Kierkegaard's Characterisation of Abraham and Mary as Knights of Faith in *Fear and Trembling*

Some Critical and Exegetical Considerations on the Relation between Faith and Reason

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Abstract Kierkegaard refers to the figure of the Knight of Faith to sustain a definite picture of the relation between faith and reason, with the aim of arguing that faith cannot be rationally buttressed or justified. In *Fear and Trembling* he identifies Abraham and the Virgin Mary as Knights of Faith. This paper first illustrates the notion of the Knight of Faith, focusing on Abraham, the Knight of Faith *par excellence*. Secondly, it considers two paradoxes that the sacrificial binding of Isaac in *Genesis* may present, one involving an inconsistency between God's command and moral standards, the other a contradiction between God's command and a blessing Abraham was offered. It argues that there is no ground to assert that Abraham would have been aware of the former. Thirdly, it claims that Mary ought to be characterised as a Knight of Faith in light of a paradox involving a blessing she was promised, and certain concrete situations and events. The article refers to historico-exegetical scholarly work to argue that, contrary to what Kierkegaard claims, given the attitude of these two figures when facing these paradoxes, one cannot sustain any picture regarding the relation between faith and reason.

Keywords Abraham; Knight of Faith; Mary; paradox; reason

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INTRODUCTION

In *Fear and Trembling* (hereinafter *FT*), Kierkegaard calls Abraham and Mary (the mother of Jesus) Knights of Faith: i.e. individuals who have complete trust in God, even when it seems unreasonable or absurd to do so. The present article first discusses Kierkegaard's notion of the Knight of Faith, focusing on the Knight of Faith *par excellence*, the patriarch Abraham. It then considers two types of paradox that, according to Kierkegaard, the *Akedah* (the sacrificial binding of Isaac in *Genesis*, where Abraham mostly exhibits the attitude and virtues that make him a Knight of Faith) presents. I claim that although Abraham's situation here may contain these two types of paradox—one involving a contradiction between God's command and moral standards, the other an inconsistency between a blessing he was promised and God's request—contrary to what Kierkegaard intimates, there are no grounds to suggest that the patriarch would have been aware of the former one. Finally, it claims that Mary ought to be characterised as a Knight of Faith in light of the fact that, like Abraham, she too faced—and was aware of facing—a paradox involving inconsistency between a favour or blessing she was promised and certain concrete situations and events in her life.

The paper refers to historico-exegetical scholarly work to back up the claims made in the second and third stages of the argument mentioned above. Most importantly, it considers what follows from these claims with regard to the debate about the relation between reason and faith, a debate in which Kierkegaard was highly engaged, his philosophy being firmly rooted in the tradition that holds that articles of faith as well as divine commands and injunctions cannot be rationally buttressed or justified (see Carr 1996, 236–49; Della Torre and Kemp 2022, 193–214).[1]

1. Apart from his engagement with his immediate religious context in nineteenth-century Denmark, Kierkegaard's views should be considered in relation to the centuries-old debate in Western thought and theology about the relation between reason and faith in Christianity, an issue that has been debated since the Church started establishing itself and gaining a foothold amongst educated Roman subjects (see Copleston 1993a, 13–40). Throughout the Middle Ages, the view that reason should be used to buttress, discern, or formulate doctrines and dogmas concerning God's existence, nature and demands generally prevailed. The opposite view, which holds that reason cannot help with establishing the existence of God, or characterise His nature, or help one understand the reasonability of the demands He makes, also had its roots in Late Antiquity. With the Protestant Reformation, this latter approach gained new vigour. For many Reformists, the human being "can have no knowledge of God but what he receives by grace" (MacIntyre 1995, 119).

With regard to God's commands and commandments, this division was characterised by two approaches to the demands He makes: what Brian Stiltner calls a voluntaristic one,

The article does not seek to argue for or against this view of the relation between faith and reason. It neither supports nor denies Kierkegaard's claim that there is a tension between reason and faith. Nor does it delve into the debate as to whether there is (or may be) an existential tension between ethical and religious spheres of existence, as Kierkegaard maintains. In a more modest fashion, what the paper claims is that, contrary to what Kierkegaard and a number of commentators seem to suggest, no argument for any view regarding the relation between faith and reason may be adduced from the attitude of Abraham and Mary to the paradoxes they were aware of facing.[2]

Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith and the Debate about Faith and Reason

Kierkegaard holds that Christianity defies vindication in rational terms, rejecting as he does the view that Christianity "could be objectively justified . . . in terms of speculative thought" (Gardiner 1988, 68). While rationality can provide the keys to understanding the material world, this being a world governed by objective laws that reason can unearth, God is the transcendent and absolute "Thou" that cannot be known through reason. If "faith begins . . . thinking leaves off" (*FT*, 44). So, while reason can provide answers (through science) to questions like "Can the atom be split?" that are rational and objective, when it comes to such questions as "Does God exist?" or "Is God benevolent?" or "How can God incarnate into a human?" or "Ought I to obey the Decalogue?" it can provide none. In *Philosophical Fragments* (hereinafter *PF*), Kierkegaard calls attempts to demonstrate that God exists and prove articles of faith like the immortality of the soul "delusional" (see *PF,* 191). In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (hereinafter *CUPPF*), he claims that faith cannot result from scientific reflection, and whoever will look for objective truths in a text like the Bible will not be approaching this text with the passion typical of faith, no matter how much effort one invests in that research. Even if, at some point, some truths concerning faith are arrived at in the context of the latter, this will produce inertia, and not push one to be faithfully related to God (see *CUPPF*, 21–22). Acceptance of God as proclaimed by Christianity

and a rationalist one. Where the former is concerned, "an act commanded by God is right because God wills and commands it" (Stiltner 1993, 22); there would be "no criteria by which [humans] can judge what God says" (MacIntyre 1995, 119). According to the rationalist approach, on the other hand, God would only command acts where these are "in themselves right . . . and God recognises this to be so" (Stiltner 1993, 22).

