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INTRODUCTION

The philosophers Søren Kierkegaard and Simone Weil lived almost a hundred years apart, yet their ideas intersect especially with regard to the relationship of the individual to God. Intriguing are the similarities between Kierkegaard and Weil and how each constructs the faith of the individual amidst great spiritual and social upheaval, as they use their own lives to shed light on the human condition. For Kierkegaard, this task was done in the course of a modernity that, as he saw it, was losing its faith in God as a result of Hegelian philosophical idealism. Weil, on the other hand, was caught in the middle of her dedication to the plight of French workers and the rise of the Third Reich in the early stages of World War II.

Though not alive at the same time, each thinker tackled similar issues in philosophy, most notably—as Kierkegaard puts it—the teleological suspension of the ethical sphere of existence. The point of this paper will be to describe, compare, and contrast the teleological suspension of the ethical realm as found in Kierkegaard's exposition on the story of Abraham and Isaac in his book *Fear*

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and Trembling,[1] with Weil's understanding of affliction found in her essay "The Love of God and Affliction."[2] Before this inquiry, I must first describe what Kierkegaard[3] deems are the three spheres of existence and how the teleological suspension of the ethical works.

WHAT ARE THE THREE SPHERES OF EXISTENCE?

Kierkegaard regards all individuals as falling into one of three spheres of existence or stages in life: the aesthetic sphere, the ethical sphere, and the religious sphere.[4] Each sphere is named according to the main practice by which one lives. In other words, *what* one believes is not the object that determines which sphere an individual falls into; it is *how* one lives that determines which sphere one is in.

To be in the aesthetic sphere, the lowest sphere, is to live one's life according to the pleasure principle: the seeking of immediate gratification and the avoidance of pain. The aesthete focuses on ideas, particularly associated with art, literature, fashion, and the people and places of the upper class. He lacks freedom, which for Kierkegaard is the possibility of giving one's life meaning and direction; for the aesthete goes to great lengths to avoid any kind of committed, long-term relationship with another human being. Boredom, says Kierkegaard, is the downfall of the aesthete. The constant seeking of new, and mostly lavish, experiences becomes tedious. Recognizing the *irony* of his situation, he makes

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*; *Repetition: Repetition,* vol. 6, in *Kierkegaard's Writings*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

2. Simone Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1973).

3. It should be clarified that *Fear and Trembling* was written pseudonymously by Kierkegaard, as were many of his works. The pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling* is Johannes de Silentio (John of Silence). Though Kierkegaard writes pseudonymously in *Fear and Trembling*, for the purposes of this paper, the ideas referred to will be treated as Kierkegaard's, though he may not have espoused the views he presented pseudonymously, as Kiekegaard himself discusses in his journals.

4. The aesthetic and ethical spheres are treated in his book *Either/Or*, while the religious sphere is treated in *Fear and Trembling*.

the transition into the ethical sphere.

The ethical person is in some ways "the exact opposite of the aesthete."[5] Existing in the ethical sphere denotes a recognition of right and wrong in the moral sense. Hence, to live ethically is to take on a moral code as one's own in order to benefit the larger community.[6] (The ethical sphere, for Kierkegaard, has its basis somewhat in the arena of politics, as a community is often based on written laws.) Yet there is something added to the ethical life that makes it a higher, so to speak, form of existence: freedom (and by extension responsibility). While the aesthete is preoccupied with avoidance of commitment, the ethical individual embraces it—whether in the form of a marriage or social relationship—as "[participation] in a community."[7] Through all of the personal choices and tasks taken up by the ethical person, it is still not enough to prevent the individual from slipping into despair. One is constantly battling selfish motivations and desires, while attempting to obtain some form of moral perfection. Because one's identity is based on the world around oneself, the ethical individual, when faced with the dilemma of a world that can change in an instant, is changed accordingly, causing inner confusion. The seriousness of trying to be perfect is exhibited within oneself as *humorous*, since there is simultaneously a realization of the paradox of the situation: the longing for moral perfection will never be attained on one's own. The religious sphere is where one finds a new way of existing.

