Kierkegaard's Regulative Sacrifice: A Post-Kantian Reading of *Fear and Trembling*

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ABSTRACT - The present paper suggests to consider Kierkegaard's use of Abraham's story in *Fear and Trembling* in regulative terms, that is, to consider it as a model – not for our moral behaviour but rather for our religious behaviour. To do so, I first rely on recent literature to argue that Kierkegaard should be regarded as a distinctively post-Kantian philosopher: namely, a philosopher who goes beyond Kant in a way that is nevertheless true to the spirit of Kant's original critical philosophy. Then, I present a post-Kantian reading of *Fear and Trembling*, focusing on the problematic implications that result from comparing this text with Hegel's theory of recognition. Finally, I submit that sacrifice in *Fear and Trembling* is a *regulative* notion in a Kantian sense. This interpretation addresses some of the most problematic aspects of the text. I conclude that the regulativity of sacrifice may be regarded as an important and perhaps an essential component of Kierkegaard's overall philosophical strategy.

Since its composition in 1843, Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* has engendered a large number of interpretative disagreements, heated debates, and philosophical conflicts.[1] In the twentieth century, philosophers in the analytic tradition, such as Henry Aiken, have often dismissed Kierkegaard's work as lacking in rationality.[2] At the same time, harsh criticism has been launched against the text even from within the Continental tradition. This trend is exemplified by Levinas's well-known attack, in which he has suggested that Kierkegaard's suspension of the ethical and leap into the religious was "amoral" and even "violent".[3]

Kierkegaard's reception in the Anglophone world has changed somewhat during the last few decades, mostly due to the work of a group of scholars who have provided new insights into his philosophical work. Green has contributed to the understanding of Kierkegaard's "hidden debt" to Kant;[4] Stewart has demonstrated the inaccuracy of traditional accounts of Kierkegaard's relationship to Hegel;[5] and other scholars such as Lippitt, Mooney, and Westphal have advocated new ways of reading Kierkegaard that take his philosophy seriously and free him from the charge of irrationalism.[6] While these efforts have been largely successful, I believe that there is still much to be done to clarify Kierkegaard's philosophy, illustrate its importance, and emphasise his legacy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (working beyond the clichéd assertion that Kierkegaard was 'the father of Existentialism').

On these grounds, this paper focuses on *Fear and Trembling* and suggests to consider the use of Abraham's story in regulative terms, that is, to consider it as a model – not for our moral behaviour but rather for our religious behaviour (I will argue for the need of such

a distinction shortly). To do so, I will first rely on recent literature to argue that Kierkegaard

should be regarded as a distinctively post-Kantian philosopher: namely, a philosopher who

goes beyond Kant in a way that is nevertheless true to the spirit of Kant's original critical

philosophy (Section 1). Then, I will discuss the interpretation that emerges from a post-

Kantian reading of *Fear and Trembling* by focusing on the problematic implications

resulting from a comparison with Hegel's theory of recognition (Section 2). My

methodology in Sections 1 and 2 is informed neither by analytic nor by contextual history

of philosophy, but rather by a combination of the two. While I believe that the topic of

Kierkegaard's reception of Kant and Hegel certainly deserves to be pursued, here I am

more interested in acknowledging the presence of an array of common features and

problems connecting Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard.[7]

    Finally, I submit that sacrifice in *Fear and Trembling* is a *regulative* notion in a Kantian

sense – that is, a symbolic presentation or exhibition that is necessary to make religious

ideas applicable to the world. Based on this interpretation, I address some of the most

problematic aspects of the book. Focusing narrowly on the account of Abraham's sacrifice

in *Fear and Trembling* does not provide an accurate picture of *Kierkegaard*'s account of

sacrifice; however, I think that *Fear and Trembling* plays a preliminary and yet pivotal role

in the pursuit of the philosophical goals that Kierkegaard wants to achieve (as it should

become clear by the end of this paper).

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According to the traditional understanding of his philosophical thought in general, and of

Fear and Trembling in particular, Kierkegaard is regarded to have taken up aspects of

Kant's philosophy 'only to reject Kantianism as a whole'.[8] In this section, I will rely on

recent Kierkegaard scholarship to draw a brief comparison between Kant and Kierkegaard

with regard to the understanding of the relationship between knowledge and faith, and their

respective accounts of the *Akedah*. This preliminary analysis will clarify in what sense

Kierkegaard can be regarded as a post-Kantian philosopher and will pave the way for

further discussion of the notion of sacrifice in the next two sections.

The role of religious notions and narratives in Kant's practical philosophy is often

underestimated. Kant's discounting of any religious *foundation* from either the theoretical

or the practical realm does not mean that he dismisses the *content* of revealed religion as

irrelevant in general, or that he discounts the idea of God in particular.[9]

Regarding the latter, Kant recommends that duties 'be regarded as commands of the

supreme Being'.[10] and invites the moral agent to listen to moral commands *as if* they were

spoken by the voice of God. In other words, moral duties should be regarded as

theonomous duties – that is, duties towards God: 'Since all religion consists in this, that in

all our duties we look upon God as the lawgiver universally to be honored'.[11] And a few

pages later, Kant reinforces the claim: 'Religion is (subjectively considered) the recognition

of all our duties as divine commands'.[12] Regarding the former, Kant considers religious

claims and notions as symbolic *presentations* or exhibitions (*Darstellungen*) of the moral

law that are for this reason 'equally capable of being known through reason'.[13] They are not

mere 'metaphors': the need for such *presentations* is, conversely, deeply rooted into the

need for a way of making moral concepts concretely applicable to the world. In fact, in the

Critique of Practical Reason, Kant notes 'special difficulties' dealing with the *application*

of the moral law – difficulties that do not present themselves in the realm of theoretical

reason. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the problem of applying categories (pure concepts)

to the contents of intuition was solved by Kant through the introduction of 'schemata'

(rules that connect pure concepts with sensible data). In the realm of practical reason,

however, we deal with 'the morally good', that is - in Kant's own words - something

supersensible, 'so that nothing corresponding to it can be found in any sensible intuition;

hence the power of judgment under laws of pure practical reason seems to be subject to

special difficulties which are due to [the fact] that a law of freedom is to be applied to

actions as events that occur in the world of sense and thus, to this extent, belong to

nature'.[14] The problem for Kant is to find something equivalent to schemata for practical

reason, that is, transitional forms to be used to apply the pure principles of practical reason

to experience. These forms are identified by Kant in symbolic presentations or exhibitions

(*Darstellungen*). In fact, whereas a pure concept can be *schematised*, moral ideas can only

be *symbolised*.[15] As Kant explains in the *Critique of Judgment*, a symbol (*Darstellung*) is

not an arbitrary sign; rather, the relation between a symbol and an idea is analogical - a

similarity that holds across differences of type.[16] Thus, religious notions and narratives are

an essential component of a set of symbolic notions that, for Kant, are necessary to make

moral ideas applicable to the world.[17] Kant explicitly claims that the 'sacred narrative' is

given 'for the vivid presentation [*Darstellung*] of its true object (virtue striving toward

holiness)'.[18]

   Therefore, for Kant, religious symbols (both notions and narratives) are transitional

forms, or analogical *presentations* (*Darstellungen*), that must be used to apply the pure

principles of practical reason to experience, insofar as they can serve as models for our

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behavior; in other words, they play a *regulative* role in the application of moral ideas to the world. It follows that religious notions and narratives, far from being mere metaphors or symbols *in a weak sense*, are rather an *essential* component of Kant's practical philosophy.

However, not all religious notions or narratives of a revealed religion can serve as models for our behaviour. In *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant first distinguishes between natural religion and revealed religion.[19] The relationship between natural religion and revealed religion is visible in the image of the concentric circles included in the Preface to the 1794 edition: revealed religion, represented by the wider circle, includes natural religion ('the pure religion of reason'), which is in turn represented by the narrower circle. What is implied in this image is that the criteria according to which it is decided that some claim is acceptable within the sphere of natural religion are set by the philosopher, 'as purely a teacher of reason'.[20] It follows that only religious content that is compatible with potentially universalisable moral maxims can be regarded as having symbolic and regulative status.

A meaningful example of the regulativity of religious notions in Kant is represented by the case of Christ. In *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant refers to the 'schematism of analogy' involved in the representation of Christ and comments: 'It is plainly a limitation of human reason, one which is ever inseparable from it, that we cannot think of any significant moral worth in the actions of a person without at the same time portraying this person or his expression in human guise [...] we always need a certain analogy with natural being to make supersensible characteristics comprehensible to us'.[21] Thus, the claim that 'Jesus is the son of God' can be interpreted as a symbolic way of

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expressing the ethically exemplary nature of Jesus's behaviour. The fact that Jesus's

behaviour can be considered exemplary means that it serves as a model for our own

behaviour; that is, the scriptural representation of Christ is peculiarly *regulative*. We must,

Kant claims, have exemplars on which we can model our behaviour: religious notions,

insofar as they are symbolic, are also regulative.[22]

As already stressed, only religious content that is compatible with potentially

universalizable moral maxims can be regarded as having symbolic and regulative status.

