

ABRAHAM'S DILEMMA

Robert Adams

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1. The Dilemma Stated

A convincing defense of a divine command theory of the nature of obligation must address our darkest fear about God's commands--the fear that God may command something evil. Certainly some of the things that God has been thought to require have been evil. Rivers of blood have been shed in obedience to supposed divine commands. Can we accept a divine command theory without assuming a potential obligation to perform such horrible deeds?

One case dominates discussion of this issue, the biblical story of the sacrifice of Isaac or, as it is more accurately called in Jewish tradition, the binding (*akedah*) of Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19). This has long been a central narrative for Jewish and Christian traditions and (with some variation) for Muslims also. Its salience for our present purpose owes much to one of the classics of modern religious thought, Soren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, in which ethical issues about the story are raised with exceptional sharpness and made the focus of a profound examination of the relation between religion and ethics. This is not the place to discuss Kierkegaard's work in detail, ¹ but the questions I will pose are certainly influenced by him. The thought that the history of child sacrifice poses an ethical problem for religion is of course much older than Kierkegaard, The Epicurean philosopher-poet Lucretius, a contemporary of Cicero and Julius Caesar, writing in the first half of the first century B.C.E., proposes Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia as a horrible example, concluding with the pungent comment, *tantum religio potuit suadere malorum* ["How great the evils that religion has been able to inspire!"]. ²

The evil of child sacrifice is not tightly tied to belief in divine commands. It is likely that the immolation of children has often been initiated by human agents seeking to express religious devotion or to obtain divine assistance in a crisis (e.g. 2 Kings 3:26-27), without the presupposition of a specific divine command. But the story of the binding of Isaac does begin with a command from God, and Kierkegaard has made reflection on that aspect of the story inescapable.

A brief summary of the story will suffice here (though it will not bear comparison with the matchless narrative of Genesis 22, or with Kierkegaard's brilliant retellings), God speaks to Abraham, commanding him to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac as a whole burnt offering on a mountain that God will show him, and Abraham sets about to comply. At the climax of the story Abraham binds Isaac on the altar and takes the knife to kill him, but is stopped by the voice of an angel declaring that the willingness he has evidenced to make such a sacrifice at God's behest is enough. Instructed by the angel not to kill his son, Abraham finds and sacrifices a ram instead. The angel declares that God will bless Abraham's descendents because he has not withheld his son.

Did Abraham do the right thing? Before the order to sacrifice Isaac was countermanded, was it right or wrong for Abraham to kill his son, or to intend to do so? That is more or less the question (or one of them) that Kierkegaard poses for us. It is a question about which Kierkegaard's Abraham agonizes, and in that respect he is a modern, nineteenth-century Abraham, Kierkegaard does not distinguish him from the biblical Abraham (though he emphasizes his contemporary relevance), but the thought that Abraham might be doing something wrong in killing (or planning to kill) Isaac as a sacrifice is one of which there is absolutely no trace in Genesis 22. Certainly the biblical Abraham sees something in some way bad, even horrifying, about killing his son. Thoughts, or at least feelings, of that character are present (though not very explicit) in the atmosphere of the narrative. The biblical Abraham is not such a monster as to lack them. I have emphasized the distinction between the wrong and the merely bad, between the obligation family of concepts and the value family of concepts; and the thought that is missing from Genesis 22 is precisely the thought that it is, or might be, morally wrong for Abraham to slay Isaac on the altar.

Its absence from the Genesis narrative probably reflects a cultural background in which child sacrifice was a generally accepted practice and disapproval of this manifestation of a parent's generous piety toward a deity was not part of the religious repertoire. It is strongly disapproved in later biblical texts, and in postbiblical Judaism and Christianity. The prophet Jeremiah clearly views the practice as forbidden by God, and wrong,

when he represents YHWH their God as condemning the people of Judah, saying, "They have built the high place of Topheth . . . to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind" (Jeremiah 7:31).³ Yet it is commanded, arguably, in one of the oldest texts of biblical law: "The first-born of your sons you shall give to me. You shall do likewise with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall be with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me" (Exodus 22:29-30).⁴

In the biblical text that has come down to us, edited undoubtedly by opponents of the practice, child sacrifice is usually represented as a pagan practice, idolatrous as well as cruel; and we know that human children were routinely sacrificed to other gods by Israel's neighbors. But the Bible does retain at least one record of a completed human sacrifice to YHWH, Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter (Judges 11:30-40). And the book of Judges contains no suggestion that anyone disapproved of Jephthah's killing his daughter, though he regretted the vow that obliged him to do so. The story evidently comes from a culture in which a father's sacrificing his child to YHWH was a recognized part of the religious repertoire.⁵

