the toxin (perhaps as a celebratory libation for securing the million dollars). Whether or not this is a plausible solution to the toxin case, it's hard to imagine Abraham developing an intrinsic desire to kill his child – the analogue of intending to drink the toxin developed in the next section. And harder still to imagine that Abraham's developing such an intrinsic desire would be presented as a model of faithfulness.

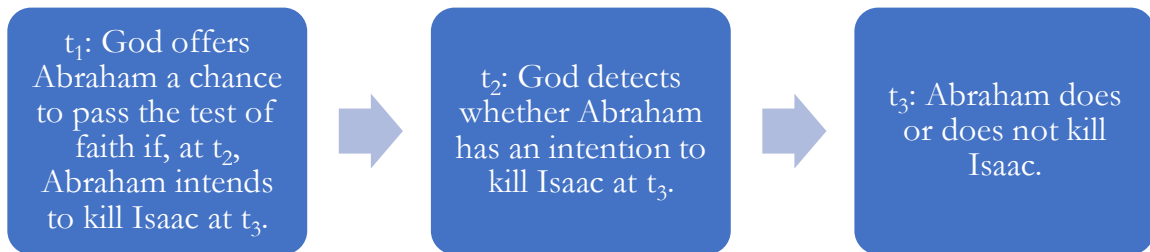
Similarly, Mele (1992) develops a story in which it is arguably possible for an agent to successfully intend to drink the toxin and win the million dollars. But Mele's case involves an agent who seems fated to drink the toxin: in such a case, Mele

argues, an agent can rationally choose to *intentionally* drink the toxin rather than doing so *unintentionally*. Looking ahead, one could imagine the Genesis story to be one in which Abraham takes himself to be fated to kill Isaac: God wills that Abraham should kill Isaac and so (Abraham believes) he shall kill Isaac, aided or unaided by his intention to do so. But while Mele (1992) draws some important lessons about intention from such fated agents, Abraham is not one of them. Indeed, as argued further on, far from seeing Isaac's death as fated, Abraham holds firmly to the possibility that God will relent.

Without pretending that there's no further debate to be had,⁷ let us, for present, grant the Kavkan premise (3), at least as it applies to Abraham's situation. After all, this paper's goal is to present a Kavkan reading of the Abraham and Isaac story, not to defend a theory of intention. In the next section, I will argue that there is a plausible way of reading the story in which Abraham meets the conditions for (1) and (2). If so, then there's a way of reading the story according to which Abraham faces a kind of toxin puzzle. While I'm arguing that the story can be read in this way, I'll also discuss how Abraham exhibits faith according to the Kavkan reading and suggest that the reading doesn't require us to say anything good about any intentions or commands to kill Isaac: If so, the Kavkan interpretation satisfies the interpretive desiderata outlined in the introduction.

Abraham and Isaac: The Kavkan reading

To begin, it's useful to think about how the events of Abraham's temptation parallel those in Kavka's toxin puzzle:



For Abraham's situation to be parallel to Kafka's protagonist's, Abraham has to be, to some degree, aware of the set-up. On the interpretation I will defend, Abraham knows – or at any rate, faithfully believes – that God is testing him. At least, Abraham believes that God will ultimately relent in demanding the slaughter of Isaac if Abraham forms the *intention* to kill Isaac.

To anticipate where we're going, the Kavkan interpretation says that Abraham's faith is expressed by his sure belief that God will ultimately uphold his covenant with Abraham. This needn't mean that Abraham arrives at such faith with stoic impassivity – Abraham's faith is surely challenged along the journey.⁸ But on the Kavkan interpretation, at Mount Moriah, Abraham long-sufferingly perseveres in his faith that God will relinquish his claim on Isaac's life.

That, in broad overview, is where we are going. But now let us look at each toxin condition independently.

So first: (1) does Abraham have good reason to intend to kill Isaac? It seems so. After all, God has commanded Abraham to kill Isaac, and Abraham faces divine wrath if he refuses. Just a few chapters earlier, Abraham tried to talk God down from destroying Sodom and Gomorrah – unsuccessfully. And Abraham 'saw the smoke of the land going up like the smoke of a furnace' (Genesis 19:28). Of course, it doesn't

follow from this that Abraham has *morally* good reasons to intend to kill Isaac: nothing I've said commits us to being flatfooted divine command theorists of the relevant sort. But Abraham has good *prudential* reasons to intend to kill Isaac.

It might be objected: those are reasons to kill Isaac (thus satisfying God's command and avoiding God's wrath), but they aren't obviously reasons to *intend* to kill Isaac. But in this case, the reasons to kill Isaac double as reason to intend to kill Isaac. To see why, suppose that Abraham killed Isaac unintentionally, accidentally tripping and sending the dagger flying in Isaac's direction. That's not going to satisfy God. God wants (so it appears) to see Abraham intentionally sacrifice Isaac, and a prerequisite of intentionally sacrificing Isaac is forming an intention to do so.