This is clearly not the case with the *Akedah*. Kant writes: 'Even though something is

represented as commanded by God, through a direct manifestation of Him, yet, if it flatly

contradicts morality, it cannot, despite all appearances, be of God (if something is

represented as commanded by God in a direct manifestation of him yet is directly in

conflict with morality, it cannot be a divine miracle despite every appearance of being one

(e.g., *if a father were ordered to kill his son who, so far as he knows, is totally innocent*)'.[23]

There is no doubt that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his own son because of a direct

command from God represented a serious concern for Kant. This is even more evident in a

passage from *The Conflict of Faculties* in which Kant condemns Abraham without appeal:

'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"'.[24]

Now, consider Kierkegaard. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an overall

comparison between Kant and Kierkegaard;[25] what I want to argue here is that Kierkegaard

has a Kantian approach to the regulativity of religious symbols, but he is disappointed with

Kant's use of those symbols exclusively for ethical purposes. As I am going to show, *Fear and Trembling* can be regarded as evidence of this disappointment.

Traditional interpretations often paint Kierkegaard as an advocate of the superiority of faith over knowledge in the theoretical realm and as a supporter of the divine command ethics in the practical realm. In short, he would be an apologist for Christian conceptual truths and a champion of irrational faith against abstract reason (a position that would have a positive value for some and a negative value for others). However, these conclusions turn out to be surprisingly poorly if the Kantian approach to regulativity is taken into account. Karl Verstrynge, in his stimulating article 'The Perfection of the Kierkegaardian Self in Regulative Perspective'[26], offers a valuable contribution to this line of thought. Verstrynge's article initially focuses on Kierkegaard's notion of perfection of the self. The religious goal of this striving to perfection cannot be presented objectively. However, Verstrynge convincingly argues that if Kierkegaard's idea of God is interpreted within a regulative perspective, then the emphasis on the subject's pole of the God-relation does not turn Kierkegaard into a subjectivist. For our purposes, Verstrynge's article is particularly valuable for the comprehensive elaboration of the Kantian view on regulative concepts in terms of Kierkegaardian insights. To that analysis, I will here add some further remarks,

Kierkegaard does not consider the idea of God to be a cognitive object. It is clear in the second chapter of the *Postscript* that Kierkegaard 'comes to the same skeptical conclusion as Kant'[27] with respect to traditional arguments for the existence of God. Kierkegaard shares Kant's distinction between knowledge and faith and thinks that rational knowledge of God is impossible.[28] Thus, Kierkegaard may be seen as expressing the same 'cognitive

humility' found in Kant.[29] In *Point of View Regarding my Work as an Author*, Kierkegaard

explicitly claims that 'the purpose of his authorship was not to raise the question of the

truth of Christianity, but rather to cause men to inquire how they could become

Christians'.[30] Kierkegaard, like Kant, believes that religion must be approached through

practical and not theoretical reason.[31] Therefore, it is on *the ethical* that we should focus to

analyse the role of religious symbols in *Fear and Trembling.*

An interpretation that assumed a unitary account of the ethical in Kierkegaard's work

would be dangerous, as each pseudonym represents a distinct existential standpoint.[32] One

might, however, appeal to the distinction made by Vigilius Haufniensis (Kierkegaard's

pseudonymous author) in the Introduction to *The Concept of Anxiety*. There, a distinction is

made between 'first ethics' and 'second ethics'. First, or secular, ethics 'is the ethical that is

contrasted with the aesthetic in Either/Or',[33] whereas second, or 'Christian', ethics turns

particularly on the consciousness of sin and is fully developed in *Works of Love*.

The reader should not forget that the purported author of *Fear and Trembling* is

Johannes De Silentio - a fictional character who 'does not have faith' (FT, 28) - and not

Kierkegaard himself. Most Kierkegaard scholars, such as Philip L. Quinn, agree that the

ethics at issue in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is 'the secular ethics of his own

time':[34] that is, first ethics. Although this claim can be considered disputable, here I will

take it as sufficiently persuasive.[35] It is also important to stress that the distinction between

moral and religious behaviour that the reader finds in *Fear and Trembling* is drawn by

Johannes, for whom ethics is simply 'first ethics' (I anticipate that for *Kierkegaard*,

religiousness is indeed ethical, but only in the sense of *second*, or Christian, ethics. I will briefly address Kierkegaard's second ethics in the final section).

What seems problematic to Johannes de Silentio, the fictional author of *Fear and Trembling* (and perhaps to Kierkegaard himself) is Kant's formal conception of morality (indeed, all post-Kantians, including Hegel and Nietzsche, recognise this as a problem). According to Kant's formal conception, humans should behave 'as if' maxims were universally applicable. Conversely, in the context of the discussion about tragic heroes in *Fear and Trembling*, it is suggested that 'there is an historical and cultural component to what is "ethical". Ethical duties are not derived from some timeless rational principle […], but from the concrete customs of a people'.[36]

Kierkegaard's philosophical relationship with *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* is extremely complex and is certainly more complex than Kierkegaard scholarship typically concedes. It is beyond the scope of this text to pursue this in detail; however, some points need to be stressed for the purposes of this paper.

First, *Fear and Trembling* is clearly critical of the Kantian reduction of (natural) religion to moral philosophy.[37] If, as Kant writes, 'religion is (subjectively considered) the recognition of all our duties as divine commands',[38] then all duties can be ultimately understood as duties to God.[39] For Kant, revelation is unnecessary in principle, or, in Johannes's words, 'God becomes an invisible, vanishing point … his power is to be found only in the ethical, which fills all existence' (FT, 59). In my view, the risk of reducing religion to moral philosophy is what leads Johannes to draw a strong distinction between (and often to contrast) *ethical* behaviour and *religious* behaviour (regarding the reason why

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Kierkegaard makes Johannes draw such a strong distinction, I will suggest a possible explanation later in the final section).

Secondly, Kant's approach to sacrifice is highly reductive, and Kierkegaard is acutely aware of this. Sacrifice is regarded as an *improper symbol*, and it is not *necessarily* moral insofar as it can involve pride alongside duty.[40] The sacrifice that Abraham is willing to perform definitely falls outside the realm of religious metaphors and symbols that Kant considers acceptable.

In short, the position expressed in *Fear and Trembling* is often marked by disappointment in Kant's reduction of religion to moral philosophy and by his consequent rejection and expulsion of all religious symbols that cannot serve as models for moral behaviour. Kant's account of religion is extremely complex and cannot be simply described as a reduction of religion to morality[41] – conversely, as already stated, religious symbols are an essential component of Kant's philosophy. From this angle, it might well be that Johannes' (or even *Kierkegaard's*) take on Kant is, to some degree, ungenerous; but even in this case, Green's claim that 'Kant's treatment of Abraham in his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* and *The Conflict of the Faculties* may have provided the stimulus for *Fear and Trembling*'[42] seems plausible.[43] In fact, the text in its entirety may be regarded as a defence of the irreducibility of religion to morality and a revaluation of the *Akedah* as a symbol of faith, although (or, better yet, because) Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac violates any moral code.

Although this reading stresses the importance of Kant to the development of Kierkegaard's philosophy, it is not in itself incompatible with traditional interpretations of

Fear and Trembling, which maintain that Kierkegaard aims to dismiss ethics in favour of an irrational (or, at best, a non-rational) account of faith. However, this is only half of the story. I submit that *Fear and Trembling* remains true to the spirit of Kant's critical philosophy, while at the same time trying to go beyond Kant. More specifically, I claim that in *Fear and Trembling* the *Akedah* is regarded as a symbolic and regulative notion and that the Kantian approach to religious notions is preserved and transformed in an attempt to amend Kant's formal conception of ethics and religion.

In the next section, I will draw a comparison with Hegel and specifically with his theory of recognition. In the final section, I will explore the *regulative* value of sacrifice as it emerges from *Fear and Trembling*.

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Traditional Kierkegaard scholarship has often superficially characterised Kierkegaard's relationship to Hegel as one of mere frontal opposition. Scholars such as Jon Stewart and Merold Westphal have done much to correct this misleading perception. Kierkegaard held Hegel in great esteem and was massively influenced by his thought, especially in his early work. Furthermore, even in his maturity, Hegel's extraordinary philosophical quality is not a matter of discussion for Kierkegaard.