2. The term "aware" is being included purposefully here. The reasons for this inclusion will be evident later in the paper.

cannot be the conclusion of reasoned argument: "Philosophy cannot and should not give faith" (*FT*, 25). Faith requires a leap.

Through this leap one not only trusts and believes that there is a God, and upholds articles of faith that cannot be rationally buttressed, but starts to consider oneself related to Him via the creature-creator relation. One will accept and abide by God's commands and commandments, even if these cannot be objectively buttressed or attested to and in fact involve absurd or paradoxical consequences (see *PF*, 37–48).

In relation to this picture of faith, Kierkegaard refers to the figure of the Knight of Faith. The latter embraces God even if there are no objective rational grounds to buttress His existence and the life choices that follow from accepting Him. He or she also has faith in God, and in Him alone, and because of this can act in ways that appear to others as unreasonable, irrational and absurd.

The foremost example of the Knight of Faith is the patriarch Abraham. In *Fear and Trembling* Mary, the mother of Jesus, is also identified as a Knight of Faith. This is due to an analogy Kierkegaard draws between her story and aspects of Abraham's narrative in *Genesis*.

The Knight of Faith may find himself in paradoxical situations that would not have arisen had she or he not made his or her commitment to God (see Gardiner 1988, 75). Such situations will generate anxiety, but will also provide the circumstances under which the Knight exhibits virtues like faith and courage.

In logic and semantics, a paradox normally involves an "unacceptable conclusion supported by a plausible argument from apparently acceptable premises" (Read 1995, 150). Classic examples would be the Liar's paradox and Russell's paradox concerning sets and classes. These rely on the meaning and ontological commitments of sentences like "All Cretans are liars," and on the properties of sets and numbers. However, the paradoxes that concern faith are not the paradoxes one finds in logic textbooks.

For Kierkegaard, a paradox involves "a tension between apparent (or real) opposites that cannot be resolved without the negation of both" (Storm n.d.). In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard implicitly alludes to two types of paradox present in the story where Abraham is requested by God to sacrifice His son. These are ones that he does not distinguish systematically in that work, but which it is important to differentiate.

The first is the paradox set out in the second part of *Fear and Trembling* (*FT*, 45–100), wherein the Knight of Faith is commanded by God to act in ways that are inconsistent with moral parameters pertaining to what is right or wrong—with moral laws and duties, like the commandment not

to murder another human being or the duty to love one's son above everything (see *FT*, 45–46). The paper calls this type of paradox "fideo-moral."

The other type of paradox puts the Knight of Faith in situations that need not require one to act in ways that are inconsistent with moral standards but involve behaviour, conduct, or life situations that are, or appear to be, counterintuitive, incongruous, or contradictory relative to some end or objective that the person in question is set or supposed to achieve. This type of paradox will be called a "logico-practical" one. Kierkegaard implicitly alludes to this second type primarily in the first part of *Fear and Trembling* (see *FT*, 1–44). How the two paradoxes differ may be illustrated through the following examples.[3]

Someone giving away his money to become richer would be doing something paradoxical in the sense of this second understanding of "paradox"—i.e. in logico-practical terms. The act in question seems to be contrary to the aim that the person wants to achieve. Yet, this situation does not involve inconsistency with accepted moral norms. On the other hand, a situation where God authorises a hungry supplicant to steal a loaf would not be counterintuitive in terms of what the person requires or seeks. (The loaf will alleviate her hunger.) Such a situation, however, may be considered inconsistent with accepted moral laws and injunctions: namely the moral law that commands one not to steal. This scenario would be an example of a fideo-moral paradox.

The *Akedah*—the sacrificial binding of Isaac—seems to involve both types of paradox.[4] Yet, unlike what Kierkegaard himself suggests, this paper claims that one can assert with certainty that Abraham would have been aware only of one paradox. Any conclusion regarding the relation between faith and reason that one can draw from the patriarch's attitude when commanded by God to sacrifice his son would therefore have to be considered only in relation to the paradox of which one can assert with certainty that he would have been aware. The reasons why one can assert with certainty that Abraham would have been aware of only one paradox are illustrated in the next two sections.

3. Kierkegaard refers to other types of paradox throughout his work. In *The Book on Adler* (hereinafter *BOA*) he refers to the paradox whereby the eternal (God) becomes finite in Christ through incarnation (*BOA*, 161–163). In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* he refers to another paradox that involves situations where, objectively, there might be evidence both for and against God, but where, subjectively, one would have faith in God and believe oneself to be related to the Deity (see Herbert 1961, 42–47).

4. I use the word "seems" here as no consensus exists amongst commentators and scholars regarding whether the story actually involves both paradoxes.

ABRAHAM, AND A FIDEO-MORAL PARADOX HE MAY NOT HAVE RECOGNISED

Kierkegaard considers Abraham to be the Knight of Faith *par excellence*. The focus here is on the story where the patriarch is called to sacrifice his son. This section illustrates Kierkegaard's claim that the *Akedah* involves a fideo-moral paradox, and that Abraham's attitude to this paradox is indicative of the attitude of the Knight of Faith towards faith, reason, ethics and the relation between these. The section that follows then claims that though Abraham's story might involve the two previously mentioned types of paradox, unlike what Kierkegaard suggests, it is safe to think that Abraham was aware only of the logico-practical one. Thus, it would not make sense to draw any conclusion regarding the relation between reason and faith from Abraham's attitude to the fideo-moral paradox the *Akedah* may involve.

The fideo-moral paradox would arise because the patriarch is required to act in ways that are (seemingly) inconsistent with certain moral rules or laws that many in Kierkegaard's society (and not just there) accepted. Abraham is commanded by God to kill his child, a command that is inconsistent with what many consider to be a moral law prohibiting murder, and with the duty to love one's offspring.[5] Throughout the years, a host of philosophers and theologians have been troubled by the morality of God's demand. The question has repeatedly been asked: how could God command Abraham to kill his child or lie to him, if this was just a tribulation? Various answers have been given.[6]

Kierkegaard claims that the tension between God's command on the one hand and laws condemning murder and the duty to protect one's son on the other indicates an unbridgeable chasm between the ethical and the religious spheres. It indicates that these spheres cannot be reconciled in a manner that would make the demands of one sphere consistent with

5. A father "should love his son" (*FT*, 61), and as regards the son he "has the highest and most sacred obligation" (*FT*, 20).