So far, I've argued that there's a plausible reading of the text according to which

1. Abraham has good reason to intend to kill Isaac.

In order to satisfy God, Abraham needs to intend to kill Isaac. Now I want to argue for the second piece of the Kavkan interpretation. Here it is again:

2. Given that Abraham intends to kill Isaac, Abraham has no good (enough) reason to kill Isaac.

This is the more controversial proposition. But here is how (2) could be true. Abraham could believe that, by merely intending to kill Isaac, God will be satisfied. This reading requires that Abraham knows – or, perhaps better, faithfully believes – that God will not follow through on the demand that Isaac be killed once God sees Abraham's intention. On this reading, Abraham knows the end of the story, at least in broad outline, before God's momentous intervention.

This is a notable interpretive choice but a textually defensible one. Here is the exchange between Isaac and Abraham on their way up the mountain:

Isaac said to his father Abraham, ‘Father!’ And he said, ‘Here I am, my son’. He said, ‘The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?’ Abraham said, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son’. So the two of them walked on together. (Genesis 22:7–8)

Earlier in the story, Abraham also tells his attendants that ‘we’ – Abraham and Isaac both – will return to them (Genesis 22:5).

This element of the story demands an interpretive decision. And though there’s room for much variation, there are, broadly speaking, two options: Option (1) is that Abraham is *misleading* Isaac, putting off the revelation of the horrible purpose of their journey until the last possible moment. There are many variations within this story: Abraham might disbelieve what he’s telling Isaac, or he might present Isaac’s return as true even though Abraham merely hopes it to be true and, in fact, suspends judgment.⁹ But if Abraham is not confident that Isaac will return from the mountain and that a lamb rather than Isaac will be sacrificed, Abraham is misleading him. In contrast, option (2) is that Abraham is honestly telling Isaac what he really believes.^{10,11}

While I don’t think either alternative is exegetically *forced* (recall that I think that part of the story’s staying power is its ambiguity), I think there is plenty to be said in favor of the second option. First, it’s easier to morally understand Abraham’s willingness to take Isaac up Mount Moriah if Abraham believes that Isaac is returning – very much alive – at story’s end. Second, it coheres with Abraham’s

having an idea ahead of time *how* God will spare Isaac, namely, by providing an animal instead. It's not just that Abraham thinks God will let Isaac live one way or another:¹² Abraham seems clued into God's dramatic moment before it arrives.¹³ But finally, it gives us a clear answer to how Abraham exemplifies faith at Mount Moriah. Even in the face of God's explicit command to kill Isaac, Abraham maintains faith that God will eventually relent – even if only after Abraham has showed himself willing to obey. Despite God's command, Abraham believes that God really will maintain God's covenant with him, giving Abraham many descendants through Isaac.

On this reading, Genesis 22 exhibits reverse dramatic irony. The character knows (or faithfully and truly believes) something that we, the audience, don't. We the readers don't know until the end that God won't maintain his demand on Isaac's life – we don't have Abraham's faith – but Abraham does.¹⁴

Once we've made the exegetical decision to interpret Abraham as (faithfully) clued into the fact that God won't, in the end, follow through with the demand to sacrifice Isaac, (2) starts to look plausible. And that's even though we said that it looked like Abraham *did* have (prudential) reason to kill Isaac (doing so would allow Abraham to satisfy God's command and avoid retribution) earlier in the paper. That's because the reasons he would otherwise have to kill Isaac are *screened off* by Abraham's belief that God will ultimately relent upon witnessing Abraham's intention. In contrast, Abraham's reasons to so *intend* are *not* screened off.¹⁵

Here's the basic thought. Abraham wants to avoid God's wrath by satisfying God's desire to see Abraham willingly intend to sacrifice Isaac. But doing so only

requires forming the *intention* to kill Isaac. And, given that Abraham has already satisfied God by forming the intention to kill Isaac, Abraham has no good reason left to go through with it! After all, Abraham loves his son, both for himself and for what he represents as the child of the covenant.

Sam Lebens writes this of the *akedah*:

‘God doesn’t want ...acts [like child sacrifice] of course, but he does want a kernel from them; he wants the willingness; the willingness, and the desire to give everything to him’ (Lebens (2017), 505).

I’m sceptical of our ability to export God’s desire even for our mere willingness to perform such acts outside the story¹⁶ – I’ll say something about this in the next section – but I think Lebens is right that *within* the story, God is presented as ultimately wanting Abraham’s willingness to kill Isaac but not the act of killing Isaac itself. On the Kavkan reading of the story, Abraham is clued into this tension. And so, Abraham is in the paradoxical situation of having strong reasons to intend to φ without having strong reasons to φ (given his intention to φ). Once we add the Kavkan thesis that S cannot intend to φ without (at least apparent) good reason to φ , we end up with the conclusion that, despite Abraham’s strong (prudential) reasons to *intend* to kill Isaac, Abraham cannot, or cannot easily, simply form the intention to *kill* Isaac.