As is well-known, Hegel maintains that Kant's conception of morality is formal and empty because it requires that norms be considered universally applicable.[44] Johannes de Silentio seems to be equally critical of Kant's formal conception of morality. In the context

of the analysis of the actions of the 'tragic heroes', Johannes' claim that 'everyone' can understand them implies that those actions are considered acceptable according to a moral code that is valid in a specific place and time (an example is Jephthah's promise to sacrifice the first creature he saw on returning from the battle, as pointed out by Evans and Walsh[45]). For Johannes, ethical duties cannot be derived from timeless rational imperatives. When Johannes speaks of 'the universal', he refers to 'the concrete universal of the social order'.[46] In this respect, *Fear and Trembling* seems to suggest that *first* ethics (which, we should not forget, has value in itself) needs to be conceived not as a set of timeless rational principles, but as an ethical order or substance that takes into consideration and even relies upon historical and cultural components such as customs and social roles. This is what Hegel calls *Sittlichkeit*.

The idea that, should ethics be considered as *first* ethics, then morality cannot be considered formally *à la Kant,* but needs to take into consideration social and cultural components, seems to be confirmed by Judge William, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author of the second part of *Either Or*. Most of Judge William's reflections are compatible with (or are even expressions of) Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*.[47]

Johannes de Silentio and Judge William clearly express specific existential standpoints, and their position cannot be *tout court* equated with Kierkegaard's. In addition, this does not mean that Kierkegaard *and* his fictional authors think of Hegel's *Sittlichkeit* as a perfectly adequate conception of the ethical life. Many clues are disseminated in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous and non-pseudonymous works suggesting that he disagrees with Hegel regarding the inclusion of religion within the ethical as *Sittlichkeit* and

regarding the dependence of religion on human recognition. A short story included in the

Postscript is meaningful in this respect. When the husband is imagined wondering whether

he can really call himself a Christian, his wife addresses him as follows:

> How can you not be a Christian? You are Danish, aren't you? Doesn't the geography book
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> say that the predominant religion in Denmark is Lutheran-Christian? You aren't a Jew, are
>
> you, or a Mohammedan? What else would you be, then? It is a thousand years since
>
> paganism was superseded; so I know you aren't a pagan. Don't you tend to your work in the
>
> office as a good civil servant; aren't you a good subject in a Christian nation, in a Lutheran-
>
> Christian state? So of course you are a Christian. (CUP, I: 50-51)

Of course, this story does not do justice to Hegel's theory of recognition, which is not

limited to the realm of ethics because it plays an important role in his (idealistically

conceived) metaphysics.[48] I will return to Hegel's 'original' account of the relationship

between recognition and religion later in this section. For now, it is sufficient to focus on

this relationship as it was understood by the Danish right Hegelians. After all, it is

reasonable to believe that it is against this version of Hegel's thought that he was reacting.

(The question of whether or not he viewed it as an accurate understanding of Hegel's

thought is not prominent here).

Hegel's philosophy of spirit starts from the notion of *Sittlichkeit* and therefore, quite

understandably, with a discussion of religious and civic law. Clearly, Hegel's tendency to

nominalise abstract concepts and personify them[49] led some of his followers (*right*

Hegelians) to consider Hegel as a realist about God, to identify the Hegelian 'spirit' with God, and to see society as the embodiment of the divine. Johannes seems to be concerned with the consequences of such a view when he refers to a generation that 'presumptuously wants to occupy the place that belongs only to the spirit who governs the world' (FT, 108). Commenting on this passage, Evans convincingly argues, 'Johannes sees the combination of Hegelian ethics and Hegelian philosophy of history to be fatal for an understanding of genuine religious faith. If my society is itself the concrete embodiment of the divine, then *Sittlichkeit*, ethical participation in those social institutions by accepting "my station and duties", is at the same time true religion. It makes perfectly good sense to think of faith as common social possession'.[50] In other words, Hegel's account of the relationship between recognition and religion might be seen as generating a sense of the inevitability of faith as a product of history, which in turn causes 'the degeneration of the Christian religion in the objective thinking of Christendom'.[51] Considered as such, the Hegelian approach might present the risk of turning faith itself into a mere statement of social fact rather than a personal and existential commitment.

In short, Kierkegaard does not like the idea of religion as something *mediated*, whether it is mediated through *ethics* or through *concepts*. First, Hegel's understanding of religion via the notion of recognition sounds to Kierkegaard like mediation through ethics (the idea that religion cannot be thought of but *through ethics*) and therefore like an absolutisation of the ethical; religion becomes *relative* with respect to ethics (FT, 61).

Secondly, Hegel maintains that 'the conceptual form of philosophy' deals with the idea of God 'in a more developed way' than is achievable in religion as a representational

form.[52] In other words, Hegel's philosophy, as read by Kierkegaard, requires that religious *Vorstellung* (representation) be mediated through philosophical *Begriff* (concept) in order to be grasped in a fully developed way. Conversely, Kierkegaard wants to preserve the immediacy of faith, conceived of as a relationship with God that is not and should not be conceptually mediated.

The story of the *Akedah* perfectly serves Kierkegaard's purposes. Kierkegaard wants to show that religion is derived neither from rational knowledge nor from ethics. That religion is not derived from rational knowledge it is something that Kant and Hegel would agree on without hesitation. However, Kierkegaard wants to stress that religious symbols cannot be mediated through either concepts or ethics. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son cannot be mediated through ethics because it would be condemned under any moral code, and it cannot be mediated through concepts because, as an expression of Abraham's personal, immediate, and absolute relationship with God, is not expressible via rational thought or words (hence the repeated claim that Abraham 'cannot speak' and 'cannot be understood').[53] Nonetheless, Kierkegaard has his fictional author Johannes hold up Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac as an exemplar of faith. The sacrifice that Abraham is willing to perform is neither a mere metaphor nor a concept. It is a direct *symbol of faith* that does not require any ethical or conceptual mediation. In other words, the *Akedah* is meaningful because it has an *analogical* relation with the idea of faith that Kierkegaard, via Johannes, wants to advance, that is, an immediate and absolute relationship with God – the analogy residing in Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac and, even more importantly, in his belief that he will eventually get Isaac back, while

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everything seems to suggest otherwise. In this way, the sacrifice of Abraham becomes a symbol of faith.

Now, consider Hegel's position with respect to both the charge of mediating religion through ethics and the charge of mediating religion through concepts. Regarding the latter, Hegel claims that 'there may be religion without philosophy, but there cannot be philosophy without religion, because philosophy includes religion within it'.[54] This claim is usually regarded as suggesting that philosophical knowledge can and should replace religion, and Kierkegaard seems to accept this interpretation. However, to claim that Hegel advocates abandoning religion in favour of philosophy is definitely an oversimplification, especially in light of the 'revisionist' reading of Hegel that has been established during the last two decades.[55] To be fair to Hegel, and to assess Kierkegaard's criticism, it is useful to briefly address Hegel's 'original' account.

From the point of view of the *revisionist* or *post-Kantian* interpretation, Hegel's solution to the question of religion in general and the status of the idea of God in particular is based on the Kantian idea that religious notions play a regulative role in human cognition and morality in conjunction with the key concept of recognition.[56] Religious claims are *idealistically* conceived: that is, their metaphysical reality (their existence as objects of reason) is conditional upon mutual recognition between individuals.[57]

This is not to belittle religious claims. To acknowledge that religious narratives are symbolic representations (*Vorstellungen*) of a content that is presented in the conceptual language of philosophy (*Begriff*) does not mean to dismiss them as 'overtaken' by concepts. Indeed, quite the opposite is true. According to Hegel (who shares Kant's concern

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as mentioned in the previous section), ideas must always be sensibilised to be applied, 'and it is this type of symbolically or analogically expressed idea that formed the traditional picture of God'.[58] This is the reason why Hegel finds it necessary for religion and philosophy to coexist. He writes: 'Philosophy is only explicating itself when it explicates religion, and when it explicates itself it is explicating religion'.[59] Hegel's account of self-consciousness is strictly interdependent with his idea of God, understood *à la Kant* as a regulative ideal and the source of norms.[60] Therefore, for Hegel, religious notions such as the idea of God play an important role in the constitution of human beings as free, rational, and capable of generating identity-conferring values and commitments.

If one considers not only *Fear and Trembling* but also the rest of Kierkegaard's work, then it is difficult to avoid concluding that Kierkegaard misunderstands Hegel's general account of religion to some degree. Hegel does not mean to invalidate religion in suggesting that religious notions express content that is also presented in philosophy in the form of concepts. Kierkegaard tends to underline the 'inadequacy of the concept'[61] to express religion (although Hegel would probably respond to this objection by saying that the concept is not an abstract and static logical notion. It is the most adequate conception of the world as a whole and the process of conceptual change. Therefore, from a Hegelian point of view, it is Kierkegaard who has a restricted conception of what *reason* is).

