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May 2, 2008
Senior Thesis
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Holy Fools are a Redundant Lot

In times of suffering, there is a voice within every Christian that asks, “Why me, God? What have I done to deserve the pain that I feel?” But what is really being asked? The Christian knows what he is: a being created in the image of God with an immortal soul and the capacity for reason, choice, and faith. He knows that he abused his free will by sinning and corrupted a previously perfect world. He also knows that his actions necessitated God’s judgment and as a result, human suffering. So why does he ask, “Why me?” One of the main questions the sufferer asks is, “Am I judged righteously?” “How,” he asks, “could an omnipotent, omniscient, and all-good God allow for sin in the world with all the pain and all the suffering that comes of it? Imagine: an all-knowing God, fully able to foresee the outcome of freewill; an all-powerful God, fully able to deny free will to man; and an all-good God, who would not inflict unnecessary pain upon others, chose to create man with free will, fully knowing how he would make use of it. Maybe God is responsible for sin. If this sin is not man’s, if it should belong to a cruel or else careless God, why must man suffer its effects?”

This is the *problem of evil* and if the sufferer is right, man will not be short of things for which he might shake his fist at Divinity. Consider the tsunamis that struck Indonesia and Sri Lanka; perhaps the bubonic plague, the so-called “black death,” that ravaged medieval Europe-- mass death and suffering—hundreds of millions drowned in debris or mistaken for the dead and piled in mass graves. But what is a hundred million deaths? Can the human mind even imagine?

Albert Camus, in his novel *The Plague* comes to this same trouble. “A dead man,” he writes, “has no substance unless one has actually seen him dead, a hundred million corpses broadcast through history are no more than a puff of smoke in the imagination” (Camus, 38). In order to avoid ideas as abstract as these, it is better to consider a more accessible evil. In *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis expresses his heartbreak following the death of his wife. “Meanwhile, where is God?” (Lewis, 4) he asks after describing the state of his daily life-- bouncing between “common sense” and “jabs of red-hot memory” (Lewis, 2).

Where is God? When you are happy...and turn to him with gratitude and praise, you will be--or so it feels--welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once. And that seeming was as strong as this. What can this mean? Why is he so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble? (Lewis, 4-5)

Lewis takes his place along with the man who raises his fist to God. “Inconstant!” they might shout, “Sadist!” perhaps. How could a good God allow a person to put an inestimable amount of emotion into a relationship only to have it end painfully? Such suffering is truly an effect of sin; but if this sin is not man’s why must he suffer its effects? The question voiced by Lewis and the man who raises his fist is as follows: “Can God be responsible for evil (and all the pain that comes of it) since He created man with free will fully knowing how man would make use of it?”

A Grief Observed cannot be reduced to a collection of bitter sentiments and Lewis to a blasphemous unbeliever, however. Rather Lewis’s writings serve to illustrate his progression

from grief to faith. Near the end of his final chapter, Lewis asks, “Can a mortal ask questions which God finds unanswerable?” “Quite easily,” he continues, “All nonsense questions are unanswerable. How many hours are there in a mile? Is yellow square or round? Probably half the questions we ask--half our great theological and metaphysical problems--are like that” (81). I would suggest that Lewis considers, “Can a good God be responsible for evil?” as one of these nonsense questions. “When I lay these questions before God,” Lewis says, “I get no answer. But a rather special sort of ‘No answer.’ It is not the locked door. It is more like a silent, certainly not uncompassionate, gaze. As though He shook His head not in refusal but waiving the question. Like, ‘Peace, child; you don’t understand’” (80-81).

Christians come to the *problem of evil* holding a number of absolute premises. (1) That God is all-knowing, and (2) that man is created with free will. Perhaps, to assume God would create man knowing he would sin is to hold God responsible for that sin (as if man were bound by God's knowledge), but Christians also hold another belief absolutely-- that God is good, and a good God cannot be responsible for sin. So is a contradiction introduced? In societal terms, yes, since society will not accept that which it cannot label. Humanity, however, has a capacity that society denies. Recall that to be human is to necessarily have the faculty of faith and, in this faculty, the question finds its answer.