What is the basis for Abraham’s faith? God’s covenant with Abraham. In the Genesis version of the story, God has promised Abraham that:

[Y]our wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him (Genesis 17:19).

Or again:

‘Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them’. Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be’. And [Abram]¹⁷ believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:5–6).

And so, Abraham *still* believed the LORD, divine commands notwithstanding. The faith that Abraham displays in Genesis 22 is the same as the faith he displays in Genesis 15. It needn’t be that Abraham understands God’s purpose in giving Abraham the command to kill Isaac: Abraham’s faith is that, despite God’s command, and whatever its purpose may be, God will continue to uphold their covenant.

Let’s take a step back. I’m arguing for the plausibility of an interpretation in which Abraham faces a Kavkan puzzle at Mount Moriah. Abraham has good reason to intend to kill Isaac. By intending to kill Isaac, Abraham will mollify God, showing that he is willing to sacrifice his son at God’s say-so. Indeed, one of the good reasons that Abraham has for so willing might be that it would contribute to God’s relenting from the command to kill Isaac, by demonstrating to God Abraham’s willingness to continue as an obedient covenantal partner.

But if Abraham really, faithfully believes that, once God sees Abraham’s intention, God will relent, then the following is true: Given that Abraham intends to

kill Isaac (and so satisfy God), Abraham has no good reason left to kill Isaac. Just as I have no reason to drink the toxin once the brain-scanner has registered my intention to drink the toxin – by then, the money is as good as in the bank – Abraham has no reason to kill Isaac once God has registered Abraham’s intention to kill Isaac. By then, God’s approval is in the bank.¹⁸

The impossibility objection

So far, I’ve argued that the binding of Isaac can be read as a version of Kavka’s (1983) toxin puzzle. This reading has an obvious objection: On the Kavkan interpretation, the story is impossible! After all, at least on the surface reading, Abraham *really does* form the intention to kill Isaac, and it’s at least partially on this basis that God relents and stays Abraham’s hand: ‘for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me’ (Genesis 22:12). But on the interpretation I’ve offered, this is an impossible ending to the story since Abraham has no reason to kill Isaac (given that he intends to)!

I think there are three kinds of responses to this objection. Which response is appealing may depend on the theological commitments of the reader.

First, there’s the *creative workaround* response. Recall that Kavka does not say that it is strictly impossible to form the relevant intention in toxin-like scenarios, but only that it is impossible to do so without a creative workaround. For instance, one could intend to drink the toxin if one managed to forget that the money would be in one’s bank account regardless of whether one drank the toxin or not or if one signed away all of one’s money conditional on not actually drinking it (cf. Kavka (1983), 34).

Perhaps Abraham uses just such a creative workaround to form the relevant intention.

But if Abraham did use a workaround, the text doesn't say anything to suggest it. For some readers, it will be more attractive to interpret Abraham's actions as *miraculous*. If Kavka is right, it is psychologically impossible to intend to φ when one (obviously enough) has no reason to (and every reason *not* to), but that does not mean that it is metaphysically impossible to do so. Perhaps Abraham miraculously broke the psychological laws. Those committed to a reading of the text that is both Kavkan and literal might favor this interpretation.

But my preferred answer is this: Impossible stories can still make narrative sense. Film and literature are filled with impossible stories, even logically or metaphysically impossible ones. Chiang (1991) writes about the life of a mathematician who proves that $1=2$. This story is impossible, but the impossible premise doesn't stop it from being a lovely story. Kafka's *Metamorphosis* begins with a metaphysically impossible transformation: I see no reasons a story shouldn't be narratively sensible even though it is premised on a psychologically impossible Kavkan absurdity rather than a metaphysically impossible Kafka one.

Impossibility needn't stand in the way of a good story. But in this case, the impossibility makes the story better. Genesis 22 starts off with an absurdity of another kind: God demanding child sacrifice. How could it be possible that a good God demand someone kill their child? Or how could the ever-faithful God break covenant with Abraham? Plausibly, Genesis 22 begins with an impossibility as well as ending with one.

Obviously, Genesis 22 isn't contextlessly ripped from the pages of an analytic philosopher's thought experiment.¹⁹ But I do think there are plausibly thought-experimental elements to the story. (And this, in part, is why analytic philosophers might be in the business of contributing to the exegesis of such a story.) Suppose, *per impossible*, God were to command an evil act. Suppose, *per impossible*, God were not the faithful God who keeps God's covenants. What would a faithful response to God look like in that circumstance? What does thinking about such cases reveal about the nature of faith?