If we think of the biblical Abraham as belonging to such a culture, it may occur to us to ask whether my divine command theory implies that it would not have been wrong for him to kill his son as a sacrifice. Why would that be implied? It would of course be implied if God really commanded him to do it. For reasons that will appear more fully later, however, I agree in fact with Jeremiah that the true God never commanded any such thing--never even thought of doing so, as Jeremiah put it. The thought that concerns us here is rather that the biblical Abraham would not have received any sign that he (with his cultural background) could reasonably be expected to have interpreted as a command of God explicitly or implicitly forbidding the sacrifice of his child--from which it would follow, by my lights, that he was not morally forbidden to do it. That is a sort of historical relativity that is indeed possible on my account of the nature of obligation, though I doubt that we can know enough about the biblical or historical Abraham and his cultural situation to know what signs he had received or how he would have been likely to interpret them. In any event I would emphasize that no such historical relativity is involved in my account of good and evil. There is nothing in my metaethics to keep me from saying that child sacrifice was and is a hideous evil in the life of any individual or culture that has practiced it, despite any religious virtues that they may have exemplified in the practice.

The Abraham of whom I wish mainly to speak here is not the biblical Abraham, however. He is not exactly Kierkegaard's Abraham either, but he is modern enough to share the latter's agony over the thought that it is ethically wrong to sacrifice his son. He holds all three of the following beliefs--or rather, he finds them all initially plausible, overwhelmingly so, in his situation, though he recognizes their mutual inconsistency.

- (1) If God commands me to do something, it is not morally wrong for me to do it,
- (2) God commands me to kill my son.
- (3) It is morally wrong for me to kill my son.

These three propositions constitute what I call Abraham's Dilemma. They are an inconsistent triad. Taken together, they are mutually contradictory; (1) implies that if (2) then not (3), But formal consistency can be restored by denying any one of the three. Which one should Abraham (or I) deny? In section 2 I will consider, and reject, two approaches in which proposition (1) would be abandoned. Then in section 3 I will discuss which of the two other propositions must be rejected.

2. Can It Be Wrong to Obey God?

The most popular basis for rejecting proposition (1) would probably be the view that what is morally wrong is eternally and necessarily wrong, and would therefore still be wrong, and certainly not obligatory, even if God commanded it (and never forbade it), This view is flatly inconsistent with my divine command theory of the nature of obligation; for if moral wrongness consists in being forbidden by God, something that is never forbidden by God cannot be wrong, The interesting question here for me is not whether I should reject this view, as I obviously must, but how far I can satisfy intuitions that may lie behind it, That what is wrong is eternally and necessarily wrong, I do not believe, As indicated in chapter 11, section 2, I think there are points on which it is contingent what a perfectly good God would or would not determine to be wrong. That is not to say that I think such a deity could ordain child sacrifice, The divine nature may be such that it is impossible for

God to want such a thing, Whether that is so is connected with a more general issue of the modal status of God's moral properties, and the discussion of that issue in chapter 1, section 5, will not be repeated here. I would not claim, however, to have offered a proof that God absolutely could not command something evil. So I had better face the question, What if God did command something evil? Suppose child sacrifice is evil but God really did command it; would it still be wrong to do it? Would it then be wrong not to do it?

I mean these as counterfactual conditional questions; I am not seriously entertaining the hypothesis that God really commanded something evil. It is interesting, however, that the prophet Ezekiel seems to accept such a hypothesis. Recounting the divine punishment of Israel's idolatry and other sins, he represents YHWH as saying, "Moreover I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not have life; and I defiled them through their very gifts in making them offer by fire all their first-born, that I might horrify them" (Ezekiel 20:25-26). The implication seems to be that these horrible sacrifices were offered to YHWH, not just to other gods, and under commands that YHWH gave to punish the people. Some of the questions that most concern me here are not addressed by Ezekiel. He does not discuss whether the command of child sacrifice was "given" by God only in the sense that God caused it to be believed, or whether it was also authorized by God and thus imposed a really valid (though horrible) obligation. Nor does he discuss whether it was wrong for the people to sacrifice their children in obedience to these commands. What is clear is that he thinks it was bad (defiling, horrifying) for them to do so.

