KIERKEGAARD AND THE DIALECTIC OF FAITH
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In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard presents a complex notion of faith, along with a critique of how faith has become too lax, the process having been devalued in his generation. He presents faith in relation to the ethical, the position from which we produce our moral judgments. Aware of the limitations of the ethical, he concerns himself with “its inability to comprehend the phenomenon of faith.” He uses the story of Abraham and Isaac to analyze a true act of faith, a movement of faith. For Kierkegaard, Abraham’s actions demonstrate a ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’. He argues that an act of faith, a purely subjective act, is produced from the absurd and cannot be adequately evaluated from an ethical standpoint. If viewed in terms of the ethical, most people would consider Abraham’s actions as immoral and impious, if not monstrous.

It is within the ethical that we form our normative judgments about our actions, and the actions of those around us. These judgments guide human behavior, informing an individual’s ability to recognize the difference between right and wrong conduct. But there may be negative consequences in promoting a view that could allow for the justification of certain violent, immoral acts. One may convince themselves that their case is the exception; that they are permitted to act in a seemingly unethical way, out of religious duty. A suicide bomber believes that he or she is doing the right thing; they are acting in accordance with what they believe to be the will of God, and this transgresses any limited human conception of right and wrong. One might ask whether Kierkegaard’s notion is not misguided when held up against, and in relation to, the modern world of terrorism and fundamentalist fervor. Because of the prima facie

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compatibility between Kierkegaard’s notion of faith and those of religious fundamentalists, some may think it best to abandon Kierkegaard’s view altogether.

This paper will argue that it is possible to preserve Kierkegaard’s notion from its unfortunate relationship to fundamentalist fervor. This will be done using two arguments. First, it will be argued, using a suicide bomber as an example of the modern fundamentalist acting from religious duty, that the fundamentalist’s acts can, surprisingly, more closely be related to Kierkegaard’s portrayal of the tragic hero than that of the knight of faith. The suicide bomber’s actions, motives, and ideology will be used to demonstrate a significant contrast between Abraham’s actions and those of a modern day fundamentalist. The second argument will be an analysis of Kierkegaard’s claims that the ethical as such is the universal, and how this affects any attempts aimed at evaluating Abraham’s actions from an ethical standpoint. Using parts of Edmund N. Santurri’s article, “Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling in Logical Perspective,” it will be argued that Abraham’s act cannot be categorized in ethical terms or analogized to other acts. It resists both moral commendation and moral condemnation because the story can only be seen as non-ethical. Kierkegaard can be shown as working beyond the normative realm, engaging in an approach that works beyond any ethical or moral treatment of Abraham’s story.

What is implicit in Kierkegaard’s claim that the ethical is the universal is that, as Kierkegaard points out, this means that the ethical “applies at all times.” Part of the point of Kierkegaard’s notion of the ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’ is that there are times, sometimes during certain religious experiences, when this universal standpoint does not apply. In certain instances of faith the single individual can extend beyond the universal. These ‘certain instances’ themselves cannot be described and evaluated, for then we would be relinquishing
them back to the universal. The point for Kierkegaard is to show that in relation to God, if social morality is the highest there is, “then Abraham is lost, then faith has never existed in the world….” Kierkegaard’s view of faith is important to preserve because by preserving it, in a sense, one is preserving faith from seeming superfluous and irrelevant in relation to the ethical/universal standpoint. If acts of faith were expected to remain within the bounds of the ethical, if these acts were expected to agree with the universal, then there would be no point in distinguishing an act of faith from a morally acceptable act within the ethical realm. As Kierkegaard points out, “then no categories are needed other than what Greek philosophy had or what can be deduced from them by consistent thought.” This is why it is important to preserve Kierkegaard against any criticism that would relate his notion to fundamentalist fervor.

In the Book of Genesis, in the twenty-second chapter, we find the story of Abraham and Isaac. In it God tests Abraham’s faith by commanding him to travel to Mount Moriah and sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Abraham, without question and without doubt, obeyed this command, but was stopped by an angel just as he had grabbed hold of his knife. When taken at face value, and objectively analyzed from the realm of the ethical, Abraham here was acting immorally, committing a murder that was even more condemnable in light of the fact that the victim was his innocent son.

