



# A Double Sacrifice

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What has become of the notion of faith? What was once considered the end to which one arrives is now considered the beginning from which one proceeds! The task of an entire lifetime has been reduced by the modern world to something which should be surpassed, as though faith was an object easily acquired, or perhaps an innate quality in human beings!

Disgusted by this contemporary persuasion, Kierkegaard is driven to write *Fear and Trembling*. Armed with pen, publisher, and pseudonym, he aims to demolish this crude notion of faith by hurling at it the fire-and-brim-stone tale of the sacrifice of Isaac. From the wreckage rises Abraham, and as Kierkegaard's true figure (father) of faith, he returns the concept of faith to the elevated stature of an ideal.

My reading of *Fear and Trembling* has lead me to assume that this ideal faith with which Abraham is accredited is one which cannot exist in the same moment as does reason. I thereby argue for a sacrifice of reason as a postulate of Kierkegaard's ideal faith . This sacrifice will be presented as the infinite resignation of the position reason commonly holds as the rule by which the world must work. In the place of reason shall stand faith.

"He left behind his worldly understanding and took with him his faith."

As the story goes, Abraham was ninety-nine years old when God promised him the son, Isaac, from whom a multitude of nations would be born. God kept this promise and Sarah, at ninety years of age, delivered the child. But this was not to be the last from God, for he later returned to challenge Abraham with a test of faith. The test required Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son as a burnt offering by his own hand. The next morning, Abraham rode off with Isaac in tow, and three days later he saw the mountain of Mori'ah, which was the chosen spot. On the fourth day, he climbed the mountain with his son, and held high the knife to Isaac's throat. But he was stopped at the crucial moment by an angel of God, for he had passed the test. Abraham had proven his faith and was permitted to sacrifice a ram instead.

Throughout *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard retells this story several times with the purpose of illustrating that it is not his willingness to sacrifice his son that has made Abraham the father of faith. In the Attunement, the story is retold four times in which, respectively, Abraham explains his action, stops his action, mourns his action, and doubts his action. In each of these tales, Abraham is brought to the same moment as in the original tale, that is, the knife is held high. The difference lies

in Abraham's state of mind throughout the ordeal. In these retellings Abraham thinks about his action and his reasoning leads him to doubt God's ability to restore Isaac in the present world and to thereby honour his original promise. But in the actual story, Abraham does not doubt the powers of God. He raises the knife without doubt, "...on the strength of the absurd, on the strength of the fact that for God all things are possible." The fundamental quality of Abraham's faith is not his willingness to do what God asks, but to do so by believing in and expecting the absurd.

I propose that this state of being requires, as a prerequisite, a sacrifice of reason. This sacrifice can only be an infinite resignation of the position reason holds as the rule by which the world must work. If the sacrifice is not an infinite resignation of this position, if it is simply the suspension of reason, then an act of faith, such as Abraham's, will be doubted upon the release of reason (as in the fourth retelling of the story in the Attunement). The suspension of reason is not enough, for faith is not to be doubted. The sacrifice of reason must therefore be as outlined: the infinite resignation of the position of reason as the rule by which the world must work.

I assert that the faith exhibited by Abraham requires a sacrifice of reason. How did this come to be? I hereby offer a theory of this sacrifice, as inspired by Kierkegaard's Knight of Infinite Resignation.

Suppose that Abraham, triggered by the irrational birth of Isaac from a ninety year old Sarah, has come to suspect that the world may work by a rule beyond that of reason. He realizes that within this world exists an all powerful God who continually defies the constraints of reason. What is he to do? If we assume that understanding is a faculty of reason, then when Abraham realizes that reason cannot contain God, he also realizes that he has no hope in understanding the world as a whole. Does he give up the world because he can't possess it as a concept? Does he kill himself? No, he does not. He continues to live in the world, aware of the fact that he cannot 'have it', so to speak. But he resigns reason to a lesser position, and he lives on under the shadow of mysterious rules and absurd phenomenon. This must disturb him, or at least make him feel a little unsure. And so, in the spirit of the Knight of Infinite Resignation, Abraham channels the discomfort brought on by this resignation of reason into a trusting love of God. By infinitely resigning reason and trustingly loving God, Abraham has successfully leaped over the final obstacle that stands before faith in existence.

The difference between the four retellings of Abraham's story in the Attunement and the original story should now be clear. The Abraham of the former has not yet sacrificed reason, while the Abraham of the latter has. In Kierkegaard's retellings, Abraham is a man plagued by the whispering uncertainties of a reasonable mind. It is reason which leads Abraham to explain his action to Isaac in the first retelling, for he thinks that Isaac has a right to know. It is reason that leads him to choose the ram as an offering in the second retelling, for he thinks that it is a safer sacrifice. It is reason in the third retelling which leads him to mourn his action, for he thinks that he has committed a sin. In the fourth retelling, it is reason that causes his hand to shake, for he thinks that Isaac might be lost from this world forever. But in the original story, Abraham thinks none of these things, for the voice of reason has long been silenced within him. On the strength of the absurd, Abraham is driven to believe that God is both capable and willing to restore Isaac to the present world, and if he is thinking anything at all in the original story, it is this. His belief in the absurd notion that Isaac can be both sacrificed and restored to bring forth a multitude of nations is the very paradox that is Abraham's faith, and this faith is only able to exist within a world that is not necessarily ruled by reason.

By acknowledging the fact that it is a feat beyond the qualifications of reason to grasp the notion of absurdity in the world, Abraham arrives at a cross-roads in life. He could live on as a man who apprehends existence through the rules of reason, and thus sacrifice any possibility of being a man of faith, or he could live on as a man of faith and sacrifice his reason. He knows he can not have both, for the two are distinct states of mind. As we know, he chooses the latter and proves himself a man of faith to both God and Kierkegaard by not only raising his arm and aiming his knife at his beloved son, but by doing so without doubt, fear, nor trembling, on the strength of the absurd'. I therefore reassert my claim. Faith, as the ideal notion put forth by Kierkegaard and demonstrated by Abraham, involves a sacrifice of reason, because "...faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off."

## Bibliography

Kierkegaard, S. *Fear and Trembling*. Transl. Alastair Hannay. London, Eng.: Penguin, 1985.

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