St. Luke relays Jesus’ words to the disciples of John the Baptist: “And He said to them in reply, ‘Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at Me’” (New American, Luke 7.22-23). In this, Jesus performs miracles, absurdities to human understanding, and requires faith of John's followers. The rational man would turn away because of course the blind do not see, the deaf do not hear, and the dead are not raised. What Jesus requires is faith that operates above

reason.

It is important to distinguish this super-rational faith from an irrational faith. The faith Jesus requires is not contrary to rationality, it merely operates outside of the realm of *purely* rational human understanding. Christians are called to this same faith. In answer to the question, “How could an omnipotent, omniscient, and all-good God allow for evil happenings in the world,” the Christian must respond in humility and admit that he truly does not understand because the question is absurd (or outside of the realm of purely rational human understandings). This questions exists in the realm of the absurd and so must be approached in the humility of faith. Anselm understood this. Quoting Isaiah 7:9, he writes:

I am not attempting, O Lord, to penetrate Your loftiness, for I cannot begin to match my understanding with it, but I desire in some measure to understand Your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this too I believe, that “unless I believe, I shall not understand.” (Anselm, 52-53)

Through this God-given gift of faith, man is able to grasp the otherwise unknowable.

In the mid-19th century, a Danish philosopher named Søren Aabye Kierkegaard applied this faith-based approach to the well-known Biblical tale of Abraham and Isaac. In *Fear and Trembling*, the work Kierkegaard put to this task, he articulates how one should come before God and explains why Abraham approached God properly. Abraham was promised descendants, as numerous as the stars, through his son; and because Abraham believed God to be trustworthy, he rejoiced. Years passed and although Abraham and Sarah aged, they continued to believe. Finally, when Abraham was one hundred years old, Sarah bore Isaac and there was more rejoicing. Then, in Genesis 22, Abraham was put to the test. God commanded Abraham to take his promised son, Isaac, and offer him as a sacrifice. Abraham did not falter, however; for he had

faith. God had promised him numberless descendants through Isaac. How God would deliver these descendants through a slaughtered son, Abraham did not know, but he believed. Abraham walked with Isaac towards the place the Lord had shown him. There on Mt. Moriah Abraham prepared the altar, bound Isaac, and raised his knife--all the time trusting God to keep His promise. Then an angel of the Lord stayed Abraham's hand. Abraham had passed the test; and, because of his faith and obedience, God blessed the world through his descendants.

Through Abraham's story, Kierkegaard believes Christians find their paradigm for faith. Abraham's test consisted of more than obedience--it required an absurd faith. How many of us would not question the source of a command to kill our child? Is this the voice of God or the devil, we might ask; and if God, is it *reasonable* that He should require murder from us? Abraham, however, believed in spite of his reason. He never entertained the idea that this Being was any other than the God whom he trusted and knew to be good. Abraham believed that the God Who promised numberless descendants was trustworthy Who also demanded that the necessary means for those descendants, namely Isaac, be killed. Still further, he believed that God could command the murder of his son and still be good. This is the direction of Kierkegaard's argument and his premises are as such: first, that it was truly God who commanded Abraham to kill Isaac and, second, that killing Isaac is a murderous and, therefore, evil act. Kierkegaard's understanding seems to indicate that God's test required Abraham to act in an evil manner. For this reason, Kierkegaard's third premise, that God is good, must be believed through faith. It is a leap of faith that Kierkegaard requires--faith that God is good even though premises one and two say otherwise, that the three premises are reconcilable regardless of an apparent contradiction. If the Christian is able to make that leap of faith and truly believe that God is good, he can appropriate the existence of an apparent contradiction in premises one and two; and so when confronted with the *problem of evil*, can respond, "Well, of course, there is no

problem.” It is this absurd, super-rational faith which Kierkegaard believes allows the Christian to grasp the paradox, to know that God has absolute power and knowledge; but because of his goodness, is neither responsible for evil nor would He ever require it of us.

Christians should not find an embrace of the absurd to be odd. We are called to turn the world and its ways upside-down. “Let no man deceive himself,” St. Paul says, “if any man among you seem to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God” (1 Cor. 3.18-19). The faithless world would no doubt say that to believe in spite of such a contradiction is absurd (Lee, 123). Kierkegaard might respond that to rely on our limited human intellect to make sense of this contradiction is what is truly absurd.

