THE BINDING OF ABRAHAM

KIERKEGAARD AND THE ABSOLUTE DUTY TO GOD

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ABSTRACT

In *Fear and Trembling* (1843), Kierkegaard states that there must be an absolute duty to God. Based on *Fear and Trembling,* as well as other works by Kierkegaard, this has been understood as the claim that divine commands generate an absolute duty to follow these commands. In this paper, I will show that this view is incorrect. It causes problems with Kierkegaard's existentialist philosophy, his ethics, and the fact that for Kierkegaard actions of faith are unintelligible. I will introduce and defend a new interpretation of this absolute duty. In this new interpretation, the absolute duty to God is generated by a commitment to follow God's will, and not by the divine commands themselves. I will show that this new interpretation solves the problems of the dominant interpretation, and I will refute some objections that could be raised.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART I: INTRODUCTION

How does one have an absolute duty to God? Does this originate from divine commands themselves, or do they come from another, higher, goal? And what is the relation between this duty and living ethically, or even living itself? Questions like these have been asked following Christian Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's statement that Abraham has an absolute duty to follow God's command: *"The paradox can also be put by saying that there is an absolute duty to God; for in this tie of obligation the individual relates himself absolutely, as the single individual, to the absolute."* (Kierkegaard, 2014 [1843], 90). Kierkegaard is very clear in *Fear and Trembling* (1843) about whether there is such a thing as an absolute duty. However, the question remains how this absolute duty comes to be.

The strongest interpretation of this text is what I have called the Duty From Command [DFC] interpretation. This interpretation states that the absolute duty to God is generated by the divine commands themselves. The commands God issues carry within them a certain element or quality that causes there to be an absolute duty for people to follow these divine commands. It is because God called unto Abraham to *"take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you"* (Genesis 22, ESV), that Abraham had an absolute duty to do so.

However, this is not the correct interpretation. This interpretation causes serious problems with Kierkegaard's theory, since it requires religion to give a new foundation for ethics, it provides justifiability to acts of faith, and it demands an essentialist explanation of life. Why these three implications are problematic, will be discussed later. Instead of the DFC, I propose we understand Kierkegaard's statements in the sense of an interpretation of Commitment To Duty [CTD]. The CTD interpretation states that the absolute duty to God is a result of the existential commitment one makes to follow God's will. Applied to the story of Genesis 22, this means that Abraham bound himself to an absolute duty to follow divine command. This interpretation will solve the three problems that occurred with DFC. In the following thesis, I will refute the DFC interpretation and provide reasonable grounds to accept CTD.

First, I will give an overview of the statements and claims of Kierkegaard concerning this passage. Then, I will explain why the DFC interpretation is the strongest common interpretation, and why it seems to match Kierkegaard's work. Thirdly, the problems with DFC, which are mentioned above, will be introduced. In the remains of this thesis, I will introduce

CTD and why it solves the problems of DFC. Then, I will tackle some of the possible objections against this new interpretation.

PART II: FEAR AND TREMBLING

2.1 Kierkegaard's statements

For Johannes *de silentio*, the pseudonym Kierkegaard used to publish the story, the biblical history of the binding of Isaac (see Genesis 22) made great impact in his personal life. The more he read it, the less he could understand it (Kierkegaard, 2014, 9). In *Fear and Trembling* (1843) Kierkegaard thoroughly researches into this act of Abraham, and tries to find its implications for our understanding of Christianity and faith.

Kierkegaard dedicates the first part of *Fear and Trembling* to the supposed teleological suspension of the ethical: by being willing to sacrifice Isaac Abraham violated the ethical norms of his society. Not only that, he also violated the ethical norms that he himself held dear (Kierkegaard, 2014, 71). However, he is not named a murderer. For Kierkegaard, this means that there is the possibility of a teleological suspension of the ethical, which means that the ethical norms can be suspended in favor of a higher purpose. For Abraham, this purpose was God's command.

In the second part of the book, Kierkegaard asks whether Abraham had an absolute duty to follow God's command. If he did not, then Abraham would not have had a good reason to suspend the ethical, and would be a simple murderer once again. Kierkegaard states that Abraham must have had an absolute duty (Kierkegaard, 2014, 90; see also the quote in the introduction). This absolute duty offered a higher purpose which allowed for the suspension of the ethical.