6. In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (hereinafter *RLRA*), Kant holds that the demand may appear "to have come from God Himself . . . [but] it is at least possible that . . . a mistake [by Abraham in interpreting God's will] has prevailed" (*RLRA*, 178). Aquinas, on the other hand, in *Summa Theologiae* (hereinafter *ST*), claims that God is not actually commanding Abraham to commit murder, i.e. to unduly take away a human life. This is because after the original Fall, and before the death and resurrection of Christ, all humans are guilty of rebellion against God and therefore under sentence of death. In the case of Isaac, God would merely have been instructing Abraham to carry out the sentence (*ST*, I–II, q. 100 a. 8). More recently, Jacques Derrida has downplayed the conflict between morality and God's command, holding that Abraham's story is fundamentally about whether Abraham is capable of keeping a secret (i.e. the command to sacrifice Isaac). This should be considered in light of another secret, the I-thou relation between the two (Derrida 1999, 172).

those of the other.[7] In terms of the moral law not to kill and the duty to protect his offspring, Abraham should not have harmed his child. Yet, God calls him to do otherwise. This tension between God's command and moral commands and duties "does not permit of mediation" (*FT*, 56–57).[8] An act of murder condemned by universal moral laws commanding one not to kill is transformed "into a holy act . . . pleasing to God" (*FT*, 53). If the ethical is conceived in terms of laws and duties that stem from reason and/or are derivable from rational considerations, then the tension between moral laws and God's commands will be indicative of a chasm between reason and faith.

Kierkegaard's presentation and discussion of this fideo-moral paradox have been of major interest to many contemporary philosophers and theologians seeking to comment on *Fear and Trembling*.[9] The present paper, however, is not interested in the issue of whether the *Akedah* does involve such a paradox or not. Assuming that it does, what concerns us here is whether there are grounds to assert that Abraham was aware of it, and hence whether persons of faith may draw any conclusions regarding the relationship between faith and reason and/or ethics from the patriarch's attitude to the paradox.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard shows Abraham as being sensitive to the tension between moral laws that command one not to kill an innocent human being and to love one's offspring on the one hand, and what God orders him to do on the other.[10] He claims that Abraham chooses to obey God's command "in defiance of the deeply grounded moral principles that

7. It is not possible to "bring Abraham's act into relation with the universal [i.e. ethical laws] . . . to discover any connection . . . between what Abraham did and the universal . . . except the fact that he transgressed it" (*FT*, 50).

8. "The ethical expression for what Abraham did, is that he would murder Isaac; the religious expression is, that he would sacrifice Isaac, but precisely in this contradiction . . . the dread" (*FT*, 22). "If faith does not make it a holy act to be willing to murder one's son then let the condemnation be pronounced upon Abraham as on any other man" (*FT*, 22).

9. See, for instance, (Sagi,1992, 83–103; Vos 2014, 200–208; Cahyawicaksana and Fery 2022, 23–53).

10. This is evident in passages like "Abraham . . . payed no heed to . . . ethical determinations" (*FT*, 71), and "[he] knew that ethically the father should love his son" (*FT*, 61) and that "to the son the father has the highest and most sacred obligation" (*FT*, 20). For Kierkegaard, Abraham's awareness of the inconsistency between God's command and universal ethical laws emerges even from the fact that the patriarch informs neither his wife, nor his son, nor his servants about the real intent of the journey to Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:1–10). One reason Abraham cannot explain to others why he is willing to kill his son is because no explanation—not even one that refers to God's command or order—can be reconciled with accepted universal ethical laws and duties (see Hannay 1982, 71).

forbid the killing of an innocent person" (Gardiner 1988, 56) as well as the duties a father has towards his son. Abraham "knows . . . that it is glorious to belong to the universal" (*FT*, 66), i.e. to act according to what moral laws and duties require. Yet in the *Akedah* he "renounces the universal" (*FT*, 65) to show his faith in and absolute obedience to God (see *FT*, 50). Abraham does not "place himself in an absolute relation to the universal [i.e., universal moral laws, but] in an absolute relation to the absolute" [i.e. God] (*FT*, 82). This is taken by Kierkegaard to indicate that to the person of faith, God's commands should take precedence over universal moral laws and duties, even if these are derived from or based upon reason. The person of faith must:

i. Do what God commands even if this is irrational.
ii. Do what God commands even if it contravenes moral laws and duties.

Moral laws and duties can be relativised, and superseded or suspended in light of something higher,[11] what Kierkegaard calls the "teleological suspension of the ethical" (i.e. "overstepping the ethical [in view of] a higher telos outside it" [*FT*, 50]). Had Abraham tried to reconcile God's commands with ethical laws or with reason, he would never have got "to the point of sacrificing Isaac" (*FT*, 47). He would have been tempted to disobey God, "the ethical [thus becoming] the temptation" (*FT*, 102). The paradox indicates the existential tension between ethical and religious ways of life.

That Abraham was aware of a conflict between God's demands on the one hand and moral laws and duties on the other is something that even some contemporary commentators of Kierkegaard accept.[12] Some take the patriarch's predicament to be paradigmatic of what it is to have faith: a "person can only be said to have faith when he/she experiences anxiety born from the dilemma of the inner struggle . . . either obeying God's commands . . . or carrying universal moral commands" (Cahyawicaksana and Fery 2022, 67). Abraham "opts for God over Isaac, faith over ethics, unreason over reason" (Mooney 1986, 23).