I will now address the charge that Hegel mediates religion through ethics. It is undeniable that Hegel's understanding of religion incorporates the notion of *recognition*. However, this does not directly indicate that religion is mediated through ethics because Hegel makes much wider use of the dynamic of recognition than would be the case if he

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limited it to the realm of ethics. A quick reading of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* shows that

Hegel recognises an individual's right to perform religious acts that have no ethical

significance. He is even willing to allow for behaviour that is in open contradiction to the

norms of the social community and the state.[62] However, there are limits; the right of the

individual conscience must stop 'as soon as it comes into conflict with the law'.[63]

Therefore, Hegel would easily accept the contemporary knight of faith depicted in *Fear and*

Trembling: the man who looks like a 'tax collector', who 'enjoys and takes part in

everything', and who 'does not do even the slightest thing except by virtue of the absurd'

(FT, 33-34). What Hegel cannot accept from an ethical and political point of view is

Abraham's willingness to kill his own son. As Stewart stresses, Abraham 'must be

persecuted since the state cannot permit the universalisation of individual acts of faith and

conscience that encroach on the rights of others'.[64] In other words, from a Hegelian point of

view, the most problematic aspect of an account that interprets the sacrifice of Abraham as

the symbol of faith, resides in Johannes's claim that Abraham's behaviour does not need to

be justified in the socio-political realm.

   As I have shown in this section, Kierkegaard's account of sacrifice as a direct symbol of

faith is not completely incompatible with Hegel's approach to religion. In fact, Hegel

himself accepts the need for religious commitments that are not mediated by ethics

(although a certain degree of mediation is unavoidable for Hegel). The social and political

dimensions of sacrifice remain the most problematic issues; from a Hegelian point of view

(as well as in the great majority of moral theories), the teleological suspension of the ethical

is too dangerous because it removes the need for recognition and justification in social and political arenas.

Kierkegaard is well aware of this danger. His fictional author Johannes is *fascinated* by Abraham, but he is also *appalled* by him. As Sylviane Agacinski notes, 'Faith is not necessarily madness, but it always might be. In this respect, Kant and Kierkegaard were in agreement: where reason gives out, madness may always take over. Hence the terror that Abraham strikes into us, and our trembling before his crime'.[65] It should be added that here the paths of Kant and Kierkegaard seem to diverge inexorably: Hegel and Kant are in accord with regard to this social-political issue. However, it might be true that Kierkegaard does not wish to depart so completely from Kant. The extent to which he can be regarded as effectively departing from Kant depends on how the role of the *Akedah* in *Fear and Trembling* is interpreted. What does it mean to claim that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac is the symbol of faith, an exemplar on which we should model our own behaviour? How literally should we read Johannes's invitation to take Abraham as a model, and how *real* this sacrifice is meant to be? Traditionally, this question (call it the *reality of sacrifice* problem) is answered in one of two ways.

The first possible answer is that Abraham's obedience to God should be considered a mere metaphor for faith, which is understood as the abandonment of the believer to the will of God. However, once it has been accepted that Johannes does not support divine command ethics, the interpreter is left wondering why it is necessary to turn to such a paradoxical and appalling story to make a point that could have been more appropriately

made with other narratives or biblical episodes. [66] Furthermore, the insistence on the episode in itself makes it difficult to regard its use as merely metaphorical.

The second possible answer is that *Fear and Trembling* should be read literally. After all, this is precisely what Johannes invites the reader to do. He asks the reader to resist the temptation of a metaphorical reading (FT, 64). Of course, it is not always necessary to prepare to assassinate one's own son to be faithful to God – the 'tax collector' does not do any such thing and yet is a knight of faith. The claim (and hence the ultimate meaning of the book) may instead be that one should be ready to go this far if required. According to this interpretation, Kierkegaard's account of sacrifice would be absolutely incompatible with the views of Kant and Hegel. Still, it remains unclear why it is it necessary to use such a paradoxical and appalling story when Johannes makes very clear, by describing the tax collector, that one can be a knight of faith without doing anything extraordinary.

I think that the second answer confers *too much* reality to the idea of sacrifice, whereas the first answer *too little*. I suggest that there is a third option. It has been said that according to Kant, some religious notions are symbols, that is, *moral* exemplars capable of serving as models for our own *moral* behaviour. Insofar as they are *symbolic*, they are also *regulative*. I suggest that Kierkegaard wants to maintain (and indeed, to strengthen) the symbolic meaning of religious notions but insists that they do not just symbolise morality; they symbolise faith first and foremost.

In this section, I have shown how Kierkegaard thinks of sacrifice as a direct symbol of faith – that is, a symbol of a faith that is not mediated through ethics. Therefore, the *Akedah* can also be regarded as regulative, as a model not for our *moral* behaviour but rather for our

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religious behaviour. In other words, it can be regarded as regulative of one's personal

relationship with God, which is what faith consists of. This reading resolves, in my view,

some of the most problematic aspects of *Fear and Trembling*. Therefore, I will devote the

concluding section to an analysis of the regulativity of sacrifice in *Fear and Trembling*.

4

The feature of *Fear and Trembling* that is both the source of most problems and one of the

reasons for its longevity is the multiplicity of interpretative levels that it allows. This

problem is even further worsened by the opening motto, an episode from Livy's *History of

Rome* in which the king Tarquinius sends his son a secret message that the recipient

understands but the messenger does not. This opening suggests the presence of a hidden

message not made explicit in the text.

According to Green, *Fear and Trembling* contains 'multiple levels of meaning', each

with 'its own significance'.[67] The first level of meaning contains 'a call to strenuous, lived

commitment to Christian Faith'. The second 'develops the psychology of faith and love'.

The third 'explores the question of the norms that should guide the conduct of a committed

Christian'. The fourth addresses the question of 'how the individual believer can be saved

from sin'. For the purposes of this paper, I am interested in focusing on the third and fourth

levels.

Consider the third level of meaning suggested by Green. There are, of course, many

different interpretations of the notion of normativity in *Fear and Trembling*. The book has

been traditionally regarded as an attack on Kantian ethical absolutism, 'ethical

philistinism', and the Hegelian notion of *Sittlichkeit*, or as supporting divine command ethics. Some interpretations are more convincing than others, but none of them is *completely* convincing.

However, critics such as Robert Perkins and Alastair Hannay have suggested a different way of reading the normativity presented in *Fear and Trembling* that stresses its structural formality. I am relying on these hints to suggest a more comprehensive interpretation of the notion of religious regulativity than I sketched at the end of the previous section.

In the following passage, Perkins connects the religious normativity of *Fear and Trembling* with a Kantian, regulative approach to duties: 'Kant, in the *Foundations* and in the second *Critique*, did not suggest any specific duties, and Kierkegaard, like Kant, is concerned with the logic of duty, in this case, theological or theonomous duty. *Fear and Trembling* supplies no content for the concept of theonomous duty; it is an effort to map the boundaries'.[68] Hannay seems to share this view when he claims that the story of the *Akedah* symbolises the 'formal features' of the 'compound attitude' of faith. However, when he tries to unpack the normativity present in *Fear and Trembling*, he provides an explanation that remains in the realm of ethics rather than supplying *content* related to theonomous duties. Hannay focuses on the apparent contradiction that Abraham is convinced that he is really going to kill Isaac even though he also believes that he will eventually get Isaac back. According to Hannay, the belief that Isaac must be sacrificed means that 'nothing in the world has value simply because one values it', whereas Abraham's belief that he will get Isaac back means both that 'things have their value nonetheless' and that their value exists 'on their own account and from God'.[69] Mooney, who broadly supports Hanney's view,

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takes this to mean that 'however important to us our cares may be, anything that possesses *real* value will possess it regardless of our attitudes toward it'.[70] As Lippitt elegantly puts it, 'The recognition that the value of something is ultimately not a function of the fact that I value it … neither is what I value dependent upon "the universal" (in the Hegelian sense)'.[71] However, Lippitt proposes a different (and in my view more convincing) solution, namely that a 'part of *Fear and Trembling*'s message is that any approach to dilemmas that supposes a definitive "right" answer can be given is untrue to the nature of such dilemmas' [72] (more on this shortly).

At this point, one could object that however interesting this debate is, it is still situated within the realm of ethics. In contrast, what I have been suggesting is that the *Akedah* can be considered as a model for *religious* rather than *moral* behaviour – that is, as providing regulativity for those situations in which the ethical is teleologically suspended. One possible way of avoiding this problem is to argue (as Mooney does, for example) that the teleological suspension of the ethical is not *really* a suspension. It just *appears* to be so to those who embrace an (essentially Hegelian) morality 'that absolutizes the claims of community, communication and reason'.[73] Mooney thinks that *Fear and Trembling* offers a deeper sort of ethics according to which what matters is the agent rather than the act. I agree with Mooney that the problem is essentially a matter of perspective, but my interpretation of the teleological suspension of the ethical differs from Mooney's insofar as I think that there is a sense in which ethics really *is* suspended in *Fear and Trembling*. This happens when sin enters the equation. In this vein, a fundamental claim that has attracted a lot of attention from Kierkegaard scholars is made by Johannes in the third Problem: 'An

ethics that ignores sin is an altogether futile discipline, but if it asserts sin, then it is for that very reason beyond itself' (FT, 86).[74] Significantly, this claim plays an important role in the fourth level of meaning suggested by Green.