In the third and final part of the book, Kierkegaard asks himself whether it was right for Abraham to remain silent about his ordeal to his wife, his son and his loyal servants. It is this part of the book that is esthetically best, but the main point of his argument is made in the first two sections. In this thesis I will mainly focus on the second part of the book, because that is where Kierkegaard focusses on the existence and nature of the absolute duty to God, which is under discussion here.

So, what is it that Kierkegaard exactly states in the central part of his book? In the second part of *Fear and Trembling* (1843), Kierkegaard quickly reaches the conclusion that Abraham

must have had an absolute duty to God (Kierkegaard, 2014, 90), for otherwise *"Abraham is done for, since he gave in to it."* (Kierkegaard, 2014, 90). The only justification Abraham has, is that it is a *"trial and a temptation (…) for both God's sake and his own."* (Kierkegaard, 2014, 91). This addition, 'for his own sake', is crucial to both the justification and the existentialist objection to DFC. The terrifying story of the binding of Isaac calls unto us whether we, ourselves, can make the same choice Abraham made (Kierkegaard, 2014, 93). It is the paradox of both loving Isaac and being willing to sacrifice him that causes Abraham to be unable to make himself intelligible (Kierkegaard, 2014, 95). This is a crucial point for the justification objection to DFC. Vital to the foundation objection is the fact that the *"the reality of his* [Abraham's] *act is that in virtue of which he belongs to the universal, and there he is and remains a murderer."* (Kierkegaard, 2014, 95-96, *clarification added*). For the DFC interpretation, the condemnation of Abraham as being a murderer becomes very problematic, as I will show in paragraph 3.3.3. The choice of the Knight of Faith, like Abraham, is a choice for *"a lonely path, narrow and steep."* (Kierkegaard, 2014, 98). Abraham does not sacrifice his son for the universal, but for the unexplainable, which makes his path terrible, lonely and dreadful (Kierkegaard, 2014, 99-101).

2.2 A variety of readings

In the following section, I will give a short eagle-eye view of the various ways these parts of *Fear and Trembling* have been interpreted. Quinn (1996), Evans (2004) and Manis (2009, 2011) ascribe to Kierkegaard a position somewhat similar to the Divine Command Theory of ethics. According to them, Kierkegaard defends this Divine Command Theory, which states that acts are morally good if and only if God commands them, and acts are morally wrong if and only if God forbids them (Fisher, 2011, 76-77). Paul Rudd (1993, 147) states that for Kierkegaard the absolute duty to God is the basis for social morality. Hannay (1982) and Zyla (2012) claim that the absolute duty to God means that there are certain moral exceptions to social morality. The ground for this moral exception comes from the divine command, which means that this view is fairly similar to the views of the Divine Command Theory. Some philosophers take another approach and state that Kierkegaard places himself in the Greek tradition of trying to define the way to achieve a good life (Stewart, 2005; Stocker, 2015). Stack (1973, 1977) and Simmons (2007) address this section as part of Kierkegaard's existential writings, saying that the absolute duty is a way of becoming oneself.

These different interpretations share a common assumption, concerning the absolute duty to God's command. According to these theories, there is some sort of universality in the

absolute duty to God. In one way or another, it applies to (almost) everyone: it is part of morality, it is an exception to morality, it is needed for a good life or it is needed to become oneself. In other words: in all these explanations the absolute duty is indifferent to who it is that has that duty. That means that the foundation of this absolute duty cannot come from active human choice, but must have some other foundation, which is commonly believed to be the divine commands themselves. Therefore most, if not all, of these theories are variations of the DFC interpretation. In the next chapter, I will elaborate on this interpretation and the problems that arise with it.

PART III: DUTY FROM COMMAND

3.1 The DFC interpretation

In the following section I will explain the DFC interpretation, and why it seems to fit with Kierkegaard's statements. The DFC interpretation states that divine commands generate an absolute duty to follow these divine commands. According to this interpretation, this is the position Kierkegaard defends in *Fear and Trembling.* There are two ways in which divine commands can generate an absolute duty. The first is stating that divine commands are morally obligatory because they serve a higher purpose. This, however, is often not seen as plausible, since this would give moral authority to the higher purpose instead of the divine commands (Joyce, 2002). Therefore, the second way in which divine commands generate an absolute duty is much more popular. This states that divine commands generate an absolute duty simply because they are divine commands. According to DFC, this is the theory Kierkegaard defends in *Fear and Trembling.*

Several statements in the second part of *Fear and Trembling* can be seen as supporting a DFC interpretation. I will discuss the strongest two: the Lucas argument, and the existentialist duty argument.