Kierkegaard understands the Mt. Moriah dilemma as one that exists outside of the rational realm; therefore, a reasoned approach to the problem found therein will most definitely fall short. This is to say that human understanding, restricted to the purely rational, has limits. Kierkegaard suggests that the Christian turn to his greater capacity: namely faith. This requires a submission of those rationally gained human understandings. Kierkegaard regarded ethics as just such an understanding. He saw “the ethical” as an institution imposed by society. Like Hegel, Kierkegaard believed ethics to be a societal interpretation of goodness, suitable for governing the population as a whole. This reduces “the ethical” to a mere social precedent proceeding from human reason and *its* interpretation of an abstract morality. With this in mind, ethics--like all things that find their root in reason--is limited when dealing with the super-rational.

In the story of Abraham and Isaac, Abraham is commanded by God to kill his son--an act that Abraham believes to be morally reprehensible. But why does he consider such an act to be so? Perhaps it is due to the responsibility he assumes as a father, perhaps because of the basic ethical understandings which have governed his life thus far. God's command remains, though,

despite those understandings. "On Kierkegaard's view, those commands do not consist of 'simple ethical teachings' but may require of the believer acts that go far beyond the bounds of ethics" (Perkins 150). And so Abraham approaches the edge of the ethical and must come to terms with its limitations. Unable to deal with the problem from an ethical stance, Abraham must, Kierkegaard says, come to it in the humility faith demands.

There is an issue, though. In order for Abraham to believe, he must deny the primacy of his personal ethical understandings. Not only this, but because God's command and his rationality are irreconcilable, Abraham must also, in faith, submit his rationality to divine command. So now, in order to approach this problem, Abraham's reliance has shifted from his sense of "the ethical" to faith. Kierkegaard refers to this shift as the *teleological suspension of "the ethical,"* which suggests that the ethical notions one holds must be set aside in order to attain a higher purpose. St. Luke's account of Jesus' challenge to the crowds well illustrates this ethical suspension: "Great crowds were traveling with Him, and He turned and addressed them, 'If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be My disciple'" (Luke 14.25-27). Jesus requires that common-sense ethical responsibilities--such as those of a child to his parents, a husband to his family, a boy to his siblings, and even a person to society--be submitted to His call. Abraham's case is identical in that he is commanded to kill his son. The higher purpose or *telos* is to obey the direct command of God. This *telos* is of a non-ethical nature, though, because it exists outside of the ethical sphere. Even basic ethical sentiments, such as a father's duty, must be suspended to even *begin* to approach this problem.

True, this is only the beginning since, as of yet, the problem has only been prepared for. The *teleological suspension of "the ethical"* is but the first step. Abraham would have to

suppress his ethical responsibilities simply to raise the knife over his son. But in order to know that the God who commanded that the knife should be raised was still good required Abraham to believe something ethically absurd. God's command to Abraham is absolutely unintelligible, in terms of purpose, to human reasoning. This is not to say that Abraham did not understand what was being asked of him; only that he had no idea as to why it was asked of him or what purpose it would serve. He did however know that it was God who required these things of him (Perkins 145). This is where the Kierkegaardian understanding of Abraham's story finds its strength!

Through this God-given gift of faith Abraham is able to say, "Lord, I do not know why you ask this of me, but I know that you are my God; and so I will obey." Because God is trustworthy to Abraham and it is truly He who requires Isaac, Abraham can be assured, by virtue of this absurd-knowing, that God is good and as such will not command evil of him! More than this, Abraham was promised numerous descendants through Isaac. This promise too he believed to be from a trustworthy God; and so consequently his faith assured him that even though God required Isaac's life, his descendants would bear his name through Isaac (Genesis 21.12).

The beauty of Kierkegaard's understanding is that it is not discouraged by rational or ethical incongruities; rather it revels in the paradoxical. This is the nature of Christianity. Is it not the dead seed that brings forth life, and he that loses his life shall save it? Could Christianity really exist in a world where "all bachelors are unmarried men" or "all virgins are without biological children?" This is what sets Kierkegaard's understanding apart from all other approaches to the *problem of evil*. It embraces the absurd as an essential element for dealing with the problem, rather than working within the restraints of limited human understanding. It does not seek to dictate divine sovereignty or benignity or knowledge by human standards. It requires that the Christian humble himself, at least to the point of not relying on his own mind.