The final sphere of existence is called the religious sphere, where the existence of the individual is based upon his or her relationship to God. In the religious sphere, one knows oneself to be a sinner and needs God's help, forgiveness, and grace to live a just life. The idea of eternal life in God's presence—salvation—is accepted "in faith and with passion"[8] subjectively. Thus, there is

5. Clare Carlisle, *Kierkegaard: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 78.
6. Beneficial insofar as the individual seeks good for others and not only self.
7. Carlisle, *Kierkegaard: Guide for the Perplexed,* 79.
8. Ibid., 80.

an emphasis on the paradoxical nature of the religious sphere: that salvation is only to be had through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ (the infinite, eternal God taking on the finite, temporal human form).[9] Salvation is needed because of sin—separation between God and man—and can only be initiated by God as he is untainted by it. As the individual comes to accept the limitations on life due to sin, one sacrifices material concerns for the sake of a next life, in the hope that one might find happiness eternally. Again, there is a paradox here: while the religious individual is found *in* the world, the individual is no longer *of* the world. Worldly things are not the primary focus of life. Interaction with the world is always checked by what the individual recognizes as God's will.

GENESIS 22 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

The story is told in Genesis 22 of the Biblical patriarch Abraham, who is commanded by God to make a human sacrifice of his son, Isaac, for no apparent reason. On the surface, it appears that Abraham is going to commit an act of maniacal murder. Furthermore, the dilemma is momentous because God orders Abraham to obey a command that not only goes against moral reasonableness but also violates a promise God had previously made to Abraham. In Genesis 12, God had promised Abraham that his people would inherit the land of Israel. Since Isaac was understood by Abraham to be the person through whom that promise would be fulfilled, and since Isaac had no children, killing him would nullify God's previous word, making God hypocritical.

Now, Abraham considered obedience to God's command his duty. Yet, what God was here asking Abraham to do was morally wrong[10] and he had no way out of his commitment to God. It is certainly the case that Abraham was not a Christian who would ask forgiveness in the Christian way. He was, however,

9. Kierkegaard never says outright that Christianity is the culmination of the religious sphere, but given his language, one can name it as Christianity.

10. Even though this narrative predates the injunction in the Ten Commandments, "Thou shall not kill," it is assumed that morality, by virtue of natural law, would have been valued nonetheless.

asked to believe in what *appears* to be a contradiction in God, similar to the Christian dilemma: Abraham is told he is to be the father of a nation and then asked to murder that nation; likewise a Christian is asked to believe in a God who is at the same time both God and man. Hence, were Abraham a Christian, the situation of killing one's own son would be (nearly) identical—identical enough, at least for Kierkegaard—to Abraham's situation, which qualifies him to be considered as making the journey into the religious sphere.

WHAT IS THE TELEOLOGICAL SUSPENSION OF THE ETHICAL?

Under the ethical sphere, the individual is subjected to what Kierkegaard calls the "universal." As was stated in the section on the three spheres of existence, the ethical sphere requires an individual to relate to the community, the group, by means of a moral code. Thus, the universal is this relationship between the individual and the group—one might think of it as a kind of social contract.

The Greek word *telos* means "end" or "purpose" and to suspend the ethical is to push it away in favor of something else. Hence, to teleologically suspend the ethical is to put the ethical sphere, including the universal, aside for a higher *purpose*: This higher purpose is the single individual as he stands in relationship to God.

HOW DOES THE INDIVIDUAL RELATE TO THE ETHICAL AND RELIGIOUS SPHERES?