In contrast, one must now imagine a twenty-one-year-old Palestinian, a Muslim, who decides to blow himself up in Tel Aviv, a city in Israel. He considers this act a religious duty. In preparing he reminds himself of his obligation to engage in jihad, or holy war, on behalf of Islam, in defense of Islam. He reminds himself that it is honorable to be a martyr, or shahid, and sacrifice oneself. He justifies the killing of innocent people with this act of martyrdom by

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3 Ibid., 100.
viewing it as an act done for a higher purpose, a religious purpose. This is a modern example of fundamentalist fervor, one that a critic of Kierkegaard’s could say demonstrates the notion of faith as defying common ethical standards in favor of one that is concerned only with the individual’s relationship to an infallible deity.

My first argument will make an important distinction between Abraham and the bomber that may untangle any convincing relationship that can be perceived between the two. Kierkegaard’s portrayal of the tragic hero can be used to demonstrate this distinction. The suicide bomber, I will argue, acts from the ethical just as the tragic hero does. When making the distinction between Abraham and the tragic hero, Kierkegaard describes the tragic hero as a person that “allows an expression of the ethical to have its telos in a higher expression of the ethical….”4 This description could also be ascribed to the suicide bomber when distinguishing his actions from Abraham’s. The fundamentalist resides within a community of people, even if it is a small one, in which he will be held in high esteem, where it will be deemed praiseworthy and necessary to the goals of that community or religious sect. This behavior is condoned and even encouraged amongst a certain amount of followers.

Just as with the tragic hero, the religious fundamentalist is seen as a virtuous person within his community, and is given confidence in his faith by this stable grounding produced by his peers. In the case of the bomber there is no direct connection with God, but there are many other external motivations. The scripture is used to justify and supplement the acts that can also be seen as rooted in a mixture of outside influences and motivations. Because of an imbalance of power, fundamentalists with little resources may find it more efficient or convenient to use a suicide attack as a tactic to dispirit their enemies. If more power were held by the Muslim fundamentalist groups they would not need to continue these ‘faith based’ acts of terrorism, their

4 Ibid., 100.
political aims would be met using different strategies. Besides socio-economic factors, many Muslim suicide bombers are told, and believe, that they will be rewarded in the afterlife for such a sacrifice. This is a very important external motivation to consider. Committing an act of martyrdom is held in very high esteem within the ethical realm of Islamic fundamentalists.

The community’s interpretations of its religious scriptures are the ethical for the suicide bomber. “The tragic hero does not enter into any private relationship to the divine, but the ethical is the divine.” This portrayal runs parallel to that of the religious zealot. Abraham has not reached a higher expression of the ethical, but has “transgressed the ethical altogether and had a higher telos outside of it.”

God demands proof of Abraham’s faith, whereas the bomber attempts to show proof of his or her faith without such a demand, without being prompted by God. The reasons for this may be political, social, psychological, and not without an element hatred for or revenge against those seen as enemies of Islam. One can quickly notice that in the case of the young suicide bomber there may be a political motivation in the form of the ongoing struggle between the Palestinians and Israelis.

Kierkegaard marks the difference between Abraham and the tragic hero. The difference is between moral virtue and purely personal virtue. Abraham is in private contact with the divine. He does not make an interpretation followed by a choice; he only makes a choice, a ‘leap’ from the irrational. The bomber acts from what he, after searching, decides is an expression of God’s will. In Abraham’s story, God’s will is made explicit. Abraham is in direct contact with God and is acting “not to save a nation, not to uphold the idea of the state,” but to prove his faith in God—Kierkegaard here may have had Hegelian state religion in mind as a target. A fundamentalist finds justification for a religious act in scripture and prayer, and therefore is making attempts to

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5 Ibid., 100.
6 Ibid., 100.
interpret and understand signals from God. Abraham is following very specific and personal orders without attempting to understand God’s motives, for it would be impossible to understand God’s motives. It is also made clear in the text that in Abraham’s story “one cannot extract from the narrative the notion that hatred formed a significant motivation.” It was Abraham’s genuine love for his son that made his choice special, as opposed to the acts of hatred usually associated with modern fundamentalists. The goal of these acts, in most cases, is to produce fear and exact retribution.