The Kierkegaardian approach to the story of Abraham and Isaac does not pretend to be a

key that unlocks the mysteries of divine command. Instead, it is an interpretative framework from which the problem can be handled. Kierkegaard approaches the problem of unintelligible divine command much the way a cartoonist approaches ghosts. A ghost is in many respects an absurdity to human reason. It has no inherent spatial significance and lacks any tangible aspect. How can the cartoonist represent a formless and intangible “thing?” Most likely he will drape the wraith in a cloth. In so doing he has confined the phantom to whatever the form of the cloth is. The ghost is still an enigma to the rational mind, as one cannot know what it is *exactly* that causes the cloth to float mid-air, but the existence of the cloth gives a certain dimension to the ghost that makes it at least sensible. In this same way, Kierkegaard has draped the ineffability of divine command with the cloth of absurd-faith. Kierkegaard's hope is to alleviate the angst of uncertainty through faith in divine promise. This approach also seems to give Abraham a joy and trust which renders his uncertainty about as terrifying as a floating pillowcase.

Now then, how can this Kierkegaardian framework be applied to the problem of evil as it exists in the created world? It may be helpful to revisit the question: If God is all-knowing and if He created man with free will, is God responsible for man's sin since He created man fully knowing that man would sin? The question continues: Can a good God be responsible for sin? The typical Christian response is no. Of course a good God cannot be responsible for sin! But the paradox remains--and thank goodness! This paradox allows the Christian to exercise that God-given gift of absurd-knowing. Remember the steps: first, the *teleological suspension of “the ethical.”* Once free from the restraints of “the ethical,” the Christian may enter into an absurd faith assuring him that although God is omniscient and man is, indeed, created with free will, that God can in no way be responsible for sin. Why? Because God is good and truly believing that must deny all thoughts to the contrary. This approach does not seek to answer the question, it merely provides a framework by which those with faith may give dimension to the ghost.

Kierkegaard's faith appeals to an absolute duty to God, specifically an "absolutely overriding duty to obey God's commands" (Perkins 141). This duty "takes precedence over every other concern" (Perkins 141) including "the highest ethical duties," which Dr. C. Steven Evans of Baylor University states "are concretely embodied in societal institutions" (Perkins 144). For this reason, "an absolute duty to God can only come from some specific communication or special revelation from God, directed to individuals" (Perkins 142). In short, an absolute duty to God must be given to the individual directly from God in the form of a command. Abraham received just such a command, and as is the case, his situation can be contrasted with those of the tragic heroes. Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter, Iphigenia, to "an angry deity" in order to insure favorable wind conditions for an upcoming battle (Perkins 144). Agamemnon's choice to sacrifice his child, in order to insure the safety of his nation, is ethically understandable according to Kierkegaard. Agamemnon weighed his ethical responsibility as a ruler with his ethical responsibility as a father, and found that ten thousand deaths outweigh one. "Since everything is moving in the ethical sphere, there is no question of a teleological suspension of the ethical" (Lee, 118). For this reason, Agamemnon simply "lets one expression of the ethical find its telos in a higher expression of the ethical" (Perkins 144). Abraham, however, acts outside of "the ethical" entirely. He also has an ethical responsibility as a father, but he has been commanded by God to kill his child. This command communicates an absolute duty to God that is of an entirely non-ethical nature, and Abraham's absolutely overriding duty to obey God's command requires that he suspend his ethical responsibility as a father.