11. The "ethical . . . is reduced to a relative position in contrast with the absolute relation to God" (*FT*, 61).

12. Sagi, for instance, claims that Abraham experienced "the conflict between religion and morality and expressed the anxiety entailed by this" (Sagi 1992, 89). He consciously "suspended the ethical and followed the divine command . . . rather than heeding the moral obligation which would have commanded him to refrain from the act" (Sagi 1992, 83). Cahyawicaksana and Fery also write about Abraham "struggl[ing] with faith against rational-ethical demands that he must also fulfil" (Cahyawicaksana and Fery 2022, 54).

The section that follows refers to historical and exegetical considerations to argue that, contrary to what Kierkegaard claims, there are no grounds to indicate that Abraham would have been aware of the fideo-moral paradox his situation may have involved. If the claim is correct, one cannot refer to the patriarch's attitude to the fideo-moral paradox to sustain any picture of the relationship between faith on the one hand and reason and/or ethics on the other—to sustain the contention that faith involves "an act of will rather than of reason" (Vos 2014, 197–98). It also refers to the second paradox that Abraham's story involves: a logico-practical paradox that the patriarch would certainly have recognised. Later in the paper, the claim is made that the relevant similarity between Abraham's and Mary's stories lies in the manner in which they face this second type of paradox.

Kierkegaard's Unwarranted Conjecture and the Logico-Practical Paradox

The previous sections have referred to what Kierkegaard calls the Knight of Faith—a person who accepts God through faith alone and determines their existence and life choices in light of this decision. In determinate circumstances, the Knight's relation to God may induce him to act in ways that appear unreasonable, irrational and absurd. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard refers to two paradoxes that may be present in the *Akedah*: a logico-practical and a fideo-moral one.

This section argues that even if the *Akedah* does involve a fideo-moral paradox,[13] contrary to what Kierkegaard suggests, there are no grounds to assert that Abraham would have recognised this paradox. If the patriarch's story is considered in historico-exegetical terms, there are no grounds to buttress the suggestion that Abraham perceived an inconsistency between some moral law or duty on the one hand and God's demand to sacrifice Isaac on the other. No conclusion regarding the relationship between faith and ethics and/or reason may thus be drawn from Abraham's supposed attitude to the fideo-moral paradox that the *Akedah* may involve.

In *Genesis*, God is displeased with Cain killing Abel (Genesis 4:8–17). Also, before the book introduces Abraham's story, God does command humans not to kill other humans (Genesis 9:6). Yet this does not imply that the author of *Genesis* or the society in which Abraham lived would have understood the "ethical [as] the universal [that] applies to everyone . . . [at] every instant" (*FT*, 45), as Kierkegaard suggests. *Prima facie* this description of the ethical as the

13. As stated earlier, the present paper will not delve into the issue of whether or not the *Akedah* actually presents us with a fideo-moral paradox.

universal applying to everyone at every instant sounds Kantian,[14] though Kierkegaard actually understood it in Hegelian terms. Here, "the ethical" is "virtually synonymous with the 'universal'" (Roberts 2007, 25), and refers to "normative claims immanent to the social sphere" (Roberts 2007, 25).[15] The "universal" would be synonymous with "duty or the moral law" (Wood 1990, 170). This understanding of the ethical "derives our ethical duties from social relationships and institutions" (Wood 1990, 158). Morality would involve "the individual moral subject . . . judging actions by a standard of the good, whose content is [also] drawn from . . . the agent's well-being [as well as] the well-being of others" (Wood 1990, 154). This contrasts with Kantian universal laws, since these do not refer to the social sphere and are not derived from social relationships and institutions, but are the "verdict of practical reason" (Wiggins 2006, 93). Kantian moral laws determine the "good on grounds valid for every rational being" (Wiggins 2006, 93) at any time, without admitting exceptions or compromises, and do not take into consideration any consequences for the community that follow from obeying such laws.

Because they are immanent to the social sphere, moral laws understood along Hegelian lines may be trumped if the results are beneficial to the social sphere they regulate (something that is anathema to a Kantian understanding of morality). Thus, if the good of the social sphere requires that in particular circumstances one does not act according to what is commanded by a moral law, or abide by one's duties, this is allowable given that it is the same social sphere that grounds the duties or moral laws in question. With regard to human sacrifices, these were frequently conceived along such lines, as offerings to obtain relief in a situation of extreme danger, to get out of a desperate situation, or as a form of reparation or to appease some god (Berthelot 2007, 152).[16] Kierkegaard himself refers to examples of Agamemnon, Jephthah and Brutus, where the command not to murder a human being and/or to safeguard one's progeny is superseded for the good of the community (see *FT*, 47–50).[17] Here, the moral law forbidding

14. As do other entries where it is claimed that "ethics [deals with] pure categories [and] does not appeal to experience" (*FT*, 71).

15. Roberts claims that "Kierkegaard uses a Hegelian term . . . [meaning] 'communal norms'" (Roberts 2007, 274) in ways "that ignore . . . historically specific contexts" (Roberts 2007, 274) and implies that these rules command "universally" (Roberts 2007, 274)—i.e. are addressed to anyone in any context.

16. Thanks to an anonymous referee who highlighted this aspect.

17. In the case of Jephthah, he had to sacrifice his daughter because otherwise "victory [would] be taken from the nation" (*FT*, 49). In the case of Brutus, he had to kill his offspring for the sake of the State and for Rome (*FT*, 49).

the killing of innocent human beings and the duty to protect one's progeny are suspended "for the sake of saving a people . . . [or] to maintain the idea of the state" (*FT*, 50). Otherwise "the whole nation is hindered" (*FT*, 48). The good of the community would supersede "the ethical obligation towards [one's] son" (*FT*, 48). The tragic hero who suspends these moral laws and duties would "still [be] in the ethical" (*FT*, 49). The willingness to sacrifice one's progeny for such a good is indeed "a higher expression of the ethical" (*FT*, 50), having as it does "support in the universal" (*FT*, 68),[18] and approaches "a higher expression of duty" (*FT*, 68).

In the case of Abraham, however, the conflict between the command not to murder and the duty to love one's son on the one hand, and God's command on the other, would not be mediated by the good of the community (see *FT*, 100). After all, God does not call on the patriarch to sacrifice his son for the sake of the latter.