It is now important to examine one way in which some might categorize Abraham’s act as ethically justified, by determining whether the command was a delusion or not, and whether doing this would hold any significance for Kierkegaard’s program. How are we to know whether Abraham was not having a hallucination? Is the authenticity of his experience important? Is this not what could delineate the difference between an act of murder and an act of faith? Since this is an argument that attempts to examine a purely subjective act, it seems as though any objective certainty or verifiability of God’s actual involvement would not be important in discussing Kierkegaard’s analysis of Abraham. Whether or not God was really speaking to Abraham is not something that one can gather evidence for in order to substantiate a claim from one side or the other.

This is not to say that the authenticity of the dialogue between God and Abraham, whether it was true that Abraham was actually by commanded by God, is not important. Although the main point here is that any outside observer could not determine the authenticity of such a personal event, whether it took place in actuality does matter on principle. But one should care about the authenticity only in a sense that it affirms a necessary connection between the

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action in question and the motivations behind that action. The authenticity of the act should not be important, or should not be cared about, for the obvious consequent: that it might show one act to be justified while showing another to be unjustified or immoral. This misguided approach would lead to the admission that having such knowledge of the acts authenticity would only compel or cause one to drag this non-ethical act down to the ethical, universalizing it. We would then be implying that all similar acts, if presupposed to be authentic, could be viewed as justified in the same way; it would set up a standard. This is not the point of what is trying to be done. We are not to be forcing a way in which to label the act as good or bad. Since the motivation for Abraham’s act of faith comes from god, one may argue that any act that God commands must be, by definition, good. But acts motivated by God, acts that involve a ‘leap’ of faith, cannot be termed or valued in this way.

When one acts out of their own volition and individual motivations, in the realm of the ethical, then one can classify those actions as good or bad, right or wrong, justified or unjustified. But when God’s intention is the foundation for Abraham’s motivation, his command directing Abraham towards action, then this action cannot be evaluated as good or bad, positive or negative; it resists this type of classification, this universalization. The only reason why the authenticity is important, the only reason one should care about it, is because the continuity between the action and what is believed to be the motivation for the action is important on principle, in order to demonstrate one’s adherence to a particular belief. Abraham’s story only has significance if the connection between God and himself is authentic, but this is for non-ethical religious reasons, not ethical ones.

This does not mean that Kierkegaard thought that the ethical had no validity, or that it wasn’t essential, but that one could find limitations in it. To claim that the religious could be
reduced to the ethical was a misguided position, “faith as he understood it and exemplified it in
his life is presupposed by religious consciousness, and any attempt to present the ‘inner truth’ of
religion in that fashion eliminates or emasculates what such faith involves must necessarily be
misconceived.”

My second argument focuses on the inference that one can make from reading
Kierkegaard’s analysis of Abraham: that Kierkegaard may have had a universalizability thesis
throughout Fear and Trembling that would help to dissolve any misconceived comparisons
between Abraham’s actions and the actions of others. Part of Santurri’s argument is based on a
logical rule “which states ‘when a given word is applicable in a certain context it is applicable in
all contexts where the same characteristics, or same relevant characteristics, are present.’” In
this sense consistency becomes a condition for the use of certain words in relation to certain
classifications. According to the principle of universalizablity, if one is to make a value
judgment, using value words, about a person or event, then that person must be willing to
universalize that judgment. If a person does not hold the same value judgments for similar
instances of certain events or people, then his or her judgments would lead to inconsistency.
Santurri thinks that with this in view we can come to a better understanding of the themes in
Kierkegaard’s work.