This idea is rather distasteful for thinkers such as Immanuel Kant. Kant viewed "the ethical" or universal as "a matter of categorical imperatives, duties that are obligatory without regard to particular circumstance" (Lee, 104). These categorical imperatives are inherent in all people and so every society necessarily reflects a universal ethic. Kant also saw "the ethical" as

self-contained in that it "has nothing outside itself that is its telos [,] but is itself the telos for everything outside itself" (Lee, 104). As such, "the ethical," for Kant, becomes the proper gauge for morality. Kant would take issue with Kierkegaard's claim that an absolute duty to God takes precedence over "the ethical" in any way. In Kant's view, "the ethical" defines morality (in that it is defined by morality) therefore no command from God can contradict it or require that it be suspended. Kant suggests, in *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, that Abraham should have responded to "the so-called divine command as follows: That I ought not to kill my good son is certain beyond a shadow of a doubt; that you, as you appear to be, are God, I am not convinced and will never be even if your voice would resound from the (visible) heavens" (Lee, 105). Kant does not believe this being to truly be God because it contradicts *his* "ethical" understandings. At this point, Kierkegaard breaks his silence. Kant presumes that he can identify God by means of his own "ethical" opinion. To begin, Kierkegaard supposes "the ethical" to be highly subjective since the notion of inherent categorical imperatives suggests the need to interpret these imperatives. Such interpretation is done personally, by means of human reason. Because of this, it is possible to suppose that there may be as many interpretations as are people that exist to make them. In this view, the universal is far from uniform. If this is not enough to dissuade the adamant Kantian, Kierkegaard revisits a previous notion of Kant's ethics, that it "has nothing outside itself that is its telos but is itself the telos for everything outside itself". Does this notion imply that "the ethical is such as the Divine" (Lee, 104)? This ethical view seems to explain all human duties through itself. Reverend Seung-Goo Lee is a professor of systematic theology at the Guk-Je Theological Seminary in Seoul, Korea. Quoting Kierkegaard, he makes the point that "even though the ethical person uses the term God... 'God comes to be an invisible vanishing point, an impotent thought; His power is only in the ethical, which ...is the content of existence'" (105). So is God subject to "the ethical," or rather Kant's personal notion of "the ethical?" If this

understanding of “the ethical” is followed to its conclusion, it is possible to say that God was subject to Kant. Kierkegaard said of Kant that he "bound himself under the law which he gave himself. In a deeper sense that means lawlessness or experimentation" (Lee, 124-125).

So does Divine command justify a denial of the rational view of ethics. It has been determined that "the ethical" is highly subjective. Does the direct command of God supersede highly subjective, “ethical” understandings? Abraham and the Christian respond with a resounding, “Yes!” It is clear to both that objective goodness can only be approached after receiving the direct command of an unchanging God. Both Abraham, in dealing with God's command, and the Christian, in dealing with the *problem of evil*, must submit their individual notions of “the ethical" in order to obey God's commands which are of a non-ethical nature.

Some would ask how it is that Divine commands could contradict "the ethical" since God is good. Dr. Eleanor Stump of St. Louis University asks this same question and raises another voiced by Socrates. Socrates asks: "Does God will what He wills because it is good, or is what God wills good because He wills it?" Dr. Stump argues for the former: that God adheres to a standard of goodness and so chooses to do good although He has the capacity to do evil. For this reason, God will never act in an unethical manner (Stump). This is a point of contention between Dr. Stump and Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard is very careful to make clear that ethics and morality encompass two entirely separate spheres of meaning. “The ethical” is subjective as it flows from human understanding; morality is objective since it proceeds directly from an unchanging Being. For this reason, morality operates infinitely above “the ethical.” While purely rational ethics may resemble morality, it is only by the grace of God--the individual has merely stumbled upon true goodness. As such, God will never act immorally, but He may act unethically. Stump seems not to recognize this distinction as she suggests that God does, in fact, will what He wills because *it* is good. Her argument implies that God is bound by a transcendent morality; that God, in his

omnipotence, is powerless to do evil. This understanding resembles Kant's categorical imperatives. Stump has essentially deified morality rather than understood that morality is morality because it comes from God. Socrates' latter option (that what God wills is good simply because He wills it) does not limit God's power as Stump's view does. In the *Problem of Pain*, Lewis speaks to this:

Omnipotence means power to do anything intrinsically possible, not to do the intrinsically impossible. You may attribute miracles to [God], but not nonsense. This is no limit to His power. If you choose to say, "God can give a creature free will and at the same time withhold free will from it," you have not succeeded in saying *anything* about God: meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning simply because we prefix to them the two other words "God can." It remains true that all *things* are possible with God: the intrinsic impossibilities are not things but nonentities. It is no more possible for God than for the weakest of his creatures to carry out both of two mutually exclusive alternatives; not because His power meets an obstacle, but because nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God. (Lewis, 18)

Lewis is correct. For this reason, to say, "God can do evil but merely chooses not to" is nonsensical. Goodness proceeds from God's nature. God does not do evil. It is entirely other than His nature. The terms "God" and "evil," as Lewis's statement implies, are mutually exclusive. Christians must agree that "what God wills is good simply because He wills it" if we are to believe that God is all-good and, at the same time, all-powerful.