The Lucas argument is derived from Kierkegaard's comparison of the divine command to Abraham to the harsh words of Jesus in Lucas 14: *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."* (Lucas, 14:26, ESV). Jesus here gives the radical command to hate the people you love. Kierkegaard criticizes Christian preachers in his day because they would explain this passage mildly, in the sense that you only have to love God more than your

loved ones (Kierkegaard, 2014, 93). Instead, Kierkegaard says, divine commands like these are to be taken literally: *"one now sees readily that if the passage is to have any sense, it must be understood literally."* (Kierkegaard, 2014, 94). The command of Jesus to hate your loved ones seems to apply to people without the requirement of a commitment to do God's will. Therefore, this seems to imply that divine commands themselves generate an absolute duty.

The existentialist argument is derived from various statements in *Fear and Trembling*, but also from Kierkegaard's other works like *The Sickness unto Death* (1846). In his works, Kierkegaard clearly states that we have a duty to become ourselves, which to him means to find our ground in the power that founded the Self (Kierkegaard, 2010 [1846], 27). In other words: our duty is to become ourselves by becoming Christians. If this applies to all people, as Kierkegaard (2010, 35) clearly states, then, again, a commitment seems not necessary to derive an absolute duty from a divine command. Our absolute duty to God can be expressed in the duty we have to become ourselves. Therefore, this too seems to imply that divine commands themselves generate an absolute duty.

3.2 Problems with the DFC interpretation

However, there are some problems with the DFC interpretation. I will discuss the three most important objections in this section. These three objections are the justifiability objection, the existentialist objection, and the foundation objection. All three of these objections provide reasonable grounds to doubt the correctness of the DFC interpretation of Kierkegaard's theory.

Before I discuss these three objections, I want to consider two other possible objections that could be brought in to the DFC interpretation. The first objection states that divine commands in themselves cannot hold a moral authority. This, however, is not as much an objection to the DFC interpretation of Kierkegaard's writings, but an objection to Divine Command Theory as a whole. Secondly, this objection conceptualizes the absolute duty to God in a moral sense, which would not be the focus of this paper. I do not want to include morality in this context for three reasons: 1) Kierkegaard does not use the term morality to refer to the absolute duty to God, 2) Kierkegaard considers the moral and the religious to be clearly distinct, and 3) faith in Kierkegaard's work is quite different from common moral theories, and therefore using morality in this context could be confusing. The second objection states that only a few people recognize they have a duty to God, and that therefore it seems implausible everybody would have such a duty. However, this is no argument against the interpretation. It could just mean that most people are wrong most of the time. On top of that, given Rudd's (1993, 150)

explanation that social morality is the fulfilment of divine command, most people could be following divine command without knowing it.

3.2.1 The justifiability objection

The justifiability objection states that there cannot be an absolute duty to God directly deriving from divine commands, since Abraham would have had some sort of justification for what he did. The absolute duty would be based on something outside Abraham, and therefore provide an independent reason on which Abraham could fall back to justify his actions. Abraham could simply appeal to his absolute duty, stating: "I do not wish to do this, and it feels wrong, but it is my duty and so I must do it." Even if everyone else does not believe in this absolute duty, the Knight of Faith could justify his actions towards himself. For Kierkegaard, it is very clear that a Knight of Faith has no justification for his actions, not even to himself (Kierkegaard, 2014, 91-96). Kierkegaard (2014, 95) clearly states: *"But the distress and anguish in the paradox is that, humanly speaking, he is quite incapable of making himself understood."* In other words, Abraham's choice is intelligible.

One could criticize this objection by stating that it is simply a shortcoming of language that Abraham cannot justify himself. There simply are no ways of describing the absolute duty to God. This point has been made by Hannay (1982, 86-89), as he claims that Kierkegaard is showing us the limits of the language of ethics, in particular the language of universal ethics. This seems to match Kierkegaard's statement that Abraham's situation cannot be explained, because any explanation would fall back to universal terminology: "*The moment I speak* [about Abraham] *I express the universal, and when I do not no one can understand me."* (Kierkegaard, 2014, 76). However, this is not all there is to the lack of justifiability of Abraham's action. Hannay's interpretation only concerns justifiability towards others, where the limits of the language of ethics could indeed be the problem. However, Kierkegaard also talks of justifiability towards yourself, which is not constrained by language. As we can see, for Kierkegaard, the existential choice of faith is one of constant struggle and doubt (Kierkegaard, 2014, 92). As we will see later, my own interpretation offers a better way of dealing with this objection.