What Kierkegaard means to say—in regards to the individual's relationship to the religious and ethical—is that an individual's direct, personal relationship with God (the religious) is higher than, or comes before, his relationship with the rest of the world (the ethical). For instance, before one looks at how the world views one's lifestyle and choices, one must first look to God as the source

of one's worth (spiritual, moral, etc.). After "being subordinate as the single individual to the universal"[11] (i.e. obeying social morality), Abraham's obedience now *surpasses* the universal via the universal itself and places himself in direct relation to God in choosing to go against the ethical/universal by "attempting"[12] to murder his son Isaac. In order to rise above the ethical (or community) sphere, one thinks of himself this way[13] by allowing himself to be judged according to God's standards or commands, not one's given society. If one permits his lifestyle to be reflective of his given community's *without* "checking in with God" first (so to speak), then he has relegated himself to the ethical sphere.

THE TELEOLOGICAL SUSPENSION OF THE ETHICAL IN *FEAR AND TREMBLING*

Kierkegaard describes faith as "precisely the paradox that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal."[14] This definition means that an individual's actions are greater than a social morality. Abraham's choice to sacrifice Isaac is greater than the universal moral norm of "do not murder" because his choice was made, not only in faith, but as the "single individual"[15]: choosing not as one who is part of a whole society , but who is the whole himself. Abraham decides not to act on what he *believes* is right and wrong, but what is commanded of him *regardless* of whether it is right or wrong according to the ethical standard. When the single individual takes it upon himself to act, not in opposition to the ethical, but for reasons that the ethical cannot explain, he is "justified before it … as superior."[16]

11. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 55–56.
12. Abraham shows more of a willing, rather than mere attempting.
13. As well as acting like it.
14. Ibid.
15. The single individual is just that: a *single* individual. Singularity is important to the effect that it emphasizes alienation from the rest of one's community, whereas the individual is emphasized in order to show that there is no escaping the responsibility one has for one's choices.
16. Ibid.

Because Abraham is still living in the world, he is under the universal. Yet, because he as an individual is acting according to faith, that is, placing his actions above the universal in that they could be considered wrong via the ethical point of view, but righteous for one who can see beyond the mere duty of the ethical, Abraham goes beyond the ethical and enters the religious sphere. For the ethical sphere, this movement is objectively immoral, but for the individual who is obeying God's command, it is beyond morality.

Kierkegaard describes Abraham as a "knight of faith"[17]: one who is like the "knight of infinite resignation" in giving up the finite and temporal world, but who receives it back "by virtue of the absurd."[18] Abraham's situation is unique in that God promised his descendants the land to where he was told to migrate.[19] Instead of simply giving up Isaac for all eternity (i.e. infinite resignation), Abraham has faith that God will not actually require Isaac of him. There is a contradiction here that fascinates Kierkegaard: God will and will not take Isaac from Abraham. What makes Abraham a knight of faith is that he understands God cannot require both of these things of him at the same time, yet he must plunge into faith without question, for he knows not *how* God will or can resolve this conflict. The knight of faith does not know what God will do, but has faith that God knows what he is doing.

WEIL'S UNDERSTANDING OF AFFLICTION

The French word from which *affliction* translates is *malheur*. While *malheur* contains "a sense of inevitability and doom,"[20] which the English word "af-

17. Kierkegaard's knights are both individuals that have given up the finite world insofar as both have renounced its power over them and focused instead on the spiritual world. Yet, there is a key difference: the knight of infinite resignation cannot accept happiness in the finite world, because he cannot believe that it is possible to find it, while the knight of faith gains the world back, believing that happiness is possible because God will provide for him.

18. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 57.

19. Genesis 12:7.

20. Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 117.

fliction" lacks, the latter will be a sufficient translation. Weil's idea of affliction came from her contact with the factory workers in France whose abuse and defilement was so horrible that Weil believed she encountered an all-together different form of existence.

"Affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain."[21] It has a meaninglessness about it, with the inability to name the significance of that meaninglessness. It contains a feeling of moral ambiguity, as a person is made concurrently the perpetrator and the victim of the same crime.[22] All of these attributes are simultaneously present in one of the afflicted.