What then is the *telos* of faith? The differentiation between the moral and ethical is made, to what does it progress? Abraham and the Christian, alike, are called to make this distinction because in doing so they distinguish the word of finite man from the word of infinite God. Once they have learned the difference, they are given a choice to either obey or disobey. Faith allows

them to make the correct choice. The *telos* of faith, Seung-Goo Lee writes, is to acknowledge the absolute duty one has to God and to maintain it through obedience (108).

Some will say that implementing such an absurd approach to God's command is an abuse of our God-given faculty of rationality. This complaint, however, is uninformed. Faith is not contradictory to rationality; it is the missing piece necessary to clearly perceive reality. Without faith, our image of reality remains unintelligibly distorted. "The ethical" is the distorted image of morality. The *problem of evil* is the distorted image of God's plan. Abraham is presented with a paradox--a distorted image. God has required Isaac of him, and he knows that killing Isaac is evil, but *by virtue of the absurd*, he also knows that God is good. "...Just this sort of 'paradox' or 'absurdity' is for Kierkegaard a prod to philosophical reflection. The invocation of the absurd is not an abnegation of thinking but its instigation" (Mooney 55). Reliance on reason in place of faith is not objectively searching out true knowledge, it is turning a blind eye to wisdom.

Referring to abused human rationality in *Choruses From the Rock*, T.S. Eliot asks, "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge (147)?" Eliot understands that not all movement is progress. Consider the movements of the spiritual child: God's children are constantly questioning, curious of what might be just beyond their reach. Their Father has placed understanding and wisdom high on a shelf, too high for humans to obtain unaided. So we, His children, stand teetering on towers of our own design and, though we cannot see, feel around for what we *know* must be right above us. These towers are unnecessary, though, as God has promised to take the items from the shelf if only we would accept His help. We, as questioning Christians, are unaware that if we merely climbed down from our unsteady rational contrivances and accepted His promise in faith, we would be given the knowledge we so desperately seek. The *teleological suspension of "the ethical"* is the first step towards acting in faith. Acting in faith is a movement towards obedience to God. Obedience to God is the beginning of wisdom.

Where does one go from here? The leap of faith is made. Once one has overstepped “the ethical,” is it ever possible to re-enter the ethical sphere (Lee, 120)? Here it is essential to understand Kierkegaard’s distinction between resignation and faith. Both resignation and faith, he insists, require that one releases the finite (or temporal) to an infinite degree (Lee, 111). Recall the cases of Agamemnon and Abraham. Both Agamemnon and Abraham were required to sacrifice their child; in so doing, they loosed hold of their finite possession entirely-- infinitely. Agamemnon infinitely released the hold he had on Iphigenia and lost her infinitely. Abraham infinitely released his hold on Isaac and Isaac was returned to him. Why do these two situations have different results? Agamemnon resigned his child infinitely. Abraham also resigned his child infinitely; however, through an absurd faith that God was good, Abraham knew that even though he had released Isaac, Isaac would be returned to him. "Had [Abraham] despaired of getting Isaac back, he would have lacked faith, the capacity to believe in the possibility of the impossible" (Lee, 114).

The difference between resignation and faith is that resignation has one movement and faith has a double movement. To act in resignation is to infinitely resign the finite. To act in faith is to infinitely resign the finite and then, *by virtue of the absurd*, have the finite returned. If Abraham's act had been one of resignation:

He would have [marched up] to Mount Moriah, he would have split the firewood, lit the fire, drawn the knife. He would have cried out to God, “Reject not this sacrifice; it is not the best thing I have, that I know very well, for what is an old man compared with the child of promise, but it is the best that I can give you. Let Isaac never find this out so that he may take comfort in his youth.” He would have plunged the knife into his own breast. (Kierkegaard, 20-21)

Through his suicide, Abraham would have infinitely resigned his hold on the finite; but, as he is

dead and faithless, would never have it returned to him. Abraham did not do this, however.