3.2.2 The existentialist objection

The existentialist objection is the second objection to the DFC interpretation. This objection states that an interpretation that sees an absolute duty deriving from divine commands cannot be Kierkegaard's, since that would imply an essentialist claim about the meaning of life.

Kierkegaard, on the other hand, is existentialist, which means that the meaning of life has to be created by people themselves.

Kierkegaard is often seen as the father of existentialism (McDonald, 2017), because he was one of the first to criticize the inability of traditional philosophy to understand the single individual (Crowell, 2017). Kierkegaard was the first to use terms like 'exist' and 'existence', when he talked about the absurdity and finitude of life (Chamberlain & Ree, 2001, 4). As Crowell (2017) puts it: *"To exist is always to be confronted with this question of meaning."* It is exactly this question of meaning that is present in *Fear and Trembling.* When discussing the difficult choice Abraham had to make, Kierkegaard speaks directly to the reader, asking them whether they know the same choice stands before them: *"You, to whom my speech is addressed, was that the case with you?"* (Kierkegaard, 2014, 23). This Christian existentialist nature of Kierkegaard's writings means that there can be no pre-given value in an individual life. It is our own duty to become ourselves: to find value and meaning in a meaningless life, by committing ourselves to a lifestyle of pleasure and beauty (the aesthetic), to a universal law (the ethic), or to God (the religious).

Let's consider how the DFC implies a pre-given meaning to life. Because divine commands generate an absolute duty, this duty is present even though no individual makes a choice to make divine commands into a duty. This duty seems to imply that there is a value connected to divine commands, i.e. it is good to follow divine commands. That value would be pre-given, providing meaning without the existential choice of the individual. This does not match the theory of existentialism, according to which value and meaning have to be created by individuals for themselves. Therefore, the absolute duty cannot be the result of the existence of divine commands.

Notice how I used 'seems' in the previous paragraph. Although it may *seem* like a logical connection that duty implies value, and value gives meaning, this could be denied altogether. That way, the existentialist objection would stand forceless against DFC. One could deny the essentialist nature of DFC by stating that, although there is a pre-given duty that comes from divine command, this does not mean that this is (part of) the meaning of life. The absolute duty to God could simply be a condition of life, just as physical conditions (like the need to eat). However, one problem remains for this kind of solution. The difference between the absolute duty to God and other conditions of life, is that the absolute duty causes certain actions to have value in virtue of themselves, while the conditions of life cause certain actions to have value in virtue of another goal. For instance, when we have an absolute duty to pray before we

eat, this is in virtue of no other value, but simply because of the absolute duty. But when we need to eat to survive, eating holds value only in virtue of surviving (in the extreme example where one does not wish to survive, eating loses this value). Somehow, this equation of the absolute duty to God and the conditions of life seems problematic. Of course, this is not a logical impossibility, but, as I will show later, the CTD interpretation offers a better way of dealing with this problem.

There is another way one could criticize the existentialist objection. One could claim that Kierkegaard is in fact making an essentialist statement here. Kierkegaard seems to make several essentialist statements throughout his work. For instance, in *The Sickness unto Death* he states that to become oneself one needs to find their relation to God (Kierkegaard, 1849 [2010], 27). This and many other quotes could give the impression that there is an ultimate way of life for individuals in Kierkegaard's opinion, which is expressed in the relation to God, of which the story of the Binding of Isaac is the prime example. However, Kierkegaard had a different intent. Instead of saying what the purpose of the life of an individual is, he shows what problems people face and how they might solve them. Problems he mentions are boringness, sin and not being able to be oneself, but the most important one is despair: *"If there were no eternal consciousness in a man (...), what then would life be but despair?"* (Kierkegaard, 2014, 15). To deal with our despair about the finitude of our existence, we can find comfort in various ways of life. While Kierkegaard states that the religious way of life is the most successful answer to this, he does not claim that this is the purpose for every individual. The meaning of an individual's life is determined by their personal, existential choice. Judge William, in *Either/Or*, has made such a choice, and committed himself to the ethical norms of society (Rudd, 1993, 76-79), which give his life meaning and value. Even the aesthete 'A' is committed to a way of life, one of drift and individualism (Rudd, 1993, 80). Although Kierkegaard considers neither to be religious, they still found a way of dealing with despair, and as such created value and meaning for themselves.