I cannot consistently say that it would be wrong to obey such commands if they were really authorized by God. Nor can I say that it would be (unqualifiedly) bad to obey them if they truly reflected God's character. For under those conditions (which may be impossible) obedience would not have the properties that I think are in fact wrongness and (unqualified) badness. It does not follow, however, that I must say it would be wrong or bad to disobey the commands under those conditions; and that is the point I want to emphasize here. It brings with it a clarification of my divine command theory.

In proposing that moral obligation is constituted by divine commands, I have not yet said much about the question under what conditions they do this. But I have indicated that there are some necessary conditions to be satisfied, and the reasons I have given for accepting divine commands as the definitive standard of moral obligation suggest some plausible conditions. Specifically, I have argued that the goodness of God, the goodness of God's relationship with us, and the goodness of God's commands themselves, all are important in accrediting God's commands for their role in constituting obligation. A deity that was what we would intuitively call cruel would not be a good candidate for the role of supreme Good, and the cruel commands of such a being would not be a good candidate for the standard of moral right and wrong. I would not say it would be wrong to disobey such commands of such a being.

That being so, I should probably identify moral wrongness, not simply with the property of being contrary to commands of God, but rather with the property of being contrary to commands of a certain kind of God. Perhaps I should say specifically: contrary to commands of a loving God, though probably a more precisely satisfactory formula could be devised. We could dispense with this qualification if (as I suspect) the requisite sort of lovingness follows necessarily from the divine nature; but since I do not claim to have proved that it does, nor even to have worked out in detail how it might follow from the divine nature, I will let the qualification stand.

If there were no loving God, then (on an adequately qualified version of my view) no acts (either of obedience or of disobedience) would have the property that I identify with moral wrongness. In that situation some other property (which on my view is not moral wrongness, but only similar to it) might be a good enough candidate, and the best available, for the semantically indicated role of moral wrongness;⁶ I do not think disobedience to cruel commands of cruel quasi-gods would have that property. We will surely approve of the decision of the Purka clan described in the following anthropological report:

There is a tradition that the men of Purka clan were once faced by their clan-gods' demand for human sacrifice, but rather than comply with this gruesome demand they rushed to the nearest river, and threw the sacred whisk symbolizing the female clan-deity into the water, and hence have performed the sacrificial rites only with the symbol of the male god who accepts the sacrifice of a goat and a cow.⁷

Believers in moral dilemmas, who think it can be fully and unqualifiedly wrong, for certain reasons, to perform a certain action, and also fully and unqualifiedly wrong, for other reasons, not to perform it, might offer a different reason for rejecting proposition (1). The proposition holds:

(1) If God commands me to do something, it is not morally wrong for me to do it.

The reason I gave above for believing that (1) follows from my divine command theory is that if wrongness is the property of being contrary to God's commands, then nothing can be wrong unless it is contrary to God's commands. In so arguing I left a loophole, however, for the suggestion that doing something God commanded me to do might still be contrary to a divine command, and thus wrong, if God gave me contradictory commands. Thus, if God commanded Abraham never, under any circumstances, to kill an innocent child, but also commanded him specifically to kill his (innocent) son Isaac, then, it might be argued, it would be wrong for Abraham to kill Isaac, because that would be contrary to God's general command, yet also wrong for him not to kill Isaac, because that would be contrary to God's specific command. Some readers have taken this to be the situation of Kierkegaard's Abraham. I don't, because I take Kierkegaard to represent the general command against killing the innocent as "suspended" by God in Abraham's case; but the hypothesis of such a strong moral dilemma arising from conflicting divine commands is certainly worth considering on its own merits.

Moral philosophers generally agree that it is possible for prima facie obligations to conflict. That is, there can be generally valid moral grounds for thinking an action obligatory, and other generally valid moral grounds for thinking it wrong. For instance, it is generally wrong for me use your property without your permission, and it is also wrong for me to allow a child to drown when I could have saved his life by throwing him a life preserver (yours, in the imagined case). This is not a hard dilemma, however. I am morally obliged to throw your life preserver to the child (if it's the only one available), and it is not wrong, all things considered, for me to do so. I may owe you a sort of apology (not a very abject one) for doing it, but that is the only part of a "guilt" reaction that can rightly be expected of me; and no one should blame me for it.

Some dilemmas are much more agonizing than this, of course, affording no "obvious right answer" to the question, What should I do? One may think it was morally necessary to do something, but feel it was a horrible thing to do (or "to have to do"), and that it would be indecent to justify oneself with any sense of complacency to those who may have suffered from it. Some philosophers think it is best to deal with such cases by saying there is sometimes no available action which it is not wrong, all things considered to perform, and that full, genuine guilt is then inevitable.

