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Infinite Resignation and Values

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard glorifies Abraham as a knight of faith. He is willing to sacrifice his only son Isaac, only to receive him back again. According to Kierkegaard, this sacrifice requires an enormous amount of faith in God. While I won't discourage Kierkegaard from turning Abraham into a knight of faith for his purposes, I see a problem with the process of infinite resignation and Abraham's sacrifice. I will first explain the problem of a worthless sacrifice before trying to find reconciliation by separating intrinsic and extrinsic value.

Let me address the problem of the worthless sacrifice. Kierkegaard thinks a knight of faith "infinitely renounces claim to the love which is the content of his life" (Guignon 50). In Abraham's case, this means he renounces or resigns his love for his son Isaac. For Kierkegaard, this "infinite resignation is the last stage prior to faith" (50). In this last stage, both the knight of faith as well as the knight of infinite resignation find "peace and rest and comfort" (49). If Abraham successfully renounces all of his love for Isaac then what value does Isaac have for him? If Abraham renounces all of his joy and pride for Isaac up to the point that Abraham is indifferent to whether Isaac lives or dies, then I daresay Isaac has no more value for Abraham.

Now I wonder how God would feel if Abraham offered him a sacrifice for which he has no more use, a mere worthless object? If God asks for a priceless and invaluable gift and Abraham offers him some stones from the road then God would probably be very

unhappy indeed. God even says in the bible: “take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love (...) and offer him (...)” (Genesis 22:2). Note that God does simply ask for Isaac’s life, in which case God could have told Abraham to abandon Isaac in the desert. But no, God desired the act of sacrifice. Therefore it undermines Abraham’s act of courage if he were to raise the dagger and could not tell the difference between killing Isaac and a goat.

In fact, we can even find in Kierkegaard’s own words that Abraham does not feel indistinct to Isaac. “Even at the instant when the knife glittered [Abraham] believed that God would not require Isaac” (42). This clearly shows Abraham has not given up his emotional attachment to Isaac up to that last moment of sacrifice. Without emotional attachment, Abraham would not need to have faith that Isaac survives - because he simply wouldn’t care. So the question arises at what point does Abraham renounce Isaac to be in compliance with Kierkegaard’s infinite resignation.

To answer this question, I would like to separate the term ‘value’ into an intrinsic value and an extrinsic value. For the purposes of this paper, intrinsic value will be defined as having an emotional attachment to something. If Abraham loves Isaac because he is only son, then Isaac himself is rewarding to Abraham. He is said to have intrinsic value for Abraham. On the other hand, extrinsic value will be defined as being only interested in the function a thing can do for us. When something has extrinsic value, we are not interested in the thing itself, but only in the gain or function we will receive from it. A plow might have extrinsic value for Abraham. If he has no emotional attachment to the plow and only values the plow for what it can do for him, then the plow would only have extrinsic value for Abraham.

With this separation being made, I would like to shift the focus back on Kierkegaard. The problem for Kierkegaard is that he needs infinite resignation in order to find faith. Yet, he also made it clear that Abraham still cares about Isaac when he raises his dagger. So how can Abraham renounce Isaac and yet still care about him?

I think Abraham can renounce his love to Isaac so that Isaac has no more extrinsic value to Abraham. If Abraham's plans for Isaac include spreading his family genes or enjoying dinner with him, then Abraham has to renounce the value of those activities. By renouncing everything Isaac could possibly do for Abraham, Abraham goes through infinite resignation. As far as Abraham's future plans or concerned, Isaac plays no more role. Abraham has given up on spending time with Isaac. He has given up hopes that Isaac might have a family of his own. He has given up any extrinsic reward or gain he could have from Isaac.

A similar example can be found in the following situation: a boy loves a girl, but the boy knows her father will kill her if she marries him. Out of love for the girl, the boy gives up his hopes and runs away. When the boy gives up his hopes, he resigns the extrinsic value of the girl. He abandons the function, or the result, he could have achieved with her. However, this does not necessitate that he gives up his emotional attachment or his love for her. He can still love her for the person she was after running away.

Likewise, Abraham does not have to give up his intrinsic value for Isaac. In Abraham's heart, Isaac will always be the son he had always wanted. While Abraham might have abandoned any hopes for a mutual future, he does not give up his emotional attachment to him. Remember, without intrinsic value we will face the problem of a worthless sacrifice again. It would also contradict Kierkegaard's own words on page 42:

“Even at the instant when the knife glittered he believed ... that God would not require Isaac”. So at what point Abraham renounces Isaac’s extrinsic value is no longer that important. He could do on the way up to mountain, or he might have done it before left home. What is most important is that Abraham never resigns his intrinsic value, or emotional attachment to Isaac.

This will also make sense of the Kierkegaard’s absurd faith. When he says “So, [the knight of faith] recognizes the impossibility, and that very instant he believes the absurd” (50). Without any emotional attachment, the knight of faith would have no reason to believe for something. He might believe IN God, but for what purpose? Despite his infinite resignation, Abraham always believed that God would not require Isaac. However, the absurdity lies in acknowledging one’s one limited power. Abraham knows there is nothing he can do that will spare Isaac’s life. At that point, when he recognizes the impossibility of the situation, he finds faith in God. A good illustration might be an immigrant who plays in the annual “Green Card Lottery”. At the moment when he sends away his application, he is faced with his own limited power. There is nothing in the world he can do to influence whether he will won or lose. At this very moment, if the immigrant is a knight of faith, he will find hope, faith, and power in God.

In conclusion, I think Kierkegaard has to let an intrinsic value remain in us, even in the stage of infinite resignation. Without intrinsic value, Abraham would face the problem of making a worthless sacrifice. But even worse, without intrinsic value, a knight of faith would have no reason to believe the absurd.

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