3.3.3 The foundation objection

The foundation objection states that an absolute duty to God cannot serve as a foundation for ethics, based on several other parts of Kierkegaard's theory. According to Rudd (1993, 147-149), the absolute duty to God gives us reason to follow the ethical norms of society. However, this seems an impossible achievement for people who do not know the divine command. Kierkegaard is clear when he states that these people can act ethical as well (Stack, 1977, 86). That means that the foundation of social ethics has to be something other than the absolute duty

to God. According to DFC, the absolute duty is a result of the nature of divine commands, thereby making it the highest-order morality there is. All other ethical norms are relative, and simply fulfillments of this duty (Rudd, 1993, 147). In this sense, there is no other foundation for ethics than the absolute duty to God. Therefore, the DFC has a wrong notion of the foundation of morality.

There might, however, be critique against this objection. This can come twofold. First, one could point to Kierkegaard's elaborate work on Christian ethics as a way of showing that living ethically derives from faith in God alone. According to Quinn, secular ethics as explained in *The Concept of Anxiety* (Kierkegaard, 1980 [1844]) cannot hold because of its inability to deal with sin. Only a secondary, Christian ethics can do this (Quinn, 1998, 349). In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard puts forth a demanding ethics based upon divine command. The moral law is a result of this divine command, and only because of that it has the possibility to 'deal with the manifestation of our sin' (Quinn, 1998, 352-363). Henriksen makes a similar point as he ascribes a new ethic to Kierkegaard's notion of faith (Henriksen, 1951, 146-148). However, according to Kierkegaard an authentic existential existence is perfectly possible outside Christianity (Stack, 1977, 86). Stack (1977, xi) states that it was Kierkegaard's intent that the ethical could be understood without a theological context. The Christian ethics in *Works of Love* can be interpreted as a way of providing meaning in the ethical for the faithful, after they have suspended the ethical when taking the leap of faith. Through strict and demanding ethical norms, the Knight of Faith can commit himself to his absolute duty to God in an ethical way of life. However, the ethical itself has a foundation outside of Christianity.

Another form of criticism is showing that the ethical life of non-Christians (in Kierkegaard's sense of the word), is in fact not ethical. Then living an ethical life could be limited to those who follow the absolute duty to God. Stack (1977, 85) refutes this critique, by stating that *"the basic conception of an existential ethics is itself neither necessarily nor essentially a Christian ethics"*. Instead, Kierkegaard's ethics should be understood as being modeled after Socrates's and Aristoteles's ethics of virtue and self-mastery (Stack, 1977, 86). In the same way that the ancient Greek ethical life did not require an absolute duty to God, so does Kierkegaard's ethical life. Rudd supports this point, as he states that Judge William, Kierkegaard's example of an ethical figure, is Christian in the common sense of the word, which means that being Christian is simply considered one of his (many) ethical duties (Rudd, 1993, 141). This clearly does not pass Kierkegaard's standard of Christianity, but nonetheless Judge

William is considered to live ethically; that is, dedicated to the task of ordering, cultivating and tempering his soul through the development of virtues (Kierkegaard, 1971 [1843], 267).

These three objections make the DFC interpretation incorrect. In the fourth part of this paper I will discuss my own interpretation of Kierkegaard's notion of an absolute duty to God and why it is a better interpretation than the DFC.

PART IV: COMMITMENT TO DUTY

4.1 The Commitment To Duty interpretation

If the DFC interpretation is incorrect, how should Kierkegaard's absolute duty to God be understood? My interpretation is that the absolute duty to God is a result of Abraham's existential choice. Because Abraham chooses to let the divine command become an absolute duty for himself, it is. The divine commands therefore, do not generate this absolute duty themselves. Let's call this the Commitment To Duty interpretation. There are several steps in this argument that need to be considered more closely.