On the Kavkan interpretation I've been advocating, Abraham's faithful response involves a refusal to believe that God will follow through on his covenant-breaking command. Abraham maintains faith through the temptation that God will be faithful – that God will uphold his covenant by sparing Isaac. God presents Abraham with a lose-lose scenario: either break his covenant with God by withholding Isaac or let God break his covenant with Abraham by killing his own child, the child of the covenant. Either alternative breaks Abraham's special covenant with God. But impossibly – perhaps, miraculously – Abraham emerges with a win. Abraham responds to God's impossible command with an impossibility of his own. Despite his persevering faith that God will relent once God sees Abraham's intention to kill Isaac, despite Abraham's faith in the covenant being so secure that he has no reason to kill Isaac conditional on his forming the mere *intention* to do so, Abraham manages to form the relevant intention anyway, satisfying God's desire to see Abraham willing to give up everything for him. Abraham's impossible intention is a narratively appropriate response to God's impossible, faithless command.

Taking the impossibility on Abraham's response on board in this way neutralizes Lebens's complaint about Hazon's view in a respect in which it overlaps with Stump's (2010: 299) and mine, namely that it insists that Abraham was aware that God's command was a test. Lebens objects:

[I]t makes the story seriously mysterious: mysterious that Abraham was being tested if he knew all along that it was just a test, and mysterious that the angel should report God's satisfaction that Abraham didn't withhold his only son, if all along Abraham knew that he would never actually have to sacrifice him! (Lebens (2017), 501)²⁰

But on the Kavkan interpretation, the story wears its impossibility on its sleeve. The impossibility of Abraham's response mirrors God's impossible command and underscores the strength of Abraham's faith in God's fulfilling his covenant. Abraham's faith is so strong that it survives even incompatible intentions.

The impossibility of Abraham's response also has ethical advantages. This is a hard story to make ethical sense of. God commands child abuse. Abraham's response, which involves intending even if not ultimately committing said child abuse, is praised by God.

First, a disclaimer. I think there are important, ethical challenges to this text and its use in faith-formation practices that the Kavkan interpretation doesn't help with. Is it a good idea to mold our faith practices around a text in which faithfulness is uncomfortably close to a willingness to be homicidal? Wouldn't Abraham have been more faithful – or at any rate, more ethical – if he had simply told God off, flatly refusing to kill Isaac? Why isn't the way this story is told more attentive to the

religious trauma²¹ that Isaac, especially, is subjected to? These are good questions, and I don't have easy answers for them.

But I do think that reading the text as an impossible story creates some modal and moral distance between the reader and Abraham. The reader can emulate Abraham's confidence that God will ultimately honor his covenants. But the reader literally cannot, while maintaining that faith, emulate Abraham's intention. Abraham's intention to sacrifice Isaac isn't something that the Kavkan interpretation presents as emulable. The story doesn't suggest (read in this way) that we should look for ways to sacrifice in the way that Abraham was willing to. Rather it suggests we should have Abraham's confidence that any commands to abuse, even those that are given in the guise of divine sanction, will ultimately dissolve.

It's useful to compare this to thematically similar Kantian (Gregor & Anchor (1996)) and Adamsian (Adams (1999)) commentaries on the story. Kant and Adams both maintain that when presented with obviously unethical divine commands, no matter how strong the apparent evidence, one ought to reject the thesis that God has actually commanded it. Thus writes Kant with quintessentially rationalistic assurance:

‘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’ (Gregor & Anchor (trs.) (1996), 283).

Indeed, many of us might find – even if we do not always feel free to admit – that we prefer Kant's version of the story and regret that it's not the one the text gives us.

Though less dogmatically framed, Adams too holds that a *loving* God would not demand horrific acts (Adams (1999), 281–284, 290–291).

Although both the Kantian and Kavkan version of events involve a rejection of certain divine commands, they do so in different ways. On the Kavkan interpretation, it's not that Abraham believes God didn't command something horrible but that, despite God's command, God will ultimately relent. For Kant's Abraham, God's terrible command never existed: for Kavka's Abraham, God's terrible command will be revoked. For Kant, God's terrible command never could have existed because it was unethical. The Kavkan interpretation, in contrast, does not demand a particular reason that Abraham thinks the command will be revoked. I've suggested that one plausible textual reason is that Abraham trusts God to uphold his covenant. There's certainly an ethical dimension to such trust, but this reading doesn't require Abraham to think that God would never act unethically²² (though neither does the Kavkan reading deny it). It only requires Abraham to trust God to uphold his covenant.²³

In any case, whether for ethical or covenantal reasons, Abraham models the kind of faithfulness that rejects the ultimate authority of commands to abuse even when such commands are clothed in divine sanction. And while I don't think that neatly resolves all the critical, ethical questions one might bring to this text, I think that's a non-negligible step in the right direction.

But there is at least one especially worrying ethical question that remains: What explanation is given, within the story, for why God command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac in the first place?²⁴ And why does God then praise Abraham for his

obedience at the end? Even if the story did not literally happen, as the Kavkan interpretation suggests, we might sensibly ask why God is represented within the text as commanding Isaac's sacrifice. (Just as one might sensibly ask why, according to Genesis, God put forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, even if one doesn't endorse a literal interpretation of the Genesis story of the fall.)²⁵ This is a difficult question, and one that various interpretations of the story (including mine) struggle to say anything definitive about.