Examples of affliction, indicative of the qualities noted, can be found amidst the Holocaust. Of the innumerable crimes committed, there is one in particular that illuminates the characteristics of affliction. The story is told about a group of men told to line up in a concentration camp.[23] Of those that were standing, another man was placed behind one of them. He is told by an SS officer to choke the man in front of him to death, or else the entire line of men will be shot to death. The man asked to be a murderer is in a predicament: either he murders one man of his own accord or he indirectly murders an entire line of them. He does not have a way out, for no right will be done, only a wrong. Whatever he chooses, his innocence is wiped out: he is the perpetrator of a crime and the victim of one.

In affliction, a person experiences distress of mind and body at the same time. Weil differentiates between strictly physical pain, pain only of the mind, and pain caused by affliction. A "toothache is an example [of physical pain]. An hour or two of violent pain caused by a decayed tooth is nothing once it is

21. Ibid., 118.

22. Whatever that crime may be.

23. Sarah MacMillen, untitled lecture (lecture, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA, October 13, 2009).

over."[24] If the suffering is only in the mind, meaning "not bound up with physical pain or something analogous,"[25] then it is not affliction, since all one must do is change one's mindset. Pain of mind is simply suffering, not affliction. Suffering can have meaning. As Christianity teaches, a person can make suffering meaningful by a mental adjustment.[26] Affliction, however, is much deeper than "ordinary" suffering. With affliction, there is a constant physical pain that does not simply "go away," whatever that pain might be. As a matter of fact, it worsens the affliction. Because affliction causes a person to experience physical pain, that very same physical pain causes a mental acknowledgment of one's own state, thus intensifying the affliction.

Another key aspect of affliction is its similarity to slavery. Weil quotes "the men of antiquity," saying, "A man loses half his soul the day he becomes a slave."[27] Just as a slave's entire being is taken over by his existence as a slave, so too is the soul branded with affliction's "own particular mark,"[28] that of slavery. One becomes a slave to affliction because, "little by little [affliction makes] the soul its accomplice,"[29] similar to Stockholm syndrome or a learned helplessness. At some point, the soul[30] believes it will not escape the afflicted condition; in a sense, it befriends the affliction. It causes the afflicted to "[stop] seeking a way of deliverance" that he might "plunge into it again"[31] should he make it through affliction the first time. Affliction becomes something of a "parasite [as if it] were directing him to suit its own purposes,"[32] tricking one into thinking that there is

24. Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 118.
25. Ibid., 17.
26. For example, if one says to oneself, "I will suffer for the glory of God," then one is consoled and is therefore not afflicted. Once suffering has some value or meaning, it is no longer affliction.
27. Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 117.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 122.
30. Or the afflicted person.
31. Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 123.
32. Ibid.

no hope for his situation.

WHAT IS THE INDIVIDUAL'S RELATIONSHIP TO AFFLICTION?

The main relationship to affliction is one of inconsolability. The kind of plague that affliction generates within the life and soul of an individual is too deep and acute to be helped. Weil goes so far as to state that "only God can [set one free from past affliction]...and even the grace of God itself cannot cure irremediably wounded nature here below."[33] Yet, "affliction would not have this power without the element of chance contained by it,"[34] for chance instills a certain fear in the individual, as though affliction could happen at any moment.

While everyone may suffer in life, not everyone experiences affliction. The circumstances for each individual are different: "The same event may plunge one human being into affliction and not another."[35] It is personalized to fit each person, since it can happen anywhere at any time, though one knows not in what form affliction comes, nor when. The only possible means of defense, according to Weil, is to "persevere in love,"[36] since God is love and created out of love (and only God can remove affliction).