I favor the opposite opinion, according to which all available alternatives may indeed be bad in important ways, but there must always be at least one that is not wrong. This view is strongly supported by a conception of moral obligation, and of the corresponding possibility of moral wrongness, as constituted by demands of a deity or other persons or a society. For such requirements cannot plausibly be taken as constituting moral obligation unless they are reasonable, and it cannot be reasonable to require something contradictory or impossible.

In an illuminating defense of a view of Abraham's predicament as a dilemma that has only wrong answers, Philip Quinn says, "One crucial assumption for my argument is that the moral realm is not the only source of ultimate values whose realization might be promoted by human actions. The tendency to moralize the whole of our lives is to be resisted."⁸ I agree that life should not be wholly moralized; but if God is the ultimate ground of all values (as I think Quinn agrees), it will hardly be a mistake to theologize the whole of our lives. And theologizing the whole of our lives, as I have argued in chapter 7, should be strongly integrative. Commenting on Quinn's paper, Linda Zagzebski asks, "Though it is not unreasonable to say that God's goodness includes more than the moral, isn't it unreasonable to say that any one part or aspect of God's goodness can be in conflict with any other?"⁹ I suppose even God can be pulled in opposite directions by competing reasons, but could the divine goodness be so conflicted as to be unwilling to treat any alternative as permissible under the circumstances?

These arguments are not likely to settle the issue about moral dilemmas, but I think even if there were situations in which every possible action would be contrary, all things considered, to divine commands, Abraham's Dilemma would not be likely to be among them. The most plausible cases for inescapable violation

of God's commands would be cases in which divine commands that are quite general (say a command to respect certain rights, and a command to prevent certain sorts of disasters) come into conflict and God has not said how to deal with the conflict. But Abraham is said to have been commanded quite specifically to sacrifice Isaac, and such a particular command seems to imply a suspension of any contrary commands from the same source. A command so specific that does not carry permission to do what is commanded might be thought to show the commander to be so lacking in consistency as to be unfit for the exalted role of defining moral obligation.

3. What Should We Believe about God's Commands?

Let us therefore set aside the possibility of solving Abraham's Dilemma by rejecting proposition (1), There are two other propositions in the inconsistent triad:

(2) God commands me to kill my son.

(3) It is morally wrong for me to kill my son,

These are the propositions that most strongly distinguish the Abraham of this dilemma from the Abraham of Genesis 22, who neither doubts (2) nor so much as entertains (3), Which of them should our Abraham reject?

Immanuel Kant voted solidly to reject (2), declaring that "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.'"10 It is not easy to reject Kant's verdict, and no easier if we follow Kierkegaard's insistent advice to imagine one of our own contemporaries confronted with Abraham's Dilemma. I have often asked my students, "What would you think if you asked your neighbor why he was building a large stone table in his backyard, and he said, 'I'm building an altar, because God has commanded me to sacrifice my son as a whole burnt offering. Won't you come to the ceremony tomorrow morning?'" All agree that the neighbor should be committed to a mental hospital.

I believe Kant's response is substantially correct, The problem, as he recognizes, has an epistemological dimension, Among purported revelations, which of them are authentic and really come from God? Hardly any religion supposes that all of them do, The conception of God as the Good proposed in the present book suggests an ethical criterion. This theological conception is not offered as a way of discovering goodness for the first time, but as an account of the nature of a goodness with which we are assumed to have some acquaintance. Holding such a conception, we must test purported messages from God for their coherence with ethical judgments formed in the best ways available to us. Our practice of ethical judgment may well be shaped, and may well have been shaped already, by religious influences; but at each step a vision of the Good, and of God as the Good, must be controlling, and must be preferred, if need be, to inferences from nonmoral phenomena supposedly caused by God, The example before us evokes especially strong intuitive support for the Kantian preference for inference from 'ought' to 'is' as opposed to inference from 'is' to 'ought' in moral theology.

Even in applying an ethical criterion, however, we should not reject proposition (2) too easily. The profound resonance that the story of the binding of Isaac has sustained in several religious traditions demands that we take seriously, at least for a bit longer, the possibility of rejecting proposition (3) instead. Religion would be not only safer than it is, but also less interesting and less rich as a resource for moral and spiritual growth, if it did not hold the potentiality for profound challenges to current moral opinion. Religion's connection with the transcendent would be threatened if it could not demand costly sacrifices for distinctly religious reasons, or if one's acts of faith and devotion could not be costly in any way to anyone besides oneself. If we believe in divine commands at all, we should not want to hold that they can never be surprising. The command addressed to Abraham in Genesis 22 is not to be rejected simply because it challenges prevailing values, or because it demands too much of Abraham and his family, or because it gives purely religious expression precedence over the worldly good of Abraham's son.