Firstly, one must accept the premise that there are divine commands issued. This is not doubted by Kierkegaard, as is shown in several parts of *Fear and Trembling* (Kierkegaard, 2014, 22 & 41; Evans, 2009, 142). However, one may wonder whether we can really know divine commands, and which divine commands we should accept as true divine commands (as there are many that exclude each other). Kierkegaard recognizes this problem, and shows that even a Knight of Faith, as Abraham was, cannot be entirely sure about whether he is following divine command, or just becoming a madman, listening to non-existing deities: *"As for the knight of faith, he is assigned to himself alone."* (Kierkegaard, 2014, 104) Rudd, too, interprets this text this way: *"but there is nothing that can tell us which is the right choice to make."* (Rudd, 1993, 140). The Knight of Faith can never know entirely sure, or prove to others, that he is called by God as he says he is (Rudd, 1993, 148). It is this uncertainty that makes the movement from the ethical to the religious even more of a battle: *"But the knight of faith is kept awake, for he is under constant trial"* (Kierkegaard, 2014, 100).

Secondly, acting in accordance with a divine command, because of this divine command, should be considered as following an absolute duty. This is clear for Kierkegaard, since he concludes from the fact that Abraham follows divine command because of divine command, that there must be an absolute duty to God for Abraham (Kierkegaard, 2014, 90).

Acting in accordance with a divine command is not enough, since acting in faith needs a commitment to be truthful and genuine (Rudd, 1993, 141). Therefore, one should act because of the divine command as well.

For the third step, we need to introduce another concept from Kierkegaard. That is the concept of a leap of faith. When discussing the transition towards faith Kierkegaard introduces this leap in his journal shortly before publishing *Fear and Trembling* (Ferreira, 1998, 207). This leap of faith is needed to reach the commitment, which is needed to gain an absolute duty to God, and is therefore quite paradoxical (Ferreira, 1998, 228). In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard describes this leap as Abraham standing on the peak of the ethical, and going beyond it: *"At this extremity stands Abraham. (…) He really does go further and comes to faith."* (Kierkegaard, 2014, 43). The leap itself is based on faith, and thus requires faith, while the outcome of the leap of faith, is faith itself (Ferreira, 1998, 228). How then, can one make it, without faith in the first place? According to Kierkegaard, faith is incommensurable with reality (Kierkegaard, 2014, 39), but it is this paradox that is one of the mysteries of faith, and guides us towards an understanding of faith that is not dependent upon us, but on God (Ferreira, 1998, 228). Abraham has taken such a leap of faith, and that is why he has the needed commitment to make the divine command into an absolute duty.

The fourth step takes it all together. If acting in accordance with and because of a divine command is recognizing an absolute duty, but the absolute duty is only possible through a commitment based on individual faith, then the absolute duty itself is only individual. Abraham acted rightly because he had an absolute duty to follow divine command: *"for in this tie of obligation the individual relates himself absolutely, as the single individual, to the absolute."* (Kierkegaard, 2014, 90). Socrates did not have this absolute duty because he did not make this commitment to God: *"If faith is no more than what philosophy passes it off as then Socrates himself already went further, much further, rather than the converse, that he didn't come that far."* (Kierkegaard, 2014, 89). Abraham follows an absolute duty that he has instituted for himself. That is the origin of the absolute duty to God according to Kierkegaard.

4.2 Solving the problems of DFC

Now consider the three objections against the DFC interpretation. Those stated that, when there would be an absolute duty to God derived from divine commands themselves, 1) Abraham would have been able to justify his actions, 2) Kierkegaard's theory would be essentialist, and 3) the ethical would become meaningless without faith. Neither of these

outcomes were true, which causes serious problems for the DFC interpretation. Let's see how CTD fixes these problems.

The *justifiability objection* stated that Abraham would have been able to justify his actions if there was a universal duty to follow divine command. He clearly is not (Kierkegaard, 2014, 91). With the CTD interpretation, this is solved, since Abraham can no longer refer to his absolute duty to justify his actions, because that would only lead back to him. His absolute duty is only present because of his own active choice to make divine command into an absolute duty. A Knight of Faith only has himself to hold on to: *"The knight of faith has only himself, and it is there the terrible lies"* (Kierkegaard, 2014, 102). People may ask, even Abraham himself may ask: why are you doing this? Why do you make this into an absolute duty? This becomes a harsh struggle for Abraham and every other Knight of Faith, making his life difficult and lonely: *"he knows it is terrible to be born in solitude outside the universal, to walk without meeting a single traveler. He knows very well where he is, and how he is related to men."* (Kierkegaard, 2014, 98).