THE SUSPENSION OF THE ETHICAL IN WEIL

As with Kierkegaard, the ethical sphere for Weil concerns an individual's moral obligation to the community. Weil, however, places a much greater emphasis on the ethical, because in order for *affliction* to occur, there must be "social degradation or the fear of it in some form or another."[37] Social alienation is

33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 125.
35. Ibid., 119.
36. Ibid., 124. She later says that love is "a direction and not a state of the soul." Ibid., 135.
37. Ibid., 119.

experienced as a result of the inability of one to communicate one's own situation of affliction with the community. An individual in this situation is separated from the rest of the group because of the subjectivity of the circumstance. Since the community cannot help the afflicted, the person is left alone in this afflicted condition without any source of human consolation.

KIEKEGAARD AND WEIL: SIMILARITIES

There are several areas of overlap in the suspension of the ethical realm that I would now like to explore. They are meaningful/lessness, moral ambiguity and misinterpretation, and alexithymia (inability to express one's feelings).

I. MEANINGFULNESS AND MEANINGLESSNESS

The meaningfulness found in the teleological suspension of the ethical is found in Kierkegaard's treatment of God's transcendence. God, for Kierkegaard, is beyond the realm of the ethics, as shown. For Abraham to suspend the ethical in the way he did shows that—at least for the knight of faith—meaning is not found in the finite world. Meaning is found in the eternal. Only by obeying the eternal command of God could Abraham hope to find any meaning in his actions towards Isaac. The ethical individual could never experience this hope, which is another reason why the suspension of the ethical places the individual above the ethical: on top of standing in singularity before God, it gives meaning to one's life. For Kierkegaard, God's transcendence makes meaningfulness possible. In affliction, however, God's transcendence is meaninglessness, since this transcendence is sign of the absence of God. Furthermore, since God is not present, and God is love, then love is absent in affliction. Perhaps what is most important about this aspect of affliction is its antinomian attribute. The antinomianism of affliction lies in the afflicted person's struggle for survival; affliction

is Ananke[38] and, therefore, not subject to law and beyond any judgment of good and evil.

II. MORAL AMBIGUITY AND MISINTERPRETATION

Perhaps the largest objection to the teleological suspension of the ethical is that it leaves one with a sense of moral ambiguity. Because Abraham is commanded by God, who is the source of all that is good and right, to *murder* his only son, one questions the morality of the religious sphere. The suspension of the ethical requires one to act on the God-given mandate. If one is asked to disregard one of God's prior statements, then one has no choice but to act on what God commands at that moment. What causes confusion on the part of the individual is what Kierkegaard calls the paradox of faith, which "may be expressed in this way…in this relationship of duty the single individual relates himself as the single individual absolutely to the absolute."[39]

Though mentioned earlier, it should be noted that in this relation, one may misinterpret what God requires. In being set apart from the ethical sphere, the individual may sacrifice his relationship with the rest of the world in such a way that is displeasing to God. For example, God may not demand that the individual completely and permanently sever any and every form of communication with the outside world but rather put it on hold for a little while, as with Abraham's sacrifice. Therefore, if the individual (mis)interprets God's message in such a way that he begins to live in disconcert with God's command, the only way he could change his living otherwise would be to *speak* about it, which would indicate that the individual is really living in the ethical sphere.[40]

38. "A personification of compelling necessity or ultimate fate to which even the gods must yield." *Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged, s.v. "ananke,"* http://unabridged.merriam-webster.com (accessed July 30, 2011). *Ananke* in this sense refers to force as caught up in an all against all battle.

39. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 70.

40. As one will see, speechlessness is a sign of correct standing with God.

One aspect of affliction that is not so much a controversy as it is a travesty is that affliction gives one a *feeling* of moral ambiguity. It is even expected, given the earlier example. Like the suspension of the ethical, affliction removes a person from good and evil, but in a different way. When Abraham 'suspends the ethical,' he does it as an act of faith, whereas with affliction, this suspension is resolved from the amoral position of the soul. Since affliction relativizes the soul's judgment of right and wrong, it actually deconstructs and destroys the morality of the person.