During all this time he had faith, he had faith that God would not demand Isaac of him, and yet he was willing to sacrifice him if it was demanded. He had faith by virtue of the absurd...He climbed the mountain, and even in the moment when the knife gleamed he had faith--that God would not require Isaac. (Kierkegaard, 35-36)

"By faith, he receives the world, symbolized by Isaac, after he has let it go" (Mackey, 215). If one truly acts in faith and suspends "the ethical," it is necessary that "the ethical" be returned to him. But the ethical nature of this new world is essentially different--blessed by God for the faith shown. There is thus "a new creation by virtue of the absurd" (Kierkegaard, 40).

This old world of "the ethical" is returned, *by virtue of the absurd*, transfigured into a blessed and wonderful world. Abraham, who was once the slave of a categorical imperative, a universal ethic, is liberated by Kierkegaard's *teleological suspension of "the ethical"* and is thus able to enter this newly sanctified, ethical existence. But where does this new world receive its law? Surely it is not from the old ethical system. That structure has been submitted to the command of God, by faith, and a new structure has emerged in its place. Perhaps it is best to look at the *telos* of faith again. The *telos* of faith, remember, is to acknowledge an absolute duty to God and to maintain it through obedience. This new world, established through faith, must have the same end as faith. It seems, then, that this new ethical structure would have to be based on an absolute duty to God. From whence comes this absolute duty, though? It has already been stated that this duty can only come from some specific communication or special revelation from God to the individual. If this is the case, then saying that faith merely begets a new ethical system is making very little of its actual importance. To elaborate, in acknowledging the absolute duty Abraham has to God and suspending his ethical duty, what Abraham actually does is establish a relationship with God by abolishing the old ethical system. The *teleological*

suspension of "the ethical" is a promise to God! It cannot be a momentary, preferential decision since it does away with the old system; rather, it is a choice to live in a personal relationship with God, always holding the continuation of that relationship above the previously held ethical responsibilities. The ethical is now viewed differently. Ethics are not "autonomous" as Kant thought, but rather "dependent on God" (Lee, 124). The *teleological suspension of "the ethical"* is an initial movement of faith that perpetuates itself through a necessity to continue acting in faith. In other words, because the *teleological suspension* does away with the previous "ethical" system, Abraham must, even after the initial movement, continue to receive his ethics directly from Divine command. This requires faith. Kierkegaard describes the life of those who have made the initial movement of faith as "[living] happily every moment this way by virtue of the absurd... not to find rest in the pain of resignation but to find joy by virtue of the absurd--this", he writes, "is wonderful" (Kierkegaard, 50).

Through the *teleological suspension of "the ethical"* Abraham has embraced his new, wonderful existence. The "Father of Faith" has acted in faith and accepted the relationship God has offered. The Jews will be happy. What of Christians though? How should this act effect them? Is it just a really good story, an interesting occurrence, an intellectual exercise? Is it only for Abraham? If so, this exposition has meant nothing since it has no applicable purpose. Christians must recall what makes them Christians. "If anyone comes to Me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple." Christians become Christian by excepting the offered relationship from God. Unless the Christian gives up everything he has known, he can have no relationship with God. Unless he submits his previous responsibilities, he can have no relationship with God. Unless he has faith enough to believe in the paradoxical (the God-man!), he can have no relationship with God! Christ's call to believe in the absurd is a call to a personal relationship with Him. In

Romans 4, Abraham is described as “foreshadowing the faith of the New Covenant” (Lee, 110).

Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins are covered. Does this blessedness apply only to the circumcised, or to the uncircumcised as well? Now we assert that “faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness.” Under what circumstances was he credited? Was he circumcised or not? He was not circumcised but uncircumcised. And he received the sign of circumcision as a seal on the righteousness received through faith while he was uncircumcised. Thus he was to be the father of all the uncircumcised who believe so that to them also righteousness might be credited [...]. It was not through the law that the promise was made to Abraham and his descendants that he would inherit the world, but through the righteousness that comes from faith. For if those who adhere to the law are heirs, faith is null and the promises void. For the law produces wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason, it depends on faith, so that it may be a gift, and the promise may be guaranteed to all his descendants, not to those who only adhere but to those who follow the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all ...But it was not for him alone that it was written that “it was credited to him;” it was also for us, to whom it will be credited, who believe in the One who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, Who was handed over for our transgressions and was raised for our justification. (Rom. 4.7, 9-13, 23-25)

God’s call to Abraham prefigures the call given to all people, Jews and Gentiles alike.