Abraham’s actions cannot be praised in moral terms because his actions could only really
be categorized as non-ethical, as opposed to unethical. In fact, any positive moral judgments
made about Abraham’s story would resist universalization. As far as moral judgments are
concerned, one cannot label an action as good “without the implicit willingness to judge a similar

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8 Gardener, Kierkegaard, 66.
9 Santurri, Kierkegaard’s ‘Fear and Trembling,’ 228.
action or similar individual in the same way.” Santurri claims that value judgments behave this way because of their descriptive meaning. Value terminology here cannot be defined descriptively, but they remain incomplete without descriptive concepts. The example used to illustrate this starts somewhat like this: we are to imagine that two people are having a conversation about two paintings. The two paintings are exactly alike, but the first person argues that the painting on the left is good but that the painting on the right is bad. The second person does not understand what the first is talking about; this seems like an inconsistent value judgment. In order for the first person to be saying something intelligible he or she must point out some further difference between the paintings that would make one good and the other bad. And this ‘further difference’ could only be explained descriptively. This description would have to hold some sort of consistency; after all, one cannot label one car as red without labeling a similar car with the same color properties as red as well. “In a sense, it can be said that logic compels me to universalize my specific judgment. Moral judgment, as a species of value judgment, similarly is governed by this logical principle.”

Kierkegaard portrays Abraham as suspending the ethical because Abraham’s act cannot be praised. The story itself cannot provide such praise with ‘descriptive meaning’. If reasons for praising that act cannot be gained from the text, then the descriptive meaning that justifies, or informs, the value judgment could not be clarified. For Kierkegaard, Abraham’s story does not contain reasons sufficient to be commendable in the traditional sense. Abraham remains silent because he literally cannot speak without making himself unintelligible. To talk about, or explain, his actions would translate them into the universal. This luxury is taken away from

10 Ibid., 229.
11 Ibid., 229.
Abraham because of the “universal character of language.”\footnote{Ibid., 231.} Because this act cannot be classified, or such a classification would be unintelligible and self-contradictory, then it is impossible to analogize Abraham’s act with an act of another. “Thus, we can suggest now that the “relief of speech” denied to Abraham is the option of moral self-justification which presupposes the logical possibility of analogization or universalization (the “universal) and, therefore, coherent relevant description of his act.”\footnote{Ibid., 232.}

One concern that could be raised is that it seems as though one would want to consider the suspension of the ethical as something that is itself commendable. Is this type of suspension of the ethical commendable? It is, but not in a way that relinquishes it into the ethical. It is commendable in the ‘eyes of God’. It is a suspension in which other humans, their opinions and commendations, are not to be taken into consideration. It is the difference between moral commendation and divine commendation. It becomes an act that cannot be commended by the moral community, but is a, arguably, more important commendation in relation to God. Following God’s will, in Abraham’s case, pleases God. This sort of divine commendation is beyond that which could be obtained within the human realm of the moral and ethical.

Is the ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’ not a universal itself, though? Once again, we are in the realm of the religious. When we refer to universalization here, we refer to value judgments made within the realm of the ethical. When one labels it a ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’, and therefore seemingly universalizing it, classifying it as any act of faith that suspends the ethical in an instance where one must obey the word of God. This not to say that some could not commend an act of this type, but rather that that particular type of moral or ethical commendation would seem unintelligible and contradictory. All acts are universalizable,
and this is the problem that the ‘leap’ of faith, in an act that contradicts our moral standards, was being faced with. Kierkegaard found a solution to this. To some it may look as though he just created another anti-universal universal to fit his purposes, but this view is misguided. He only created a universal classification that related to God, one rooted in the divine, separated from the type of universalization we would associate and relate to our ethical standards.

To conclude, Kierkegaard’s notion of the ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’ cannot be related to fundamentalist fervor for two reasons. The modern day fundamentalist committing horrific acts out of religious duty can at most be described only as acting from the realm of the ethical, or from what may be perceived within their community as a higher expression of the ethical. Although one could argue that from the ethical standpoint, these acts can be shown to be mistaken attempts at both faith and a higher expression of the ethical. Secondly, fundamentalist fervor, in order for us to know about it as such, must be given a description that can classify it as just that. When Abraham suspends the ethical his act defies any such classification or comparison because it resists being universalized within the moral or ethical, but instead can only be classified in relation to the divine. To reside in the realm of the ethical “involves holding oneself up for public inspection by being prepared to commend one’s way of life.” Abraham’s act cannot be commended in this way, for it lies in the realm of the non-ethical; it extends beyond the ethical and resides in the religious.

\[14\] Ibid., 244.
Works Cited