One popular line of thought is that God is (represented as) using this encounter to teach Abraham and those who come after him that (perhaps unlike other local deities) God does not ultimately demand child sacrifice. With the Kavkan interpretation in mind, one might add that God wanted Abraham to learn that one should reject child sacrifice even when given the appearance of divine sanction.

I think something about this is right. Certainly, we are to take the rejection of child sacrifice as among the story's lessons. But as Lebens notes, this does commit God to 'a very peculiar pedagogic strategy' (Lebens (2014), 257). And, also, a traumatic one. It's hard to imagine teaching one's toddler not to put their finger in a light socket by telling them to do it only to stop them at the last second. What kind of parent would do that?

Worsley has recently suggested that God gives tests Abraham to invite him to another 'second personal encounter' and 'wrestling match' whereby 'Abraham's relationship with God [might] be deepened' (Worsley (2018), 212). But although I think Worsley is right that wrestling matches of a certain right sort can be valuable, I find this a puzzling explanation within the context of this story: Giving threatening

commands, even those one will ultimately revoke, is a very peculiar relational strategy, more likely to produce antagonization than deepening friendship.

Stump (2010) and Hazony (2012) press a different line. For each, God's aim is to determine whether Abraham will obey God (Hazony (2012), 117) or trust God's promises (Stump (2010), 293) even when doing so would directly violate his self-interest. Both argue, focusing on different texts, that Abraham is especially prudent in looking out for his own self-interest (of the sort that is compatible with genuine altruism when called for). This applies even to Abraham's covenantal relationship with God: Stump suggests that, at various points, Abraham hedges his bets for securing descendants via extra-covenantal means (e.g., his children with Hagar and Keturah) despite, at other points, showing full confidence that God will honor the promise to give him many descendants through Isaac. God wants to know whether, when all the chips are down, Abraham will fully commit to God even when doing so is excruciatingly out of line with Abraham's interests.

This strikes me as more plausible than the alternatives in terms of how the story invites us to imagine God's motivation. But I do want to resist the idea – that Stump (2010, 302), at least, holds – that this would give God a 'morally acceptable' reason to try Abraham. Suppose I want to know whether my partner will trust me even when doing so clearly goes against their self-interest. I do that by asking them to do something outrageous and painful, amputating a limb or putting down their pet, just on my say so. Even if I have every intention of stopping them before they go through with it, this is manipulative behavior: an abuse of trust. It would be trust-breaking to make a request for that reason, not trust-strengthening.²⁶

I've surveyed some candidate answers to why (within the story) God commands Isaac's death. Although I've found them unsatisfying, at least as ethical explanations of God's command, I don't have any answer to offer in their place. I do, however, have a kind of anti-answer. As I'm thinking of things, one advantage of the thought-experimental nature of the Kavkan reading is that it minimizes questions about why God gave Abraham this command. To compare, suppose on hearing Jackson's famous (1982) 'Mary' case, someone asked, 'But *why* is Mary locked away in a black-and-white room with only a black-and-white television through which to learn about the outside world?' There is an answer to that question, of a kind, namely: Because that's a kind of controlled environment in which we might have something interesting to learn about knowledge of phenomenal properties! But that's not an answer *within* the story. It's an explanation of why Jackson has set up his thought experiment the way he has, not a story-internal explanation of why Mary spends time in black-and-white rooms.

Similarly, on the Kavkan reading, the question 'Why did God command Abraham to kill Isaac?' does not have an answer within the story. Consistent with that, there may be an explanation for why someone has told the story in this way, namely, that it is a way to learn something about faithfulness in response to God's apparent faithlessness. The story presents one kind of controlled environment in which we might learn something new about faithfulness.

What goes for God's impossible command goes for God's praise of Abraham's obedience to that command. God's praise for Abraham's obedience (and subsequent re-affirmation of the covenant) wraps up, in a genre-appropriate way,

Abraham's trial. But on the Kavkan interpretation, this is part of the thought experiment. By ceding to God a willingness to kill Isaac, Abraham escapes the trial unscathed. But we shouldn't infer that Abraham's willingness to kill Isaac is morally valuable because it was praised by God any more than we should so infer (in this impossible context) that it was right to do because God commanded it.²⁷

This reading is, admittedly, more amenable to those who are willing to view the story as a poetic thought experiment and not a straightforward history of events. I appreciate that there are important and nuanced theological reasons some might want to hang onto a rationale that is compatible with the story's full-blooded historicity; nevertheless, for those whose theological convictions allow, the thought-experimental reading of the story helpfully de-centers questions about the story-internal reasons for the set-up of the thought experiment, focusing less on God's faithless command and more on Abraham's faithful response.²⁸

Escaping the tension: exploring non-Kavkan readings

So far, I've advocated the advantages of reading the text as involving a kind of incoherence that is captured by Kavka's toxin puzzle. I've argued that the incoherence of the story – our inability to think our way into Abraham – is a virtue, not a vice.