To make sense of this passage, it is useful to appeal once again to the distinction between *first ethics* and *second ethics* drawn in the Introduction to *The Concept of Anxiety*. There it is said that the first ethics is 'shipwrecked on the sinfulness of the single individual' (CA, 20). First ethics (an ethics that ignores sin, in Johannes's words) concerns itself with *rightness* and *wrongness* and with the (Kantian) idea that it is always possible to determine what is right. However, first ethics turns out to be inadequate. Several commentators agree that the reason for the inadequacy of first ethics is that 'it is defined by a commitment to living up to a set of standards that are in fact impossible to live up to'.[75] Significantly, to clarify this point, two of these commentators (Quinn and Evans) make the same reference to what John E. Hare calls the 'moral gap': that is, 'the gap between the moral demand on us and our natural capacities to live by it'.[76] Interpreted in this light, the claim that the first ethics is 'shipwrecked' on sin 'looks like a claim to the effect that the necessity of universality of sin undermines the validity of the ethical standpoint'.[77] In other words, Kierkegaard's conception of sinfulness, with its commitment to the Lutheran doctrine of Total Depravity, means that we can never 'get it right' - hence the claim 'Before God, we are always in the wrong' (EO, 2, 339-54). On one hand, once sin enters in, the very idea of ethical perfection is (as Mulhall stresses) 'utterly lost'.[78] On the other hand, to accept sin means also to accept the possibility of salvation through the agency of divine grace. In fact, we can be forgiven *precisely* because we are sinner and because we have

now realised that we cannot be ethically perfect. From this angle, the *Akedah* might be said to effectively symbolise and exemplify the 'double movement of faith' (FT, 29, 105), as suggested in various ways by several authors. In my interpretation, the first movement is the acknowledgment of our unavoidable condition of sinners, and the second movement the belief that we can be forgiven by God.[79]

However, even if we leave first ethics behind and embrace the second (Christian) ethics[80] (and the conception of sin that comes with it), we do not find ourselves in a haven of rest. *Pace* Johannes, the religious is not opposed to the ethical, but rather represents (as suggested by Stephen Evans) a higher type of ethics, or a 'morality in a new key'.[81] Second ethics inevitably implies an entire different set of duties: theonomous duties, or duties toward God. These duties may potentially conflict with straightforward ethical duties. Such conflicts generate dilemmas – not pure ethical dilemmas, but rather *tragic dilemmas*. Here I rely on the definition provided by Lippitt: 'Tragic dilemmas present situations in which whatever action one takes, one's life will be marred'.[82]

Let us take a step back. What is the normativity of theonomous duties? Of course, this cannot be the traditional normativity that demands right and wrong answers. However, it also cannot be a divine-command ethics, because such an ethics would retain the possibility of providing *right* answers to dilemmas.[83] Hegel, who shares Kierkegaard's criticism of Kant's absolutism, relies on recognition; hence the notion of *Sittlichkeit*. However, according to Johannes (and Kierkegaard), this notion cannot be applied to the realm of religion. For theonomous duties, we require something else: a regulativity that is specifically religious.

I suggest that sinfulness as it is presented in *Fear and Trembling* means that some (tragic) dilemmas are insoluble for us because sinfulness is, first and foremost, 'our absolute difference from Absolute Goodness'.[84] Faith, by making us confront our theonomous duties, potentially puts us in situations in which we no longer have access to that haven of rest that is represented by first ethics (we have lost the illusion that we can be ethically perfect). Nonetheless, we still need to decide what to do.[85] This is why, in the realm of theonomous duties, we require regulative ideas.

This approach can be labelled *regulative contextualism*[86], the idea that different forms of regulative normativity and corresponding different forms of duties are appropriate in different contexts. For Kant, ethical duties should be conceived of as if they were theonomous duties; the real religious duties are also ethical duties. Even if one considered Green's thesis that some of Kant's reflection on religion in general and on Abraham in particular may have provided the stimulus for *Fear and Trembling* as an exaggeration, Kierkegaard's awareness of the Kantian regulative approach to religious notions and narratives would be still more than plausible, especially because a regulative understanding of religion had already been developed by Schelling and other Post-Kantians.[87] Kierkegaard retains the regulative structures that are implied in the Kantian conception but separates theonomous duties from ethical duties. Ethical duties based on social recognition are appropriate in the context of first ethics (thereby constituting something analogous to the Hegelian notion of *Sittlichkeit*). Theonomous duties based on exemplars are appropriate in the religious context. In other words, theonomous duties can only be guided by religious exemplars whose main characteristic is that they are independent of customs. Abraham, in

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his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac, is a perfect exemplar of a faith effectively independent of customs, and his circumstances are paradigmatic of those tragic dilemmas in which ethical duties and theonomous duties exist in opposition. Because he is beyond ethics, Abraham cannot explain the reasons for his actions, but his behaviour can serve as a regulative model for our own religious behaviour.

Clearly, it is not groundbreaking to suggest that for Kierkegaard, Abraham is meant to be an exemplar of faith (rather than ethical action); this interpretation has already been advanced by other commentators.[88] However, in claiming that Abraham is an exemplar of faith, I do not mean simply that his story presents a metaphor or a symbol (in a weak sense) that serves to illustrate some (religious) content. Indeed, I think that its use should not be regarded in the way that the use of religious notions and narratives in Kant is often *mistakenly* interpreted as suggesting. In the first section, I noted that for Kant religious *Darstellungen* are transitional forms that must be used to apply the pure principles of practical reason to experience and that these forms play a regulative role in the application of moral ideas to the world. Here I suggest that Kierkegaard, once he has claimed autonomy for theonomous duties, has found himself in a predicament analogous to the 'special difficulties' mentioned by Kant in relation to the application of the moral law: he must find regulative forms that can make *religious* ideas applicable to the world. Interpreted in this way, Abraham is not merely a metaphor or a symbol in a weak sense but is instead one of those regulative exemplars that are an essential component of Kierkegaard's philosophy.

From this angle, *Fear and Trembling* might be regarded as an 'introductory' work, in which a fictional author (Johannes) struggles with the fascination and the appalling generated by dealing with Abraham as an exemplar of faith. It should not be forgotten that according to an ancient and well established tradition, Abraham is considered a *figura Christi*, a figure of Christ. In this respect, the reference to the Virgin Mary in *Fear and Trembling* (FT, 57) might represent a hint pointing in that direction. In fact, the inclusion of Mary as one of the exemplars of religious life changes the way in which the function of sacrifice is talked about in *Fear and Trembling*. In a few paragraphs, Johannes emphasises Mary's willingness to self-sacrifice. This short digression might be taken as an anticipation of the indication (which is explicit in other pseudonymous and non-pseudonymous works) of Christ as the exemplar on which Christians should be model their religious *and* ethical behaviour (in the context of *second* ethics). In *Works of Love*, Christ's self-sacrifice is indicated as the most important content of imitation: 'He sought his own by giving himself for all so that they might be like him in what was his own, in sacrificial giving of himself' (WL, 264). And in *Practice in Christianity*, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Anti-Climacus says that 'Christ's life here on earth is the paradigm; I and every Christian are to strive to model our lives in likeness to it'. Later on he remarks that Christ came into the world with the purpose 'of being the *prototype* [*Forbillede*], of leaving footprints for the person who wanted to join him, who then might become an imitator' (PC, 107).[89]

If regulative exemplars are acknowledged as an essential component of Kierkegaard's philosophy, then Kierkegaard can be regarded as a philosopher who certainly goes beyond and, to some extent, against Kant (he is sceptical regarding Kantian moral absolutism, and

he thinks that the realm of faith should be conceived more autonomously than Kant concedes), but he does so in a way that is nevertheless true to the spirit of Kant's original critical philosophy because he applies the idea of regulativity to the realm of faith.[90] In fact, what appears clear from *Fear and Trembling* is that religion is not a set of dogmatic truths but should instead be approached as a way of life. This is definitely a very Kantian approach.[91] However, for Kierkegaard, a religious way of life cannot merely adopt ethical normativity. Rather, it needs its own regulativity.