We are not likely to believe that it is never right to sacrifice for any cause the well-being of those for whom we care and are responsible. Most will defend, in some circumstances, the willingness of nations to sacrifice their

sons in warfare. Genesis 22 has been viewed, sometimes with bitterness, as a precedent for that willingness. II Those who most strongly disapprove of all such sacrifices to Mars commonly do approve of standing up for one's political convictions in some cases where that is likely to result in hardship for one's family. Where the political cause is sufficiently good and important, I imagine that few of us would disapprove of persisting in one's loyalty to it even at some risk to the lives of one's family. To say that such sacrifices may be justified for a political but never for a purely religious cause is not to offer an argument against religion, but simply to reject it. The history of martyrdom is full of people who have been honored (rightly, I think) for expressing their religious convictions, and refusing to renounce them, even when their martyrdom would obviously result in great suffering for their families as well as for themselves.

The annals of Jewish martyrdom offer particularly poignant and self-conscious parallels to the sacrifice (as many saw it) of Isaac. This is richly documented, with reference to the persecutions in Germany connected with the first Crusade in 1096, in Shalom Spiegel's fascinating study of the resonance of the akedah in medieval Judaism, *The Last Trial*. Confronted with the sole alternatives of death and forced conversion to Christianity, hundreds of Jews chose to die as sacrifices, more or less ritually cutting each other's throats. The following story is told of a Rabbi Samuel and his son Yehiel, also a rabbi, who in those dire circumstances, "offered his throat for slaughter by his father. Whereupon the father recited the appropriate blessing for the slaughter of cattle and fowl, and the son responded with 'Amen.' And all those who were standing around them responded in a loud voice, 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One,'"¹² And the father cut his son's throat, having first inspected the sword and found it to be flawless for ritual purposes, ¹³ The chronicler exclaims, "How extraordinary was the stamina of the son who unbound let himself be slaughtered,"¹⁴ thus invoking the memory of Isaac, who was said in Jewish tradition to have asked to be bound lest fear cause him to do something that would spoil the sacrifice,¹⁵

Most of us, I imagine, will admire the father and son in this story, and will not blame them--whether or not what they did is exactly what our own conscience would tell us to do in like circumstances. If they claimed that God told them to do what they did, I would not say that no such command could come from God, Why does their action seem to deserve such respect?

Probably the most important factor affecting our response is that Samuel and Yehiel are facing a desperate situation, engulfed in an evil not of their own making. None of their options is a happy one. Death at the hands of their persecutors would be a cruel fate. Betraying their sacred convictions would be worse. Death is not chosen gratuitously in this context, but for a compelling reason that anyone who has any sympathy for their religion can understand. By treating the death of Yehiel ritually as a sacrifice they can at least confirm, dramatize, and possibly enhance its religious meaning.

It is significant that the alternative to death is their own repudiation of a religious loyalty. Few alternatives would so convincingly justify the choice of death. The Jewish martyrs may be compared at this point with the mass suicide at Jonestown, which probably does not command the respect of most of us in the same way. The Jonestown believers faced events that would very likely have destroyed the communal institutions in which they were living, but would not have forced them to abjure their faith. Preferring death to apostasy is something we understand, and are rightly reluctant to blame. Rightly or wrongly, we are much less inclined to admire, and much more inclined to blame, someone for preferring death to living on without a particular physical or social setting for one's religion--though we can certainly understand that the latter might be a grievous loss.

In the particular comparison before us, our judgment is likely to be affected also by our general respect for Judaism and the contrasting suspicion in which we are likely to hold the "cult" that organized Jonestown, That is an appropriate *type* of influence on our judgment, whether or not our judgment about Jonestown in particular is fair. "Religious judgment," as we might call it, is not to be sharply distinguished in these matters from moral judgment, and probably already has a lot of moral judgment in it. I'd rather not rely too heavily on this line of argument, however, as this is not the place for comprehensive assessment of the comparative merits of different religions.