The CTD interpretation is a much better fit with Kierkegaard's existentialist ideas than the DFC, and can thereby solve the *existentialist objection*. Where the DFC seemed to suggest an essentialist core to Kierkegaard's theory, the new interpretation remains purely existentialist. The purpose of Abraham's life is not given at birth, but is created by himself. With his commitment to God, and the duty that he chooses for himself, Abraham gives value and meaning to his life. This is an active choice Abraham makes, and it is not required of others that they make the same choice as he did. Every individual has its own duty to find meaning in his or her life, and Abraham has found a way of doing this by making following divine commands an absolute duty. Therefore, CTD solves the problem DFC had with Kierkegaard's existentialism.

The *foundation objection* stated that the ethical loses its strength when there is an absolute duty to God, that stems directly from divine commands. The non-Christian can no longer act ethically without obeying God, since the entire ethical framework is based upon God's divine command (in the DFC interpretation). If someone does not know God, can he be truly ethical? The new interpretation solves this problem easily. Yes, the ethical becomes relative because of the absolute duty to God that Abraham has, as Rudd (1993, 147) says. But, that does not mean that it becomes relative for everyone. Only because Abraham chooses another duty for himself, because he goes beyond the ethical, it becomes relative. For all others that do not go beyond the ethical, it holds its moral force.

Therefore, the three problems of the DFC interpretation do not apply to the CTD interpretation, and the CTD interpretation matches some of the core elements of Kierkegaard's theory better, like the existentialist nature of his work.

4.3 Objections to CTD

One could, of course, raise objections to this new interpretation of *Fear and Trembling.* For instance, why does Kierkegaard talk about an absolute duty at all, if it does not apply to everyone? Or, does this not make Kierkegaard's ethics completely irrational? These questions I will answer in the following section.

Firstly, the question arises why Kierkegaard talks about an absolute duty at all. If the duty is only present when there is a true commitment to God's will, it would hardly seem absolute in the common sense. It also is not absolute since it does not apply to everyone, everywhere. It is, however, absolute in a different sense. It is absolute in the sense that it makes the ethical relative. That means, that if there is an ethical demand upon Abraham, which contradicts the divine command, or makes it impossible to follow divine command as well, then the ethical demand can be suspended in favor of the absolute duty Abraham has to God: *"So Abraham's story contains a teleological suspension of the ethical. He has, as the single individual, become higher than the universal."* (Kierkegaard, 2014, 84). It is absolute in the sense that it trumps all other demands that could be made upon the Knight of Faith. The absolute duty therefore is not eternal or universal, but individual and in need of constant reaffirming: *"he is under constant trial and can turn back in repentance to the universal at any moment, and this possibility can just as well be a temptation as the truth"* (Kierkegaard, 2014, 100-101). This, of course, is quite a different notion of an absolute duty than is customary, and the consequences of this I will discuss later.

In addition to this, one could wonder whether there even is an absolute duty to God. If the only thing that constitutes this duty, is the commitment of the Knight of Faith to do God's will, then there can be no absolute duty to God. This point is made by Bogen (1962). If one holds to the definition of an absolute duty as universal and founded upon something other than faith, then indeed, there is no absolute duty to God. But as I have shown, this is not the definition Kierkegaard uses for his idea of an absolute duty to God. The commitment of Abraham generates an absolute duty because it demands of him to follow divine command, even when other demands contradict this.

Secondly, one could name this ethical-religious theory as irrational (MacIntyre, 1984). The paradox, which is faith, just has to be accepted, and to do that, reason has to be shut down and one needs to make an – irrational – leap of faith. This objection could also be raised against many other interpretations of *Fear and Trembling*, but holds more force against the CTD interpretation because this interpretation has no possibility of justification. Where the DFC interpretation had divine commands to point to, the CTD does not. Lillegard (2002) shows that MacIntyre's critique is a too one-sighted and simple presentation of Kierkegaard's position. It is right that reason is not the sole basis of knowledge and not the only ground for action (Hannay, 1982, 105-111; Piller, 2008, 1208). Kierkegaard develops the core of his theory further, among others in *Works of Love*, and gives reason a place as the driving force behind the development of the virtues of a true Christian. Rationality is given place not as the source of faith, but as a means to shape the life of a Christian when the leap of faith is made. Therefore, the objection that Kierkegaard's ideas are irrational holds no sway.