Abraham is the model for how fallen man should approach the call of God. Abraham is more than the paradigm for Christian faith; he is the paradigm for the Christian. Kierkegaard saves the story of Abraham and Isaac from being merely a moral tale that Christians can apply to their lives; instead he reveals it as the reason Christians *came* to be followers of Christ! To be Christian is to act in the way Abraham prefigured. Kierkegaard’s *teleological suspension of “the*

ethical” is the Christian’s promise to live the rest of his life, every moment, in a personal relationship with God *by virtue of the absurd*.

Christian theology attempts to address the problem of evil, tirelessly asking in as many ways and wordings as language can render, “Can God be responsible for *my* sin?” This question is in a sense self-defeating because it attempts to lay the fault for man’s trespasses against God on God, when truly man has only himself to blame. Theology, as Denis de Rougemont says, “is distorted by setting out from the ‘problem of God’-- exactly as though in unbelief--when the real problem is to know how to obey Him” (306). Humanity must, in humility and faith, in fear and trembling, come accountable before God and acknowledge that we are sinners and that God is truly good. Abraham and we with him must be willing to sacrifice everything, our ethics and arrogant rationalism included, to follow God’s call to faith. If we delight ourselves in that which is His; we, with Abraham, will rejoice.

This truly is a wonderful life that the Christian has entered--a world whose ethical system is determined by a relationship with an unchanging, all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God. No wonder Abraham had such a peace. He could raise the knife above his son assured that he was justified, that Isaac would not be taken, and that he would be blessed. Christians enjoy the same assurance. If one were to ask a Christian, “Would God ever require you to do something that is wrong?” the Christian would say, “No, God is good.” If one were to ask, “Can God be responsible for sin?” the answer would be the same. The peace that both Abraham and the Christian feel comes from the personal relationship they have with a God they know to be good. This peace they feel does not imply that there is no pain, though. It is a freedom from anxiety not a freedom from suffering, as suffering is an essential and refining aspect of the Christian life. A Christian’s suffering is still so painful to him, even with absolute peace in the knowledge of God’s goodness and power. Christ still wept at the grave of Lazarus despite His Own assurance

that He would raise him. Abraham is no exception to this suffering. Genesis 22 relays the conversation between he and Isaac as they walked to Mt. Moriah:

As the two walked on together, Isaac spoke to his father Abraham: “Father!” he said. “Yes, son,” he replied. Isaac continued, “Here are the fire and wood, but where is the sheep for the holocaust?” “Son,” Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the sheep for the holocaust.” Then the two continued going forward. (Genesis 22.7-8)

With God's promise still echoing through his head, is it possible that these words did not hurt Abraham? Could anyone hold a knife over their child, look into eyes that are fully aware of what is about to happen, and not have an almost unbearable pain in their heart? God does not promise the Christian a painless existence. The Bridegroom has simply promised to remain with his Church for better or for worse: “Amen, amen I say to you, that you shall lament and weep, but the world shall rejoice; and you shall be made sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy” (John 16.20). The offered companionship takes the bitterness and hopelessness out of *problem of evil* and, by extension, the *problem of pain*. God promises a peace in the knowledge that whatever He commands is righteous because it is He Who commands it. The Christian may have complete assurance of this because he knows, *by virtue of the absurd*, that God is good.

From Mt. Moriah to Golgotha, God's call is a call to embrace the absurd. Kierkegaard merely records what this embrace looks like. Through his framework, Christians may grasp the paradox that is Christianity and aspire to the paradox that is Abraham. Kierkegaard said of Abraham that he “was great by that power whose strength is powerlessness, great by that wisdom whose secret is foolishness, great by that hope whose form is madness, great by the love that is hatred of oneself” (Kierkegaard, 16-17). Christians are called to this same greatness.