Not everyone will agree, of course. But I think that even non-Kavkan interpretations of the story can be helpfully read with the toxin puzzle in mind. Those who reject the Kavkan interpretation find creative ways to avoid the Kavkan tension implicit in the story. And this gives us a useful heuristic for understanding the interpretive moves of other authors.

To illustrate this, let's consider a recent exchange between Lebens (2014; 2017) and Hazony (2012; 2015). Lebens takes quite seriously that Abraham really does intend to sacrifice Isaac (Lebens (2015), 502), even pointing a Rabbinic text that presents Abraham as disappointed that the command was taken back, asking if he may still be permitted to spill a *drop* of Isaac's blood (Lebens (2017), 502; Genesis Raba 56:7). And so, fully intending to kill his son, Abraham is not taken to believe, in advance, that God will spare Isaac. After all, if Abraham thought God would ultimately abrogate the command, Abraham wouldn't have any reason to go through with killing Isaac. Indeed, although Lebens doesn't mention toxins, he does explicitly appeal to the 'mysteriousness' of readings according to which God knew Abraham had intended to sacrifice Isaac while Abraham knew it was just a test (and so that he wouldn't really have to kill Isaac) the whole time (Lebens (2017), 501). The textual challenge Lebens faces is making sense of Abraham's apparently confident attestations (to his attendants and to Isaac himself) that Isaac will return in Genesis 22:5–8.

Hazony deals with the Kavkan tension another way. Hazony holds (with the Kavkan reading) that 'Abraham at every point keeps firmly in view what is to him a fact – that whatever God may have said to him, he will not require him to murder his son' (Hazony (2012), 118). And so, again, plausibly because of the Kavkan thought that Abraham cannot intend to do what he knows he will not and has no reason to do, Hazony also maintains that 'at no point does Abraham intend to murder Isaac' (119). The textual challenge Hazony faces is explaining why God tells Abraham that

he knows that he fears God ‘since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me’ (Genesis 22:12).

Of course, neither Lebens nor Hazony is insensitive to the textual challenges they face, and both have things to say in defence of their versions. My aim here is not to knock down alternative interpretations: that would be an odd goal for such a generatively ambiguous text, and out of place coming from someone not interpreting the story through the same canonical lens. Rather, my aim is to identify a particular virtue of the Kavkan interpretation. On the Kavkan interpretation, one gets to take at face value Abraham’s attestations that Isaac will return and also God’s attestation that Abraham has not withheld Isaac. The price of hanging onto both attestations is a kind of narrative impossibility, but as I’ve been arguing, there are worse things for a story than to be impossible.

Second, my aim is to illustrate how alternative readings can be categorized by how they escape the implicit Kavkan tension in the story. If Abraham’s belief that God will abrogate his command eliminates any reason for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, then it makes sense, given Kavka’s principle, that interpretations should frequently divide into those (like Lebens’s) that deny Abraham had the relevant belief and those (like Hazony’s) that deny Abraham had the relevant intention.

It is also interesting to consider how Islamic and Christian scriptural texts have re-read the story in ways that remove the potential for Kavkan tension in Genesis. In the Qur’an, Abraham never says, nor is there any hint he believes, that Ishmael will not ultimately be killed. Indeed, Abraham and Ishmael explicitly confer together and jointly decide to fulfil Abraham’s vision of sacrificing his son (Quran

37:102). In addition to giving Abraham's son more explicit agency,²⁹ this removes the Kavkan tension in the Genesis story by removing Abraham's apparent belief that God will not follow through on the demand for his son's life.

In the Christian New Testament, the story is different once again. As in Genesis, Abraham 'offered up Isaac' (Hebrews 11:17), but it is not because Abraham believes God will take back his command. Rather, Abraham's hope is explicitly in Isaac's resurrection: Abraham 'considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead' (Hebrews 11:19). Surely, this reading resonated with an audience eager to connect Abraham's faith with the story of Jesus' resurrection.³⁰ It also facilitates drawing parallels between the horror of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac with the horror of the cross. This reading, too, evades the Kavkan tension as I've presented it in Genesis. For the author of Hebrews, Abraham's belief that Isaac will return does not screen off the reasons he has to kill Isaac. That's because Abraham thinks he will (or at least may) satisfy God by actually killing Isaac (rather than merely intending to), and that Isaac will return because God raises Isaac after being killed.

The binding of Isaac (or Ishmael) is an ambiguous and interpretively fecund story. I've noted the advantages of reading the story in a way that takes the Kavkan tension in the story at face value. But I don't mean to insist that this is the only productive or interesting way to read the story. Indeed, I suspect that we'd be unnecessarily constraining ourselves by reading the text in only one way. It may be just as interesting how interpretations of the binding can escape the Kavkan tension of the story as to explore what we may learn by embracing it.