Another salient feature of the story of Samuel and Yehiel is that the son is a willing victim. Indeed, he is the first to propose the sacrifice. This certainly pulls some of the teeth from any charge that his rights are violated

by his father, and makes it much easier for us to approve of what they did. This is not a feature of all of the reports of Jews sacrificing each other to escape persecution in this period. There are reports of "babes and sucklings" being killed in this way too,¹⁶ and it is doubtless harder for us to approve of that. I do not know whether the infants, if not sacrificed, would have been killed by the persecutors, or baptized and brought up as Christians. On anything like the latter assumption, if the story were played out in a culture similar to our own today, we would think the children's rights were violated by sacrificing them. I am not inclined to judge harshly what was done, heroically in a way, and in desperate circumstances, in the eleventh century, in a cultural context in which there was conflict about which religion was the right one, but general agreement that it was worse to die in the wrong religion than to die young. For our own thinking about Abraham's Dilemma, however, the issue of consent is one that cannot simply be dismissed. That is why I have preferred to focus on the case of the adult, and willing, Yehiel as one in which it might not have been wrong for a father to sacrifice his son.

Do our reflections on this example show us a way in which it might be right to solve Abraham's Dilemma by abandoning the claim (3) that it was morally wrong for Abraham to kill his son, in order to retain the claim (2) that God commanded him to do it? I think not. Of the factors that inclined us to approve of the sacrifice of Yehiel, the one that most easily carries over to Abraham is our general respect for their religion; Abraham is after all the "father of faith" to several distinguished traditions. But this is not enough to settle the issue, for deservedly respected religious figures can certainly make grave errors of judgment; and we are particularly likely to be unable to agree entirely with them across a long interval of centuries.

The issue of consent is quite problematic in the case of Abraham and Isaac. Genesis 22 leaves it an open question whether Isaac consented; it certainly does not present him as volunteering to be sacrificed. Though calling him a boy, on the other hand, it does represent him as old enough to carry the wood for the burnt offering (presumably quite a lot of wood); traditional exegesis has inferred that he could not have been physically compelled against his will, though that hardly assures fulfillment of a high standard of fully voluntary consent.

Consent was not a significant feature of the ancient practice of child sacrifice. The usual age of the children sacrificed was probably from birth to about four years; certainly that was the case at Carthage, a Phoenician colony which has left us the most extensive evidence of the practice that we have from any Mediterranean site.¹⁷ More important still, for our understanding of the practice, the sacrifice was conceived as a maximally precious gift from the parents to the deity; and that is surely the meaning of the "offering" and the "not withholding" in Genesis 22:2, 16. In this conception the status of the child is much too close for our comfort to that of being the parents' property. There is not sufficient "moral distance," as Ronald Green puts it,¹⁸ between parent and child for the question of the child's rights against the parent to arise. That does not justify us, however, in failing to raise that question.

That killing Isaac (especially without his consent) would violate his rights, even if it was his father who did it, is one of the ways in which we are likeliest to think it would be wrong for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. This point has not been stressed, so far as I know, in Jewish and Christian religious critiques of child sacrifice; but the development of such critiques, particularly in Judaism, is associated with a greater moral distance between parents and children. It is perhaps more than coincidence that the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, which (as we have seen) reject child sacrifice, also both repudiate the proverb "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge," which they interpret as expressing traditional acceptance of the punishment of children for their parents' sins. "As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Behold all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:2-4; cf. Jeremiah 31:29-30). Here, and in virtually all of the later Jewish and Christian traditions, the children stand before God on their own account. When they are seen in that light, their sacrificial death can no longer be seen primarily as their parents' gift. Thus the original meaning of child sacrifice, the meaning it has in Genesis 22, is undermined by a more adequate vision of the moral and religious significance of the children's lives.

This recognition of moral distance between children and their parents is reflected in postbiblical Judaism and Christianity in the prevalence of interpretations that see Isaac as a willing victim.¹⁹ The rabbis typically describe him as thirty-seven years old at the time of the trial, and thus fully competent to give his assent. His willingness is so accentuated that in some expansions of the story in midrash Isaac has become its principal

hero. There are even midrashim in which Isaac expresses his willingness to be slaughtered before God gives the command for it.²⁰ The sacrifice of a volunteer certainly seems less offensive morally than the sacrifice of an unconsenting victim. But this is not a full or convincing resolution of Abraham's Dilemma. We want to know whether one should believe that God really commanded the sacrifice; and thinking of the sacrifice as suicidal rather than homicidal is hardly enough to remove the objection to regarding the command as genuinely issued by God.