Viewing Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac as a regulative exemplar solves the *reality of sacrifice* problem: his act should not be read literally or metaphorically but should be considered regulatively. When Johannes devotes himself to describing the knight of faith whom it would be possible to encounter today, he invokes the image of a taxman whose behaviour is (externally) very ordinary. None of his actions is as extreme as that of preparing to sacrifice one's own son. As Mooney puts it, 'If the knight can be Abraham or a serving maid or a shopman, then we are forced away from reading the story as advocating sacrifice on demand'.[92] On this basis, Mooney concludes that 'to be a knight of faith is to have had one's soul tempered through ordeals'.[93] My conclusion is that *Fear and Trembling* asks us to consider some examples, such as the *Akedah*, as regulative ideas on which to model our theonomous duties.

One question still needs to be examined. I have argued that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac and any other violent and unethical action of that sort is not a necessary requirement for faith. These actions serve mostly as regulative ideas. However, in certain extreme cases in which the theonomous duty is not simply 'not dependant' on ethical duties

but in fact actually runs contrary to ethics (as in the *actual* case of Abraham), should a

knight of faith *actually* be ready to sacrifice his/her own son? It seems that Johannes,

Kierkegaard's fictional author (and indeed a character in his own piece), thinks so.[94]

Interpreted in this way, the picture presented in *Fear and Trembling* would ultimately be

incompatible with both Kant's and Hegel's philosophy. However, one should not forget

that the text's epilogue tells a story in which some Dutch merchants dump a few loads at

sea 'in order to drive up the price' of spices during a time when the price is slack (FT, 107).

Perhaps this is what Kierkegaard (via Johannes) is doing in *Fear and Trembling*: using an

extreme story (Abraham's) to *force up* the price of faith. He emphasises the necessity of

regulative ideas regarding theonomous duties by 'artificially raising the price of faith'[95]. As

I anticipated in Section Two, I think that *Fear and Trembling* plays a preliminary and yet

pivotal role in Kierkegaard's overall strategy, namely, in the pursuit of the philosophical

goals that Kierkegaard wants to achieve. From the perspective of Johannes de Silentio

(someone who is 'outside faith'), sacrifice serves as an entry point to that 'paradoxical

religiousness' that represents the essence of Christianity – the position of the knight of

faith. In *Fear and Trembling*, the 'price of faith' is deliberately exaggerated, with the aim

of reacting against the 'veritable clearance sale' (FT, 3) in which faith is sold at a too cheap

price. This is the reason why Johannes draws a strong distinction, and often contrasts,

ethical behaviour and *religious* behaviour.

The view of sacrifice presented in *Fear and Trembling*, however, it is not exhaustively

representative of Kierkegaard's view as a whole. Although humble self-denial is alluded to

in *Fear and Trembling* with respect to Abraham's disposition in reply to God's command

as well as in the brief discussion of sin, the *kenotic* aspect of sacrifice, which is prominent in other works such as *Works of Love*, does not come across explicitly in Johannes's analysis of the *Akedah*. This is, after all, consistent with the premises: Johannes does not have faith, and therefore he is not able to grasp the importance of this aspect. From this angle, *Fear and Trembling* should be regarded as a preliminary work that clears the way for a more comprehensive treatment of sacrifice as a regulative notion. But this treatment would not be possible without the reestablishment of religion as based upon trust and grace. With respect to the ultimate meaning of the *Akedah*, I therefore endorse the view, presented by Lippitt, of 'an Abraham who trusts in God, who believes in the possibility of divine grace even in this, the most terrible of situations'.[96]

If the inner meaning is religious regulativity (exemplified, in turn, by sacrifice), then the text can be regarded as developing the Kantian problems of formality and religion as an alternative to Hegel's absolute idealism. I find that this solution offers three inter-related advantages and one significant drawback.

First, Kierkegaard's approach has the advantage of dealing with religious faith by trying to understand what it actually *is* rather than speculating on what it *should* be. As Agacinski puts it, 'Kant's "pure rational faith" may well be genuinely pure; but in that case it can no longer be faith'[97]. When forging his idea of religion, Kant inevitably makes it too abstract (something of which Hegel is also critical). Although Kant maintains that we need religious symbols to apply the principles of morality to experience, so that they can serve as models for our behaviour, and he goes as far as presenting Christ as the prototype of a pure moral disposition, his approach to *religious* regulative ideals remains consistent with his

philosophical agenda – the advancement of a 'pure rational faith'. For instance, Kant writes

that the Scriptures attribute to God 'the highest sacrifice [*Aufopferung*] a living being can

ever perform in order to make even the unworthy happy ("Therefore hath God loved the

world, etc."), although through reason we cannot form any concept of how a self-sufficient

being could sacrifice something that belongs to his blessedness, thus robbing himself of a

perfection',[98] and then suddenly stresses that to suppose that an omnipotent being could

sacrifice his absoluteness and divinity ('robbing himself of a perfection') is absurd, even

nonsensical.[99] Conversely, as it clearly appears from *Works of Love*, Christ's willingness to

sacrifice himself in a kenotic fashion is precisely what Christians should imitate (WL,

264).

Secondly, and in line with this phenomenological approach, Kierkegaard's work in

general and *Fear and Trembling* in particular have the advantage of claiming autonomy for

the realm of religion. Kierkegaard wants faith to be more autonomous from ethics than

Hegel typically concedes (or is usually *regarded* as conceding). If my interpretation of *Fear

and Trembling* is correct, the core of Kierkegaard's message is precisely a notion of

regulativity that can be applied to the religious realm (what I have called regulative

contextualism).

Thirdly, against Kant *and* Hegel, Kierkegaard affirms the need to emphasise the

personal dimension of faith. I do not have the space to pursue this topic here, but

Kierkegaard's claim in favour of the autonomy of the religious realm is intrinsically

connected with the idea that faith is really meaningful only if it is conceived as a

relationship of trust and love with a personal God. Although the concept of belief in a

personal God as one of 'trust' is not completely absent from Kant's philosophy,[100] Kant and (even more) Hegel tend to present God as an idea, and Christ as a symbol. And clearly, we can *rely* on an idea or a symbol, but we cannot *trust* them in the way we *trust* a person. It seems to me that *Fear and Trembling* emphasises the need to think of the relationship to God as a personal relationship of trust. As Westphal puts it, 'We are reminded that what is essential to love (and faith) is an element of passion that is neither reducible to nor deducible from any form of learning, the theoretical learning of the learned or the practical learning of the socialised'.[101]

Because theonomous duties express a personal and unique relationship with God, we cannot expect Kierkegaard to provide a detailed description of what the knight of faith is *expected to do*. To use Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac in a regulative manner is to adapt this notion to a particular situation or need and abandon the norms that result when they no longer fit the situation. It is this conception of regulativity, I suggest, that underlies Kierkegaard's preference for *exempla*. The knight of faith cannot be described in terms of action but can only be portrayed through exempla, as Nietzsche's overman. This comparison is not, I think, out of place. Both Kierkegaard's knight of faith *and* Nietzsche's overman refuse to depend on specific norms, and they adopt regulative principles (including the notion of sacrifice) that are not applied in the name of (ethical) values or according to customs or habits. They are guided by superior principles – a personal relationship with God for Kierkegaard and a responsibility towards the species for Nietzsche.[102] This makes clear, however, the problematic aspect of Kierkegaard's solution.

Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche try to answer the problem that Kant's philosophy was meant to address: namely, the need for some way to make moral and religious concepts applicable to the world. Hegel's solution to this problem lies in the dynamic of recognition and the notion of *Sittlichkeit*. However, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche regard this solution as too reductive. In particular, Kierkegaard supports the idea of *faith* as a personal and absolute relationship to God. This faith is not irrational and is in fact governed by a regulativity that makes use of exemplars, which in turn serve as models for religious behaviour. If faith is a personal relationship, then this regulativity must be *subjective* (and Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjectivity need not be stressed). However, it is precisely this subjectivity that constitutes the main problematic aspect of Kierkegaard's solution. Obviously, no issue exists if the *Akedah* is used only as a way to force up the price of faith, as I suggested previously. But when we have excluded the recourse to recognition, subjectivity can definitely have dangerous consequences. Kierkegaard thinks that this is a worthwhile price to pay, but Hegel would certainly disagree. Kierkegaard is not concerned with the political implications of his use of the notion of sacrifice, but it could be argued that he should be. Accepting the idea of a *personal* and *subjective* regulativity effectively means to exclude human actions from the control of reason (both the 'pure' Kantian reason and the 'social' Hegelian reason), and to legitimate (at least potentially) any action done in the name of a personal relationship with God. However, Kierkegaard's approach and his emphasis on the symbolic and regulative meaning of religious notions can be regarded as a useful corrective to Hegel's recognition approach. As it is presented in *Fear and Trembling*, the story of Abraham shows how sacrifice can be used as a regulative notion when dealing with *theonomous* duties. The notion of sacrifice cannot be exhaustively

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explained on ethical grounds, as it features an irreducible *religious* content. However, the adaptation of this notion to specific situations requires trust in God and in the divine grace; and Johannes cannot be explicit on this, as he does not have faith. Other works by Kierkegaard will serve this purpose. And yet, *Fear and Trembling* plays an essential role in Kierkegaard's overall philosophical strategy.