Conclusions

I've argued that there's a plausible way of reading the story of God's command to kill Isaac in which it is a story of impossibilities. God gets the impossibilities started with a covenant-breaking command. Then Abraham responds in kind by forming an impossible intention: intending to do something (kill Isaac) despite having no reason to do so given his faithful belief that God will relent if he merely intends to kill Isaac. Abraham's faith is not at all expressed in his intention to sacrifice Isaac: rather, Abraham's faith is expressed by his belief that, despite what God has commanded, God will prevent the fatal blow.

Focusing on the Kavkan puzzle at the heart of the story gives us more reason to treat this passage less as a record of God's commands (that really would be terrifying) and more as a philosophically- and theologically-informed thought experiment: Suppose God were to appear to command something terrible: what would a faithful response look like? And what might that tell us about faith? This reading suggests that one way faith is expressed is by refusing to believe that God sanctions covenant-violating abuse, even when such sanction appears to come from the very mouth of God.

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Notes

¹ Hong & Hong (1983) consistently translate Kierkegaard as saying that God tempts, rather than tests, Abraham.

² See Qur'an 37. Although the text does not name Abraham's son explicitly, Abraham is given the promise of Isaac *after* the intended sacrifice, and so the son in the story is naturally interpreted Ishmael. See Afsar (2007, 494) for further details.

³ I am not hereby claiming to offer an interpretation that has no morally questionable features. It's a hard story. See discussion under 'The impossibility objection'.

⁴ This is at odds with interpretations that have, instead, tried to make direct ethical sense of Abraham's intention to kill his child. For instance, Aquinas, when commenting on this story, writes that given original sin, God has the moral right to command anyone's death (and people have the right to obey that command). See ST I-II, q. 94, a. 5. Nor will I suppose that this is a case in which the ethical is suspended as in Kierkegaard.

⁵ For some theorists, intentions aren't 'in the head' and so even the most souped-up brain scanners aren't the right kinds of thing to identify them. See, e.g., Wittgenstein (1958, §337) for this sort of view. But we needn't hash out the details here. The critical thing is that Kavka's story stipulates some way that a device infallibly determines whether an agent has a given intention. In the Abraham story, we will be able to stipulate that God infallibly knows whether Abraham has a given intention at a time.

⁶ 'Yet you cannot do so (or have extreme difficulty doing so) without resorting to exotic tricks...'
(Kavka (1983), 35).

⁷ See, e.g., Gauthier (1998) and Levy's (2009) response.

⁸ Indeed, as Stump (2010, 270–282) meticulously lays out, Abraham seems to vacillate between genuine trust in God's promise for many descendants through Isaac and attempts to hedge his bets with (by the lights of Genesis) extra-covenantal offspring.

⁹ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for stressing the possibility for variation within this broad category.

¹⁰ Either way, Abraham is not being entirely straight with Isaac, as evidenced by the fact that Isaac needs to ask the question at all. Contrast this with the version of events in the Qur'an wherein Ishmael explicitly agrees to undergo the sacrifice.

¹¹ While the honest interpretation is not the majority report, neither is it anomalous. See, e.g., Stump (2010, 301) and Hazony (2012, 117–118).

¹² This reading is thus in light tension with that in the Christian New Testament according to which Abraham thinks maybe God will resurrect Isaac. On the 'honest interpretation' of Genesis 22, Abraham seems to have a clear idea that Isaac will be spared because God will provide a sheep instead.

¹³ Those who disagree may wish to make hay out the fact that Abraham says there will be a lamb whereas God actually provides a ram.

¹⁴ Of course, in a certain sense, the audience *does* know how the story ends – the original audience for this story is a group of people who take themselves to be the descendants of Isaac! Still, even someone who knows Isaac survives need not know that Isaac survives *because* God relents (rather than, for instance, because Abraham defies God). Moreover, there’s a way of (re-)reading stories that imaginatively takes up the position of someone for whom the ending is not yet revealed: when re-watching *Casablanca*, we can imaginatively take up the position of not yet knowing whether Rick and Ilsa will run off together. (Thanks to Avraham Sommer for conversation here.) For the opposite view, see Coats (1973, 393) who thinks Abraham doesn’t realize what he is saying but that the audience can pick up on the foreshadowing.

¹⁵ I’ve described things as though Abraham *would have had* a prudential reason to kill Isaac (namely, that it would satisfy God) but in fact *doesn’t* because what would have been a reason is screened off (or, if one prefers, defeated) by Abraham’s faith that God won’t actually require Isaac’s death in the end (instead being mollified by Abraham’s mere willingness). On this way of putting things, screened off reasons aren’t reasons any more than former senators are senators. But terminologically, one might prefer to go another way. Another way to describe the case is as one in which Abraham does in fact have a reason to kill Isaac, it’s just an *undercut*, *defeated*, or *screened off* kind of reason.