Willing or unwilling, the intended death of Isaac lacks what I think is the most important feature that makes the self-offering of Yehiel understandable and admirable as an act of religious faithfulness and heroism. It is not a response to an independently existing crisis, or to a train of evil already in progress. If Isaac has to choose between death and the renunciation of a precious religious loyalty, nothing but the demand for sacrifice itself forces that on him, nor does anything else force the sacrifice on his father Abraham. For Kierkegaard this is indeed a distinctive characteristic of Abraham's deed; it is what distinguishes him, as a knight of faith, from "tragic heroes" whose sacrifices meet generally intelligible needs.²¹ It is "'temporally' pointless," as Gene Outka puts it.²²

It does not even have the kind of religious point that the sacrifice of Yehiel has. Why would God command such a horrifying deed with no extrinsic point to it? Why would God see the sacrifice as desirable? Without a satisfying answer to this question it will be hard to be justified in believing that the demand for sacrifice comes from God. Under the circumstances, it would seem that any positive value attaching to Isaac's death must be internal to the action of Abraham--and perhaps of Isaac, if he is a willing victim. It must be a symbolic or at least an expressive value, dependent on the meaning of the act. But what good meaning would the act have?

A positively valued meaning stressed by many interpretations of the story is found in the obedience of Abraham and Isaac. One can understand that a good God might value obedience to (good) commands, and might prize it the more when it overcomes a serious temptation to disobey. But why would God want to be obeyed in such a horrible way? It is not as if the world contains so few occasions for the heroic performance of duty that God would need to create a crisis by commanding an otherwise pointless killing.

The primary meaning envisaged in the ancient practice of child sacrifice was undoubtedly that of expressing devotion by making an especially costly and precious gift to the deity. We can understand thinking that such devotion is a great good, but this meaning is undercut by ethical reflections that we can hardly reject. I have already pointed out that seeing the child as having rights even against his parents undermines views of child sacrifice that focus on the parents' gift. But even the interpretation of a voluntary offering of one's own death as a precious gift can be undermined by reflection on what the offering or demanding of such a gift says about the recipient.

The meaning of a gift depends not only on its costliness to the giver but also on the desires or values of the recipient. How would you like to receive for your birthday a brightly wrapped box with a card on it announcing "the costliest and most precious gift I could find," and open it to discover the severed head of either the giver or the giver's child? What could be more horrible? Who would have thought you'd want that? Should we say, "It's the thought behind the gift that counts"? That's the conventional way to set aside the consideration of the recipient's desires and values, but it seems obscene here. The thought behind this gift could only be read as insulting--as I said, who would have thought you'd want that? For the "thought" that conventionally validates the gift has to include at least the hope that you will like the gift, and who but a monster would like such a gift as this? By the same token, it seems hardly honoring to God to suppose that God would like, and therefore welcome or command, the otherwise pointless killing of a person. (This is not, of course, to say that God would not welcome someone's making a self-offering of a death that could not be avoided anyway, or that could not honorably be avoided, as in the case of Yehiel.) The original supposedly positive meaning of child sacrifice depends (for us, at any rate) on avoiding not only the question of the child's rights but also the question of what the sacrifice presupposes about the deity's attitude toward the child.

Kierkegaard suggests a different religious point for the intended sacrifice of Isaac. If God's demands coincide too neatly with those of universal morality, he fears, one will not have a sufficiently individual and personal relationship with God. The "teleological suspension of the ethical" for Abraham meets this religious need, as Kierkegaard sees it.²³ There is much to be said for the idea of individual vocations from God, and for allowing

them to put some pressure on other ethical considerations, as I will argue in chapter 13. I will also argue there, however, that such vocations can generally be conceived in terms of goods that God has given us to love. Surely there are plenty of ways for God to give individual vocations without commanding a gruesome and otherwise pointless sacrifice.

I conclude that in any cultural context in which it is possible to worry about Abraham's Dilemma it will hardly be credible that a good God has commanded the sort of sacrifice that is envisaged there. To this conclusion it may be objected that an omnipotent deity would have the power to cause a sign that we could not credibly fail to interpret as a genuine command from God to offer otherwise unnecessary human sacrifices.²⁴ I am not sure this is true; Kant's remark that I have quoted about a voice ringing from the sky suggests that he thought it is not. But suppose it is true; how should we respond if God confronted us with such a sign? Should we obey, trusting that God will see to it that obedience works out for the best, even if we do not see how?²⁵ Or should we change deities, like the men of the Purka clan described earlier?