III. *ALEXITHYMIA*

A unique characteristic of Abraham's situation is his utter silence when faced with who to tell about his situation. Kierkegaard takes this up in the third section of *Fear and Trembling* titled, "Was It Ethically Defensible for Abraham to Conceal His Undertaking from Sarah, from Eliezer, and from Isaac?" Abraham seems to experience *alexithymia*,[41] which is a condition whereby one experiences an event so traumatic that one cannot speak of it. Abraham cannot tell anyone of what God has commanded of him, for it is beyond words; no one can understand what it is he is going through. Even *if* he attempts to communicate it with others, he will have exited the religious sphere,[42] for language is of the ethical sphere.

The suspension of the ethical is expressed through *alexithymia* in this way: the actual silence of an individual who has been given a command from God is no different than that of another individual who is also silent. The only dif-

41. *Alexithymia* translates from the Greek as "without words for emotion."

42. The ethical sphere includes laws, which individuals are supposed to obey. These laws can only be understood by a large amount of people because they are put into language, a language that everyone can understand. The religious sphere does away with this language because the personal relationship with God overrides any form of communication with others in that the relationship is attuned to the individual, and thus the individual's life circumstances. Therefore, only that individual can even begin to try to understand what God is commanding of him because the commands are strictly *specific*—only an individual can carry them out.

ference between the two is that the religious individual's situation "cannot be translated into real life,"[43] that is, cannot be spoken of or discussed.

Correspondingly, a person cannot explain what is happening to him in affliction, for language is taken away. As stated by Weil, "[the afflicted] have no words to express what is happening to them."[44] It is seemingly the same situation as Abraham's, except it moves in an opposite direction: Abraham's silence is hopeful, but the silence of affliction is despairing. There is no way to numb the pain of affliction, for if there were a cure, one could not voice it. As language is taken away, so is meaningfulness.[45] Even those individuals who have been in contact with others who experience affliction can never truly know what it is unless experienced themselves, for "affliction is something specific and impossible to describe in any other terms…"[46]

CONCLUSION

In order to understand the suspension of the ethical, one must understand where the ethical fits into existence and the role it plays. It is possible that the moral of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is that faith is something which cannot be calculated. Kierkegaard uses Abraham as his example for faith because Abraham is completely dependent on God as a single individual: There is no group or community to help him understand his task—or what he is to do—for he must do it himself. The ethical sphere is about following a community's institutionalized norms and the religious is, in some sense, a breaking away from the institution. Kierkegaard creates the religious sphere to combat the politics of the passionless Danish Lutheran Church, which was part of his reason for writing *Fear and Trembling*. A community cannot tell an individual how to act in a

43. Carlisle, *Kierkegaard: Guide for the Perplexed,* 129.

44. Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 120.

45. It should also be noted that thought is taken away. Since affliction is beyond suffering, there is no thinking out of it.

46. Ibid.

relationship to God, to the effect that the individual must still choose his own life, that is, he must discern on his own what is the best way to act and therefore live. Ultimately, Kierkegaard's point is that one's personal relationship to God should not take place at the ethical level because it is *individual*[47] and institutions have a tendency to corrupt individual belief. Thus, the individual in his faith has a tendency to be suspicious of groupthink and community norms.

Similarly, Weil's notion of affliction places the individual outside the realm of suffering and into a state of slavery, which is affliction. The ethical sphere is suspended because society cannot help the afflicted cope: the afflicted state is beyond the boundaries of human classification and logic. Seemingly, the individual is all alone, left to live in one's own prison, unable but striving to love in a condition of meaninglessness. Weil's afflicted individual, like Abraham, is an outsider to society, without fellowship, and belonging nowhere. Eventually, the afflicted individual may find his soul again and escape affliction, but only through a constant striving toward love.

47. *Individual* as it is a singular experience for each human being.