I feel ambivalent about the best way to describe the case. But if the latter way is right, Kavka’s principle needs modification to apply to Abraham:

3*) S cannot intend to φ without an (at least apparent) *ultimately undefeated* good (enough) reason to φ .

The ‘ultimately’ undefeated bit is to account for the possibility of defeater-defeaters. Intuitively, S can sometimes intend to φ even if all their reasons to φ are clearly defeated so long as some of those defeaters are themselves defeated by defeater-defeaters. Things iterate from there. What 3* requires is that (at least apparently) one of the chains of defeat (if any) for reasons to φ resolves in favor of the reason to φ .

While a full discussion of defeat is beyond the scope of this paper, this amendment is not unmotivated. It’s no easier to try to motivate oneself to φ when all your reasons to φ are obviously defeated than when you obviously have no reason to φ at all.

¹⁶ I hope God doesn’t want people who are willing to kill their families at God’s say-so, even if that willingness is a mere willingness.

¹⁷ At this point in the story, Abraham’s name has not yet been changed from ‘Abram’.

¹⁸ I’ve developed this tension in line with Kavka’s principle. But there are other ways to do so. There is *prima facie* tension between an agent’s intending to φ and believing that they *won’t* φ . Hence Anscombe’s (1963, 1–2) observation that ‘I am going to φ ’ seems like both an expression of intention and a prediction. Here’s one modest principle that aims to capture a link between intention and belief: One can’t intend to φ if one believes it is impossible for one to φ . As I’ve told the story, it’s true of Abraham that he believes it’s impossible for him to kill Isaac. That’s because he has certain faith that God will not allow Isaac to be killed. If this principle is true – I don’t intend to weigh in here – then Abraham has reason to *intend* to kill Isaac but is not able to because, by so doing, he would violate a necessary doxastic condition on so intending. Thus, Abraham is shown to end up in a similar bind, but without relying on Kavka’s principle. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this friendly suggestion.)

¹⁹ It’s also worth flagging that thinking of the final, received version of the story as thought-experimental doesn’t entail that the story is ungrounded in any historical event. An anonymous reviewer suggested a reading wherein Abraham mishears God’s command, wrongly interpreting God as demanding Isaac’s sacrifice (perhaps in part because this is what Abraham’s cultural context led him to expect). Such a reading would highlight the dangers of being too sure that one has interpreted God correctly. It would also allow for an historical origin behind an impossible story.

²⁰ Cf. Lebens (2014, 257).

²¹ For this concept, see illuminating work in Panchuk (2018).

²² That Abraham's question in Genesis 18:25 on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah ('Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?') is not obviously rhetorical suggests that Abraham thinks it's a live possibility that God would act unjustly.

²³ This gloss fits well with recent work on trust. Kelp & Simion (forthcoming) argue that for someone to be trustworthy just is for them to be disposed to fulfill their obligations (of which covenantal obligations could be a part).

²⁴ I focus on the moral puzzle of God's test of Abraham, but there's an epistemic puzzle too: why does an all-knowing God need a test to determine Abraham's final intention in the first place? Thanks to Shlomo Zuckier for conversation on this point.

²⁵ That's because 'Why, within the story, does God put forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden?' doesn't presuppose that God did put forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. For more on the connection between presupposition and proper question-asking, see Willard-Kyle (manuscript).

²⁶ Stump (2010) adds to this explanation an illuminating analysis of the parallels between Abraham's treatment of Isaac and of Ishmael. Crucial is her insight that in Genesis 21 Abraham unprovokedly casts Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness with scant provisions – what would be a potential death sentence – armed only with God's say-so that Ishmael, at least, would survive. 'The truly immoral response on Abraham's part,' Stump surmises, 'would be to appear to trust God's promise to preserve Ishmael but then to act as if God could not be entrusted with Isaac' (Stump (2010), 304). There isn't space here to give adequate treatment to the heartbreaking stories of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis. For now, I only note that while the parallels between Isaac and Ishmael do make the tale of Mount Moriah more narratively fitting, Abraham's bad treatment of Ishmael does not seem like a morally legitimate reason for God to test Abraham by commanding him to treat Isaac badly.

²⁷ I'm grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the challenge from God's concluding approval.

²⁸ To be sure, setting the story within a thought experiment doesn't immediately resolve all ethical questions one can bring to the text. We might still ask: is the thought experiment a good one? Is it appropriate for theological and ethical formation? And so on.

²⁹ Some, however, have argued that Isaac's cooperation can be inferred from the Genesis story. I'm not optimistic.

³⁰ There's debate around whether to think of the resurrection element of the story as distinctively Christian or as something that grew out of pre-existing Jewish reflections on the story. I won't wade in here, but see, e.g., Green (1982), Lebens (2014, 2017) and Hazony (2015).

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