Thirdly, it is commonly believed in Christianity, at least in the major branches, that not following God's commands and not committing oneself to God is the cause of some sort of punishment. How can this be if most people do not have an absolute duty to follow divine commands? To make that clear, the non-existent relation between punishment and duty has to be made clear. Forcing someone to do something does not give a duty to that person to do it. That becomes obvious when we consider the following example. Let's say I force a shopkeeper at gunpoint to give me the holdings of his register. Does the shopkeeper have a duty to do so? Of course not. Nonetheless, when he does not do it, there might be unpleasant consequences. In the same sense does the fact that not following divine commands could lead to (some sort of) punishment not mean that we have a duty to follow divine commands.

4.4 Implications of CTD

There are some implications of this new interpretation, that do not offer an objection to the interpretation itself, but require further investigation to fully understand what the consequences are of Kierkegaard's ideas. I will discuss three of them.

The first implication is that religious duties can no longer be used as a justification for actions. While Kierkegaard praises Abraham for his commitment to God, Abraham has no way of justifying his actions towards others. The absolute duty he follows, is only there because he has instituted it himself. Besides, Abraham himself could be completely wrong in his understanding of the divine command: *"To journey out beyond ethics is to find oneself alone –*

perhaps with God, perhaps just alone." (Rudd, 1993, 148). This implicates that it is hard to incorporate religious duties in, say, the juridical or political system. On the other hand, the concept that Kierkegaard gives of religion allows for a new view on it. The place that religious duties should have within practical frameworks should be further investigated.

The second implication is that the theory of Kierkegaard can lead to barbaric actions. Abraham's act should be approached with *horror religiosus* [holy terror] (Kierkegaard, 2014, 77), and repetition of such acts would not be a desirable outcome of Kierkegaard's theory. This doubt also applies to the DFC interpretation, but is still valid. Kierkegaard recognizes this fact himself as well, as he wonders whether it is right to speak of Abraham in the first place: *"Should one perhaps not dare to speak about Abraham?"* (Kierkegaard, 2014, 65). However, every theory could be misinterpreted, and as such this theory is just like any other (Kierkegaard, 2014, 35). Speaking of Abraham's greatness is like a *"two-edged sword, bringing death and salvation."* (Kierkegaard, 2014, 35). It is the task of the philosopher to talk about Abraham in such a sense, that people will understand what it means for them.

One other thing the CTD interpretation provides no solution to, is the epistemological problem that remains after accepting this theory. How can we know divine commands? How can we know which divine commands are the good ones, since it seems that there are so many issued? How can we know others act because of a divine command or not? These questions apply to every interpretation of Kierkegaard, since knowing God is one of the things he sees as the mysteries of faith. The task remains with the single individual to decide whether the revelation comes from God or not. The Knight of Faith cannot use any traditional epistemological reasons to find absolute certainty in faith, since there is an 'objective uncertainty' regarding matters of faith (Hannay, 1982, 125). For Kierkegaard, the epistemological problem of faith is one that stems from a wrong conception of faith, since the matters of faith are, per definition, not provided by reason or traditional methods: *"The content of religion is promise; its methodology is the elevation of the particular above the universal; its expression is paradox."* (Friedman, 1982, 163). It is our personal task to decide whether we are called by God or not. Therefore, the epistemological problem remains valid, but is of far less importance to Kierkegaard than to modern day philosophers.

PART V: CONCLUSION

As I have shown, the apparently strongest interpretation of the absolute duty to God in Kierkegaard's writings, is inconsistent with various other passages in *Fear and Trembling* and in other works. This interpretation stated that the absolute duty comes from the existence of divine commands. However, this leads to serious problems concerning Kierkegaard's ethics, his existentialism and the inability of Abraham to justify himself.

Instead, we should interpret the absolute duty to God as a result of the existential commitment of an individual to follow divine commands. Because Abraham took a leap of faith and committed himself to the divine commands, he had an absolute duty to follow these divine commands. This interpretation solves a lot of the problems that more common interpretations have.

The Binding of Isaac, as told in Genesis 22, was therefore also the binding of Abraham: by committing himself to follow God's command, he bound himself to these divine commands with an absolute duty. It is exactly this act that has astounded Kierkegaard so much, and exactly this act that is, according to Kierkegaard, central to becoming a Christian.

PART VI: LITERATURE

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