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[2] Cf. Aiken, 1956: p. 226).

[3] "Kierkegaardian violence begins when existence is forced to abandon the ethical stage in order to embark on the religious stage, the domain of belief. But belief no longer sought external justification. Even internally, it combined communication and isolation, and hence violence and passion. That is the origin of the relegation of ethical phenomena to secondary status and the contempt of the ethical foundation of being which has led, through Nietzsche, to the amoralism of recent philosophies". (Levinas, 1998: p. 31).

[4] Green, 1992. Another important resource for an account of Kierkegaard's relationship to Kant is the collection edited by Phillips and Tessin, 2000.

[5] Stewart, 2003.

[6] Cf. Lippitt, 2003; Mooney, 1991; Westphal, 1987. Of course, there are several other scholars who have meaningfully contributed to a rereading of Kierkegaard's work, including Scandinavian and German scholars. I will refer to some of them later in the paper. Here, I refer to Lippitt, Mooney, and Westphal both because I

think that their contribution to Kierkegaard scholarship in recent years has been particularly relevant and because their views play a significant role in my own account of *Fear and Trembling*.

[7] This methodology might also be considered as 'hermeneutic history of philosophy'. Cf. Peperzak, 1986: p. 69ff. For an overview of key issues surrounding the debate between analytic and contextual history of philosophy, see Sorell and Rogers, 2005.

[8] Green, 1992: p. 183. This understanding is precisely the traditional picture that Green has challenged. The relation of Kierkegaard to Kant has been address by a significant number of scholar in the last century: see Brunnel, 1924; Baeumler, 1925; Fahrenbach, 1979; and Barrett, 1984 (just to mention a few).

[9] It would be a mistake to assume Kant's reduction of religion to ethics. In *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant claims that 'morality leads inevitably to religion' (Kant, 1996b: p. 60 [AA 06: 6.8]), and argues that it makes a morally meaningful difference whether an agent believes or disbelieves. Cf. Caswell, 2006. See also Rossi and Wren, 1991 and Palmquist , 1992.

[10] Kant, 1996a, p. 164 [5:129]..

[11] Kant, 199b, p. 137 [6:104].

[12] Kant, 1996b, p. 177 [6:154].

[13] Redding, 2009, p. 102. Also, see Bielefeldt, 2003.

[14] Kant, 1996a, p. 90 [5: 68].

[15] This distinction has been very well drawn by Paul Redding: 'While an empirical concept can be *exemplified* (one can give a phenomenal presentation of the concept "dog", for example, by pointing to *this actual dog*) and a pure concept *schematised* (one can give a phenomenal presentation to the concept "cause" by pointing to *this actual event of a ball smashing a window*) an idea can only be *symbolized*". Redding, 2009, p. 96.

[16] Kant, 2007, pp. 225-228 [5:351-354].

[17] Another important *Darstellung* is beauty as a symbol of morality. Cf. Kant, 2007, pp. 225-228 [5:351-354].

[18] Kant, 1996b, p. 160 [6:132]. Other evidences of Kant's use of religious symbols and narratives as *Darstellungen* of the moral law include: p. 121 [6:82] and pp. 195-195 [175-176].

[19] Kant, 1996b, p. 178 [6:155].

[20] Kant, 1996b, p. 64 [6:12].

[21] Kant, 1996b, p. 107 [6:65].

[22] A more detailed analysis of the regulative role of religious notions for Kant is beyond the scope of this paper. Good accounts of the notion of regulativity applied to religion in Kant include: MacKinnon, 1975; Caruth, 1988; and Teufel. 2011.

[23] Kant, 1996b, p. 124 [6:87]; emphasis added.

[24] Kant, 1996c, p. 283 [7:63].

[25] There is now an extensive literature on the comparison of Kant's and Kierkegaard's views on morality, especially in relation to: moral rigorism (Fremstedal, 2011b), radical evil (Robert, 2006), hypothetical and categorical imperatives (Knappe, 2004), and the highest good (Fremstedal, 2011a).

[26] Verstrynge, 2004.

[27] Perkins, 1983, p. 43.

[28] Perkins writes that both Kant and Kierkegaard 'are skeptical regarding the possibility of rational knowledge of God' (Perkins, 1983, p. 48). However, Kant is not just 'skeptical'. He is really 'negative' regarding the possibility of a rational knowledge of God. A reading of *Philosophical Fragments* reveals that the same can be said of Kierkegaard.

[29] A sketch of Kierkegaard expanding Kant's 'cognitive humility' and 'giving it an existential twist' is found in Mooney (2007, p. 224). As presented in the book, this sketch is extremely intriguing and promising, but it remains partially undeveloped.

[30] Perkins (1983, p. 46).

[31] Cf. Green, 1992, p. 223.

[32] Cf. Lippitt, 2008, p. 80.

[33] Quinn, 1998, p. 349.

[34] Ibid.

[35] It might be objected that *Fear and Trembling* identifies the ethical with the divine: 'The ethical is the universal and as such in turn the Divine. It is therefore right to say that every duty, after all, is duty to God' (FT 59). However, I agree with Lippitt (2003, pp. 81-82) that it is misleading to regard this claim as a definition of 'the ethical': Johannes here is *questioning* the very assumption that the ethical is the universal. As it is argued by Lippitt, 'If *all* duties are duties to God, what room does this leave for specific, particular duties to God of the kind faced by Abraham? Is "duty to God" in fact merely shorthand for ethical duty, duty to "the universal"?' (Lippitt, 2003, p. 102). I will return to this point shortly.

[36] Evans and Walsh, 2006, pp. xxi- xxii.

[37] Of course the fact that *Johannes de Silentio* is critical of the Kantian reduction of (natural) religion to moral philosophy does not mean that *Kierkegaard* is equally critical – and even if *Kierkegaard* was effectively critical of such a reduction (something that should be demonstrated), this does not mean that his criticism was justified – in other words, the question whether Kant *actually* reduces religion to moral philosophy belongs to a different sphere of inquiry and cannot be addressed here.

[38] Kant, 1996b, p. 177 [6:154].

[39] Lippitt, 2003, p. 102.

[40] Kant, 2002, p. 19 [4:407]. This Kantian attitude towards sacrifice is part of Milbank's criticisms of Kantian ethics. Cf. Milbank, 2003, p. 14ff.

[41] Cf. Palmquist, 1992.

[42] Green (1998, p. 271).

[43] For the sake of completeness, it should be noted that Green's work has been criticised by both Kant scholars and Kierkegaard scholars. Cf. Davis, 1994; Westphal, 1993; Knappe, 2004; and Firestone and Jacobs, 2008. While I do not subscribe to the thesis (which sometimes surfaces in Green's work) that Kierkegaard 'took steps to ensure that his debt to Kant would not be detected' (Davis, 1994, p. 119), I consider persuasive the case he builds concerning the influence of Kantian ideas on Kierkegaard.

[44] Cf. Hegel, 1991b, §135A. Regarding Hegel's critique of Kant's categorical imperative, see Houlgate, 2005.

[45] Evans and Walsh, 2006, p. xxii.

[46] Cf. Westphal, 1998, p. 110.

[47] Of course this does not apply to *second* or *Christian* ethics, in the context of which the *social* dimension of *Sittlichkeit* plays a marginal role. Some critics, such as Mooney, have even suggested that the country parson's sermon at the end of volume two of *Either/Or* was perhaps directed at the Judge himself rather than at the aesthete, and therefore might be regarded as a criticism of the 'social ethics' advanced by Judge William. Cf. Mooney, 1995.

[48] Cf. Redding, 2009, p. 150ff.

[49] Cf. Redding, 2010.

[50] Evans, 2004, p. 76.

[51] Thompson, 1994, p. 14.

[52] Cf. Redding, 2007c.

[53] As everything else regarding *Fear and Trembling*, this reading too is not uncontroversial. There has been a recent flurry of papers on the topic of what Abraham can and cannot say, and why – see, for instance, the exchange between Lippitt (2008) and Kosch (2008), or Conway (2008). An analysis of this debate is beyond the scope of this paper; in my reading, I endorse the position expressed by Lippitt in the mentioned paper (as well as in Lippitt, 2003, chapter 5 "The Sound of Silence: Problema III", pp. 111-135).

[54] Hegel, 1991a, p. 12.