Someone who upholds the conception of the ethical as the universal—whether in Kantian or Hegelian terms—will understand the *Akedah* as involving a fideo-moral paradox. (In the former case, this is because violating a moral law is not contemplated for any reason whatsoever, whilst in the latter instance it is because, as Kierkegaard suggests, the universal commands not to kill and to love one's offspring are not being violated to obtain some good for, or avert some evil to, the community).

Yet there are no grounds, Biblical or historical, to assert that Abraham did himself perceive the ethical as "the universal." If he (and his community) had upheld certain other characterisations of the ethical—for instance, some proto-Ockhamist conception of it—he would have perceived no fideo-moral paradox. Here an act is made right by the very "fact that God wills . . . it to be done" (Copleston 1993b, 104). Any moral laws would be "wholly contingent" (Copleston 1993b, 104) not only in relation to their "existence but [also

18. Edward Mooney refers to two ways in which, within Hegelian philosophy, a duty can be understood as "universal." This explains why Jephthah, Brutus and Agamemnon would still be in the "ethical." According to Mooney, "A duty can be taken to be universal if it is binding on all persons as persons, or on all persons within a given role or position or relationship. If I am a servant or debtor, I have certain obligations binding on me that derive from my role or relationship and would bind anyone else in that role or relationship. They may of course be overridden by other claims or obligations, but they nevertheless have some hold on my conduct, and they have that hold regardless of desires or interests I may have to the contrary. When Agamemnon must kill his child we have tragedy rather than senseless murder because duties attached to his role as parent and to his status as a person are counterbalanced by duties attached to his role as king, head of state, preserver of the common good . . . But both sorts of duties or claims are, in Kierkegaard's terminology, in the realm of the universal" (Mooney 1986, 27).

to their] essence and character . . . [depending only] on the divine creative . . . will" (Copleston 1993b, 104). God could at any time establish a different moral order, or even "order what he had previously actively forbidden" (Copleston 1993b, 104). Given such an understanding of the ethical, if God ordered someone to murder their own son this would not just fall within the ethical but actually become meritorious. If Abraham did somehow conceive of the ethical along these lines, God's demand, while probably sounding strange (in the sense that God does not command Abraham to sacrifice his son as a reparation, appeasement or for some other reason in relation to which human sacrifices where frequently offered in many societies),[19] would not have been perceived as inconsistent with moral laws or the ethical. He would not have been aware of any fideo-moral paradox.

The claim being made here is not that Abraham understood the ethical along these proto-Ockhamist lines. Rather, it is that the historical/exegetical grounds for believing that he understood moral laws along these lines are on a par with those for asserting that he understood them in Hegelian terms—as in both cases there are none.

Since Abraham's attitude towards the fideo-moral paradox that the *Akedah* may present us with depends on him perceiving the ethical as the universal, and since there are no grounds to assert that he did conceive of the ethical along these lines (and not along lines that may make God's demand to sacrifice Isaac consistent with the ethical, as would be the case if he espoused some, proto-Ockhamist theory), one cannot claim that Abraham perceived the fideo-moral paradox that the *Akedah* may have involved and reacted to it in a determinate way. In short, one cannot draw any implications regarding the relation between faith on the one hand and reason and/or ethics on the other by referring to his attitude to such a paradox.

Abraham, though, would have been aware of another paradox connected to the sacrifice of Isaac, this being the practico-logical paradox involved both in the *Akedah* and in Abraham's entire story in *Genesis*. Kierkegaard alludes to this paradox in the first part of *Fear and Trembling*. It is this second paradox that would have caused him anxiety and distress, and it is in relation to this paradox that he would have exhibited the virtues that make him a Knight of Faith.

In *Genesis*, God calls the patriarch and asks him to leave his native land. Abraham sets aside personal comfort to follow this call. In return, God promises him a blessing. Later on, the two strike a pact: Abraham will

19. In the case of Abraham, his action would "not generate concrete results" (*FT*, 53). Abraham's sacrifice "did not serve the state" (*FT*, 67).

receive the blessing if he obeys God. As Kierkegaard notes, the blessing in question is not an other-worldly reward (*FT*, 27). God does not promise Abraham an exalted afterlife. Abraham's promise is "for this life" (*FT*, 16), and is to be obtained through a son that he will beget: "I will make you a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great" (Genesis 12:2 NAB). Later on, God also promises him and his descendants a land (Genesis 1–9; 13:14–18). Abraham fulfils his part of the pact with God and leaves the land of Ur (*FT*, 12). Yet his wife remains barren. The years are passing and he has no progeny. As "time passed, it became unreasonable [for] Abraham [to] believe" (*FT*, 13) he would be blessed in the manner promised by God. Abraham, however, held fast in faith and expectation. He kept believing "the preposterous" (*FT*, 16)—namely, that he would receive the blessing even if it now seemed unlikely.

At one point, following his wife Sarah's advice, Abraham adopts a pragmatic approach and has a child with his slave Hagar (Genesis 16:1–4). God, however, indicates to Abraham that it is not through this son that the pact will be fulfilled, but through another child to be born to Sarah, something that seems unlikely given her age (Genesis: 17:19). God's promise seems to be finally fulfilled in Abraham's old age (see *FT*, 13). After Isaac is born, the most obvious ending to the story would be to have Abraham growing "old in the land . . . [having a multitudinous] generation, [and] find[ing] favour in Isaac" (*FT*, 16). God, however, asks him to sacrifice this child (Genesis 22:2). In being ordered to sacrifice his son, Abraham is commanded by God to do something that is inconsistent with God's own pledge, with the pact they struck, and with the blessing this supposedly involves (Genesis: 12:1–4; 17:2–9). He was being "deprived of every hope for the future" (*FT*, 17). Yah seems to have tricked him. The demand appears to be the culmination of a life of torments (see *FT*, 13).