I have already indicated my approval of the decision made in the Purka clan, but I would need to imagine the unimaginable in order to rule out the other alternative. Much would depend on whether we could see the author of the command as the supreme Good. If we could, then perhaps trusting obedience might seem the right course. A situation in which I would find it reasonable to believe that a good God had given such an abhorrent command seems to me so unimaginable, however, that I think it is at best a waste of spiritual energy to try to decide what one should do in that case. If we hold anything like a typical Jewish or Christian theology, God's giving such a command is not to be expected. I doubt that a theology should try to prepare conditionally for such a radical shake-up of its own convictions as the acceptance of such a command would entail. It does not honor God to prepare oneself mentally for receiving such a command. Consider an analogy: it would hardly be an expression of confidence in your spouse to ponder in any but the most abstractly theoretical way the question what you should do if your spouse demanded your cooperation in a serious crime. So long as it is possible for us at all to dismiss them, I think it is the part of religious as well as moral wisdom to dismiss all thoughts of our actually being commanded by God to practice something as horrible as human sacrifice. The question whether God commands such a thing should stay off our epistemological agenda as long as it possibly can, which I expect will be forever.

NOTES

1. *Fear and Trembling* is discussed more fully in Adams, "The Knight of Faith."

2. Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, Book 1, line 101.

3. Cf. Jeremiah 19:1-9, 32:35. For repudiation of the practice by Jeremiah's younger contemporary Ezekiel, see Ezekiel 20:25-26, which I will discuss later. I follow Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, p. 42, in attributing these statements, or their substance, to the historic Jeremiah and Ezekiel; but I claim no expertise in the often disputed attribution and dating of texts from the prophetic books.

4. Verses 28-29 in the Hebrew. I have changed the RSV's "its dam," which suggests a distinction between animals and humans, to "its mother," which renders quite literally the indiscriminating Hebrew word. It should also be noted that "its" and "his" are indistinguishable in Hebrew, which has no neuter gender.

5. For persuasive argument on this point, and on the interpretation of the texts cited in this paragraph and the preceding one, see Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, chap. 1. I am much indebted to Levenson's fascinating discussion of child sacrifice and the binding of Isaac in the Bible and postbiblical traditions. At least two kings of Judah, Ahaz and Manasseh, each burned a son as an offering (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6) and, as the Bible, in condemning them, does not mention pagan deities as receiving these sacrifices, we may conjecture that they were offered to YHWH.

6. Here I presuppose the account of the relation between the semantics and the metaphysics of value presented in chapter 1, section 1, and adapted to the semantics and metaphysics of obligation at the beginning of chapter 10, section 1.

7. von Fiirer-Haimendorf, *Morals and Merit*, p. 146; quoted in Little and Twiss, "Basic Terms in the Study of Religious Ethics," p. 73.
8. P. Quinn, "Moral Obligation, Religious Demand, and Practical Conflict," p. 203.
9. Zagzebski, Review of Audi and Wainwright, p. 108. I am indebted to Zagzebski for very helpful discussion of these issues about dilemmas and divine commands.
10. Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, p. 283n (Ak. VI1, 63). Similar statements can be found in *Kant's Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, pp. 100f., 179f, (Ak, VI,87, 186f.).
11. For an eloquently bitter example, see the poem of Wilfred Owen relating Abraham's action to the First World War, quoted in Judah Goldin's introduction to Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, pp. xvi-xvii n. 12.
12. Medieval source quoted in Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, p, 22.
13. Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, p. 23.
14. Medieval source quoted in Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, p. 22.
15. Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, p, 147.
16. Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, p. 19.
17. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, pp. 20ff. The Carthaginians, like the Phoenicians, spoke and wrote a language so close to Hebrew that one could think of them as dialects of the same language. In fairness I should note that in the story of Jephthah, his daughter, apparently an adolescent, does consent, though not with the enthusiasm that the rabbis would later ascribe to Isaac (Judges 11:34-40).
18. Green, "Abraham, Isaac, and the Jewish Tradition," p. 7f.
19. This connection of ideas is asserted, with reference to Hellenistic Judaism, in Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, p. 191£.
20. Green, "Abraham, Isaac, and the Jewish Tradition," p. 9. The emphasis on Isaac's willingness is abundantly documented in Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, pp. 187-92, and especially in Spiegel, *The Last Trial*.
21. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 57-59.
22. Outka, "Religious and Moral Duty," p. 215.
23. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 68-81.
24. A similar objection to the Kantian position is pressed in P. Quinn, "Religious Obedience and Moral Autonomy," p. 275.
25. Cf. P. Quinn, "Religious Obedience and Moral Autonomy," p. 276.