[55] The *revisionist* or *post-Kantian* interpretation of Hegel, pioneered by Robert Pippin and Terry Pinkard, argues that Hegel builds on Kantian themes and thus considers Hegel's thought as an extension of Kant's critical philosophy See, for instance, Pippin, 1989; Pinkard, 1994. Regarding a non-traditional approach to religion in Hegel's philosophy along the lines of the revisionist reading (broadly conceived), see Redding, 2007b, pp. 16-31; Lewis, 2008, pp. 556–574.

[56] Cf. Pippin, 2002.

[57] 'This does not make selves unreal or fictional, it simply makes their reality, unlike that of nature, conditional upon their recognition by others'. Redding, 2007b, pp. 27-28.

[58] Redding, 2007b, p. 22; see also Bielefeldt, 2003.

[59] Hegel, 1988, pp. 78-79. Cf. Westphal, 1983, p. 71.

[60] While contemporary approaches to Hegel share the idea that Hegel's philosophy cannot be simply considered a regression to pre-Kantian metaphysics, they differ in their interpretation of Hegel's relation to Kant. Scholars supporting the so-called 'revised metaphysical' or 'conceptual realist' interpretation of Hegel have sometimes charged the 'post-Kantian' interpretation of forcing a Kantian reading of Hegel. For an account of this dispute, see Pinkard, 1990.

[61] This expression is used, with reference to Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel, by Westphal, 1987, p. 74.

[62] 'A state … may completely overlook individual matters which may affect it, or even tolerate communities whose religion does not recognise even direct duties towards the state' (Hegel, 1991b, § 270).

[63] Stewart, 2003, p. 315.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Agacinski, 1998, p. 132.

[66] The claim that the position presented in *Fear and Trembling* implies a rejection of the divine command theory is not undisputed. Traditional interpretations often endorse a reading of *Fear and Trembling* that suggests that first ethics should be suspended when contradicted by a direct command by God. A more sophisticated version of the interpretation that reads *Fear and Trembling* as supporting a divine command ethics is that which is offered by Evans (1983, pp. 141-151). Evans substantially appeals to the peculiarity of Abraham's personal relationship with God, a relationship which is marked by trust and love. Other scholars, such as Green (1998, pp. 266-267) and Lippitt (2003, pp. 89ff; 145) have advanced the counter-argument that '*Fear and Trembling* hardly stresses the love of God'.

[67] Green, 1998, p. 258.

[68] Perkins, 1983, p. 56.

[69] Hannay, 1985, p. 24.

[70] Mooney, 1991, p. 91.

[71] Lippitt, 2003, p. 152.

[72] Ibid., 154. A similar claim is advanced by Mooney (1991, p. 81) - who, however, considers this position just an 'intermediate' interpretation): 'There are dilemmas and in such straits, ethics cannot guide, deliver us from wrong'. Nevertheless, this aspect is emphasized less by Mooney than it is by Lippitt, who is sceptical about the 'virtue ethics' to which Mooney's interpretation seems to lead.

[73] Mooney, 1991, p. 80.

[74] An in-depth analysis of this claim is undertaken in Green, 1992, pp. 190-7.

[75] Kosch, 2006, p. 160. The same interpretative position is held by Quinn. 1998, p. 349, and Evans, 2004, p. 83.

[76] Hare (1966, p. 1); the notion of "moral gap" is used by Quinn (1998, p. 349) and Evans (2004, p. 82).

[77] Kosch, 2006, p. 160.

[78] Mulhall, 2001, p. 386.

[79] The legend of Agnete and the merman (FT, 82-87) supports, in my view, this specific reading of the double movement of faith. Other interpretations of the Akedah as a symbol of the double movement of faith have been suggested by Fremstedal (2011b), Krishek (2009), Mooney (1991), and Sløk (1980),

[80] In recent years, interpretative efforts have been made to substantiate a third option – namely, that 'first ethics' should be revised and understood from a religious perspective (see, for example, Davenport, 2007). While I agree with Davenport's critique of a 'strong divine command theory', my interpretation is different insofar as it regards Christian ethics (as interpreted by Kierkegaard) as grounded on regulativity.

[81] According to Evans, religion is a 'morality in a new key' insofar as one is guided not by 'autonomous striving to realize one's own ideals, but grateful expression of a self that has been received as a gift'. Evans 1993, p. 26..

[82] Lippitt, 2003, p. 157.

[83] It has to be clarified that the divine command plays a role in the 'second' Christian ethics, especially as it is presented in *Works of Love*. However, the role of the divine command is limited to the *duty to love*. Indeed, Christian love is a 'commanded love' (WL, 19) because the love of one's neighbour that is required of Christians is unnatural for humans and thus needs to be made into a duty. However, this does not make

Kierkegaard's 'second ethics' a 'divine command theory'. Cf. Quinn, 1998, p. 353ff; Roberts, 2008, pp. 73-92. Roberts even concludes his paper by saying that the divine command (in Kierkegaard's 'second' ethics) does not function 'as the base of a moral theory'. For an analysis of the regulativity of 'commanded love' that emerges in *Works of Love*, cf. Bubbio, 2012.

[84] Mulhall, 2001, p. 386.

[85] In this context, Kierkegaard's claim that the person who lacks an awareness of ethics lacks an awareness of God (CUP 244) becomes understandable, and not in contradiction with the position presented in *Fear and Trembling,* which is expressed from a different existential standpoint. (I am.grateful to the anonymous reviewer of a previous version of the paper, who has drawn my attention to this point).

[86] I model this term on Paul Redding's 'cognitive contextualism'. This term is used by Redding to describe the Hegelian idea that different forms of logic and corresponding forms of negation are appropriate in different contexts or in different cognitive orientations. Cf. Redding, 2007a, p. 208ff.

[87] An excellent account of Kierkegaard's relations to Kant and Schelling on religion, with a particular focus on the notion of freedom, can be found in Kosch (2006, especially pp. 123-138). Kierkegaard's exposure to Schelling's thought might have played a role in the development of his own use of regulative notions; however, the problem to which regulative notions are meant to respond (that is, the application of moral ideas to the world) is, as mentioned, a peculiarly Kantian problem to which all the post-Kantians (including Kierkegaard, in my view) tried to respond in different way. Therefore, I don't regard the possible mediation of Schelling as particularly relevant here.

[88] Allusions to Abraham as an exemplar for faith can be found in several commentators. Among them, it seems to me that the scholar whose interpretation is closer to mine is Lippitt. For Abraham as an exemplar for faith, see, for instance, Lippitt, 2003, p. 157. However, as I am going to stress, I take Abraham as an exemplar for faith in what seems to me a *stronger* sense – that is, as a Kantian regulative notion.

[89] The figure of Christ as an exemplar in Kierkegaard's philosophy clearly deserves a treatment in its own right. Cf, Bubbio, 2012.

[90] In previous literature, a reading of Kierkegaard's idea of God in the spirit of Kant's notion of regulative concepts has been attempted by Pattison (1997), and expanded by Verstrynge (2004). However, Pattison focuses on the Kantian use of regulative concepts in the theoretical realm, whereas I suggest that it is their practical use that is particularly developed by Kierkegaard. Verstrynge's interpretation is more in line with my interpretation, which is particularly focused on the regulative use of the notion of sacrifice in *Fear and Trembling*.

[91] 'The use of Abraham also conveys a new emphasis on faith as way of life. This emphasis is meant to replace the centuries-old understanding of faith as merely an acceptance of dogmatic truths' (Green, 1998, p. 259).

[92] Mooney, 1991, p. 84.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Johannes considers the case of a man who, having listened to the pastor preaching on the greatness of Abraham, goes home and plans to imitate Abraham by murdering his own son. Johannes concludes that the man 'would probably be executed or sent to the madhouse' (FT, 24). I agree with Lippitt that Johannes here is 'trying to make absolutely clear what is involved in praising Abraham for his action' (Lippitt, 2003, p. 36); and in fact, a few lines below, he claims to have 'the courage to think a thought whole'. (FT, 25).

[95] Cf. Lippitt, 2003, p. 133.

[96] Lippitt, 2003, p. 70. Lippitt introduces this account as a response to Cross (1999, p. 239), who endorses the picture of an Abraham acting as if he will not lose Isaac while concurrently fully believing that he will lose Isaac.

[97] Agacinski, 1998, p. 141.

[98] Kant, 1996b, p. 107 [6:65].

[99] Cf. MacKinnon, 1975, p. 141.

[100] See Wood, 1970, pp. 160-174.

[101] Westphal, 1983, p. 64. See also Fleming Crocker, 1975, pp. 125-139: 'Faith, then, is a kind of openness, a passionate receptivity on the part of the historically existing individual to the revelation of God as a Person […]. This openness was the decisively significant feature of Abraham's relationship to God'.

[102] I have analysed the regulative dimension of sacrifice in Nietzsche's thought as well as his political implications in Bubbio, 2008.