In the *Akedah*, then, Abraham faces a logico-practical paradox. On the one hand, he is promised a blessing through a son if he obeys God. On the other, obeying God seems to imply renouncing the son through which the blessing in question will materialise. Abraham would have been aware of this paradox because, contrary to the fideo-moral one discussed above, awareness of this logico-practical paradox does not require a specific conception of ethics or moral norms. It only requires a basic notion of consistency. He would have known that by fulfilling God's demand he would be renouncing the possibility of the blessing ever materializing. By disobeying he would be renouncing the commitment to obey God that he had endorsed, thus dissolving the pact. This logico-practical paradox would have caused anxiety and distress.

It is in Abraham's attitude to this logico-practical paradox that he exemplifies "what [it] is to believe" (Vos 2014, 198). It is in relation to this logico-practical paradox that he displays virtues like faith[20] and courage.[21] Abraham continues to trust and obey God, and keeps his part of the pact, even though God seems to "make sport" (*FT*, 14) of him. His steadfast attitude and commitment are those of a Knight of Faith. Abraham believes the absurd: namely, that God will still keep his promise despite the command to sacrifice Isaac (*FT*, 38). Here, the absurd "is not identified with the improbable, the unexpected, the unforeseen" (*FT*, 38), but with acting in a determinate way, even if "all human reckoning [would have] long since ceased to function" (*FT*, 27). It involves having "reason and reflection saying: you cannot act" (Kierkegaard 2002, 268) in a determinate way, and yet having to act in that way nonetheless (see Kierkegaard 2002, 268). Reason would tell Abraham that he cannot obey God and sacrifice Isaac if the blessing is to materialize. Yet Abraham still obeys God and trusts Him. He still trusts that God will in "the next instant recall the requirement" (*FT*, 27) and "not require Isaac of him" (*FT*, 27).

An implication of the fact that Abraham faced a logico-practical paradox and would have been aware of doing so is that his willingness to sacrifice Isaac can only be taken to indicate that the person of faith trusts God even when circumstances seem antithetical to the blessing they have been promised. In such circumstances, the person of faith keeps trusting that God's promises will come good, even if it seems absurd for the person to retain their faith.

Abraham's attitude to the logico-practical paradox is not indicative of any specific view regarding the relation between reason and/or ethics on the one hand and religious faith on the other. It cannot be adduced to indicate that there is a chasm between faith and reason, or that the demands

20. According to Kierkegaard, faith involves a double movement. The first such movement is resignation: "giving up what one loves the most" (Vos 2014, 211). Abraham thus resigns himself to losing Isaac. This movement may be common to the Knight of Faith and to people who have no faith. An atheist may resign herself to losing her son and come to accept this in a stoic fashion. Kierkegaard notes that there is no absurdity in this resignation (*FT*, 37–38). The Knight of Faith, however, "makes another movement" (*FT*, 37), believing that what they are resigned to losing will be restored back (Vos 2014, 211). This is the second movement. Abraham is ready to renounce Isaac, but keeps believing that God's blessing will come good and that Isaac will be restored "by virtue of the absurd" (*FT*, 29), because "with God all things are possible" (*FT*, 37; see also Adams 1990, 386). Abraham will make both movements (*FT*, 102).

21. Courage involves the "ability to be still and silent even in a situation of anxiety and distress, fear and trembling, and [be open to] a Word that may change everything" (Carlisle 2016, 285). This "is intimately linked to the idea . . . that faith is a mode of receptivity and responsiveness" (Carlisle 2016, 287).

of faith and moral laws and duties could be fundamentally incompatible with each other—that there is an existential tension between ethical and religious ways of life.

It is in relation to a similar logico-practical paradox that Mary resembles Abraham, and she too deserves the title of Knight of Faith. This will be discussed in what follows.

Mary as a Knight of Faith

To recapitulate, in *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard interprets Abraham's story as involving both a fideo-moral and a logico-practical paradox. The paper argues that even if the *Akedah* involves the two types of paradox, if the story is considered in historico-exegetical terms one can only assert that Abraham would have been aware of the second paradox. That Abraham was also aware of the fideo-moral paradox that God's command to kill his son presents us with is something that Kierkegaard conjectures in the absence of any biblical or historico-exegetical backing. No conclusion regarding the relation between reason and/or ethics on the one hand, and religious faith on the other, can be drawn from Abraham's attitude.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard claims that Mary, the mother of Jesus, is another Knight of Faith. The rest of the section argues that he is correct in identifying Mary as such a figure, though one of the reasons Kierkegaard brings forward to sustain this claim is off the mark. There is, however, a point of analogy between Abraham's and Mary's stories as they relate to the logico-practical paradox—one that Kierkegaard seems to have been aware of, but which he did not develop—that qualifies her as a Knight of Faith. However, even that in virtue of which Mary qualifies as a Knight of Faith does not allow one to draw any conclusions regarding the proper relation between faith and reason.

Kierkegaard rightly holds that in their lives both Abraham and Mary are not "exempted from distress and torment and paradox, [indeed] they become great through these" (*FT*, 56). They are not exempted from anxiety. Yet when it comes to substantiating the similarities between the two figures, he compares Mary to Abraham primarily because of what he claims is their silent isolation.[22] Mary's silence is due to the fact that no one is able to understand the mission assigned to her by God (see *FT*, 65).

22. Kierkegaard claims that Abraham is silent on his way to Mount Moriah due to the impossibility of revealing to others the command he is abiding by. The reasons for this are twofold. First, there is the impossibility of others understanding Abraham's intent, since they would not understand how a command by God could be inconsistent with moral norms and

Clare Carlisle rightly notes that Kierkegaard "imaginatively reconstruct[s Mary's] inner life in a way that goes beyond the biblical narrative" (Carlisle 2016, 282). For instance, he discusses the episode in Luke 1 where the Archangel Gabriel communicates to Mary the news that she has found favour with God and will beget a son. For Kierkegaard, this was a mission "only [she] and no one [else] could understand" (*FT*, 55), and this was for Mary a source of anxiety and torment (see *FT*, 56).

Mary's being anxious because only she can understand her mission is something conjectured by Kierkegaard. In relation to Gabriel's visit, Luke refers to the fact that she was "deeply troubled" (Luke 1:29 NAB) by the Archangel's manner of salutation. She may have become "a model disciple who consents to what is not yet fully understood" (Gaventa 1999, 55), but this does not imply that she was unable to communicate the news the Archangel had given her, or that she was anxious because of her mission. Her bride Joseph seems to have been aware of her calling, and believed her story. As Jorge Pixley and Leonardo Boff note, Mary's reaction to the news brought by Gabriel "is not complicated by any consideration of the scandal [her pregnancy] . . . will cause" (Pixley and Boff 1989, 85). Indeed, Joseph seems to be more worried than Mary and wants to protect her, being concerned about possible sanctions their community may have meted out in light of Jewish laws concerning sexual intercourse, pregnancy and engagement (see Matthew 1:19–21). Furthermore, as noted by Raquel Lettsome, in no way do Mary's pregnancy and mission "alienate her from society" (Lettsome 2021, 17) or cause her to detach herself from her community and kin. After Jesus's birth is announced, she connects with her relatives and other members of her family (see Lettsome 2021, 17), and goes to visit and assist Elizabeth and Zechariah (Luke 1:39–40).

Mary, however, may rightly be characterised as a Knight of Faith in light of other similarities between her narrative and the story of the patriarch Abraham. Specifically, her story resembles Abraham's narrative in relation to a logico-practical paradox pertaining to a favour and blessing she was promised, and to events and happenings that involve elements and features that seem to be antithetical to this blessing and favour. Her character as a Knight, and the virtues pertinent to such a figure, emerge in light of the anxiety that would have been caused at different points in her life by this paradox. Kierkegaard seems to be aware of this paradox when he asks "When [was] woman . . . so mortified as Mary? And is it not true in this

laws, including the duties a father has towards his son (*FT*, 51). Secondly, others would not have believed Abraham if he had told them that this was all a trial (*FT*, 21).

instance also that one whom God blesses He curses in the same breath?"(*FT*, 55) Yet he fails to develop this aspect of her narrative.

The Archangel Gabriel told Mary that she had "found favour with God" (Luke 1:30 NAB), had received a blessing, and was "highly favoured among women" (*FT*, 55). Her blessing and favour, then, are gender-specific.[23] The Church, especially where its Eastern and its Catholic branches are concerned, has generally characterised Mary as being blessed and finding favour with God in terms linked to original and inherited sin (she being freed from the latter—hence her resistance to sin and temptation), to Jesus's redemptive mission, and to sexual morality (where virginity is considered an inherently superior moral or spiritual state). Aspects of the Marian narrative, such as Jesus' virginal birth, were emphasised and supplemented with doctrines that defined Mary as the *Theotokos* (fifth-century Ephesus) and declared her perpetual virginity (the Seventh Lateran Council), her Immaculate Conception (1854), and her Assumption into Heaven (1950).

Regardless of the truth of these doctrines and dogmas, Mary herself would not have understood her finding favour with God along these lines. She would have understood these in ways that would have made sense to a woman belonging to first-century Judaism in Palestine. (Even if she carried within her what, in *The Book on Adler*, Kierkegaard calls "the paradox of the eternal becoming finite," there are no grounds to indicate that she would have been aware of this paradox, especially on receiving the news of her blessing by the Archangel.) Within first-century Judaism, a woman's role was to rear and educate children, not through the study of the Torah (this role was assigned to males—namely, to fathers and to the Synagogue) but by instilling in them Jewish values and preserving certain customs like the keeping of the Sabbath.[24] A woman would find favour with God and be blessed if her offspring imbued the Jewish values she would have sought to instil in them. She would also find favour with God through a son, were he to later find a secure status in society. This would have enabled him to have a stable family and afford his mother as comfortable an old age as possible. In the case of Jesus, then, the Archangel distinctly specified that "he will be called Son of the Most-High . . . [and] God will give him the throne of David his father" (Luke 1:32 NAB). This Davidic

23. This is confirmed by the greeting she receives from her relative Elizabeth, who calls her: "Blest . . . amongst women" (Luke 1:42 NAB).

24. This represented a regression compared to previous centuries, when women could participate in the economy and labour (see Exodus 35:25; Ruth 2:7; Proverbs 31:1; Samuel 8:13), as well as in the Temple in most mansions—apart from priestly ones (Psalms 68:25; 1 Samuel 1:12; 2 Samuel 6:19–22). By the first century women had been relegated to the domestic realm.

kingdom was thought by Jews to be worldly yet eternal, characterised by justice, and headed by a legitimate ruler. (Unlike the house of Herod and the Hasmoneans, Jesus was related to King David, a fact emphasised by both Mark and Luke.)

Given the standards pertaining to what made a woman blessed in first-century Judaism—the standards in terms of which Mary would have interpreted her finding favour with God and her being blessed—if one considers the gospel episodes that involve her, she seems to be anything but a woman who found favour with God through her son.[25] Jesus's birth made her liable to punishment, occurred in shabby and dangerous circumstances, and led to political exile (Luke 2:1–9; 34–35). On returning to Judea, a holy man at the Temple predicts that a sword will pierce her soul (Luke 2:35), and Jesus becomes a cause for concern when he gets lost at the Temple, one year before his Bar Mitzvah (Luke 2:42–47). His reaction to Mary's expression of concern ("Son, why have you done this to us? Your see that your father and I have been searching for you in sorrow" Luke 2:48 NAB) does not reveal much empathy on his part.

Though Luke claims that in the years after the episode Jesus is obedient to his parents (Luke 2:51), the incidents from his adult life that follow do not lend credence to the idea of a woman who found favour with God; rather, they are a further cause of anxiety and distress (see Matthew 27:5–6). The episode of the wedding feast in Canaan, for instance—a feast at which Jesus arrives late and where he performs his first miracle—shows Mary and Jesus on very different wavelengths as regards the "Kairos," meaning the "right time" for him to show God's glory through his deeds (John 7:2–9).

25. In the Marian stories in the Gospels, we do not see an implicit or an explicit challenge to ideas about women prevalent in first-century Judaism, as might be the case with certain other gospel stories that concern women. Here, stereotypical roles are implicitly challenged and subverted. Thus, even though Rabbinical wisdom would warn that whoever "dialogues at length with a woman hurts himself, is careless in the study of the Law, and ends up in the Gehenna" (*Pirkei Avot* 1:5), the longest dialogue in the Gospels involves Jesus and a Samaritan woman (John 4:1–29). In other passages, women are described as the first witnesses to the resurrection (Mark 16:1–10) at a time when women's testimony was not accepted (see Hertzberg 2008, 116). Luke's gospel also tells of women who provided Jesus and the apostles with a living (Luke 8:1–3). Jesus also praises a woman who does not engage in house chores and mansions (the proper role of women according to Jewish society of the time) but listens to him as an ardent disciple (Luke 10:38–42). No such challenges to female roles and stereotypes are to be found in gospel passages involving Mary: there are no challenges to commonly accepted ideas regarding what made a woman blessed or favoured by God. The only passage where Mary's narrative seems subversive is the prayer she sings on meeting Elizabeth (the Magnificat). Here, however, the subversion in question is not gender-related, but concerns the "ănāwîm . . . [the] 'poor of the Lord' [that] include . . . widows, orphans, and foreigners" (Lettsome 2021, 13).

Jesus neither formed a stable family nor found a secure place in society. With the beginning of his public ministry—a ministry in which Mary was generally uninvolved—he undertook the life of a vagrant and was frequently at odds with established authorities and members of his own community. This will likely have caused Mary anxiety and concern given the kind of Jewish upbringing, "respectful of the temple as the centre of Israel's . . . religious faith" (Pixley and Boff 1989, 86), that she probably gave him.[26]

No wonder that she supported some members of her family who wanted "to take charge of him [thinking that] 'He is out of his mind'" (Mark 3:21 NAB).[27] Jesus's reaction to their attempts is not one that would have made a Jewish mother feel blessed or favoured by God, seemingly distancing himself from her and his family "in favour of his followers" (Kilpatrick 2001, 17)[28] and claiming that "Whoever does the will of God is brother and sister and mother to me" (Mark 3:34 NAB). In the final episodes of Jesus' life, then, the son through which Mary was supposed to be blessed and to find favour with God not only fails to guarantee her a tranquil old age or re-establish David's kingdom in this world, but is abandoned by his disciples, tried, condemned to death, tortured and killed.

Just as with the patriarch Abraham, Mary in her life faces a logico-practical paradox. Events and happenings occur that seem antithetical to the promise made to her by Gabriel. Yet Mary exhibits virtues like faith and courage—virtues that make her a Knight of Faith. Even though, as Kierkegaard writes in his *Journal (The Journal of Kierkegaard 1834–1854; A Selection*, hereinafter *TJK*), a "sword . . . pierced [Mary's] . . . soul . . . [she still] dared . . . to believe . . . [that she is] the chosen . . . [that] she . . . found grace in the sight of God" (*TJK* 233). Even when she fails to comprehend, Mary holds fast in her faith right up to the crucifixion, seemingly consumed by tragedy but subsequently reconciled with the community Jesus has founded and, on Pentecost, present alongside the nascent Church after her son has risen from the dead (Acts 1:12–26). She thus shows herself worthy of the title Knight of Faith.[29]

26. The journey to the temple narrated in Luke 2 is indicative of the respect that Mary and Joseph had for this institution.

27. See also Matthew 12:46 and Luke 8:19.

28. See also Matthew 12:48–50; Mark 3:33–35; Luke 21.

29. Carlisle points to other similarities between Mary and Abraham: both "receive news from God that they will bear a son, against the natural course of things" (Carlisle 2016, 281), and both "receive a son directly from God, contrary to expectations" (Carlisle 2016, 279). Moreover, like Abraham, Mary faces the loss of the child through which she was blessed; like

As in the case of Abraham, Mary's attitude to the logico-practical paradox she faces suggests that the person of faith keeps on trusting that God's promises will come good, despite events and happenings that appear antithetical to the blessing and/or promise in question. Her attitude to this paradox, however, does not indicate that there is an unbridgeable chasm between reason and faith. One cannot draw any conclusion here regarding the proper relation between faith and reason.

CONCLUSION

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard claims that Abraham is the paradigmatic Knight of Faith in light of how he faces up to the paradox his narrative involves. The present paper has argued that though Abraham's story might involve both types of paradox—both a fideo-moral and a logico-practical one—contrary to what Kierkegaard suggests, the patriarch would have been aware only of the second.

It has also been argued here that Kierkegaard is correct in identifying Mary as a Knight of Faith. Yet he mischaracterises the paradox that is involved in her narrative. Mary's paradoxical situation does not involve the impossibility of communicating to others her mission. Rather, she faces a logico-practical paradox similar to the one confronting Abraham. Her paradox concerns the fact that she is supposed to have found favour with God and be blessed through her son Jesus, yet the events involving Jesus seem antithetical to how she herself would have understood these developments.

My thesis has not been that Kierkegaard is wrong in claiming that there is an opposition between faith and human reason, or an existential tension between ethical and religious spheres of existence. This is a weighty question that goes beyond the remit of this article. Rather it is that no conclusions can be drawn about the relation between religious belief and reason from the attitude of these two figures to the logico-practical paradox they faced and were aware of facing. One can only conclude that the person of faith will keep on believing that God's blessings and promises will come good.

Jesus promised humans life aplenty. Yet death, injustice and suffering seem to prevail. The person of faith should believe that, despite all appearances to the contrary, death, suffering and injustice will not have the final say.

the great patriarch, she bears "witness to the loss of the divine gift as well as to its subsequent restoration" (Carlisle 2016, 279).

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